1876 – Suker's Colliery Painting

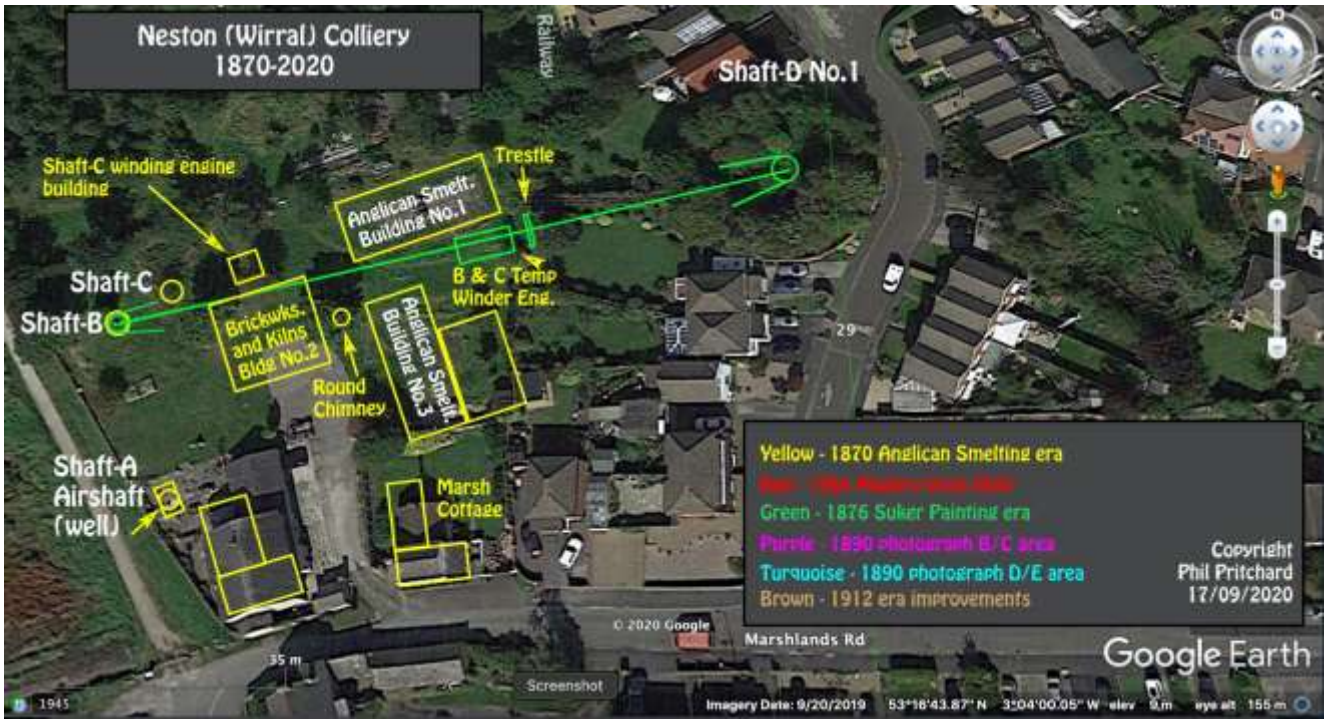
Arthur Suker – A Landscape view of the colliery by a contemporary landscape painter 1876.

1876 and the Neston Colliery Company Ltd was formed. The remains of the previous failed smelting company were adapted to supporting a small coal mining operation, and which also had to comply with new legislation following a mining disaster in the North East.

Two new shafts were to be sunk, and the shaft winding arrangement was changed to enable the sinking of one of the two new shafts. The changes were captured in a painting by Mr. Arthur Suker – a landscape painter of that same period. It is difficult to unravel what is illustrated in Suker's painting because of the combination of headgear and trestles in the painting, and their locations.

One of the sets of headgear was for an Airshaft, Shaft-A, which fleetingly appears on some maps, but not on others. The temporary winding engine for Shafts (B&C) development was also hidden out of view, until discovered on the 1888 lease map.

A Google Earth view of the colliery location, with locations identified as to what would have been there corresponding to Sukers painting.



Mr. Arthur Suker was an English painter (1857-1902). Essentially, he was a landscape painter, however he painted a scene of the Smelting Works and Collieries at Neston and captured a moment in time when the site was in the process of being re-purposed solely as a colliery site.

The original is in the Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead. [049]

Acknowledgements to Williamson Art Gallery for the image of Suker's painting.

This view is southwards, looking along the coastline at the end of Marshlands Road, past the old quayside, and towards Burton Point, in the distance. The centre-left part of the painting is the most interesting from the **Neston Colliery** point of view and is enlarged below.

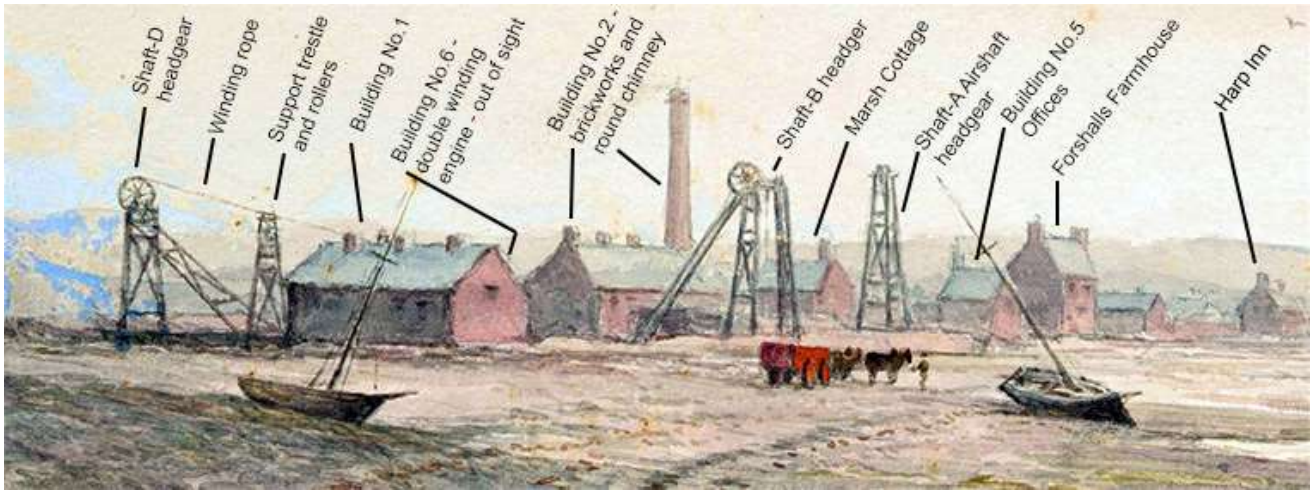
It is important, and interesting at this point to look further afield, to the 1862 Hartley Colliery Disaster. On Thursday 16th January 1862, there was a historically significant disaster at the Hartley Colliery in Northumberland. The colliery, like many of that period, only had a single shaft. The single shaft at Hartley was used to transport colliery workers in and out of the mine, to haul coal out of the workings, for ventilation, and also as a pumping shaft for water. The single shaft would have been divided into two halves by light screening (known as brattice) to separate the Upcast and Downcast ventilation air.

The massive (90 tons) cast iron beam of the steam pumping engine literally snapped in half at the centre pivot, into two 45-ton sections. The 45-ton section of the beam which was attached to the pumping rods in the shaft, went hurtling down the shaft, with a substantial loss of life – killing 204 colliers. The cause of the failure was the

type of material (cast Iron) used for the beam, and which the material was later deemed as not being suitable for used in such a load bearing structure. It was the early days of material science, and the properties of cast Iron were not fully understood [041]. There is a local connection to Cheshire – Stephenson's Cast Iron railway bridge across the River Dee at Chester also failed in a similar manner, causing a train to crash down into the River Dee [041].

The immediate effect was the introduction of new additional legislation for safety in mines. On the 7th August 1862, an Act of Parliament was passed to tighten up the Law relating to Coal Mines, this required all new mines to have two escape routes (either shafts or drifts, or any combination of the two), and for all existing mines to have access to a second escape route before the end of 1864. Where the escape routes were a pair of shafts, they also had to be a specified distance apart (Detailed in a later chapter). *Note: a drift is an access tunnel to the workings which is not vertical.

This may not have affected the existing operation but would have been a consideration in the development plans. The overriding factor regarding the development would have been the capacity of, and the condition of the two older Shafts (B&C), requiring the development to include two new shafts, these being Shafts (D&E).



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In 1875, with the establishment of the **Neston Colliery Company Ltd.** (later becoming **Wirral Colliery Company Ltd.**), a new era in coal mining in Neston started. There was a ready-made location on the coastline, good reserves of coal, with a small coal mining operation already in existence, and substantial buildings available for development.

For reasons that were probably associated with the new legislation, the demand for coal increasing, and with a reasonable knowledge of the Anglican Smelting coal mining operations, the development plans for the colliery included two new shafts which would require sinking. The painting shows one of the two new shafts being sunk, the shaft is referred to here as Shaft (D) and would later become the new **Wirral Colliery** Shaft No.1. It was a significant piece of shaft sinking, there were problems encountered during the sinking with a rock fall and the shaft sides collapsing, burying several workers. Luckily, no-one was killed, but one of the shaft

sinkers, Mr Ellis Roberts suffered a crushed leg, which was amputated on the kitchen table of a nearby house after he was rescued. The shaft had a long lifespan and was not filled and capped below ground level until as late as February 1983 when the area was starting to be developed, well after the closure of the colliery operations.

The old **Anglican Smelting** haulage Shaft (B) would also continue in use, but with a subtle change in winding arrangements.

Suker's painting represents the new winding arrangements for Shafts (B&D). The new arrangement was not obvious until a later map contained in the 1888 Lease documents was discovered, which revealed a new building on an unusual alignment.

Suker was an excellent painter of landscapes, but colliery headgear would probably have been a new and unusual concept to him, hence his perspective and representation has suffered somewhat. The distance between the wooden trestle and the new Shaft (D) headgear was in reality much greater than what is shown in the painting.

Interpreting Suker's painting, starting at the left-hand side, the first item illustrated is the headgear and winding wheel for the new Shaft (D) with support trusses facing to the right in the direction that it would be wound from. The headgear would have been made of wood, like most headgear of that era.

At the foot of the support trusses is a vertical timber trestle, supporting rollers on the top. The purpose of the trestle was to support the winding rope on the long cable run from Shaft (D), over the proposed railway line, and to the winding engine.

The next structure from the left, is a red brick building, corresponding to Building-1. This is a fair representation of the Building-1 as seen on the later 1890 photograph, the view of which is partly obscured on the 1890 photograph by a later extension on the northern side for coal handling from Shafts (B&C). The foundations of this building are still clearly visible on aerial photography, and on the ground.

One building that is not visible on Suker's painting, but is shown on the 1888 Lease map, is a new building (Building-6) between Building-1 and Building-3, this is on a straight-line alignment between Shaft (B) and Shaft (D). This building is a new winding engine house, winding both Shafts (B&D). It was almost certain that it re-used the "Double Powered Condensing Winding Engine" and boiler from the 1866 **Anglican Smelting** auction. This was a temporary arrangement and used in the Shaft (D) sinking. There was a pair of 'Winding Engines' advertised for sale in the Liverpool Mercury in 1882, which may have been the same engine. They were advertised as 'nearly new' – after having been used in a working colliery, and then used for sinking new shafts – a modest claim indeed.

The next building from the left, is Building-2, and was originally used as a brick works. Above the brickworks building is a tall (circular section) chimney, associated with the brickworks, which also appears on the 1890 photograph.

The next feature to the right is a small group of buildings at the bottom of Marshlands Road (Colliery Lane), including the small Building-5 used as offices and as a laboratory, Marsh Cottage and Forshalls Farmhouse, then further along is the

familiar outline of the Harp Inn, and eventually a slightly exaggerated view of the Burton Point headland.

However, there is something else missing from Suker's painting, which is Building-4, which was the old winding engine house and boiler for Shafts (B&C). This would have been demolished to get the old disused winding engine out, for re-use as detailed above for Shafts (B&D). It may also have been in the direct line of the winding cable for the new arrangement using Building-6.

Just above the small red cart, is the headgear for Shaft (B), either it is new headgear, or the old headgear re-aligned so that it could be operated in tandem from the new double winding engine between Buildings-1&3. Shaft (A) has also had its winding wheels on the top of the wooden headgear removed, as well as the angled headgear support trusses. Shaft-A is marked on some maps as 'Airshaft', so it had probably been re-purposed in the past.

The colliery was opened in 1877 and operated using the two old Shafts (B&C), it was known to be a very wet mine, accordingly, pumps had to be in operation all the time to prevent flooding.

There was a strike in 1884 for better pay, eventually resulting in the closure of the **Neston Colliery Company Ltd.** The colliery was eventually re-opened with a subtle change in name as the **Wirral Colliery Company Ltd**.