Early History of the Coal Mining Industry in County Durham

It is assumed that the Romans used coal during their occupation of County Durham, as coal is found on Roman sites elsewhere in the North of England, but no specific evidence has yet been found in County Durham, although there may have been some coal-working on the South Bank of the river Tyne. During the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ between the Roman period and the Norman Conquest, it seems that timber was the fuel used, but in Norman times there is clear evidence that coal was being mined. The Prince Bishops continued to be major investors in and exploiters of County Durham’s coal reserves. Detailed accounts survive in the Durham Cathedral archives for coal mining as early as 1458, during the Wars of the Rose, and in 1509-10, soon after Henry VIII had come to the English throne.

With the growth of the shipbuilding industry in Tudor times, both for the navy and for ships sent out with explorers such as Drake, and also the building of more timber-framed structures, sound timber became in short supply, and wood for fuel also became more expensive, so there was increasing demand for coal as a fuel. There was a particular demand for coal in London as its population grew, and coal sent to London by sea from the Tyne became known as ‘sea coal’. Such was the capital's appetite for coal that a tax on coal provided huge sums for the rebuilding of the City of London after the Great Fire of London in 1666. The coal-mining industry increased in scale throughout the 17th century. During the 18th century the Industrial Revolution made vastly greater demands on the coal suppliers. Two early developments of particular significance for coal production were Abraham Darby’s discovery of a method of smelting iron with coal rather than charcoal in 1713, and Thomas Savery’s invention of the steam engine. The steam engine was to have a two-fold effect on the history of coal mining, for not only did it increase the demand for coal when steam engines were installed in numerous mills and factories, and later on the railways, but steam-powered beam engines allowed deeper mining by allowing water to be pumped out from underground.
Decline of the Coal Industry

The peak of coal production in Great Britain occurred in 1913 at over 270 million tons (58,700,000 of those tons from County Durham), and declined thereafter despite increasing mechanisation. Production later stabilised at about 200 million tons per annum. In 1947 the coal industry was nationalised, and the industry began to operate in a more co-ordinated manner, with a trend towards the more intensive working of fewer mines. The National Coal Board took over more than 100,000 men in County Durham, producing 24 million tons of coal a year from 127 collieries. From the 1950s alternate sources of fuel started to be used for the railways, shipping and electricity generation, as well as domestic heating, and demand declined. By 1974 County Durham employed only 25,000 men at 22 collieries, annually producing about 8.2 million tons of coal, but the productivity rate per man/shift had increased from 17.4 to 33.4 cwts.

Nationalisation saw investment in improved mechanisation, and miners at last won better conditions and decent wages. The irony is that the mid-20th century also saw an increasing number of pit closures, particularly in the west of County Durham, with production increasingly concentrated at the large coastal pits. Over 8,000 families moved to the Yorkshire coalfield under schemes grant-aided by the NCB. Many other miners began to commute long distances to the coastal belt.

Strikes in 1972 and 1984 focussed public attention on the problems caused by contraction of the industry, and caused deep feelings that are still very evident among many County Durham families. In the 1980s the closure of coastal mines began. In 1993 the last deep mines closed, those at Easington, Vane Tempest, Wearmouth and Westoe. Work to remove disused colliery structures, to landscape pit heaps, and to clean up the seashore, has meant that there is now little obvious evidence of this once-dominant industry. The miners’ skills, culture, language, and folklore live on in the communities left behind, but these will diminish with time.