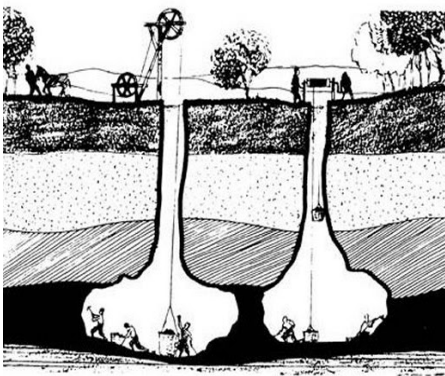


Mining the Sea of Coal

Mining has shaped the landscape around the parish of South Wingfield without leaving any visible evidence of the former collieries, iron works and tramways. Everything has been returned to nature, including a once prominent spoil tip which is today covered by woodland. The closure of Wingfield Manor Colliery in 1963 and Amber Valley Colliery in 1996 brought to an end an 800 year history of coal and iron mining in the parish. The railway was central to South Wingfield's industrial development.

From small beginnings to deep mining.

In early times coal and iron were dug from the ground where the seam came to the surface. Coal seams below a layer of rock were reached by sinking a short shaft. At the bottom of the shaft miners would hack away at the coal and then haul it to the surface in buckets. The miners on reaching the coal or iron, belled-out the bottom of the shaft. Lacking any support, the roof would always be in danger of collapse and countless accidents must have occurred. These mines came to be known as bell pits; remains of bell pits can be seen today as hollow depressions in the ground in Shaw Wood.



Two examples of bell pits: right with a winch operated by two men, left with a horse powered winch.



Hollow depression from collapsed bell pit.

From the 1750's small mines with deep shafts were opened around Oakerthorpe Valley. Coal was worked in stalls (chambers) with pillars of coal left at strategic points to hold up the ceiling.

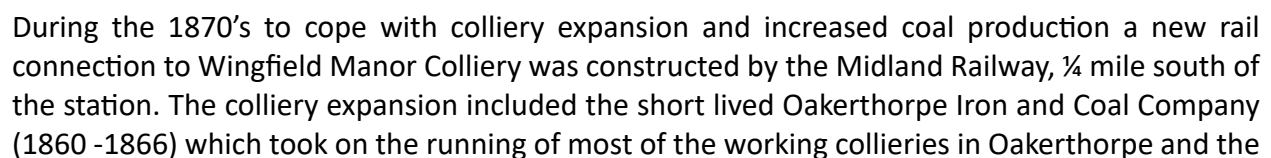


Pentrich Engine
Science Museum

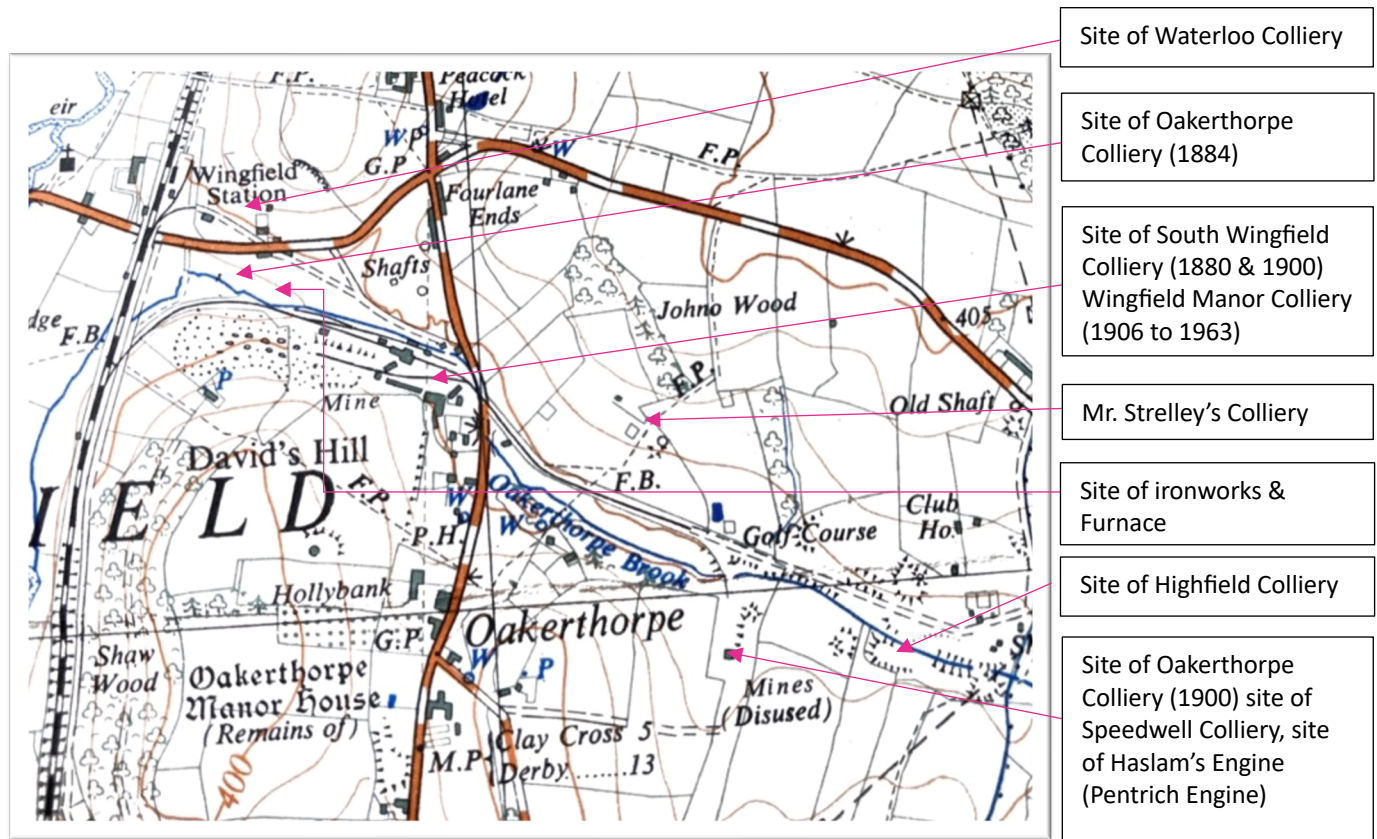
Speedwell Colliery (east of Oakerthorpe) was the first colliery to sink shafts below the outcropping rock. Haslam, the mine owner commissioned a steam pumping engine to pump water from the mine. The engine was designed by Francis Thompson - a different Francis Thompson to the architect who designed Wingfield Station. The engine was cast in 1791 and worked at Speedwell Colliery for the next 50 years. In 1841 Haslam abandoned Speedwell Colliery and opened another mine 1.5 miles south at Pentrich. Haslam had the Speedwell engine dismantled and re-erected at Pentrich. This engine was one of the last to be working in the country and was moved to the Science Museum in 1919, where it is on display.

The Coming of the Railway

Map to show route of colliery sidings between 1850-1880, tramway to Highfield Colliery



two blast furnaces built by Birmingham Ironmasters, Marshall & Co. The furnace chimneys were 99 feet high and along with the collieries and associated industries must have dominated the skyline. In due course the colliery spoil tips formed a backdrop to many views in the parish. The Iron & Coal Company went into liquidation in 1866. The Wingfield Colliery Company acquired Speedwell, Highfield and Oakerthorpe Collieries. For the next 30 years the collieries worked intermittingly, some closed and new managers tried to re-open them, Speedwell succumbed to flooding. The price of coal fell, owners wanted to cut wages and by 1893 Derbyshire miners were on a 3 day week. To a limited extent trade continued but during this time mining stood still.



OS Map showing industry and colliery sites.

Forging ahead

In 1896 FN Smith JP (of Wingfield Park) & West Hallam Coal Company acquired Oakerthorpe Colliery (Speedwell). A new deeper shaft was sunk reaching the Tupton seam, increasing the underground workforce from 24 to 300 in 1903. In 1904 a new shaft was sunk on Wingfield Manor Colliery site down to the Kilburn Seam a depth of 265 yards. In 1906 the Speedwell and Wingfield Manor Colliery were bought under the sole ownership of FN Smith and known as The Wingfield Manor Colliery Company. In 1920 Wingfield Manor Colliery Company was taken over by the Clay Cross Company for £5000 but continued to trade under its own name.

Under the ownership of the Clay Cross Company, Wingfield Manor was one of the first local mines to provide pit head baths, described as something of a luxury in 1932. Prior to the installation of 40 bathing cubicles, miners had bathed on arrival at home. In 1939 a horizontal drift was driven from the surface down to the Tupton seams and later the Black Shale coals. Coal was extracted from the working face via conveyors belts up the drift to hoppers and screens. Screened coal was loaded into railway wagons and was transported via the colliery railway sidings and Midland Railway to destinations around the country. Peak production occurred in the 1950's when 300,000 – 400,000 tons of coal were produced each year with a workforce numbering 540 – 600. The coal industry was nationalised in 1947, Wingfield Manor Colliery came under the control of the National Coal Board and put administratively in East Midlands Region Area No. 4. It merged with Swanwick Colliery in 1963 and working ceased.



Aerial view of Wingfield Manor Colliery
Photo: South Wingfield Local History Group



Wingfield Manor Colliery showing screens at the back and shaft to the left.
Photo: South Wingfield Local History Group (G. Yeomans)



Wingfield Manor Colliery sidings 'Barrogill Castle' shunting engine.
Photo: South Wingfield Local History Group (G. Yeomans)

Full circle

It is very difficult to imagine the area around Oakerthorpe as an industrial site today. After the closure of the colliery the land underwent reclamation. The height of the pit top was reduced and the area landscaped and planted.



Pit top, view from Holme Lane (1970)
Photo: South Wingfield Local History Group (G. Yeomans)



Pit top levelled, view from Holme Lane (1970)
Photo: South Wingfield Local History Group (G. Yeomans)

When viewed from Holme Lane the once industrial spoil heap is now seen as a continuation of Shaw Wood. This remains a popular area with walkers, the old tramway to Highfield Colliery is a nature reserve. The collieries have long gone and coal mining as a way of life has passed into history whilst the negative effects of burning fossil fuels are hotly debated. The human toll of mining has been recognised and a plaque was unveiled in the Market Place, South Wingfield in 2022 dedicated to the men who lost their lives in local mines between 1834 – 1940.