1890 - Photograph

A photograph of the Colliery site in 1890 showing the completion of Shaft-D:

The Wirral Colliery Company Ltd. was well established in 1890 with a new manager (Mr. James Platt), it invested in the new coal mining operation, with the second new shaft, mechanisation, new headgear, a large new winding engine house, and a new boiler house.

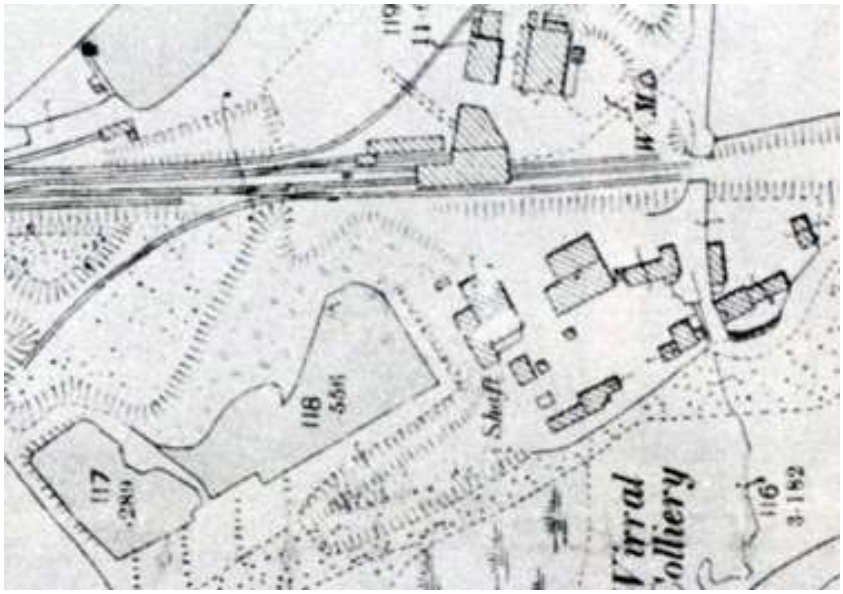
The changes were captured by an unknown photographer, journeying along the North Wales Coast. The original was purchased from an online auction house by the author.

The picture below shows the layout at the date of the 1890 photograph, not all of the map is visible on the photograph. Note that the Building-2 (brickworks) chimney remains, despite the demolition of Building-2 – chimney demolition would be a specialised task and there were many other items of work to be carried out.

In 1889, Mr. James Platt, who was previously an Under-Manager at a colliery near Skelmersdale, became the manager at **Wirral Colliery**. He moved over to Little Neston with his wife and nine children. Under his management, the colliery started to prosper, and developments were soon started in earnest at the colliery. He stayed as the colliery manager until 1910 and died a year later. He lived in a large house on the corner of Cross Street and Colliery Lane (now Marshlands Road), He would have been the driving force behind the improvements depicted in the 1890 photograph.

This photograph was purchased by the author as an 1890 photograph from an online auction site. The same auction seller was also selling a number of other photos of

the same ilk, they had been (sadly) cut out of the same vintage photograph album. The photographer appeared to be touring the North Wales Coast, taking photographs of coastal industrial scenes, and including (fortunately) one of the **Wirral Colliery**.

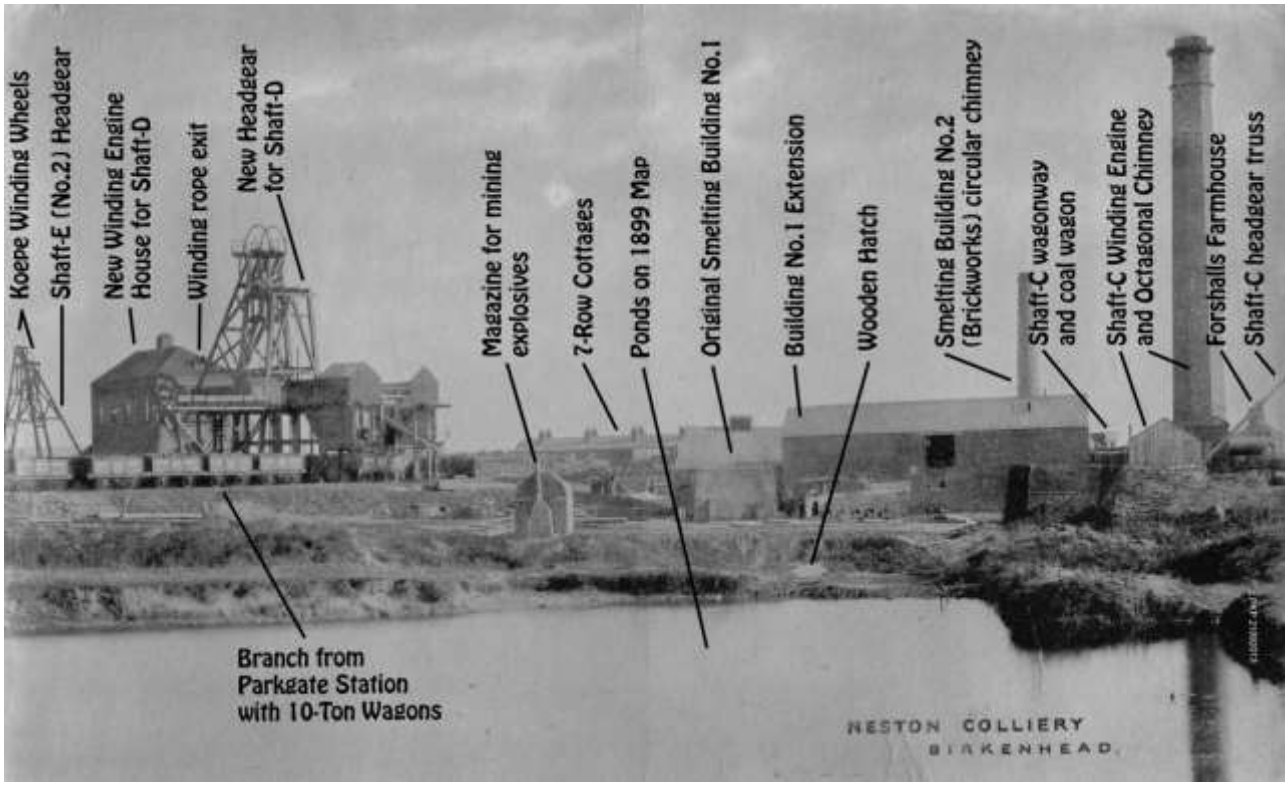


Acknowledgements to OSGB 1909

Acknowledgements to Phil Pritchard (author)

The original photograph is high quality, and was taken from a point looking south, between the two ponds (labelled 117 and 118)) in the bottom left quarter on the map

dated 1909. The two ponds were soon filled in and covered in pit waste as the colliery moved into full production. The amount of waste produced by the new colliery using modern mining methods was much greater than the previous era when the mining was more laborious.



Acknowledgements to Phil Pritchard (author)

1/. Headgear for Shaft (E) (**Wirral Colliery** shaft No.2). This shaft was required as a means of egress in an emergency to meet the new stringent underground access regulations, and also to act as a new ventilation shaft, after the disaster at Hartley Colliery. A later map has a building shown in line with the shaft, which would have been the fan house, connected to Shaft (E) via a fan drift to ventilate the whole mine operation underground. There was a fan included in the 1866 Anglican Smelting auction particulars, but it is doubtful if that was the one used here, mining ventilation fans were quite sizable and developed, even in 1890. In later years the shaft itself was modernised to carry compressed air pipes, and electricity for lighting cables.

This shaft was also shown in several contemporary photographs with a building inline, and behind the large new Shaft (D) engine house, this was the separate (and much smaller) winding engine for Shaft (E).

The Shaft (E) headgear is interesting, and different, as it has two winding wheels, one above the other, which was quite unusual in the UK at that time (most are side by side). This used a typical ‘Koepe’ winding method and used a continuous winding rope in a long loop, not the more usual arrangement of a single rope that is wound up on a drum. It was unusual, but only came into common use after 1870. The one advantage is that it only needs a winding engine with a small diameter cable drum, as it only ‘holds’ a small number of loops of the winding cable, as compared to the

normal arrangement where the whole of the cable has to be stored on the drum. This fact alone makes it useful for deep shafts – but this shaft isn't particularly very deep. It is also useful if there is only a winding engine available that has a small diameter cable drum.

2/. A new winding engine house for Shaft (D) is shown as being built, the structure itself appears complete, but notable is the absence of a boiler house chimney, the boiler house was on the other side of the boiler house and was a low structure, so may have simply have not been visible. When completed, the chimney was a square section. The right-hand side of the tiled roof shows an exit slot for the winding rope, leading up to the winding wheels on the headgear, but the rope had not been installed at the time of the photograph, neither had the cage guide wire hangers, these hung off the crosspieces at the top of the wooden headgear and are clearly visible on other contemporary photographs of the headgear.

The headgear is new, the old headgear from the old tandem winding gear with the trestle depicted in Suker's painting having been removed, the arrangement in Suker's painting was a temporary one for the sinking of the shaft. The shaft was a major undertaking, being 5.49 m (18 feet) diameter and 139.3 m (457 feet) deep. The size varies slightly according to different documents.

3/. In front of the Shaft (D) headgear are some wooden building structures, which would have been used to unload coal hauled out of the colliery via Shaft (D) into lines of waiting 10-ton wooden wagons. The photograph shows some rail wagons, proudly bearing the lettering "Neston Colliery Company". The southernmost of the two structures was not complete in the photograph and had not been roofed. There is a gas light hanging from a beam out of each of the two transverse ridge roofed buildings.

Because Shaft (D) was not yet in operation, the 10-ton mainline wagons would be loaded with coal from Shafts (B&C), as is evidenced by the small narrow wagon railway running at a higher level above ground into Building-1, this building being used for handling coal from Shaft (C). There is an empty coal wagonway tub standing on a turntable on the right-hand side of the Building-1 extension. The coal from Shaft (C) would be used to provide an income while the modernisation was happening, and the new shafts were being sunk.

The railway where the wagons are standing is the end of the colliery siding from the original Parkgate Station, it would later be extended over Colliery Lane via a small overbridge to use land over on the other side of Colliery Lane for waste tipping.

4/. On the skyline in the middle of the picture is the roofline and chimneys of the early miner's cottages, known as "7-Row", they are still standing in 2021.

5/. In front of the “7-Row” in the foreground is a small round topped brick structure, this would be the magazine for storing mining explosives, it has a vent on the top. The round top style is seen in a few places around North Wales, such as this example here from Hanabys Level, nr Ffrith, Flintshire.

6/. The ponds only appear on the 1899 OS Map, they were soon covered up with pit waste to quite a depth – and still are to this day. It is understood that some of the buildings on Riverside are advised not to let any water drain into the soil, only into the piped drainage system to avoid any slippage.

Acknowledgements to Phil Pritchard

7/. The Anglican Smelting Company Building-1 is partly visible, it has a roofline that matches Suker’s painting. It is obscured by an extension in front of it (from the photographic point of view).

8/. There is a tall circular chimney standing up, this is the chimney for Building-2 (Brick Kilns), at some time Building-2 was demolished, but the chimney was obviously not demolished at the same time. The demolition of the chimney would be a specialised task, and not very important at this stage of the developments.

9/. The tall octagonal chimney is the boiler chimney for the Shaft (C) winding engine, although it looks a rather grand structure for its intended purpose. There was another winding engine in later years for Shaft (B), which would also need a chimney, presumably they both used the octagonal example.

10/. The small wooden shed is the new winding engine house for Shaft (C), the winding rope can be seen emerging from the roof and going upwards to the winding wheel on top of the Shaft (C) headgear, which is just off-picture. The angled headgear support trusses can be seen at the base of the wooden winding engine.

The coal output from Shaft (C) would have been used to keep the colliery running whilst the new development is taking place, hence it was worth having a new engine, or possible re-using the old double compound engine again which was unlikely, as it was later offered for sale.

Shaft (C) was later filled in on an unknown date, as was denoted as such in the NCB closure map. However, Shaft (B) nearby wasn’t filled in, they appear to have kept it open until closure, probably as an emergency escape route, and for use when the main shaft was out of operation. The three remaining Shafts (B/D/E) were not filled in until 1983 when development work was started on the Riverside Walk housing estate. Until then, they were surrounded by three very high circular walls, which are quite prominent in a period photograph of the Boiler House chimney demolition. When the author visited in mid-2020, the outline shapes of Shaft (C), and its winding engine could still be seen in the (newly mown) grass.

11/. The northern gable end wall of Forshalls Farmhouse is visible beneath the angled headgear truss for Shaft (C), just visible is the small gable end window – which is still there 130 years later.

12/. There is a massive pair of wooden trap doors at the end of the ponds, purpose unknown – perhaps covering up an old shaft, otherwise of unknown purpose.

13/. The photograph is labelled as: “**Neston Colliery** - Birkenhead”, which is incorrect as by 1890, it was named as the “**Wirral Colliery**”, and there was no connection with Birkenhead whatsoever. It was never known as or associated with “Birkenhead”.

1890 - 1895

1890-1895 Developments: *The development works which started with the arrival of Mr James Platt are completed, and there are some developments on the coastline side of the colliery concerning the old shafts.*

The picture below shows the colliery in its undeveloped operating layout. There is no evidence that Shafts (B&C) are actually used, except in emergencies. At some unknown date Shaft (C) was taken out of use and filled in, however, it must have had an operational life after 1890, because it had just had a new winding engine and headgear installed at the time of the 1890 photograph.

Although the 1890 photograph gives an excellent view of the colliery, there are a few details that are just off the right-hand edge of the photograph, in particular the headgear for Shaft (C), and both the headgear and winding engine for Shaft (B). The only issue that this raises is that it is impossible to date anything associated with the new winding engine and headgear for Shaft (B), as these only appear on later maps.

As there was so much activity around 1890, it is fair to assume that this is when Shaft (B) had new headgear and winding engine installed, the headgear is also shown on the 1911 OS map, and others.

Shaft (B) is also unique in that headgear has some remains still in existence, the winding engine bed is a large concrete structure in the current property owner's garden, as is a NCB concrete Monument marker (used to denote the location of old shafts), the author recalls there being a blue & yellow NCB sign on the engine bed, back as recently as 1985.

Shafts B&C raise a few questions. As there are obviously two ‘good’ new shafts at the colliery – namely shafts (D&E), why were Shafts (B&C) kept in operation, as they appear to be fairly old, although Shaft (C) was noted on the NCB ‘Closure’ map as ‘filled in’, and Shaft (B) as being in use as an Upcast shaft. It may have been that it was essential to keep them operational during periods of colliery development, in order to produce an income. It may also have been the case that they accessed other coal seams than those that were accessible from shafts (D&E) until the later developments took place underground at the colliery. The geology underground here is very faulted, as is evidenced by the sections of shafts (D&E) being totally different, despite being a mere 60 yards apart.

Shaft (B) engine bed looking north, the Shaft (B) NCB ‘Monument’ in the distance on the centre line. The NCB ‘Monument’ is used to denote the centreline of a coal mine shaft that has been filled in. The monuments often have a plate attached showing details, which usually quickly disappear. This is the monument that retained a Blue & Yellow NCB sign for many years.

Acknowledgements for both pictures: Phil Pritchard (author)

Summarising the 1890 photograph, there were works that obviously needed to be completed, and no doubt others that are not obvious from the photograph, before the two new shafts were in operation.:

- Complete the coal handling / preparation buildings and plant between the railway and the Shaft (D) headgear
- Complete the Shaft (D) winding engine house
- Construct the Shaft (D) boiler house (this may have been completed as it was a low building and hence may not be visible).
- Construct the Shaft (D) boiler house chimney.
- Install winding ropes to Shaft (D), and cage guide ropes. Shaft (E) already had winding ropes at the time of the photograph.
- Demolish the old ex-Brickworks round chimney.

There was obviously still a lot of work to be done.