

**Commentary for PhD by Publication**

**The Neston Collieries, 1759-1855: An Industrial  
Revolution in Rural Cheshire**

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## **Declaration**

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this work are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

Word count: 10,522 words for the contextual analysis (excluding ancillary material, references/notes, Abstract and Bibliography).

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## 1. Abstract

This Commentary relates to a single published work, *The Neston Collieries 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire*.

The book uses a microhistorical approach to study the establishment, conduct and closure of two collieries (principally Ness Colliery) in Neston, Cheshire between 1759 and 1855. The period broadly coincides with the Industrial Revolution and the book seeks to identify how the owners and workers experienced this 'revolution'.

This Commentary gives an overview of the use of the microhistorical approach and contextualises the book with other studies with which it has common ground. It argues that the book is unusual, if not unique, in being a book-length microhistorical study of a British colliery during the Industrial Revolution, especially in its coverage of eighteenth-century developments. The book is also important in terms of the breadth of its subject-matter, giving an holistic view of the operational, commercial and social aspects of the works.

To achieve its microhistorical focus, extensive use was made of archival material and the Commentary explores the principal such material and how it was used. It will be seen that these sources were able to generate valuable insights into the collieries and the colliery community at both an aggregate and granular level. Granularity was particularly important in gaining insight into the lived experience of the colliers and their family members throughout the period in multiple facets of their lives.

The Commentary argues that, by virtue of its focus, the book demonstrates that the Neston collieries did not fit with many of the generalisations of 'macro' studies of the period. The Commentary also shows that detailed analysis was able to address misunderstandings and omissions of knowledge concerning Ness Colliery's significance.

It will be argued that the book has made a significant contribution to advancing the historiography of coal mining and the Industrial Revolution, particularly insofar as North-West England and North Wales are concerned.

## **2. Introduction**

This Commentary relates to a single published work, *The Neston Collieries 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* (hereafter *The Neston Collieries*), first published by the University of Chester in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The Commentary will demonstrate that the book is a significant, original and substantial body of work and that it is of PhD research standard. The writer was the sole author.

There were two adjacent collieries near Neston, west Cheshire, during the period in question – Ness Colliery and Little Neston Colliery. The former was by far the more significant, operating throughout the period covered in the book whereas the latter was in business for no more than about thirty years from c.1820. Ness Colliery was also much larger and widely connected and far more documentation about it survives. It was the main focus of the book and is the primary operation referred to in this Commentary.

### **Origins of the Book**

The writer has lived in the Neston area in west Cheshire for almost thirty years. His interest in the history of the area evolved over the years, not least through studying for a Masters in Landscape, Heritage and Society at the University of Chester completed in 2006, for which a Distinction was awarded. As part of this course the writer prepared a 20,000-word dissertation on the early collieries at Neston about which little had previously been written. This work related well to his studies of landscape development but his interest was also stimulated by his study of the Industrial Revolution and by his business background both professionally and as a lecturer in the subject. This research was necessarily limited by time and word count but it was soon apparent that there was scope for even further study of the subject.

In 2013, in view of his extensive knowledge of the collieries and their many points of interest, the writer was invited to write a book on them by the University of Chester Press. The work evolved over the following six years. It inevitably drew upon his previous study but, importantly, a flexible time limit and word count allowed the research to be far more comprehensive and analytical; it was also possible to place the findings much more fully

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries, 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* (Chester: University of Chester Press, 2019 and 2nd edn, 2020).

within their geographical and temporal context, not least in relation to the more-or-less contemporary Industrial Revolution. The final work amounted to about 166,000 words.

The draft book was subject to independent authoritative assessments by two well-qualified readers and then underwent editing by an experienced academic publisher. Following publication, the book has received several very positive reviews, not least for its scope and depth of analysis.<sup>2</sup>

There are seven sections to this Commentary. The next section, 'Research Rationale and Objectives' looks at what the writer was seeking to achieve in writing *The Neston Collieries*. Section 4, 'Historiography', seeks to place the book in the context of other writing on the Industrial Revolution and the coal industry, and microhistorical studies generally. 'Methodology', Section 5, considers the processes the writer went through to create the book and details some of the key work packages involved. The final substantial section, 'Coherence, Significance and Contribution to Knowledge' presents arguments for the importance and originality of the work insofar as it advances both the historiography of the Industrial Revolution through the lived experience of the individuals involved and understanding of regional industry and trade.

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<sup>2</sup> Reviews of *The Neston Collieries* by Anthony Annakin-Smith, by Graeme White, *Cheshire History*, 60 (2020-1): 177-8; Peter Carrington, *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*, 90 (2020): 7-11; Mike Nevell, *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 112 (2020): 216-7; Alan Crosby, *The Local Historian*, 51, 1 (January 2021): 81-2; James R. Evans, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 170 (2021): 173-4.

### 3. Research Objectives and Rationale

The principal objective of *The Neston Collieries* was to provide an holistic study of an individual mine (i.e. principally Ness Colliery) during the Industrial Revolution to see what this 'revolution' meant in reality in one particular locality; what was the lived experience of those connected with it? A published study of this sort had not been undertaken locally, nor in relation to collieries in nearby mining regions (Flintshire and South-west Lancashire) nor, to the writer's knowledge, anywhere else in the country. This aim was to be achieved by taking advantage of the diverse available sources of information about or related to the works to create a comprehensive, thematic microhistory of them.

Fitting the Neston works into the context of the Industrial Revolution was central to the project, relating events, as far as relevant and possible, to what was happening locally, regionally and nationally at that time. Overall, the aim was, wherever possible, to contextualise the 'micro' with relevant 'macro'. Investigation would cover not only operational aspects, which are often the main focus of mining histories, but also trading and transport methods, markets and customers served, and the working and social conditions of the mining community. The study also needed to recognise the inextricable interlinkages between these various strands to create a coherent whole. The intention was to create a narrative, telling the story of the mines, complemented by in-depth analysis advancing understanding of both the economic and social aspects of them and the associated community. István Szigjártó suggests that one of the characteristics and advantages of microhistories is that they are 'never isolated from the level of the general'; the diversity of contexts enable 'the fabric of society to be revealed'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, empirical evidence would be used to disentangle the local experience from generalisations about the Industrial Revolution. In turn, this would expand the historiography of this period by contributing to understanding of what it really meant to those involved, albeit in connection with a single location.

In addition to the above, a detailed, original study of the Neston collieries would be able to inform comparative understanding of mining operations elsewhere, for example in relation to coal output levels, pay rates, mining practice and accident data and enhance understanding

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<sup>3</sup> István Szigjártó, 'Four Arguments for Microhistory', *Rethinking History* 6, no. 2 (2002): 211.

of the development of regional, and even national, industry and trade. Moreover, those with more specific interests beyond the mining industry – for example business marketing, agricultural improvement or medical care – would also find original material which could inform their research.

A corollary of the main objective was that it could bring to wider attention a colliery which has largely been ignored by historians, regardless of their individual interests: historians of coal mining, of wider industrial development, of maritime trade and even those with a regional perspective have paid little attention to these works. It seems that the size and longevity of neighbouring mining areas, Neston's failure to fit into any neat regional categorisation (discussed in Section 6) and the relatively haphazard distribution of surviving sources (Section 5) has deterred historians from asking questions about the mines. Had they done so, they would have found that Ness Colliery grew almost overnight into an enterprise of considerable size compared to mines in neighbouring regions; it was also very significant in terms of the region's shipping exports. Moreover, the book showed that it was the first large industrial site in west Cheshire and had the area's first steam engine.<sup>4</sup> In addition, there were many occurrences there which are sufficiently unusual to deserve a permanent place in accounts of British coal mining. These include the use of wholly underground navigations for coal transport; serial acts of sabotage by Ness Colliery's aristocratic mine-owner and his successful prosecution; the use of a business logo at a time when such devices were very rare; and the innovative provision of colliery workers' medical cover via their employer's subscription to Chester Infirmary.<sup>5</sup>

The following sections of the Commentary will explore how the above objectives were met.

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<sup>4</sup> John Kanefsy, 'Early Engine Database', accessed 8 October 2021, <https://coalpitheath.org.uk/engines/index.php#searchDb>. The next in the west of the county was at Chester Steam Mill in 1785.

<sup>5</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 70-73, 37-44, 196-7 and 202-4.



## 4. Historiography

There is a considerable historiography around the Industrial Revolution. The phrase itself has been the subject of much debate given that changes during the era affected far more than industry and were not necessarily revolutionary in terms of speed or universality of their impact. As Nicholas Crafts has said, 'If interpreted very literally, then the phrase 'Industrial Revolution' can undoubtedly be extremely misleading'.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless it is convenient and widely understood shorthand for a period of great change in British society and was used, with an introductory caveat, throughout *The Neston Collieries*.<sup>7</sup>

Several historians, of whom a principal proponent was E. A. Wrigley, have argued that a defining feature of the Industrial Revolution was the transition from organic power (particularly wood and charcoal) to inorganic (coal and coke).<sup>8</sup> This transition was reflected in growing demand for coal: estimates by Flinn and Church suggest that British coal output rose approximately ten-fold in the period of operation of Neston's collieries.<sup>9</sup> The rate of adoption of coal use varied by industry but it allowed industries either to start expanding rapidly or to maintain growth in the face of challenges of suitability or availability of other fuel sources.<sup>10</sup> As domestic fuel users turned increasingly to coal, consumption grew constantly in that market too.<sup>11</sup>

Change in the coal industry itself was also necessary to meet growing demand. The introduction of the steam engine to facilitate drainage and the technology's subsequent development were core to the growth of coal production. However, that aside, the coal industry was not particularly progressive; it took many decades for there to be step-change developments in, say, ventilation, lighting and coal-cutting.<sup>12</sup> The miners and their families were, however, part of wider society, which was undergoing changes in, amongst other

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<sup>6</sup> N. F. R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth During the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 1 and 240-1.

<sup>8</sup> E. A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> M. W. Flinn (*The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 2, 1700–1830: The Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 26), estimated output of 5.3m tons in 1750 and 8.9m tons in 1775; Roy Church (*The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 3, 1830–1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 3) estimated 68.4m tons in 1850-1855.

<sup>10</sup> Emma Griffin. *A Short History of the Industrial Revolution*, 2nd edn. (London: Palgrave, 2018), 111-112.

<sup>11</sup> Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 252.

<sup>12</sup> Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 83-90 and 443-4.

things, mobility patterns, medical care, education and religious attitudes.<sup>13</sup> At the same time a new business culture was developing with increasing numbers of partnerships being formed, based upon co-operation and trust.<sup>14</sup>

Insofar as the Neston collieries are concerned, then, two main questions arose. Firstly, to what extent did they make their own contribution to the Industrial Revolution and reflect the changing scale and nature of coal demand? Secondly – a much broader question – to what extent did Neston’s collieries exemplify the revolution? This is a question not only about technical progress but also about the extent to which the owners, workers and other stakeholders experienced the processes of change that were going on elsewhere.

The microhistorical approach was well suited to tackling these questions. The role of the microhistorian, Jesse Paul has suggested, is ‘to gain understanding and insight into the properties of large-scale global processes and events by looking at the finely textured details of everyday life during the chosen period of time under study’.<sup>15</sup> Pat Hudson described the ‘hallmark’ of the method to be using ‘small-scale research to ask, and to answer, big questions’.<sup>16</sup> From a teleological twenty-first century perspective we can look back on what we call the Industrial Revolution and discuss the big events that characterised it. But what did it look like to the relatively ordinary worker or business-owner at the time? Or, as Paul says, can we ‘gain insight into how the large [was] felt by the small’?<sup>17</sup>

Microhistory has its roots in social history so that often, as Szijártó has suggested, studies relate to a ‘village community, a group of families, even an individual person’.<sup>18</sup> Hudson acknowledges, though, that microhistories can concern economic change, as well as social ones, over several generations.<sup>19</sup> Francesca Carnevali made microhistory a core element of

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<sup>13</sup> Griffin, *Short History*, 53-70; Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 242-20, 232-241; Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 435-8.

<sup>14</sup> Mokyr, *Lever of Riches*, 385-6.

<sup>15</sup> Jesse Paul, ‘What is Microhistory?’, *Social Evolution and History* 17, no. 2 (September 2018): 64.

<sup>16</sup> Pat Hudson, ‘Industrialization in Britain: the Challenge of Micro-History’, *Family and Community History* 2, no. 1 (1999): 5.

<sup>17</sup> Paul, ‘What is Microhistory?’: 65.

<sup>18</sup> István M. Szijártó. ‘Introduction: Against Simple Truths’. In *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* ed. Sigurður Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, (London: Routledge, 2013), 4, citing Ginzburg and Poni (1991).

<sup>19</sup> Hudson, ‘Industrialization in Britain’: 5.

her later work on economic and business history.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless there appear to be fewer microhistories focused on industrial or industrialising societies. One such work by Levine and Wrightson focused on the transformation of the Tyneside village of Whickham in the early modern period from an agricultural to industrial society.<sup>21</sup> A published account more contemporary to the Neston collieries was Rhiannon Thompson's article which she described as 'a microhistorical study of a rapidly developing parish in the Somerset coalfield'.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of their temporal or subject focus, though, what all microhistorical studies have in common is human agency. 'For microhistorians', says Szijártó, 'People who lived in the past are not merely puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors'.<sup>23</sup> Carnevali's view was that 'people matter' and that a bottom-up perspective was as valuable, if not more so, than a top-down (e.g. economic and political) one.<sup>24</sup> *The Neston Collieries*, then, sought to recognise those involved as individuals as far as possible – agents of change and continuity who are, to quote Lüdtke, 'simultaneously both objects of history and its subjects'.<sup>25</sup>

One benefit of microhistories, as Hudson has said, is to provide 'a welcome alternative and a complement to the generalizations of macro-level research'.<sup>26</sup> Thus they are an attempt to avoid the problem that 'implicit in aggregative work is the assumption that there is a national norm towards which regions and localities and different classes or occupational groups tend'.<sup>27</sup> National data, such as the growth in coal output stated earlier in this section, can therefore mask regional trends. Indeed, even regional trends – such as the roughly sixteen-

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<sup>20</sup> Paolo di Martino, Andrew Popp and Peter Scott, 'Editors' Conclusion' in *People, Places and Business Cultures, Essays in Honour of Francesca Carnevali* ed. Paolo di Martino, Andrew Popp and Peter Scott (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017), 225.

<sup>21</sup> David Levine and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560-1765* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Rhiannon Thompson, 'A Breed Apart? Class and Community in a Somerset Coal-Mining parish c.1750-1850', *Rural History* 16, no. 2 (2005), 137–159.

<sup>23</sup> Szijártó, 'Introduction', 5.

<sup>24</sup> Paolo di Martino, Andrew Popp and Peter Scott, 'Editors' Introduction: Economic History: As if People Mattered', in *People, Places and Business Cultures, Essays in Honour of Francesca Carnevali* ed. Paolo di Martino, Andrew Popp and Peter Scott, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017), 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Andrew Port, 'History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory', *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edn, Vol. 11, 109, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Hudson, 'Industrialization in Britain': 8.

<sup>27</sup> Hudson, 'Industrialization in Britain': 8.

fold growth in output of North Wales coal during Ness Colliery's period of operation (Neston being part of the Flintshire Coalfield) – was far from indicative of Neston's experience.<sup>28</sup>

More generally, the Industrial Revolution was far from being a single phenomenon that had a uniform impact across Britain's geography. Many places were not 'revolutionised' in any significant way. King and Timmins suggest that 'when we talk about Industrial Revolution, what we often mean is intense change in a few quite small areas'.<sup>29</sup> Cheshire is generally considered as being part of 'the North-West' which, in turn, is often viewed as being at the forefront of British industrialisation. Thus, for example, Jon Stobart has said 'The north-west can lay strong claim to be the first industrial region'.<sup>30</sup> But, as Stobart acknowledges, west Cheshire was rural and remained so until well into the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The Neston collieries, then, were an exception in the region – a small, industrial island in a largely agricultural landscape. Stobart states that in respect of manufacturing, trade and commerce, 'Cheshire and the southern part of Lancashire taken together appear to have formed a reasonably coherent economic entity ... and an area of considerable interactive integrity'.<sup>32</sup> So, a question *The Neston Collieries* sought to answer, discussed in Section 6, was how did the works fit with Stobart's suggested trading and commercial pattern?

The Neston collieries – indeed any business – necessarily had relationships with other businesses and individuals i.e. they were part of a trading network to a greater or lesser extent. Such networks have attracted increasing research interest over the past decade or so, often focused on individual merchants. Sheryllynne Haggerty's study of Liverpool traders' networks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is one example.<sup>33</sup> She defines a network as 'a group or groups of people that form associations with the explicit or implicit

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<sup>28</sup> Flinn (*British Coal Industry*, 26) estimated output of 80,000 tons in 1750 and 110,000 tons in 1775; Church (*British Coal Industry*, 3) estimated 1.6m tons in 1850-1855.

<sup>29</sup> Steven King and Geoffrey Timmins, *Making Sense of the Industrial Revolution: English Economy and Society 1700-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Jon Stobart, *The First Industrial Region: North-West England, c.1700-60* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004), 32. Whilst the book's primary focus is on the period to 1760 it often considers developments up to and sometimes beyond 1800 i.e. spanning Ness Colliery's most productive years.

<sup>31</sup> Stobart, *First Industrial Region*, 43-4; A. D. M. Phillips and C. B. Phillips, *New Historical Atlas of Cheshire* (Chester: Cheshire County Council, 2002), 66-71. Chester itself had a multiplicity of small industries in the eighteenth century but nothing of any great scale.

<sup>32</sup> Stobart, *First Industrial Region*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Sheryllynne Haggerty, 'Networks', in *'Merely for Money'? Business Culture in the British Atlantic 1750-1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 161-197.

expectation of mutual long-term economic benefit'.<sup>34</sup> These networks emerged as part of a growing business culture. Haggerty notes that during the eighteenth century the 'cult of commerce became an increasingly important part of being British'.<sup>35</sup> She adds that 'Risk, trust, reputation, obligation and networks were the "institutional elements" of this successful business culture. All these elements were both dependent on, and played out in, the networks in which these men were all part'.<sup>36</sup> This raises the issue, again discussed in Section 6, of how this business culture and the growth of networks manifested itself at Neston.

It is, perhaps, axiomatic to say that just as all places did not experience the Industrial Revolution equally so all individuals did not do so equally either. Even for those who were in a direct chain of involvement with facilitating this revolution – such as colliers – the question arises as to what extent they experienced 'revolution' or any form of profound change; what was the lived experience for these people?

There is a considerable historiography around social change in the Industrial Revolution, though rather less which is specific to coal-mining.<sup>37</sup> John Benson's published one such work, with his social history of British miners in the nineteenth century, published in 1970. His 'major aim' was 'to challenge the stereotype of the thriftless and irresponsible miner' and concluded that 'miners and their families were far more thrifty and responsible than is generally allowed'.<sup>38</sup> The temporal overlap of Benson's work with *The Neston Collieries* is limited, though, with his having rather more material on the later part of the century than the former and, given his chosen time frame, very little prior to then. Similarly, Angela John's pioneering work on female mine-workers had a Victorian focus.<sup>39</sup> There is considerable material on social change, as well as other topics, in the most recent wide-ranging publication concerning the industry's history. However, as its title indicates, the six-volume *Coal in Victorian Britain* again has limited temporal overlap with the Neston works – it takes a post-

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<sup>34</sup> Haggerty, 'Merely for Money?', 164.

<sup>35</sup> Haggerty, 'Merely for Money?', 235, citing Linda Colley.

<sup>36</sup> Haggerty, 'Merely for Money?', 236.

<sup>37</sup> For example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz 1963); Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn, A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2014); and *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950*, ed. F. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century, a Social History* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), 4 and 215.

<sup>39</sup> Angela John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

1830 'long Victorian view' with occasional consideration of earlier matters but in 'many' cases using 1850 as the start point.<sup>40</sup> The 1830s marked the start of growing interest in miners' welfare with associated legislation (e.g. The Mines and Collieries Act, 1842) and increasing exercise of workers' power reflected in growing unionisation; there were also new applications found for coal in manufacturing and for transport.<sup>41</sup> Such developments generated significant new information sources for future researchers some of which were of value to this writer. However, *The Neston Collieries* also sought to explore the lived experience of earlier decades. Records were more sparse but valuable sources included Quarter Session records and the records of Chester Infirmary which appear to have been little explored. More broadly, one way to counter the relative paucity of earlier material was to use 'total reconstitution' to piece together aspects of colliers' lives – discussed in the next section.

One interesting study of change in the earlier period was Thompson's article on a newly-established Somerset mining community, mentioned earlier. In it she explores the demographics and mobility patterns of the colliery community and, in particular, discusses their sense of community identity. John Langton has also produced some relevant work. His *Geographical Change and Industrial Revolution: Coalmining in South-West Lancashire, 1590-1799* looked at 'the welding of scattered economic pockets [of coal mining] into a functionally coherent economic region' over the course of two centuries.<sup>42</sup> The work's time period partly overlaps with that of *The Neston Collieries* and Langton considers many topics in common with the book including the size and location of his selected area's collieries (170 or so pits), the markets they served, colliers' earnings and demographic data drawn from, for example, parish registers. As such, it was referenced as a comparator in *The Neston Collieries* on several occasions. However, it does not seek to be a microhistory of the area or of any individual colliery and does not have the same granular level of detail, particularly regarding social

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<sup>40</sup> John Benson, gen. ed., *Coal in Victorian Britain* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012); Quentin Outram, *The Historiography of the British Coal Industry*, University of Leeds Business School Research Paper no. 16-04: 45, accessed 17 July 2021, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2694975](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2694975).

<sup>41</sup> The Mines and Collieries Act had been preceded by a parliamentary report by the Children's Employment Commission. There had also been reports on Accidents in Mines (1835) and on Employment of Children in Factories (1833) which included consideration of conditions in coal mines. There was a 'burst of activity' (Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 398) following the repeal of the Anti-Combination Acts in 1824; Raymond Challinor (*The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners* (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1972), 30) describes the formation of The Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland in 1842 as 'an important landmark in the history of British trade unionism'; Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 450 and 454.

<sup>42</sup> John Langton, *Geographical Change and Industrial Revolution: Coalmining in South-West Lancashire, 1590-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.

conditions. Langton also produced a later paper on migration patterns of south Lancashire miners.<sup>43</sup> Section 6 looks further at Thompson's and Langton's work in relation to *The Neston Collieries*.

None of the texts cited in this section make any mention of Neston. More generally, the Neston collieries have been largely overlooked by coal industry historians whose work has tended to focus on larger, longstanding coal-producing areas such as the North-East.<sup>44</sup> And, of course, despite being part of the Flintshire Coalfield, Neston's geographical position means that it has not fallen into the scope of any study of Welsh industry. In any event the Flintshire Coalfield was one of the smallest in the country and, while there have been published articles and occasional fuller studies of individual mines or periods there, a comprehensive account – with or without reference to Neston – has yet to be written.<sup>45</sup> Local studies also pay Neston little attention. The five-volume *A Victoria History of the County of Chester* allocates just a passing mention to the Neston works despite their various points of significance.<sup>46</sup>

The general failure to recognise the Neston collieries' importance means that their contribution to the region's economy has also been widely misunderstood. Chester was a port with significant maritime trade in the period under review and Ness Colliery was at the heart of it for many years. However, no writer or researcher has recognised this, wrongly suggesting that Flintshire was the principal source of the regions' coal exports in the second half of the eighteenth century. To give just two examples (more are listed in the Note below), Armour's doctoral thesis on 'The Trade of Chester and the State of the Dee Navigation 1600–1800' mentions Flintshire coal several times but refers to coal from Ness just once, almost as an afterthought; and Flinn attributes coal exports from Chester only to 'North Wales'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> John Langton, 'People from the Pits: the Origins of Colliers in Eighteenth-Century South-West Lancashire', in *Migration, Mobility and Modernisation*, ed. David Siddle (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 70–89.

<sup>44</sup> To give just one example, when searching for 'coal', eighteen of the top twenty articles in the journal *Northern History* relate to the North-East (sorted by relevance).

<sup>45</sup> Re size, estimates by Flinn (*British Coal Industry*, 26) and Church (*British Coal Industry*, 3) show that North Wales (including Denbighshire) was almost always the smallest region of British coal production in the period 1750–1850. As examples of specific studies see, for example, Lewis Jones, *The Coal Mines of Mostyn* (Rhewl, Flintshire: Lewis Jones, 1997) and Kenneth Lloyd Gruffydd, 'The Development of the Coal Industry in Flintshire to 1740' (M.A. diss., University College of North West Wales, Bangor, 1981).

<sup>46</sup> B. E. Harris, ed., *A History of the County of Chester, Volume 1, Physique, Pre-History, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Domesday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 223; C. Armour, 'The Trade of Chester and the State of the Dee Navigation 1600–1800' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1956), 258; also 279 and 281. Other sources which make no mention of

The historiography of the coal industry is considerable but *The Neston Collieries* has sought to use microhistorical techniques to add to existing understanding of the period by shedding light on the commercial and social aspects of the Neston mines, as well as operational ones, in a study which is original in both form and content.

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Ness include Robert Craig in 'Some Aspects of the Trade and Shipping of the River Dee in the Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 114 (1962): 99-128; P. F. Skidmore, 'The Maritime Economy of North West England in the Later Eighteenth Century' (PhD thesis, University of Greenwich, 2009); and A. H. Dodd 'The North Wales Coal Industry During the Industrial Revolution', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 84 (1929): 197-228 and *The Industrial Revolution in North Wales*, 3rd edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1971), 197-226. The last are an otherwise-valuable book and journal article on North Wales during the Industrial Revolution but they give no indication of the contribution of Ness to the stated tonnages of Chester's coal exports to which he refers. Sidney Pollard ('A New Estimate of British Coal Production, 1750-1850', *Economic History Review*, 33, no. 2, (1980): 226) gives export figures from the Dee Estuary drawing only upon Dodd's data for North Wales.



## 5. Methodology

It has been said that microhistories are built upon the accumulation of ‘little facts’.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, research for *The Neston Collieries* required the identification of as much relevant archival and other information containing such facts as possible. Keith Wrightson used the term ‘total history’ for this ‘assembly of every discoverable record relating to a particular location’.<sup>49</sup> However, the risk of this approach, he warned, is that it ends up with a ‘history of trivia’. While, then, it was necessary to be wide-ranging in the search for sources it would also be necessary to be highly selective about what material should or should not be included in the work. The chosen material had to do one or more of meaningfully advancing the narrative of the mines, facilitating analysis of significant aspects of their operations or shedding light on the lived experience of those involved.

The key initial task was to find as many primary sources as possible which directly concerned the Neston collieries or which contained information on them as part of some broader subject matter. The search for this material was primarily undertaken using online and offline databases; in the end relevant material was found in nearly thirty repositories. Searchable, online databases covering, say, census information and newspapers also yielded many worthwhile results. The survival of relevant material is serendipitous and inconsistent over particular time periods or on particular topics. However, in the end, around 400 items have been cited with many more reviewed but not included.

For colliery-specific information to have real meaning, it was necessary to contextualise it with wider happenings in the region and country (and, on occasions, internationally). Sometimes, this material was used to provide comparators to recognise homogeneity and heterogeneity (e.g. re literacy rates);<sup>50</sup> on other occasions it was used to identify causality (e.g. threats of war and insurrection led to smuggling opportunities in colliery loads).<sup>51</sup> Sometimes such material could be obtained from primary sources, such as production and cost accounts accessed for the mines in Orrell, Lancs. and those in North Wales.<sup>52</sup> On other

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<sup>48</sup> István Szijártó, ‘Four Arguments for Microhistory’: 209.

<sup>49</sup> Cited by Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 259.

<sup>50</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 230-231.

<sup>51</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 179-180.

<sup>52</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 103.

occasions, though, secondary sources were used – in total around 340 books and articles were referenced.

The book was structured thematically. Chapters were organised into sections of related material and, generally, the contents explored chronologically. Much of the financial, production, trading and demographic information was quantitative, based upon the collation of data from diverse sources, often in large quantities (discussed below). Presentation of this material lent itself to the use of tables (thirty-seven in total) and, occasionally, graphs. Every table and graph was supported by qualitative analysis and, in many instances, was related to information drawn from other comparable contexts e.g. in relation to North Wales or south Lancashire. The mixed method research approach combined the objectivity of well-sourced data with the opportunity for explanation and discussion, suited to the handling of both economic and social material and supporting a ‘total history’ approach to the subject matter. It was important not to seek to over-interpret the available data. For example, the method of calculating profitability in the period in question was very different from today and not necessarily consistent between organisations. Thus the book describes a profit at Ness in 1769-1770 as ‘appearing’ to be better than comparators, with an endnote explanation.<sup>53</sup> One reviewer commented positively on the usage and extent of data but added ‘Rightly, conclusions from the various analyses are drawn cautiously’.<sup>54</sup>

The multiplicity of sources used and the very broad scope of the work meant that synthesis was an essential and constant feature of the work: arguments needed to be assembled from assorted sources of evidence and interconnections needed to be recognised between material on different facets of the mines. This synthesis could take many forms but, to give one example, the number of colliers recorded as having a child baptised – used as an indicator of the relative number of employed men, given that little explicit data is available on employee numbers – was shown to relate well to the known fortunes of Ness Colliery for most of its life.<sup>55</sup>

Amongst the research work undertaken were two particularly large, discrete work packages. They were identified at an early stage as each offering a significant original contribution to

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<sup>53</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 20-1 and 270.

<sup>54</sup> Evans, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 174.

<sup>55</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 91 and Fig. 6.2.

the holistic view of the collieries and were to provide extensive quantitative and qualitative material for the book. Both required extensive synthesis in their collation and interpretation.

One of these related to the colliery workforce and their families. In order to gain insight into the changing size and structure of the colliery workforce and into the working and social lives of those involved the writer sought to collate all surviving information about every known worker at the Neston collieries and their family members. The technique of reconstructing historical data on family membership from records in parish registers – family reconstitution – has been used in many studies to help understand the structure and development of historic communities.<sup>56</sup> However, criticisms have been made of it. For example, Steven Ruggles, writing about Wrigley et al's 1997 book on family reconstitution, notes various problems including selection bias (i.e. the lack of representation of certain types of individual such as migrants and non-conformists) and under-registration of vital events until required to do so upon the establishment of the General Register Office in 1837.<sup>57</sup>

Thompson, in her Somerset study, noted that 'community reconstruction projects are methodologically challenging' and that 'when communities experienced rapid turnover of population and significant structural change, techniques of family reconstitution and life history analysis gain an added layer of complication'.<sup>58</sup> These challenges applied at Neston too. There was considerable mobility of members of the mining community into and out of the Neston. Moreover the colliers' arrival changed the composition of Neston's populace almost overnight but they were not always readily identifiable in parish records as entries did not always specify the individual's occupation meaning. More generally, a collier will only appear in parish registers if they experienced some form of recordable event, and not all will have done so.

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<sup>56</sup> Reay (*Microhistories*, xix) cites several English studies by Wrigley, Schofield and others as well as 'seminal' work in Germany by J. E Knodel. See also Gill Newton, 'Recent Developments in Making Family Reconstitutions', *Local Population Studies* 87 (2011): 84, 86 and 88.

<sup>57</sup> Steven Ruggles, 'The Limitations of English Family Reconstitution: English Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580-1837', *Continuity, Change and Chance* 14, no. 1 (1999): 105-130; E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E Oeppen and R. S. Schofield, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580-1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, 'A Breed Apart', 137.

*The Neston Collieries* acknowledges the potential limitations and omissions of community reconstruction.<sup>59</sup> However, one way to mitigate these issues is by extending the analysis to ‘total reconstitution’, as Reay termed it, by adding information from other documentary sources.<sup>60</sup> Thus, *The Neston Collieries* has accessed as broad a range of sources as is possible – not just parish registers and, from 1841, census records, but also, to give just a few examples, militia lists, poor law records, newspaper articles and death certificates. Where Neston’s colliers had migrated from or went to other areas, data was accessed from non-local sources such as the census records of Flintshire, Lancashire and Staffordshire. Some of the sources were available online (principally parish registers and censuses) but many others were archival. Commercial genealogical websites were often very useful but, for accuracy, the writer invariably referred to images of the original documents rather than transcribed material. Online sources also varied considerably in terms of the comprehensiveness of their coverage: the geographical scope of the commercial databases varied requiring multiple providers to be used, particularly to ensure coverage of North Wales. Furthermore, none included, for example, the register of the chapel of Puddington Hall, Ness Colliery’s owners’ local mansion, which was to prove valuable in terms of insight into religious attitudes.<sup>61</sup> Thus, use of this source revealed that, despite the chasm in social status between mine-owning baronet Sir Thomas Stanley and the colliers, he allowed use of his hall’s private chapel for baptisms of their children – it seems that Stanley’s desire to see members of the mining community embrace Catholicism, in a period of growing nonconformism amongst them, trumped any social division.<sup>62</sup> Detailed analysis of the records also shows that some of the colliers were, apparently, indiscriminate in their use of Catholic and Anglican places of worship for baptisms.<sup>63</sup>

The output of the above work was two Excel spreadsheets recording, so far, 605 individual workers, 508 wives and 2,040 children – in total over 3,100 lines of information on the larger

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<sup>59</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, several pages indexed under ‘parish registers, as information source’, but principally 198-9.

<sup>60</sup> Reay, *Microhistories*, xxi. Pamela Sharpe, who undertook a similar exercise in relation to one of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population’s study areas also used the term in ‘Total Reconstitution Method: a Tool for Class-Specific Study’, *Local Population Studies*, 44 (1990): 41-52.

<sup>61</sup> The register is available at Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, ref. ERC 6 and spans 1783 to 1843.

<sup>62</sup> Annakin-Smith, 225.

<sup>63</sup> Annakin-Smith, 225.

spreadsheet.<sup>64</sup> Whilst there is no claim that the record is perfect, the considerable number of identified individuals nevertheless allows worthwhile qualitative and quantitative analysis of a significant section of a mining community in aggregate over time. Equally, the nature of the material allows tracking of many of the individuals over time too – giving insight into their family development, careers and geographical mobility. There were two further benefits of this reconstitution package. Firstly it helped address the risk of imbalance of coverage from the fact that surviving documents – correspondence, wills, estate information and so on – typically relate to the owners of the mines or other elites connected to them, rather than the ‘ordinary’ workers. Secondly, it often gave insight into the lives of the early colliers about whom, as noted earlier, there is less surviving documentary material. Thus, for example, it was only possible to piece together the story of basket-making apprentice Peter Robinson and his family in the 1770s and ‘80s, used to illustrate the operation of the Poor Laws, by assembling data from eight different sources in three locations.<sup>65</sup> This ability to piece together elements of the story of individual colliers and family members was a critical component of *The Neston Collieries*: a feature of microstudies is that they often seek to give a voice to the ‘marginalized’.<sup>66</sup> There are virtually no surviving documents where one hears the voice of Neston’s colliers directly so their experience often needed to be assembled from surviving fragments, as far as was possible, in this way.<sup>67</sup>

‘Total reconstitution’ allowed for analysis both at a granular level, looking at individuals, and in aggregate, looking at the population as a whole. A second large-scale package also allowed this granular-aggregate analysis, bringing fresh insights into the conduct and importance of the shipping trade (discussed later).

A key source here was the Exchequer ‘Kings Remembrancer Port Books’ for Chester, held at the National Archives.<sup>68</sup> These comprise a record of Chester’s inbound and outbound

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<sup>64</sup> Available at <http://www.nestoncollieries.org>.

<sup>65</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 213-4 and 333-4.

<sup>66</sup> Paul, ‘What is Microhistory?’, 64.

<sup>67</sup> The fullest accounts of words spoken by any colliers appear in testimony given by several men prior to the 1821 court case involving Thomas Cottingham and Sir Thomas Stanley (Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, DBC 261, ‘Cottingham v Stanley Bt.’). The material gives few clues, though, to the men’s personal lives. The few relevant records of the Wirral Union, administering the Poor Laws (Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, LGW 1/1-3, Proceedings of the Board of Guardians of the Wirral Union) are, perhaps, the most vivid record of individual lives but the notes are summaries of the administrators’ understanding and views rather than direct accounts by the recipients of relief.

<sup>68</sup> E 190 series. A list of the port books used is given in Appendix IV of *The Neston Collieries*.

overseas and coastwise shipping trade. The series runs from 1565 to 1774, thus partly overlapping Ness Colliery's important early years of operation. Generally known as just the 'port books', they contain information on, for example, the vessels, the merchants involved, the quantity and nature of goods carried, and ports of origin and destination. Occasionally they give details of unusual events involving particular vessels. Overall they give valuable detailed insight into Chester's British and international trade. About sixty port books were identified and reviewed in detail for *The Neston Collieries*, covering several thousand voyages both with and without coal; none had been digitised so it was necessary to use the originals. Details from every relevant voyage were extracted and aggregated numerical data compiled as appropriate. A few researchers have previously drawn upon the books' contents, some of them tabulating selected data. The most detailed published material is by Craig in his article on eighteenth-century Dee trade and shipping but his comments on Chester's coal exports, as a small part of his article, are still very limited.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the analysis in *The Neston Collieries* is the most extensive yet undertaken – certainly in relation to the final twenty years of the surviving accounts shortly before and after Ness Colliery's opening.

The contents of the port books were the most important single input to two chapters of *The Neston Collieries* with the data summarised in eleven tables supported by explanatory text. However, use of the port books is not without its problems: several are missing or are severely damaged making the content partly illegible. Both Armour and Pope in their doctoral theses on regional trade put forward a number of criticisms of the port books as research tools in particular relating to their comprehensiveness and accuracy.<sup>70</sup> The writer was alert to these issues but cross-checks with other sources, along with consideration of logic and consistency of the records, suggest that in relation to the specific time period and cargoes under consideration, they have not had a significant distorting effect on the findings.

There were two important corollaries to this work package. One was a consequence of the port books' routine failure to identify individual points of loading of the coal for export. The relevant books usually identified only the port of Chester as being the place of loading rather than specifically naming, say, Ness, or Mostyn in Flintshire. This omission therefore required

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<sup>69</sup> Craig, 'Aspects of the Trade and Shipping', 121-2.

<sup>70</sup> Armour, 'The Trade of Chester', 171-82 and D. Pope, 'Shipping and Trade in the Port of Liverpool' (PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 1980), 136-43.

the synthesis of information from multiple and diverse sources, other than the port books, which enabled a firm, previously-unrecognised conclusion to be reached that Ness was the principal place of loading in the late eighteenth century rather than any of the Welsh ports. An important contributor to this conclusion was analysis of the state of the River Dee at the time, following its diversion in 1737 from the English side of the estuary to the Welsh one for much of its length. The variety of sources used for this particular aspect – including customs records, maps and contemporary written accounts – and the consequent written commentary and conclusions add new insight to this topic (see Section 6).

A second corollary of the port books' analysis was that, to give any meaning to the data on destinations of coal voyages, it was necessary to explore *why* the coal was being carried there i.e. who the buyers were and why. The intermediated nature of much of the coal business at that time meant that information on specific end-users was usually not available, although some useful exceptions were found. Nevertheless, by synthesising information from diverse primary and secondary sources, it was possible to identify and evidence the nature and, to some extent, scale of the rapidly evolving demand for coal for both household and industrial needs, particularly in North Wales and Ireland. This work gave an economic rationale for the collieries' establishment and continuation.

An important feature of the microhistorical narrative, according to Giovanni Levi in his influential 'On Microhistory' is that 'of incorporating into the main body of the narrative the procedures of research itself, the documentary limitations, techniques of persuasion and interpretive constructions'.<sup>71</sup> Throughout *The Neston Collieries* the writer has sought to be open concerning his sources and their limitations so that the reader, too, can become actively involved in understanding and interpreting the research process.

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<sup>71</sup> Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory' in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 109-110.

## 6. Coherence, Significance and Contribution to Knowledge

This section of the Commentary seeks to demonstrate the ‘coherence, significance and contribution to knowledge’ of the work i.e. that it is logically cohesive, is important in one or more ways and that it contains worthwhile original information which advances understanding of its subject matter.<sup>72</sup>

### The Microhistorical Approach

One point which is common to these three aspects for consideration is the adoption of a microhistorical approach to the research. Broadly spanning the period of the Industrial Revolution, the book sought to identify what this ‘revolution’ really meant for those involved in one particular locality and to identify how that reality differed from generalisations often applied to the era. This necessitated examination of a wide range of sources to enable production of a detailed microhistory of the economic as well as social aspects of the target businesses in a book-length study. Wickham has stated that ‘There are not that many examples of full-blown economic microhistories’.<sup>73</sup> In particular, there are certainly few, if any, pertaining to the coal industry in the period concerned.

A critical aspect of the approach was that it had to be holistic as every aspect of the works was interdependent with others: for example, geological conditions and technological developments affected production volumes; production capability influenced recruitment and mobility patterns; and trading arrangements influenced surface infrastructure. This point underpins the overall coherence of the text. Continued operation of the collieries (and indeed any comparable enterprise) relied on the successful integration of, and with, multiple endogenous and exogenous factors – operational, societal and commercial. Failure to recognise any particular facet of the mines would mean that any study would inevitably be incomplete. The approach required thinking which transcended historical subject boundaries

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<sup>72</sup> ‘Coherence, significance and contribution to knowledge’ as stated in University of Portsmouth, ‘What is a PhD by publication?’, accessed 16 January 2022, [https://www.port.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-research/research-degrees/phd-by-publication#:~:text=A%20PhD%20by%20publication%20is,publishing\)%20before%20registering%20with%20u.](https://www.port.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-research/research-degrees/phd-by-publication#:~:text=A%20PhD%20by%20publication%20is,publishing)%20before%20registering%20with%20u.)

<sup>73</sup> Chris Wickham, ‘Economic History and Microhistory’ in *People, Places and Business Cultures, Essays in Honour of Francesca Carnevali* ed. Paolo di Martino, Andrew Popp and Peter Scott (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017), 199.



– this was not just, say, industrial history, business history, maritime history or social history but total history at a microhistorical level.

A further point of importance is that, given that the Neston mines have been all but ignored by past writers and researchers, almost all the material is original and sheds new light on each topic under consideration both in relation to its local relevance and its wider contextualisation.

In terms of its approach, scope and detailed content, then, the book is significant in breaking much new ground. All the academic reviews have been very positive with all or large sections of the work being described, amongst other things, as ‘remarkable’, ‘outstandingly ambitious’, ‘an important addition to the literature’ and ‘exemplary’.<sup>74</sup> White, considering the scholarship demonstrated, as well as the book’s presentation and supporting material (including the website) asks, ‘Is this the way forward for academic publications in general?’.<sup>75</sup>

While the book’s coverage spans 100 years, a particular point of significance is that there is much material on Ness Colliery’s early years – a period in British coal mining about which less has generally been written. Moreover, the Neston works were not in a long-established mining area such as Lancashire or the North-East; Ness Colliery was a newly-formed business established on an apparently virgin site. The book is thus, in part, a case study in business and community creation at the dawning of the industrial age. This section will first consider the book’s contribution to knowledge and significance in relation to the collieries as businesses; a subsequent section will consider social aspects of the mines.

### **The Colliery Businesses**

In terms of initial ownership structure, the book shows that Ness Colliery was an exception to the more common business models.<sup>76</sup> Neither solely gentry-owned nor leased to one of the new breed of industrial entrepreneurs, the business combined the interests of both types of men, as well as local yeomen.<sup>77</sup> The bonds which bound these men were honour and trust

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<sup>74</sup> Respectively, Reviews of *The Neston Collieries* by Crosby, 81; Crosby, 81; Carrington, 7; Nevell, 216 – also Crosby, 81 (‘the exemplar for future historians to follow’) and Carrington, 7 (‘a model of its kind’).

<sup>75</sup> White, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 177.

<sup>76</sup> Both Flinn (*British Coal Industry*, 38-9) and J. V. Beckett (‘Land Ownership and Estate Management’, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume 6: 1750-1850* ed. G. E. Mingay, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 573) discuss various business models, none of which mirrors that at Neston.

<sup>77</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 17-19.

underpinned by personal reputation – all prerequisites to important business relationships of the period.<sup>78</sup> In time, though, the external parties fell away so that, counter to trends elsewhere, by the early nineteenth century the land-owning Stanley family were the sole proprietors, maybe unwilling and quite possibly unable to divest themselves of the business.<sup>79</sup>

The initial investors may have had varying degrees of personal involvement but, between them, these men were agents of change, innovators in a newly industrialising world who, to an extent, were having to make it up as they went along, making decisions about, for example, recruitment strategy and capital investment requirements. The latter included the expensive new technology of steam engines. Insofar as these are concerned, this writer's new information on engine installation at Ness and in North Wales has informed John Kanefsky's recently-established Early Engine Database, contributing to his ongoing work on the speed and extent of the diffusion of the technology in Britain, in turn helping advance understanding of Britain's early industrialisation.<sup>80</sup> The new colliery's marketing strategy also needed to be determined. *The Neston Collieries* includes a section on marketing communication techniques, a topic which has had very little attention elsewhere.<sup>81</sup> A notable finding was Ness Colliery's use of branding by introducing an identifying logo; this was a remarkable piece of business history which deserves to be more widely recognised.

As the book sought to identify the reality of the Industrial Revolution, one pressing question was whether there was, indeed, a 'revolution' at all? Joel Mokyr, when talking of technological innovation during the Industrial Revolution, drew a distinction between what he termed a 'macroinvention' – 'an invention without clear parentage and representing a clear break from previous technique' and 'microinventions' which 'modify and improve [a macroinvention] to make it functional without altering its concept'; he adds 'both are very much part of the story [of the Industrial Revolution]'.<sup>82</sup> The Ness consortium's decision to establish a colliery in 1759 in a wholly rural corner of Cheshire is analogous to Mokyr's concept of a macroinvention. This

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<sup>78</sup> Mokyr, *Lever of Riches*, 383-85; David Sunderland, *Social Capital, Trust and the Industrial Revolution, 1780-1880* (London: Routledge, 2007), 176

<sup>79</sup> Langton, *Geographical Change*, 217-19; Beckett, 'Land Ownership and Estate Management', 573-4.

<sup>80</sup> John Kanefsky, 'Early Engine Database'.

<sup>81</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 195-7. For example, Flinn (*British Coal Industry*, 254-285), includes a section on 'The organisation of coal marketing' but this is largely focused on the structural aspects of coal distribution rather than on marketing communications.

<sup>82</sup> Joel Mokyr, *Lever of Riches*, 291, 294 and 297.

move was, to use his phrase, a ‘major discontinuous change’, unrelated to anything that had gone on there before.<sup>83</sup> However *The Neston Collieries* shows that this ‘macro’ change was complemented by a series of subsequent ‘micro’ changes in order for the colliery to grow, compete and (later) forestall closure, for example the introduction of underground canals, developments in subterranean wagon haulage and the move to the Lancashire System of coal-working. From an operational and commercial perspective, then, the book demonstrates that the reality of this lengthy ‘revolution’ at Neston’s works was, effectively, of a single ‘revolutionary’ moment, early in the new period of industrialisation, followed by incremental changes in one way or another over the following decades: this was evolution rather than revolution.

A related point is that whilst there is, then, evidence for both initial and subsequent innovation, for much of the time the status quo prevailed: in general, today was much like yesterday and would be much like tomorrow. As the microhistorian Magnússon has said, it is important to ask, ‘What takes place when nothing happens?’.<sup>84</sup> Thus *The Neston Collieries* unapologetically covers the routine as well as the new or extraordinary – pay rates (information on which is generally ‘elusive at the best of times’), underground working methods and shipping operations, to give just a few examples.<sup>85</sup> The book sheds new light on these and other topics – for example, very little appears to have previously been written about colliery farms but the book discusses the form, equipment, purpose and benefits of the farm at Ness Colliery.<sup>86</sup> Such material on quotidian activity emphasises that continuity was as much a feature of the Industrial Revolution as change. Overall, such information advances knowledge and, supported by the book’s comprehensive index and publicly-available database, provides a basis for further research and comparison by others. To give one example, Peter Kirby, in his study of ‘Attendance and Work Effort in the Great Northern Coalfield’ mentions that ‘Regional and local work records can throw valuable new light on [this topic] where national data do not exist’.<sup>87</sup> *The Neston Collieries’* information on working

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<sup>83</sup> Mokyr, *Lever of Riches*, 291.

<sup>84</sup> Sigurður Magnússon, ‘Far-reaching Microhistory: the Use of Microhistorical Perspective in a Globalized World’, *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017): 322.

<sup>85</sup> Evans, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 174. Flinn’s collation of ‘all available random quotations of hewers’ wage rates’ is notably sparse (*British Coal Industry*, 387-9).

<sup>86</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 55-57.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Kirby, ‘Attendance and Work Effort in the Great Northern Coalfield’, *The Economic History Review* 65, no. 3 (2012): 976.

patterns, supplemented by analysis of marriage dates in the database (a form of analysis which Kirby uses to indicate days off work) can provide just such material.<sup>88</sup> In his review of *The Neston Collieries* Carrington notes the book's value to industrial historians 'as a source to be quarried for useful comparative data';<sup>89</sup> similarly Evans says the 'background and carefully assembled microdata ... will undoubtedly appeal to scholarly researchers'.<sup>90</sup>

### **Coal Output**

One of the questions posed earlier was 'To what extent did the Neston collieries make their own contribution to the Industrial Revolution?'. There was never any expectation by the writer that a largely-forgotten colliery on a small coalfield would have been a major contributor to Britain's total coal output. However, the absence of any published quantitative data meant that it was impossible to make even a rough estimate of the Neston collieries' contribution to regional production (however one chooses to define 'region'). The book's original analysis shows that with estimated production levels of up to 24,000 tonnes in its early years, Ness Colliery was one of the largest mines in comparison with those in nearby North Wales and South Lancashire.<sup>91</sup> The colliery was, thus, regionally significant but, as noted earlier, it has been all but ignored by historians to date. The information has also specifically supplemented knowledge of production of the Flintshire Coalfield in the period in question: the little available data for Ness Colliery's main years of production are fragmentary and the only published overall estimates to date, by Flinn, are based on very broad assumptions rather than commercial or official specifics.<sup>92</sup> Data has been produced in the book on actual or estimated output at Ness for several years, especially in the 1770s and 1820s, with indication of relative production levels for many others.<sup>93</sup> As Lucy Newton has said of the microhistorical method, the 'bottom up approach to research through the consultation of a variety of

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<sup>88</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 100-3.

<sup>89</sup> Carrington, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Evans, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 173.

<sup>91</sup> Annakin-Smith, 21.

<sup>92</sup> Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 26. Pollard ('British Coal Production': 216) groups North and South Wales' production, telling us nothing about the Flintshire Coalfield specifically.

<sup>93</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 21, 30, 251 and Chapter 2, passim.

dispersed and disparate sources' helps to 'avoid the limitations imposed by official statistics (or lack of them)'.<sup>94</sup>

Discussion of the Industrial Revolution tends to be framed in terms of progress such as development of new technology or growth in output. However *The Neston Collieries* shows that failure was also a feature of contemporary business experience. For example, the aborted early apparent attempt to bring what would have been one of Britain's earliest canals to Ness reflects both optimism about the opportunities of the new industrial age tempered with realism about what was actually viable.<sup>95</sup> More generally, the story of the Neston collieries is ultimately one of failure. Although coal output of the Flintshire Coalfield and in Britain generally grew enormously during the period of Ness Colliery's operation, the aggregative generalisations mask the reality that the Neston works' story in the nineteenth century was effectively one of long decline. This was not a mirror of the 'improvidence' of which serial 'get-rich-quick' Flintshire mine-owners were accused;<sup>96</sup> the Neston mines were largely in the same family's hands for almost a century but their fate was subject to uncontrollable, exogenous factors – diminishing worthwhile coal seams coupled with the rapidly vanishing opportunity to ship coals away by water.

### **Regions and Networks**

The Neston collieries were an isolated example of industrialisation in west Cheshire so an important facet of the book was exploring to what extent the business had relationships beyond the local vicinity.

A key finding was that, although the new business was situated in the important seat of industry known as 'the North-West', the Neston collieries had little engagement with others in that region: there is no evidence of Neston's coal being carried on the canal networks, of serving the North-West's major industries or of supplying the populace of Lancashire or even inland Cheshire with coal. They do not fit neatly into Stobart's suggestion of Cheshire and southern Lancashire forming a 'coherent economic entity'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the Neston collieries do

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<sup>94</sup> Lucy Newton and Francesca Carnevali, "'Made in England": Making and Selling the Piano, 1851–1914' in *People, Places and Business Cultures, Essays in Honour of Francesca Carnevali* ed. Paolo di Martino, Andrew Popp and Peter Scott (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017), 225.

<sup>95</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 148-9.

<sup>96</sup> Dodd, 'North Wales Coal Industry', 216.

<sup>97</sup> Stobart, *First Industrial Region*, 33.

not fit neatly into any obvious concept of regionality and maybe that is one reason why they have tended to be overlooked. The collieries' connections with Lancashire were mostly limited to the comings and goings of individual colliers; the works were geologically part of the Flintshire Coalfield but geographically cut off from it; and they lay in the administrative county of Cheshire but were an isolated industrial development. King and Timmins note that the establishment over time of mining in 'peripheral areas' of the country complicates the notion of regionality of industrialisation.<sup>98</sup> A further layer of complexity is added at Neston as its coal industry came and went twice in the period 1759-1927 so the town's industrialisation – of which the mines were the sole significant manifestation – was not a permanent feature. It is unsurprising that King and Timmins comment that the issue of defining regions – including their boundaries, stability and typicality – has 'tortured generations of English historians'.<sup>99</sup>

Significantly, though, what became evident from the research is that the Neston collieries were an integral part of what might be termed the Dee Estuary economy, covering an area which defies neat spatial definition along county or national lines. This economic area comprised Chester, the west coast of the Wirral – including Neston, the largest eighteenth-century town on the peninsula and the adjacent important port of Parkgate – and the Flintshire coast where there were many settlements and a range of primary and secondary industries based on the locally-available coal and mineral ores. Within this (broadly) triangular geographical structure there was an interchange of various raw materials, finished goods, labour, knowledge and capital creating a dynamic trading network before, during and after the period covered in the book. Many individuals had involvement in more than one point in this 'triangle'. One example is Richard Richardson, Chester merchant and mayor, owner of a Flintshire lead smelting works and co-founder and principal initial operator of Ness Colliery.<sup>100</sup> Little if anything has been written about this network, perhaps because writers and researchers have tended to specialise along national lines. The writer has recently made a small contribution to this task with an article on Flintshire and Neston's coal links for the forthcoming issue of the *Flintshire Historical Society Journal*.<sup>101</sup> There is scope to expand study of the area beyond those directly or indirectly involved with the coal trade and to develop

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<sup>98</sup> King and Timmins, *Making Sense*, 37.

<sup>99</sup> King and Timmins, *Making Sense*, 36.

<sup>100</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 18-19.

<sup>101</sup> Anthony Annakin-Smith, 'The Neston Collieries and their Links to Flintshire during the Industrial Revolution', *Flintshire Historical Society Journal*, 42 (2022), in prep.

network models similar to those made by Haggerty in respect of individual Liverpool merchants.<sup>102</sup>

The Neston works' network of contacts was not confined to Chester and the Dee Estuary, though; they also looked west to North Wales, Ireland and beyond for its customers. Analysis of the port books for Chester has revealed the importance of this coal to the region's shipping trade, representing around 60% of its coastwise trade and 80% of overseas business. Craig, in his analysis of Chester's eighteenth century shipping, identified a spike in this trade around the middle of mid-century but attributed it, vaguely, to the 'vigorous Irish/Chester trade' and refers only to production in Flintshire.<sup>103</sup> However, synthesis of material from multiple sources in *The Neston Collieries*, not least concerning the state of navigation of the River Dee, has shown that it was the opening of Ness Colliery which gave rise to this invigoration.<sup>104</sup>

As well as interrogating the port books, data has been aggregated with that from many other sources to give a record of Chester's seasale coal trade from 1750 to 1855, as near complete as is possible.<sup>105</sup> This is the first such record and illustrates the changing relative importance of the overseas and coasting trades over the period as navigation conditions and trading relationships altered. Furthermore, when aggregated with data from Liverpool (see Table 10.1 which draws upon six disparate sources), it illustrates the rapidly changing dynamics of the seasale coal trade between the two ports as the Lancashire town's total trade first lagged but then substantially surpassed Chester's.<sup>106</sup> *The Neston Collieries* also evidences the very rapid rate of change to the course of the River Dee in the first two decades of the nineteenth century; this change was to quickly reverse the fortunes of the sea-trade on each side of the estuary. Several authors have written about the Dee in the eighteenth century; others have focused on the involvement of Thomas Telford from 1817. However, there has been scant attention to the speed and significance of changes at the start of the nineteenth century.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Haggerty, 'Merely for Money?', 161-197, passim.

<sup>103</sup> Craig, 'Aspects of the Trade and Shipping', 120-1.

<sup>104</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 156-160.

<sup>105</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, Appendix V.

<sup>106</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 164.

<sup>107</sup> F. Webster, 'The River Dee Reclamation and the Effect upon Navigation', *Transactions of the Liverpool Engineering Society*, 51 (1930): 63-100 all but ignores this period and incorrectly implies that Thomas Telford was involved from 1800; G. M. Haynes-Thomas, 'The Port of Chester', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 59 (1947): 35-40, also all but ignores the period as does Craig, 'Aspects of the

The attention to customers, whether end-users or intermediaries, was an important feature of the book, not only in the seasale trade but also landsale and by river to Chester. This is a topic which tends to get relatively little attention in accounts of contemporary collieries. Quentin Outram, in *The Historiography of the British Coal Industry* noted that ‘Coal historians have so far failed to look much beyond the coalfields. The history of the British industry has almost always been construed as the history of coal extraction and, to some extent, transport’.<sup>108</sup> Alan Crosby commented that ‘geological, technological and engineering aspects ... are the mainstay of many books on mining history’ and that the topic of markets ‘is, all too often, ignored or woefully inadequate’.<sup>109</sup> Four chapters of *The Neston Collieries* (almost 30% of the main content by page count) is dedicated to customers and markets giving insight into all significant aspects of the direct and intermediated trades and underlining the importance of this aspect of the coal business.

### **The Social Perspective**

The chapters on ‘The Colliery Employees and Their Working Conditions’ and ‘Social Aspects of the Neston Collieries’ are the two longest in the book and included twenty-one tables of information. The diversity of sources used coupled with the granularity of information in the two underlying databases allowed *The Neston Collieries* to get as close to the lived experience of the colliers and their families as the available information permits. This topic of social change during the period of review is large and multi-faceted; as Szijártó says, microhistories offer ‘a diversity of contexts within the frame of a relatively limited investigation, thus presenting the fabric of the society and culture to its readers’.<sup>110</sup>

Neston was relatively unusual in that there is no known history of local mining prior to the Industrial Revolution, unlike Flintshire or John Langton’s study area of south Lancashire. Thus the parish experienced rapid, if spatially concentrated, industrialisation, with the more-or-less overnight formation of a mining community. Equally rapid de-industrialisation was to follow almost 100 years later as the mines closed and many of the men and, sometimes, their families went elsewhere. The formation of the new community was, though, similar to the

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Trade and Shipping’. Both Armour, ‘Trade of Chester’, and G. Lloyd, ‘The Canalization of the River Dee in 1737’, *Flintshire Historical Society Publications*, 23 (1967–8): 35–41 focus on the early period.

<sup>108</sup> Outram, *Historiography of the British Coal Industry*, 44.

<sup>109</sup> Crosby, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 82.

<sup>110</sup> István M. Szijártó, ‘The Periphery and the new Millennium’ in *What is Microhistory?*, 76.



situation Thompson describes in her study in Somerset where mining first started in the 1780s.<sup>111</sup> Drawing comparisons between mining communities in Neston with those of Somerset and of South Lancashire illustrates the difference between them and emphasises how microstudies are a valuable tool to elicit such differences, recognising that every location is subject to unique circumstances.

Thompson shows how, contrary to often-perceived stereotypes, colliers in her chosen study parish of Camerton were well integrated into the local community, reflected in social, religious and marriage practices. Further, the parish boundaries were not a particular constraint in defining the community identity of Camerton's inhabitants (of whom a large proportion worked at the mines). In part this was because the majority of men who came to work there were from the surrounding villages. The inhabitants of Camerton also had quotidian links with the wider area, not least Bath about seven miles away.

Study of Neston's experience suggest it was rather different. In Ness Colliery's early days there appears to have been little local recruitment. Instead, granular information on individual colliers as well as evidence from other sources has evidenced how experienced men largely came from North Wales and Lancashire.<sup>112</sup> Wirral's geographical position, bounded on three sides by water, meant that these were anything but 'local' men and there may well have been local resentment that the best jobs were, apparently, not going to Nestonians. The incomers themselves would probably have felt little affinity with locals (and, indeed, the men from different areas probably felt little affinity with each other). There are indications that this 'otherness' in relation to the local community continued into the nineteenth century: many men turned their back on the parish church; the collier's public house was given a Welsh name; and a contemptuous description of the colliery townships by a leading Nestonian in 1841 described the residents there as 'the very lowest order of society' and the subject of 'long complaint'.<sup>113</sup> Thompson notes reference to colliers' involvement in daily life at Camerton;<sup>114</sup> very few such examples exist at Neston. And, while the development of coal mining in Somerset 'broke down ... parish boundaries', the parish boundaries at Neston were more or less unbreached; indeed, the colliers' residence was almost wholly confined to just

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<sup>111</sup> Thompson, 'A Breed Apart', 137-159.

<sup>112</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 87-9.

<sup>113</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 200, 224, 232 and 229.

<sup>114</sup> Thompson, 'A Breed Apart', 148-150.

two townships.<sup>115</sup> While, then, the evidence at Neston is fragmentary it appears that the grafting of a colliery community – men and their families who were outsiders and employed in work wholly outside local experience – onto an established rural market town created a source of social tension which was never satisfactorily resolved.

If migration patterns at Neston differed from those in Somerset then they differed from those in south Lancashire too. Langton's study of colliers' mobility patterns in the eighteenth century omits any mention of Neston, despite evidence in *The Neston Collieries* of colliers' movement between the two places.<sup>116</sup> That omission aside, he notes that in south Lancashire mobility was largely confined to movement between the many pits in that region. This allowed men to remain part of local kinship networks even if their place of employment changed. At Neston any change of mining employer necessitated a longer journey, across water, which would inevitably have interfered with ties to friends and family left behind. Clearly men must have perceived that the rewards and opportunities on offer at Ness outweighed the social disadvantages.

There is evidence that the Neston colliers' migratory relationship with Lancashire was two-way but a surprising finding was the lack of migration to North Wales, despite its proximity; the reasons are unclear but the research suggests that antipathy due to different views on industrial action or the adoption of different working practices – pillar and stall vs. the Lancashire System – are possible causes.<sup>117</sup>

Analysis of the migration data reveals an important point concerning female employment too. Various writers have noted the variability of female employment practice around the country.<sup>118</sup> There is no significant evidence for female employment in the mines at Neston, in common with Flintshire. However it was commonplace in Lancashire.<sup>119</sup> After the Neston collieries closed there are several instances of females moving from Neston to Lancashire and being recorded as a collier there. Their motive may have been economic necessity but it indicates a willingness, not apparently noted in other studies, to adapt to local custom –

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<sup>115</sup> Thompson, 'A Breed Apart', 155; Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 218.

<sup>116</sup> Langton, 'People from the Pits', 86-7.

<sup>117</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 237.

<sup>118</sup> For example, Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 333-6; Church, *British Coal Industry*, 191-3; and John, *Sweat of Their Brow*, 21-3.

<sup>119</sup> P. E. H. Hair, 'The Lancashire Collier Girl, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 120 (1968): 63-84.

attitudes to work were determined, in these instances at least, by location rather than personal disposition.

The available sources allow us to glean insights into cultural aspects of the colliery community such as behaviours, pastimes and attitudes to education and religion. The sources also make it possible to track events in the lives of many of the individuals over time – not just in relation to geographic mobility but also giving insight into their family development and careers. This granularity is a significant feature of the book; in his review, Evans notes that *The Neston Collieries*' use of data 'offers greater depth than can often be found in comparable studies of colliery communities'.<sup>120</sup> The approach allows individual stories to be told which helps illustrate the subjects' lived experience and humanises the historical record. Thus, for example it was only after piecing together information from diverse sources that it was possible to identify how married father of-two Edward Taylor survived burns from one accident, only to die in an explosion three years later, exemplifying the principal risks to the collieries' workers.<sup>121</sup> There were no large-scale accidents at Ness but the accumulated mortality data shows that it was, as Benson notes, the constant flow of single deaths in mines which produced the heaviest toll.<sup>122</sup> *The Neston Collieries* also supplies morbidity information drawn from records from Chester Infirmary and Poor Law commissioners supplementing the surviving 'rarest of glimpses' of non-fatal accidents which Flinn bemoans.<sup>123</sup> More generally, the book's substantial attention to the lives of those in the mining community, in aggregate and individually, allows us to see those involved as agents making choices over, say, work location and roles, religion, education, timing of child conception and family size.

John Benson has been keen to overturn the trope of the 'thriftless and irresponsible' miner in the Victorian era.<sup>124</sup> Such an exercise at Neston for the preceding decades would be hard to evidence with any certainty. The 'long ... complaint' (in 1841) about the 'character and habits' of the colliery community supports the stereotype. So does their apparent willingness to live in 'hovels' fronted by foul-smelling pits. Both these comments are consistent with those by Challinor and Ripley, talking about the first half of the nineteenth century, about

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<sup>120</sup> Evans, Review of *The Neston Collieries*, 174.

<sup>121</sup> Annakin-Smith, *Neston Collieries*, 107-112.

<sup>122</sup> Annakin-Smith *Neston Collieries*, 112-3; John Benson, ed., *Coal in Victorian Britain, Volume 5, Environmental Health* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), xvi.

<sup>123</sup> Flinn, *British Coal Industry*, 422.

<sup>124</sup> Benson, *British Coalminers*, 4.

which Benson is uncomfortable.<sup>125</sup> But suggestions of collectivism and of a friendly society at Ness, and the conscious move towards new forms of religion are all, by Benson's reckoning, indicative of a quest by responsible colliers to 'ameliorate [their] very difficult conditions'.<sup>126</sup> In any event, what does seem evident is that despite a century of 'revolution', and belated government attention to mines and miners' welfare, conditions at Ness were little different at their close than at their opening – the 'hovels' of 1847 can hardly have been much better than their predecessors, men still died in serial accidents and young children were, apparently, still working underground despite legal prohibition. Berg and Hudson acknowledge the 'uneven' nature of industrial development during the Industrial Revolution but conclude that, nevertheless, 'the industrial world of 1850 was vastly different for most workers from that of 1750'.<sup>127</sup> It would, though, be hard from the accumulated evidence to make such a case for Neston's mining community.

The question arises as to what extent Neston's collieries were representative of mines in the region – however defined – or in Britain generally. As at other mines, the speed and direction of change was, in general, far from revolutionary. But *The Neston Collieries* shows that the Neston mines differed from generalised perceptions of the period in several ways. Output shrank contrary to national and regional norms; the works did not fit into the neat pattern of the 'North-West economy'; its ownership structure and pattern were unusual; and migration patterns were different from those found elsewhere. Moreover, of course, every individual named and indexed in the book was an agent in their own, unique story. The focus of the microhistory, then, enables identification of the 'normal exception' – events which 'fail to fit into grand frameworks or narratives', reflecting 'the complexity of reality, ... the really real'.<sup>128</sup> Such a focus enables us to recognise that the grand narrative can obscure deviations from the accepted norm and underscores the value of exploring history from a micro level.

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<sup>125</sup> Benson, *British Coalminers*, 3 citing R. Challinor and B. Ripley, *The Miners' Association, A Trade Union in the Age of the Chartists* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), 50. Similar discomfort is shown for this wording by Quentin Outram, ed., *Coal in Victorian Britain, Volume 1, General Introduction, Useful Knowledge* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), xii. Benson is General Editor of the *Coal in Victorian Britain* series.

<sup>126</sup> Benson, *British Coalminers*, 4-5 and 88.

<sup>127</sup> Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, 'Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review* 45, no. 1 (1992): 42.

<sup>128</sup> Port, 'History from Below', 112.

## 7. Conclusion

The historian Richard Brown has said:

‘The glory of microhistory lies in its power to recover and reconstruct past events by exploring and connecting a wide range of data sources so as to produce a contextual, three-dimensional, analytic narrative in which actual people as well as abstract forces shape events.’<sup>129</sup>

*The Neston Collieries* has sought to deliver just such an analytic narrative aiming to identify what the Industrial Revolution meant in reality for one particular mining area and the individuals connected with it. An innovative and ambitious microhistorical approach was taken, using extensive quantities of archival and other research material, to deliver a coherent, holistic and comprehensive study of the mines which is both original and substantial.

While there is extensive coverage of operational aspects of the works these were considered alongside in-depth study of commercial, trading operations – a topic which is often neglected – and considerable social analysis and comment. The granular approach to social information enabled extensive insight to be gained into the lived experience of those involved, particularly the colliers and their family members, for example in relation to mobility, demographics and mortality.

The microhistorical perspective has allowed a view to be obtained which goes considerably beyond a generalised or aggregative ‘macro’ view of historical developments, revealing ways in which experience at the Neston collieries ran counter to less localised narratives. More generally, the book has advanced in many ways the historiography not only of Neston’s mines, but of regional industrial, economic and social development and of coal-mining practice during the Industrial Revolution. It has also addressed some significant omissions and misunderstandings in that historiography.

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<sup>129</sup> Richard D. Brown, ‘Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge’, *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 1 (2003), 18.

Overall *The Neston Collieries* has shown how a microhistorical approach can be used to illuminate a new and wide-ranging topic and, in particular, has offered extensive new insight into Neston's collieries and their place in the Industrial Revolution.

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