Coal Mining in Hindley

by Chris Southworth

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No one really knows when or where coal was first mined in Hindley and district.

It would probably have taken place where there were coal seams outcropping at the surface of the ground. This would have been in the stream valleys of Borsdane Brook and Marsh Brook. In places like Borsdane Wood and Rayner Park and from behind the Alexandra pub on Swan Lane down through Carr Common and into Westleigh. There would also have been some places on Amberswood Common where the coal seams were found at the surface.

These workings would have been carried out by people who lived close to where the coal seams outcropped and the mined coal used for their own purposes. Farmers would have used coal mined on land that they owned.

This mining would probably have taken place in the 18th century or earlier and no records are known to exist.

The workings would have been very limited in extent, only going into the seams as far as was thought safe before the roof collapsed or water flooded the excavations.

The next stage in the mining of coal would have been the sinking of shallow shafts or pits down to access the coal seams. These would have been very small shafts about six feet or less in diameter and having ladders in them for people to climb up and down to transport the coal out in baskets slung over their backs. Some pits may have had crude systems for lifting the baskets out on the end of ropes using man power or in some cases using horses.

These shafts were known as “bell pits”. This was because when the coal was mined all the way around the shaft until it was abandoned, the profile resembled a bell.

The pit would be worked for coal until it became unsafe or flooded. It would then be abandoned and another pit sunk close by. The excavated material from the new shaft would be used to fill the old one.

Bell pits would have been present in areas of Hindley Green, Westleigh, Amberswood Common and Bickershaw.

The coal mined would still only be used within a short distance of the pit and not transported far.

In the late 18th century and early 19th century, mining began to get more organized.

Companies were formed in order to mine the coal on a more commercial basis. The companies invested money into digging deeper and larger shafts to access deeper untapped coal seams down to about 200 feet.

They installed better ways of removing the coal from out of the ground through the shafts. Larger baskets or boxes were used and more use made of horses to provide the power.

Better ways of moving the coal underground from the coalface to the shaft were devised.

Wheeled containers, sometimes on rails were hauled by men, women and children, using ropes, straps or sometimes chains. As the distances from the shafts increased, this work was obviously extremely arduous and dangerous.

The roof of the workings had to be supported better and the main tunnels kept open for longer periods so there was increased use of timber for props and bars.

Ventilation of the mines was always a problem, not only to provide a reasonable standard of breathable air for the miners but also to remove any dangerous or explosive gases from the mine workings.

Water was also a problem to be dealt with and was the cause of many mines having to close long before the coal seams were worked out. More effective and efficient pumping arrangements had to be developed.

Transportation of the coal above ground away from the mine shafts was improved. Previously horse and cart over very poor tracks and roads had been the only way. Now there was in place a number of small horse drawn tramways from the pits to the Leeds and Liverpool and Bridgewater Canal. These were usually jointly constructed and owned by a number of mines. Coal could then be tipped into canal barges and transported to customers farther afield.

The mines however were still very primitive and extremely dangerous places of work. Many people, men, women, boys and girls were killed and seriously injured whilst in the process of mining coal. Whole families would be employed down the pits and their whole way of life would depend upon and revolve around them.

Mines around Hindley and district in the first half of the 19th century would have been Castle Hill Colliery and Chapelfields Colliery in Hindley, Stonehouse, Albion and Springfield collieries in the Hindley Green and Westleigh areas. In Platt Bridge were Platt Bridge Colliery, Low Hall Colliery, Foggs Pits and on Amberswood Common were Amberswood Colliery, Moss Hall Pits and Fir Tree Pits.

In the mid 19th century, from about 1840 onwards however, things changed rapidly.

First of all, the employment of females and boys under the age of ten was made illegal.

The really big developments came though with the use of steam to power machines in and around the mines and the building of the railways system.

Steam was used to power ever larger winding engines to lift the coal from deeper shafts. It was used to drive ventilating fans, water pumping machines and underground haulage engines.

From about 1838 onwards until the 1860's there was a massive expansion of the railways system in South Lancashire, in a large part to transport the enormous amounts of high quality coal known to be present beneath the ground in places like Hindley.

By the mid 1860's, Hindley had 6 mainline railways within about 5 miles of the town centre. Four ran in a North/South direction and Two crossed East/West. Hindley had 4 railway stations also.

This expansion of the railway system resulted in a massive development of the coal mining industry. Not only was there an increased demand for coal to power the steam locomotives on the railways, but also to power the steam engines in the local cotton mills and many other engineering works. The close proximity of the port of Liverpool meant that enormous quantities of coal were sent to the docks to fuel the ships which transported goods all over the world and vast amounts of coal were exported abroad as well.

From about 1850 onwards, therefore, some quite sizeable collieries were opened up and developed to work the rich coalfield beneath Hindley. Each of these collieries having their own connection to the main rail lines.

I've listed them below and their location.

Hindley Deep Pit:	To the West of Hall Lane near Hindley Golf Club
Ladies Lane Colliery:	Pennygate Medical Centre.
Hindley Hall Collieries:	To the west of Liverpool Rd. near the Hospice
Strangeways Hall Colliery:	Off Liverpool Road down Crompton Street leading to Amberswood Lake.
Low Hall Colliery:	Where the Woodcock Drive estate is now in Platt Bridge.
Hindley Field Colliery:	Off Bickershaw Lane near to the prison Victoria
Colliery:	Off Bickershaw Lane near to the prison
Grange Colliery:	Next to Leyland Park
Grammar Pit:	Near Park High School
Springs Pit:	At the end of Oak Avenue off Atherton Rd. Hindley Green.
Swan Lane Colliery:	Swan Lane Hindley Green.
Brookside Colliery:	Behind the Alexandra Hotel, Swan Lane, Hindley Green.

These collieries employed many hundreds of local men, both underground and on the surface. Women were also employed on the surface at mines, mainly working in the coal screens where they removed by hand any non coal material such as rock, wood etc. These women, often the wives of miners working underground at the pit, were known as Pit Brow Lassies. They also did other work at the pit surface such as loading up materials for transport underground, moving waste material to the colliery tip, and any other general labouring jobs.

Most pits also used ponies underground to pull tubs of coal from the working places to the shaft and empty tubs back or tubs full of timber for roof support. These ponies lived underground in stables close to the shaft bottom. They were generally very well looked after by their minders but only came up the pit in the summer for a fortnight during the pit's holiday period.

Millions of tons of coal were mined from beneath the ground in and around Hindley. The coal was taken from many different coal seams at depths down to about 2500 feet below the surface of the ground.

The mining conditions were extremely difficult, among the worst in Britain. Very hot, over 100F in some deeper mines, dusty, often wet. The rock strata in which the coal was found was often tilted at up to about 1 in 3 and much broken by geological faulting and fracturing. Many problems were caused by underground water flooding the workings and large pumping engines were required to keep the conditions reasonably dry.

The coal seams, when mined, gave off immense quantities of methane gas or firedamp as it was known in the mines. This gas is highly explosive and had to be removed out of the pits by the ventilation system to lessen the risk of underground explosions such as the one at Springs Pit in Hindley Green in 1868 in which 62 men and boys as young as 12 lost their lives or the one at Pretoria Pit Westhoughton in 1910 when 344 were killed.

The mining of coal carried on extensively throughout the remainder of the 19th century and into the 20th century, the peak years being 1910- 1913. After this, the collieries around Hindley rapidly began to be worked out, some had already closed before this time.

Falls in the price of coal caused by the lack of demand in the 1920's speeded up the closure of a lot of collieries.

By the 1930's, only a handful of collieries in and around Hindley were still operating and the last one to close, Strangeways Hall, did so in 1937.

Nowadays there is very little to be seen of the former very intensive and important coal mining industry which provided employment for thousands of Hindley men and women.

There are a few former pit lodges still left, now just used for fishing, such as Deep Pit, Square Lodge and Grammar Lodge. All the old shafts have been filled and capped with a concrete slab, some having a small concrete pyramid as a marker. There are very few other traces of the mines left to see now. However just off Bickershaw Lane near the Travellers site there is a memorial plaque to be seen which marks a very unique but tragic incident in local mining history.

The plaque marks the final resting place of Dolly the steam engine, and her driver Ludovic Berry.

On 30th April 1945, Dolly was shunting 13 wagons between Wigan Junction and Low Hall collieries. The lines which Dolly was travelling along had been laid over the top of a 1200 feet deep old shaft, which had been long abandoned and filled. However, possibly because of very heavy rainfall and the constant use of

the track, as the last wagon on the train passed over it, the shaft opened up and the wagon went down it dragging the other wagons and Dolly with it. The driver, Ludovic Berry applied the brakes in an attempt to stop the train, but they could not stop it going down the shaft, Mr Berry remaining on board and plummeting to his death in the shaft. Even though the front of the engine could be seen about 20 yards down the shaft, it was decided that a recovery of his body was too dangerous and the shaft was filled again.

Ludovic Berry's family had the memorial plaque placed there in the 1990's.

On the next page is a list of the coal seams which were found during the sinking of the Trafford pit at Strangeways Hall Colliery.

This shaft was the deepest in Hindley and district at 2153 feet deep. It was nowhere near the deepest shaft in Lancashire however, that being the two shafts at Parsonage Colliery at Leigh which were both 3010 feet deep.

The coal seams at Trafford Pit ranged in thickness between about 2 feet and 7 feet. The quality also varied. The finest quality seam in Lancashire was the Arley. This was also the deepest, and that was usually the case, the deeper the seam, the better the quality of the coal. The seams are listed in order of the depth at which they were found in the shaft.

List of coal seams found in Trafford Shaft, Strangeways Hall Colliery

Riding

Park

Park Yard

Ince Yard

Bulldog

Binn

Crombouke

Brassey

Rams

Pemberton Five Feet

Bickershaw Seven Feet

Wigan Five Feet

Wigan Four Feet

Trencherbone

Cannel

King

Ravine

Yard

Smith

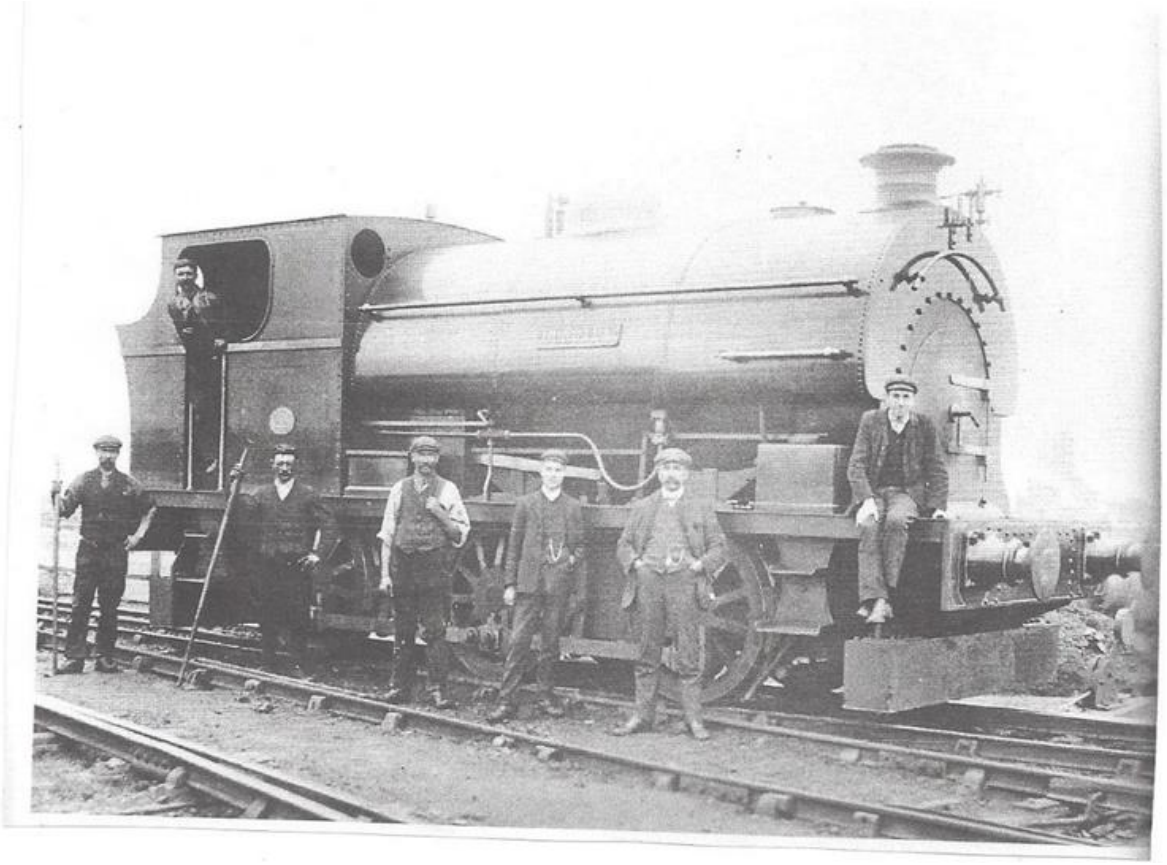
Arley

Only the Park, Cannel and Smith seams were not mined at Strangeways Hall Colliery.

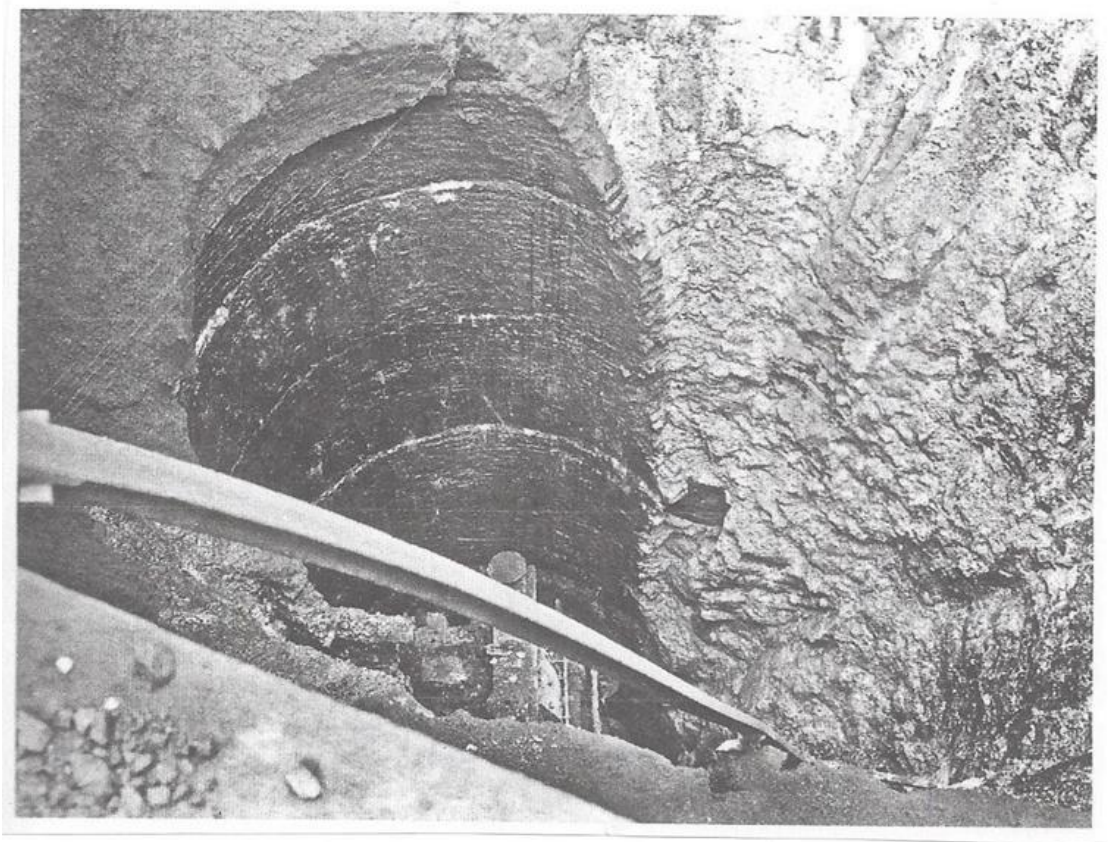
On the following pages are some photos of various collieries in and around Hindley. Then there are some maps of the colliery layouts in around 1928. Finally there is a Google satellite map on which I have superimposed all the known mineshafts in and around Hindley and the names and locations of the collieries.

The shaft which opened up and swallowed Dorothy and Ludovic Berry was known as the New Zealand shaft of Brookside Colliery or No. 7 of Low Hall Collieries. It can be seen on the map of Low Hall Collieries.

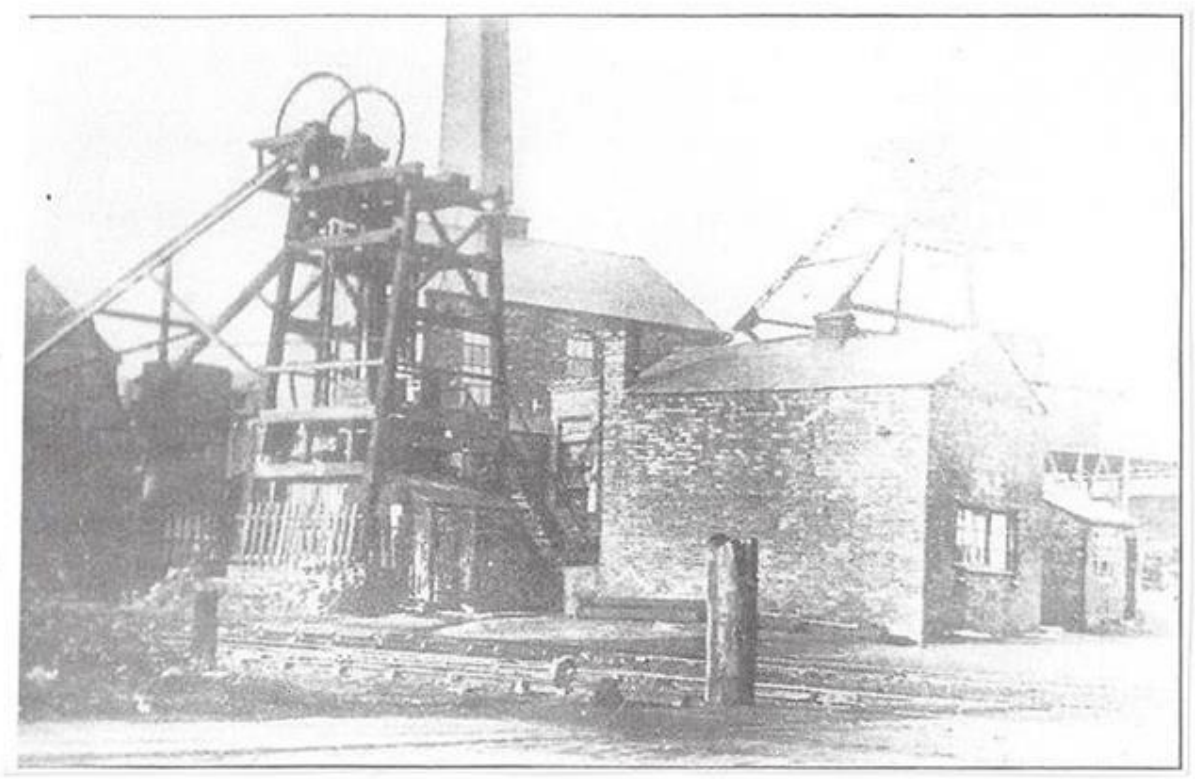
IMAGES



This is a photo of the engine Dolly in the late 1920's with the driver, Ludovic Berry, in the cab

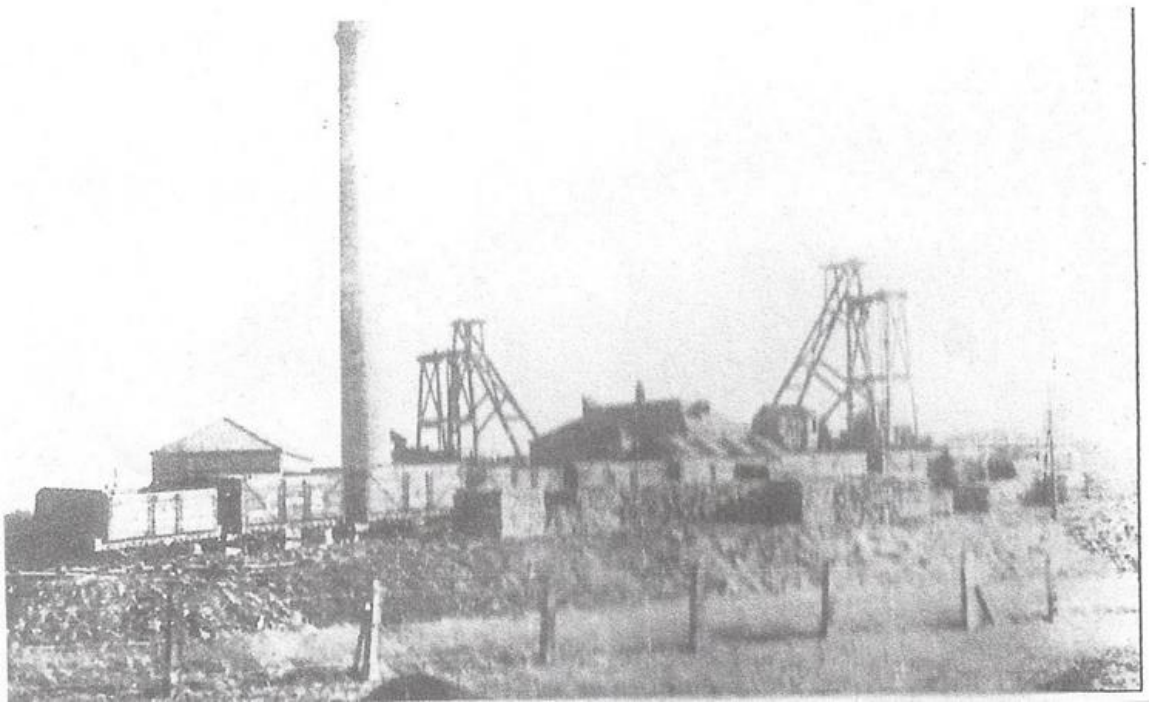


This photo was taken the day after the accident. Looking down the old shaft, the front of the engine can be seen and a length of rail.



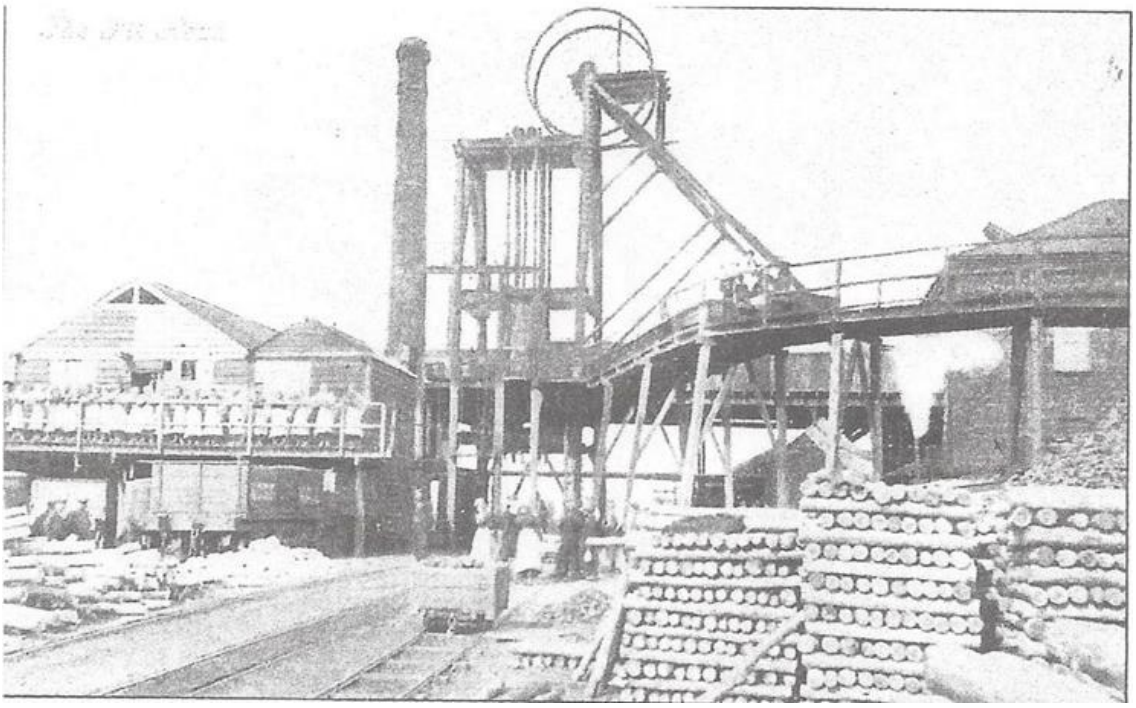
Swan Lane Colliery in 1927.

Ladies Lane Colliery around 1900.

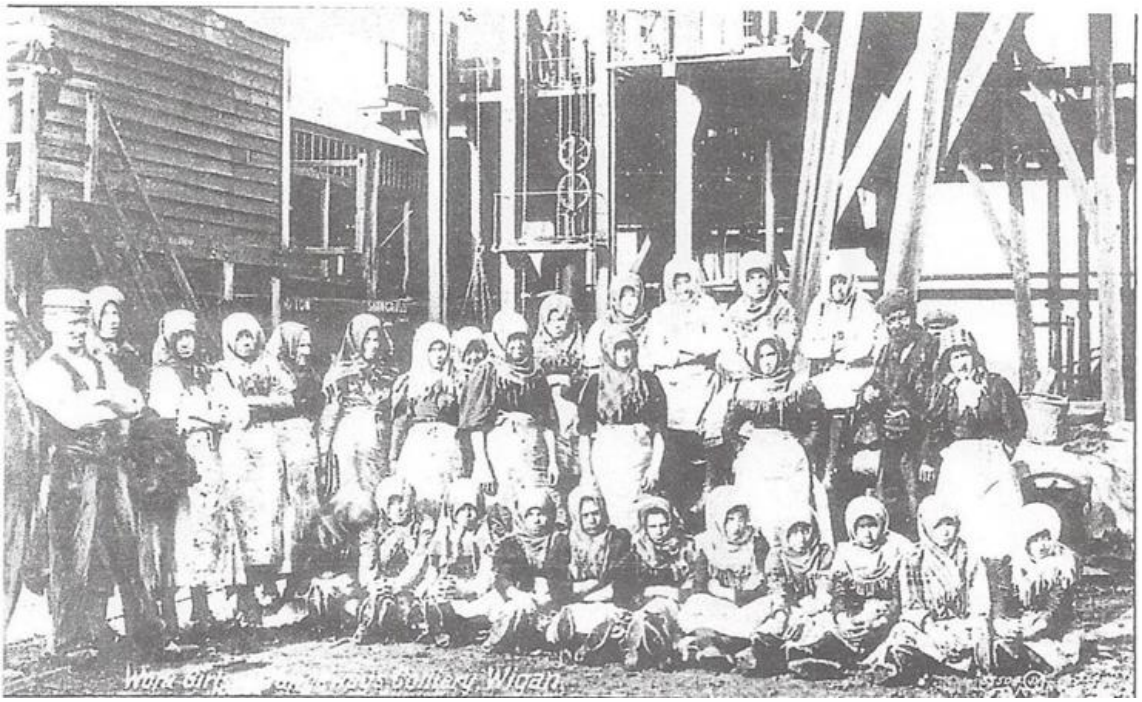


Grange Colliery in the 1920's.

A frightening bunch of Grange Colliery miners in 1927

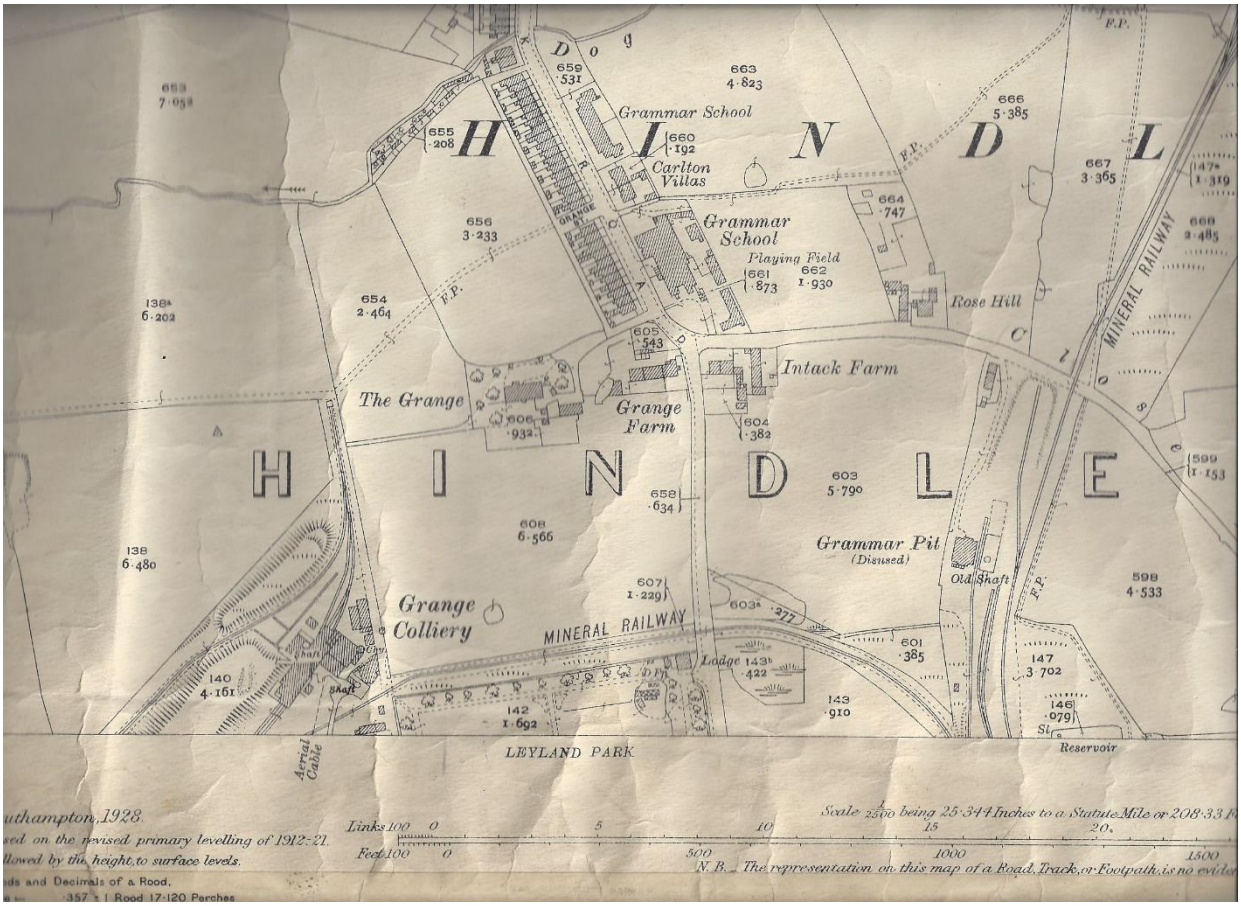


Strangeways Hall Colliery about 1906.



Pit Brow Lasses at Strangeways Hall Colliery about 1906

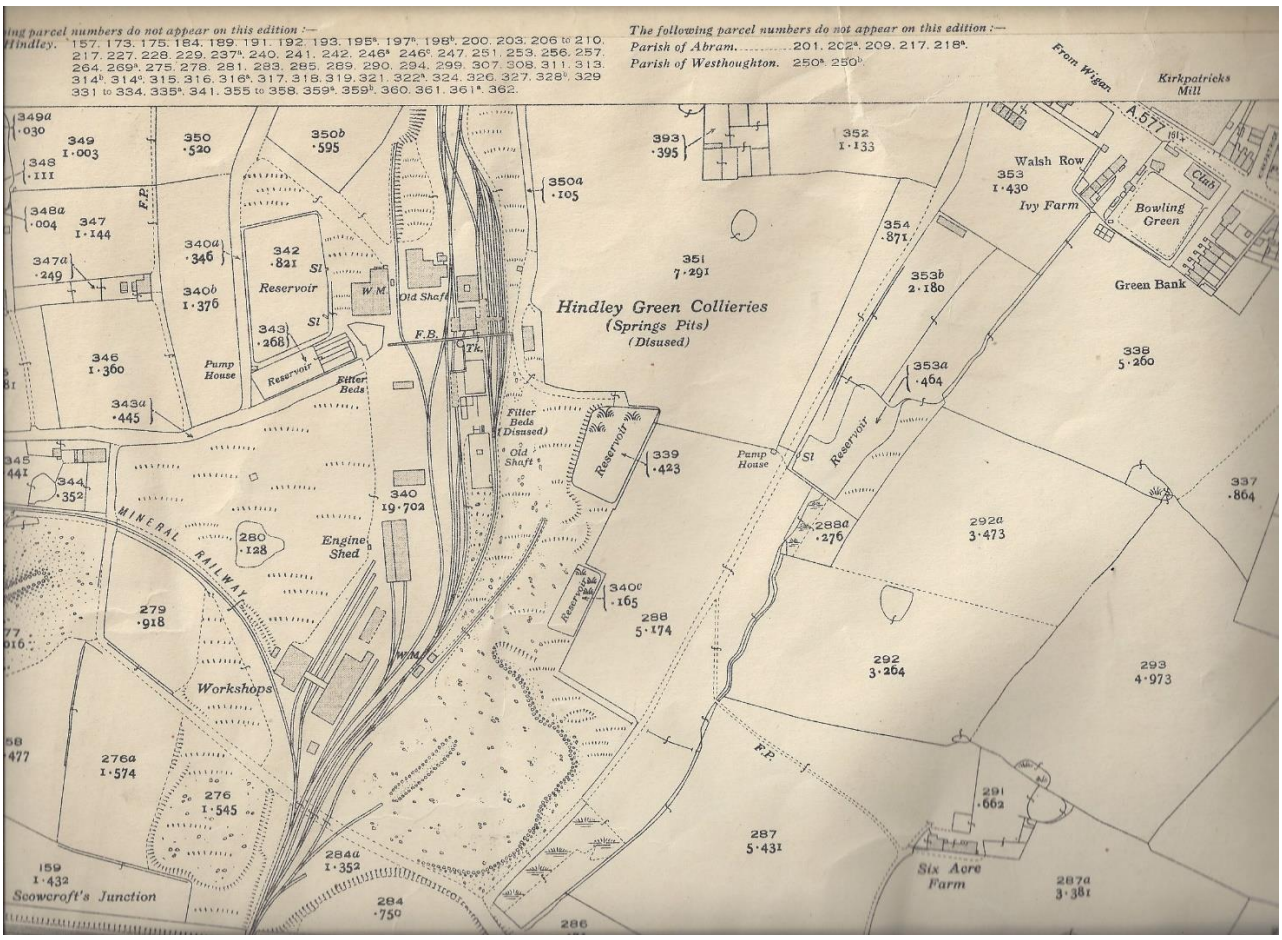
Maps



Grange Colliery & Grammar Pit 1928

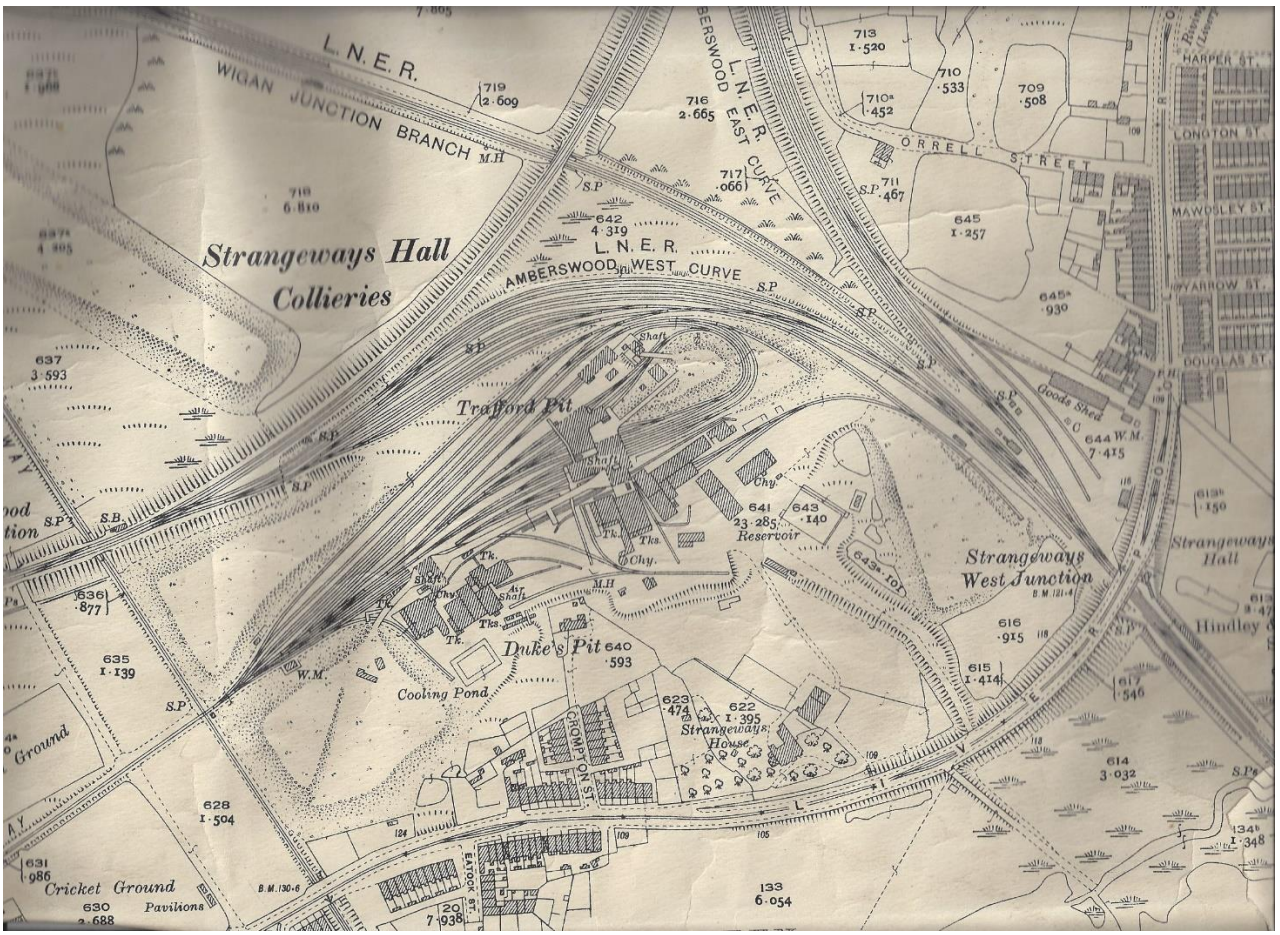
Hindley Deep Pits 1928

Hindley Field Colliery 1928



Hindley Green Collieries 1928

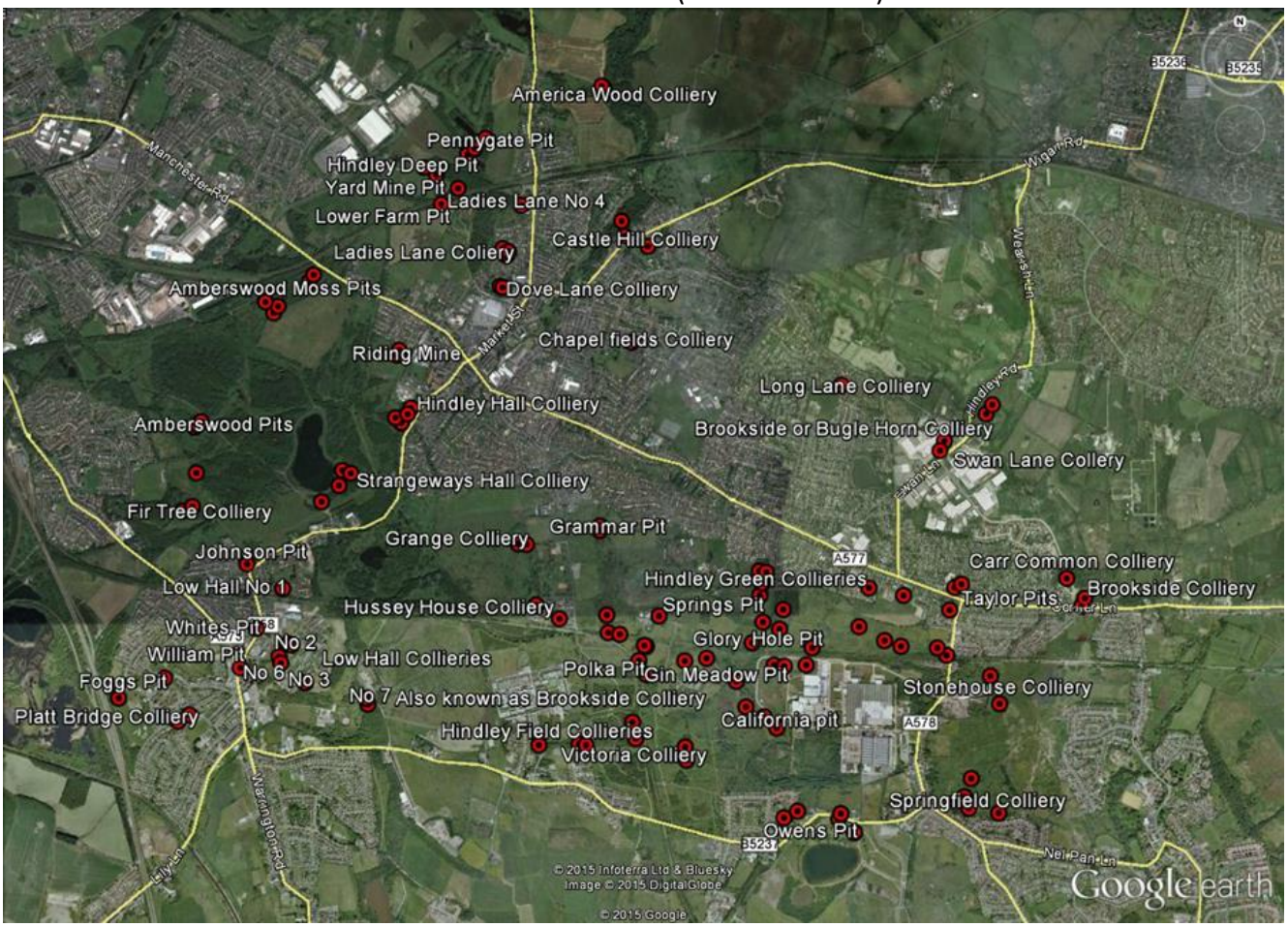
Low Hall Colliery 1928



Strangeways Hall Colliery 1928

Swan Lane & Brookside (Bugle Horn) Collieries 1928

COLLIERY LOCATIONS - (GOOGLE MAPS)



Hindley Collieries – Overall

Hindley Collieries – Amberswood Area

Castle Hill & Chapelfields

Hindley Green & Bickershaw

Castle Hill & Chapelfields Area

Platt Bridge Area