A LONG HISTORY OF COAL, IRON AND STEEL IN CUMBRIA

Generations of mining experience in the area

Coal mining dates back to the 13th century when the Monks at St Bees started to exploit the local coal seams; 7 centuries of mining activity followed on from their lead.

In the 1600s, the Lowther family drove major developments in the mines and Whitehaven itself. By 1685 Whitehaven had a population of over 1,000. It continued to grow rapidly. By 1700 the population was around 3,000.

A great feat of engineering took place in 1729 when the Lowthers started sinking Saltom Pit right on the sea shore, just clear of the cliffs. The sinking of this new mine so close to the sea, to work the coal under the sea bed, was quoted as being the most remarkable Colliery enterprise of its day.

The Cumbrian iron ore field lies to the south of Workington, and produced extremely high grade phosphorus-free haematite.

A word from Daniel Defoe

In the 1720s Daniel Defoe wrote that Whitehaven had grown up from a small place to be very considerable by the coal trade which has increased so considerably of late, that it is now the most eminent port in England for shipping of coals except Newcastle and Sunderland. Large quantities of tobacco, rum and sugar were also imported into Whitehaven.

Transport by rail

Railways came early to West Cumberland. Coal mining during the 18th century soon created problems in transporting coal from the pithead to the local harbours for shipment to market through the Irish Sea; as a result by the late 1800’s a major railway network had been developed.

A Bessemer converter in operation

The Bessemer converter continued to work until 1977. One offshoot of the steel industry was the production of steel railway rails. Workington rails were widely exported and a common local phrase was that Workington rails ‘held the world together’.

With Cumbria as the world’s premier source of iron ore, and the local coalfield providing the other major ingredient for steel production, the world’s first large-scale steelworks was opened in the Moss Bay area of the town.

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