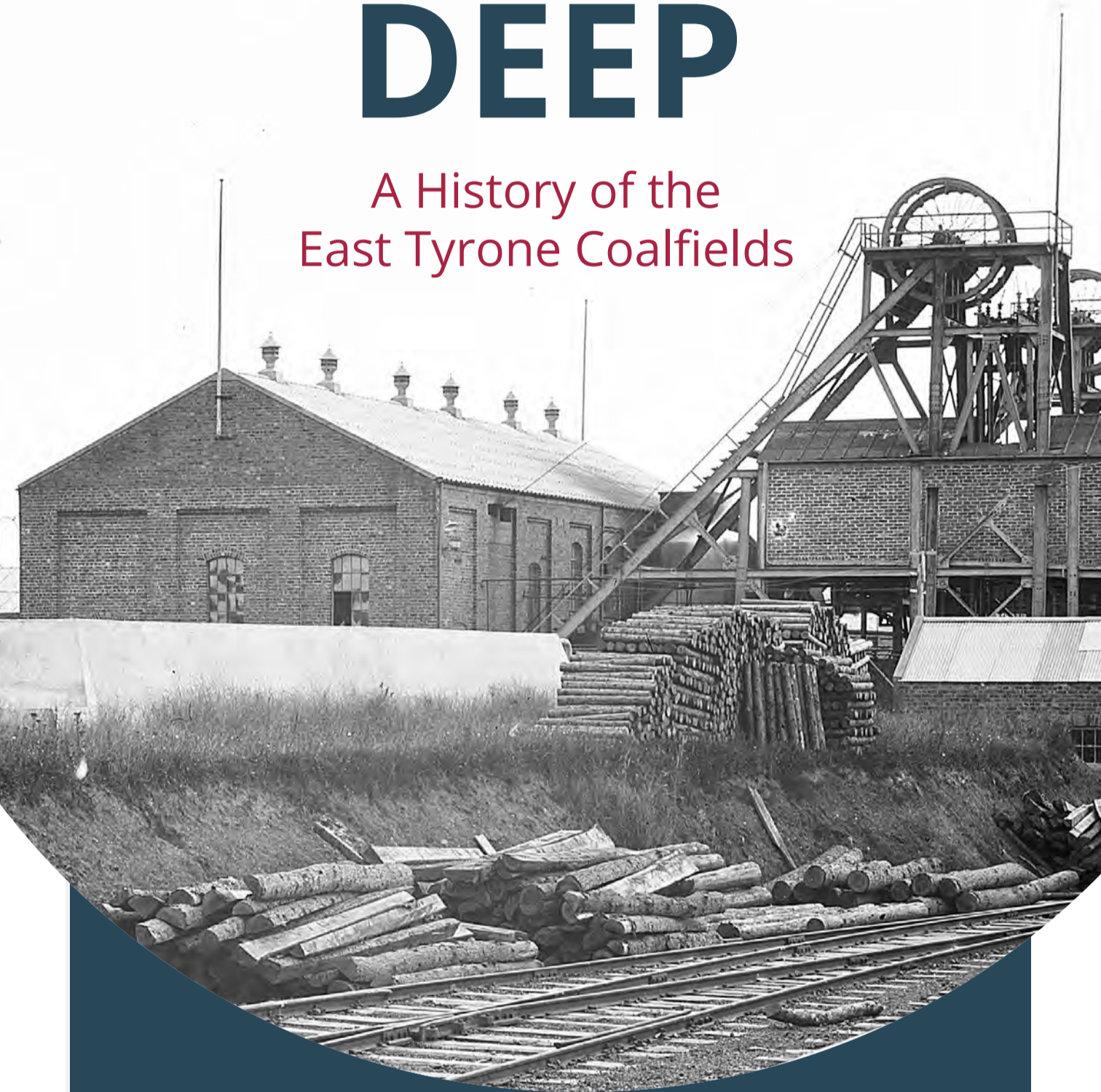




DIGGING DEEP

A History of the
East Tyrone Coalfields



Annagher Colliery, 1924

© National Museums NI Collection, Ulster Folk Museum

This is the story of the coal and clay pits of Coalisland and district, the men who worked down them and the millions of tons of coal that are still believed to be beneath our feet.



Supported by
Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council



Find out more at www.coalisland-lnp.com



COAL

and the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution began in the eighteenth century with the invention of the steam engine. Coal became extremely important because it was needed as a fuel to fire the boilers which created the steam and powered the engines.

In factories and mills, steam engines drove the machines that made cloth or metal. This revolutionised the manufacturing process and the factories could make more goods and employ more people than ever before.

Steam engines also made it possible for coal mines to get bigger. The engines were used to pump water out of the mines and stop flooding in the underground coal beds and this meant the pits could reach deeper. In addition, the engines operated winches which carried the miners up and down the deep shafts.

Coal was also essential for the pottery, brick and pipe industries because they needed it as fuel for their huge kilns.



The town of Coalisland emerged as a result of the Industrial Revolution in Ireland. It had potteries, brickworks, textile mills, weaving factories and coal mines.

Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



CANALS

Digging coal out of the ground was expensive. Bringing the coal from the mine to the customer added even more cost. Originally, coal was transported using a horse and cart. As mines became larger, canals were built to bring coal by boat from the mines to the towns and factories. The Coalisland Canal (also known as the Tyrone Navigation) started at coalfields near Dungannon and stretched through Coalisland and into Lough Neagh.

Coalisland Basin

Without the coal mines, the town of Coalisland would not exist. The town takes its name from two parts of its historic past - "COAL" is linked to the mines and "ISLAND" is linked to the canal and the harbour, or Basin, which was built in the centre of the town.

Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



EARLY MINES

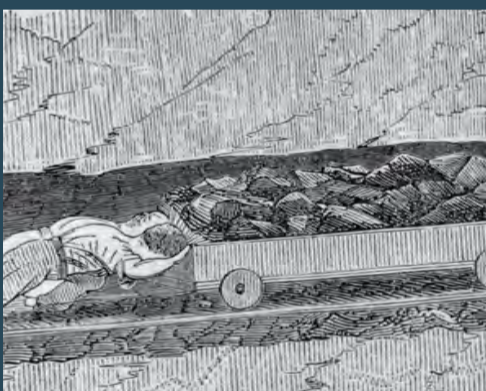
Coal mining in East Tyrone was first reported in 1654. Over the next 316 years, major mining operations took place at several different places, including Annagher, Annaghone, Congo, Creenagh, Derraghadoan, Derry, Drumglass and Lurgaboy

In early coal pits, the miners worked in terrible conditions. There were several types of jobs and all ages were sent down the mine.

The Hewer (pictured right) would work in a seam of coal which was sometimes as little as 60cm deep. They used a hand tool, such as a pick, to break coal from the face and worked by the light of a single candle.

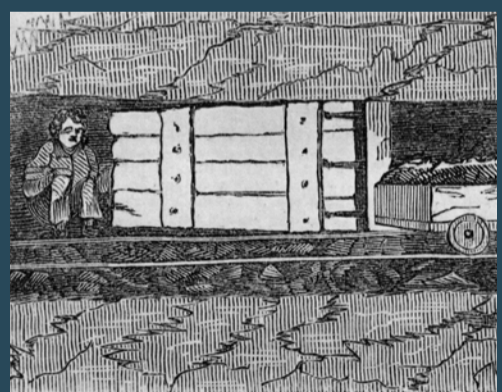


The Getter was often a woman. She would gather the coal into a large basket or a small cart, working on her knees in the enclosed space with the Hewer.



Thrusters and Hurriers (left) moved the coal in small carts to the bottom of the pit where it was lifted to the surface. Thrusters were often young girls and they pushed from the back of a cart, forcing it forward; at the front was a Hurrier, a small boy who pulled the cart with a belt attached to his waist. Older boys and women were stronger and would work alone as Hurriers.

Beginning work at five years old, Trappers (right) were the youngest children in the mines and worked in complete darkness. They were responsible for opening and closing ventilation doors as the carts went back and forth to the pit bottom.



In 1842, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Children's Employment reported that:

"...To the honour of Ireland, it must be stated that no young children appear to be employed in underground work, except some in the small collieries of Drumglass and Coal Island, in the county of Tyrone."

The inquiry shocked the nation and it became illegal to employ females down a coal mine or boys under the age of 10 years old.



MINING DISASTERS

Mining was a dangerous job and many men were injured or tragically killed while underground doing a day's work.

THE CONGO DISASTER

In 1895, six men were killed when the Emerald Pit in the townland of Congo catastrophically flooded. They were:

William Bretland and his nephew, David, from Ashton-under-Lyne

Frederick Mitchell, Manchester

John Cooper, Ashton-under-Lyne

John McMullen, Killybrackey

Edward Rafferty, Rossbeg

The head engineer at the colliery had concerns about the safety of the mine. He warned that there would be old shafts which were filled with water – if these were accidentally breached, the result would be disastrous.

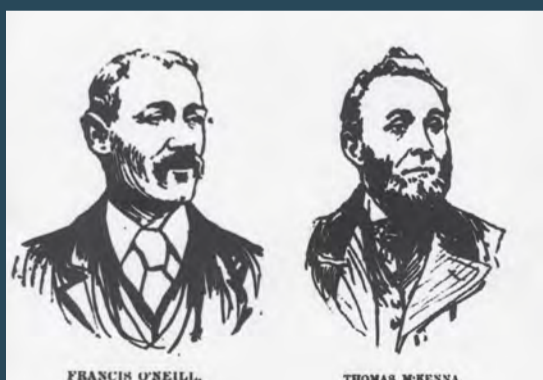
Unfortunately, this was exactly what happened and, at 1.10am on 10 December 1895, the men were killed as huge volumes of water flooded the narrow coal seam in which they were working.

A relief fund was set up for the grieving families and £940 was raised to be shared among the relatives. The Congo Pit was eventually shut down in 1900.

THE ANNAGHER HEROES

In August 1898, coal started to be mined from a new pit at Annagher. To begin with, all seemed to be going well and the miners had no concerns about their safety. Everything changed on Thursday, 29 September 1898.

Shortly after 1pm, four miners were engulfed in a large fireball which had been caused when gas ignited in a shaft 60 metres underground. Two men made it back to the surface: Daniel Gervin, of Lisnastrane, and his son Francis (27). Both men were conscious but badly burned and Francis later died. Despite rescue attempts, the other two men, Bryan Murphy (60) and John Hughes (27) were later found dead in the mine.



Thomas McKenna and Francis O'Neill made several heroic attempts to go down the pit to rescue Murphy and Hughes. Their bravery was recognised by the Royal Humane Society - Thomas McKenna was presented with a bronze gallantry award and Francis O'Neill received their highest honour, the "Stanhope Gold Medal".



SIR SAMUEL KELLY'S ANNAGHER PIT

In 1921, work began to open a new colliery at Annagher. The mine owner, Sir Samuel Kelly, was very optimistic about its success. He promised 1,000 jobs, with 100 new homes built at Gortgonis for the mine workers. Sir Samuel renamed the district Newtownkelly.

By July 1924, 200 miners and their families had arrived from Scotland and Cumberland looking for work. Sir Samuel expected to bring 100,000 tonnes of coal to the surface each year for the next 40 years and the mine was busy 24 hours a day, with three shifts of men working eight hours each.

However, the Newtownkelly Colliery proved to be a massive failure. Within three years it had closed. Unfortunately, the coal at Annagher had proved much too difficult to reach and there was considerably less of it than expected. All the men lost their jobs and the largest coal mining operation ever attempted in Ulster was abandoned in April 1927.

Images courtesy of Lowther Estate Trust





FIRECLAY

Fireclay is found underground, beneath seams of coal. In the past, it was regarded as an important by-product of mining. It can withstand intense heat and was traditionally used as the lining for flue pipes and furnaces or to make crucibles or firebricks for stoves. Today it has been replaced in the construction industry by modern and more efficient materials.

Ulster Fireclay Works

In 1890, Dan Devlin established the Ulster Fireclay Works Limited at Annagher. It was later taken over by James Corr. In 1920, it was purchased by Sir Samuel Kelly and became known as Kelly's Yard.

Kelly increased the company's manufacturing capacity until it was the only supplier of pipes, firebricks, chimney pots and other such products in Ireland. It was later taken over by the Stewart family.



Ulster Fireclay Works, 1905

Images courtesy of National Library of Ireland

Clay pit disasters

Clay was being mined to make bricks and pipes and workers in these pits faced the same risks to the coal miners. On 24 October 1911, three miners were killed at the Tyrone Brickworks Company, Killylack, when a tunnel wall collapsed, burying them beneath 50 tons of clay – they were John McCallion (50), Peter McCurry (23) and James Heaney (26).

On 20 May 1943, William Williamson (45) and James Templeton (60) were killed at the Ballynakelly clay pit. The pit had flooded overnight and pumps were being used to clear the shaft. After a few hours, the two men descended to check if it was safe. Tragically, gas had gathered in the mine and they were killed when it ignited and caused an explosion.



Ballynakelly clay pit, 1931

Left to right, back row: R. Templeton, R.J. Simpson, J. Williamson, R. Buller, J. Kelly, J. Skelton.
Seated: J. Templeton, F. O'Neill, D. Cullen, R. McLernon, M. McNally.



THE ANNAGHONE COALFIELD

The Annaghone coalfield is separate from the Coalisland coalfield and situated to the north of Stewartstown. It was mined in the early 1820s but the coal was reported to be low grade and there were dangerous explosions caused by gas.

Cratley Coal Company

In May 1913, a new pit was opened in the Annaghone coalfield in the townland of Cratley. The newspapers optimistically reported that up to 100 men might be employed. However, the coal was such low quality and the running costs for the pit were so high, that it closed in 1915.

In May 1934, another pit was opened at Annaghone. The new mine was in the townland of Lislea but it took the name of the Cratley Coal Company. Each day 60 tons of coal was being brought to the surface each day,

with ambitions to increase that to 600 tons. Three teams of miners, each consisting of four men, were working three shifts around the clock down two mine shafts.

At this stage, the Cratley Pit was the only coal mine operating in Northern Ireland. By 1936, coal production had dropped to 25 tons a day and in March 1937 the mine closed. Later that year, a large auction sold off the machinery at Cratley and today almost nothing remains to be seen of the old coal pit.



Images taken from the article "Cratley Coalpits by A. Laverty, "The Bell", Journal of the Stewartstown & District Local History Society, No.2, 1987-1988.



THE DERRY PIT

In the 1950s, over 150 men worked at the clay pit at Gortnaskea, making it one of the biggest employers in Coalisland. The skilled workforce mined beds which were 60 metres underground and the clay was then used to manufacture sewer pipes, firebricks, chimney pots and other products.

In 1956, a narrow seam of coal was discovered. It was identified by geologists as the "Derry seam" and this gave the new pit its name, although it was also sometimes called the Rectory Pit because it was close to the Church of Ireland Rectory.



Jim Young at coal face.

The Derry Pit regularly produced 80-90 tons of coal a week. Local customers could visit the pit to buy coal for £10 per ton and the rest was supplied to factories in the East Tyrone area.



Davy Graham, Jim Clarke, Michael O'Neill, Malachy Corr, John L Corr & Alex Simpson.

The end of coal mining in Northern Ireland

In 1895, one newspaper had reported that East Tyrone had "one the richest coalfields in the kingdom" although extracting the coal had "a record of partial, if not entire, failure". Sadly, these words proved very true.

By the mid-twentieth century, factories had begun using oil, rather than coal. In November 1970, the Derry Pit was forced out of business, although the fireclay mining continued for several years. The Derry Pit was the last coal mine in Northern Ireland and, while there are still believed to be millions of tons of coal underneath East Tyrone, it is unlikely to ever be mined.



Francis McElvenna, James O'Neill & Lawrence Kelly.