

The Manchester Coalfields

The Museum holds the Lancashire Coal Mining Collection, which was previously held at the Lancashire Museum of Mining, Buile Hill Park, Salford. Much of the collection relates to the Manchester Coalfields.

In 1761 the Duke of Bridgewater opened the Bridgewater Canal to move coal from his mines at Worsley to the centre of Manchester. The Bridgewater Canal not only sparked the development of Manchester as the world's first industrial city, it also encouraged the exploitation of coalfields to the west of Manchester. Coal was crucial to the growth of the cotton industry in Manchester as it fuelled the steam engines that drove textile machinery. Many shafts were sunk and the coal was transferred to the canal by tramway. Very large amounts of coal were extracted and deeper pits soon became necessary. The coal fields were extensively modernised between the 1890s and 1914. Many of the existing pits were deepened and new pits were constructed to very great depths. Some of the deepest pits remained in use until the 1960s.

The economic depression of the 1920s hit the Manchester coalfields very hard. Many pits had already worked out their best coal and others were approaching the end of their reserves. The result was mass pit closures. By 1930 output from the Manchester coalfields was 15 million tonnes while parts of the West Manchester coalfields had stopped production completely.



Astley Green – The last Lancashire pit head

Manchester Coalfields Ltd was formed in 1929 to stem the decline of the coalfields. The new company was an amalgamation of the best of the existing mines and only a few mines survived outside of Manchester Coalfields Ltd. The enterprise was run by a young and enthusiastic general manager, Humphrey Browne. He worked hard not only to stop the decline in the Manchester coalfields but also to instigate improvements. At first some collieries were closed but planned closures always took account of social effects. The company pursued a policy of mechanisation. In the first 16 years of the company's existence the percentage of mechanically cut coal had increased from 17% to 98% with an annual output of 4 million tonnes. Mechanisation also affected the handling of coal and the use of ponies underground ceased in 1932. Workers at Manchester Coalfields Ltd pits were on average 1s 6d (7.5p) per shift better off than their colleagues at other pits.

Mining was a dangerous business. However, Manchester Coalfields was very generous in its provision of welfare facilities, such as pithead baths and canteens. It also had a very robust safety culture and saw training as a major priority. Mining was not just a brute force job; a great deal of intelligence was needed to do the job efficiently and safely. Some boy entrants had the opportunity to attend part-time education for up to four years at a local technical college and gain Mine Manager's certificates. After 1942 provision was made to send boys to university.

Production from the Lancashire coalfields as a whole had decreased to 12,500,000 tonnes by 1950 as the coal ran out. In the Manchester Coalfield Ltd pits production was down to 3,500,000 tonnes and it was recognised that the future of some of the collieries was in doubt. After nationalisation the National Coal Board progressively closed many of the older pits from 1958 onwards. The following decade saw the almost complete abandonment of the Manchester coalfields.

For more information:

Read Hayes, Geoffrey. *Collieries in the Manchester Coalfields*. Eindhoven, NL; De Archeologische Pers, 1993.
Challinor, R. *The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Frank Graham, 1972.
Malet, Hugh. *Bridgewater: the Canal Duke, 1736-1803*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977.
Hayes, Geoffrey. *Coal Mining*. Princes Risborough, UK: Shire Publications Ltd, 2000.