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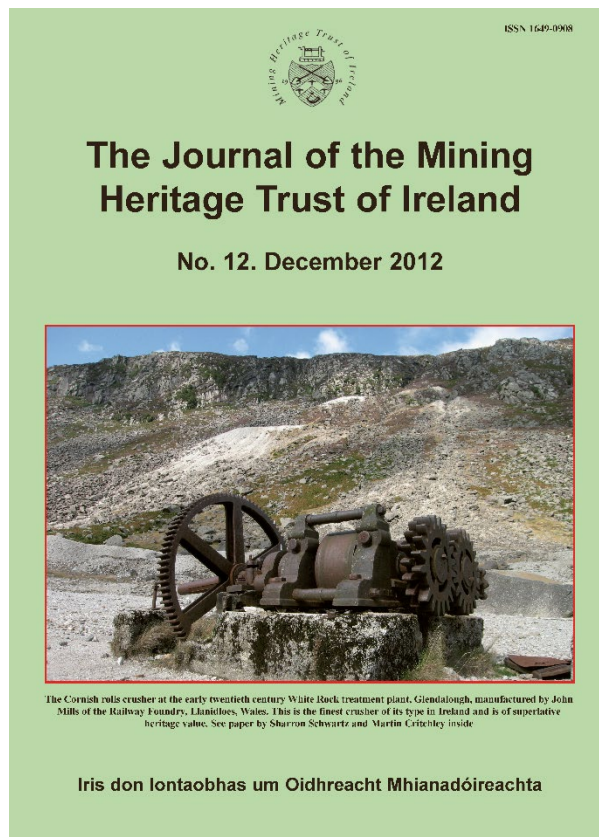
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# THE DUHALLA COALFIELD, CO. CORK: A PRELIMINARY HISTORY

Des Cowman

**Abstract:** The Duhalla Coalfield forms part of ‘the largest area of coal in the British empire – 640 square miles’ stretching from Clare, through Limerick and Cork as far as Killarney, reportedly (Meagher 1976-’77). How come so few know about this? Probably because the quality and quantity of coal proved uneconomic. The largest known working on this huge field was the section running south west of Kanturk in the barony of Duhalla (Map 1). While information on it is scrappy, what does emerge is the extreme difficulty in working here experienced by a company with huge resources which suggests that the rest of the field could not be worked economically. This is ‘preliminary’ in that nothing significant has been written about Duhalla mines but there are probably other primary sources. For instance, considerable mining seems to have taken place in the townland of Dromagh, but only one contemporary source refers to it: there is no known description of any of those other workings marked on the map. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 12, 2012, 1-3.

## INTRODUCTION

The Irish name Duthalla may mean ‘black cliff’ suggesting that the presence of coal was noticed from Celtic times. There probably were small-scale workings here in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and by 1715 Parliament had been successfully petitioned to build a canal linking the coalfield to the river Blackwater with the ambitious aim of exporting through Youghal. Forty six years later the canal was started but only went half-way and the remaining five miles were never built although the matter was discussed again by a Parliamentary committee in 1795 (Jackson no date).

The problems already related about Slievardagh coalfield in Tipperary were replicated in Duhalla (Cowman 2007). Both are on a plateau and the coal could easily be accessed by driving in on the coal from the sides but the pits filled with water so that local people simply sank another driving. At some stage an Edward Freeman erected a water-wheel to unwater a working at Donagh (Meagher 1976-’77, p 25-27). More is available about an operation run c.1840 by Messrs Leader at Dromagh employing 200 people (Roper 1841).

This operation was by means of levels driven from shallow pits on poor quality coal used for making lime and in the homes of the poor. F. Roper interviewed three local boys including Jeremiah Kinely:

... I am about 17 years of age, and live with my mother. I have been working here these nine or ten years. I now work at hurrying, which is filling the coals into a wagon and pushing them to the foot of the shaft. I have to push the wagon above 60 yards. It is hard work and I do not like it. I think the loaded wagon would weigh about 2cwt. or more. I have very good health generally. My work agrees very well with me. I get 1s. A day. I am paid every Saturday night

very regularly. We take our turns for our time of work. When it is my turn for night-work I go down with the night corps about eight o’clock, and come up about five in the morning. We have none of us any meals during the time we work at night. I like the day-work best. Every second week we change about from night-work to daywork. We have just the same kind of work at night-work as day-work. I take my wages to my mother. I cannot read or write. I have never been to school. I go to chapel.

Another 17 year old hurrier had very much the same to say not liking the work but coming up with the standardised phrase ‘my work agrees very well with me’. A 14 year old filled the bucket at the bottom of the shaft from the wagons hauled by the hurriers used the same phrase having just said ‘I would not work at it if I could help it’. Roper said they looked healthy but unwashed. He did not visit the other mine worked by the Leaders (brothers?) at Dysart.

There was active mining in the area when the Mining Company of Ireland (MCI) leased the Lisnacon part of Duhalla coalfield and it is from their reports to shareholders that we learn something of the difficulties of mining there.

## MCI’S LONG DRAINAGE ADIT: 1845 to 1883

The Board of MCI, ever vigilant to find new mining possibilities investigated many sites, most of which proved fruitless and which they realistically abandoned. Lisnacon was an exception in that they spent over forty years in mainly loss-making endeavour there. Perhaps their success at Slievardagh colliery provided a false analogy for them. In early 1845 they took a lease on the townland of Lisnacon from P.D. Latouch ‘on equitable terms’, anticipating ‘the company will derive ample profit for many years for the capital intended to be expended on the undertaking’ (MCI 1<sup>st</sup> 1845). They had

*Map 1. The Duhalla Coalfield*



resources which locals did not have and could run an adit to unwater their property.

The cost of driving this adit turned out to be between £400 and £500 per annum, and the length over a mile. However this only emerged later and after a year they 'supposed' the distance to be about 925 yards (MCI 1st 1845). A year later they thought they were nearly half-way there and were encouraged by finding culm en route but apparently not in saleable quality (MCI 1st 47 + a/cs). Twelve months later a single statement, with nothing about coal, culm or other detail, announced that 1148 yards had been driven (1st 1848). A year later 'several nips in the strata have retarded the work' (presumably buckling of floor or roof) and six months later they hit 'unusually hard rock' (1st & 2nd 1849).

Good news for shareholders a year later – they had sold enough culm to cover the cost of completing the adit. The accounts tell a different story: 30 tons sold for £8-15/- whereas the average monthly cost was nearly £40 (1st 50 & a/cs). No further mention of this but there was more hard rock and 'an excessive flow of water'. A new expedient was devised. A shaft was to be sunk and drivings made from it 80 yards west to the coal and east 60 yards to meet the existing adit (2nd 50). This means that the adit was about a mile long but did hit the coal and after seven years they still hoped for a 'moderate return'. Meanwhile they had got a fractional return from 300 tons of culm sold for £177 (2nd 1851 + a/cs). Six months later 200 tons of culm were sold for only £78: cost of extraction £178 (1st 52 + a/cs).

This therefore was a costly project and arguments about abandoning it could be countered by pointing out that their long drainage adit would then benefit others. Apparently the adit was still incomplete as shareholders were told in late 1852 that they were 'extending the tunnel to the sweet vein of coal' (2nd 52). Six months later a profit (at last!) of £128 is reported but 'the workings have been continued on a limited scale' (1st 53). The next report has a profit of a suspiciously similar £128 but the adit was being extended again (2nd 53 + a/cs). The 'sweet Coal' proved elusive and not until early 1855 (eight years after starting the adit) is 78 tons of coal reported as well as 1522 tons of lesser value culm. The report to shareholders says that this yielded a profit of £304; the accounts show a loss of £188! (2nd 1855r+a/cs). Conversely, the next report gives 2099 tons (unspecified) sold for £194 but the accounts show the profit as £304 (1st 56 + a/cs) with similar anomalies over the following years.

The brevity of the company's reports on the Duhalla colliery (as distinct from the details from Slieveardagh) and their idiosyncratic relationship to the financial statement from there mean that other interpretative tools must be used. Thus in 1859, having sold 2492 tons of coal, the directors bought the lease of the adjoining townland of Dromskeha (2nd 59) – surely a measure of optimism. However, three years later they refer to the 'depressed prices for culm' (2nd 62) while in the process of buying a steam engine (2nd 63), presumably for pumping. Is this an admission of the failure of the great adit? Six years later it needed a new boiler. Despite adit and engine 'the unprecedented wetness of the season' impeded production

the next year (2nd 70) with 'flooding' still a problem in 1872 (1st 73) although pumping was reported to be complete in the next report (2nd 73). Whether the other mines in the area were still being worked at this stage is unlikely although various shafts and adits were noted in the early 1860s (Memoirs GSI).

New problems for MCI were reported - 'the uncertain nature of the coal seams' (2nd 74) and shortly afterwards the operation was to be 'reduced' (1st 75). Retrospectively the flooding of 1873 was blamed for problems four years later and a new cross-cut was needed (1st 77). MCI were in trouble by then anyway (Cowman 2002). An inevitability faced the Duhalla operation and that it survived for another six years is another strange aspect of this operation. In 1883 the pumping engine was removed and the mine finally abandoned.

## SEQUELS

An 1896 listing of eight coal-mining areas in Ireland makes no reference to Duhalla (Inspector's Report). Somebody optimistically tried to sell Dromagh in 1901 (MJ ad). Some other party was interested enough to draw up a map of the area in 1920 (possibly the one included here) which reportedly was to be circulated to schools but never was (SS 27 Aug. 2011). A Mr Maguire inquired of the GSI in 1932 about the possibility of reopening Dromagh to get culm for limekilns. The reply was negative as the seams were dipping at 60 to 75 degree angles (Hallissy 1932). Another inquiry in the 1940s at the instigation of a Mr. Meehan about a mine at Island Dahill was also negative, the veins being almost vertical and variable. However, this is described as the only mine on which there was useful information and that it was commercially worked within the previous 50 years (Anon no date). There were probably other unrecorded expressions of interest in the 20th century but the area was debated in the Dail three times between 1941 and 1956. Local TD Linehan referred to a survey 'many years ago' by Scottish inspectors whose report 'sabotaged' the prospects for Duhalla. Minister MacEntee replied 'according to the advice given to me, it would be quite impossible to attempt the working of this mine in present circumstances'. It would seem that in the exigencies of war Irish coal areas be re-examined and the resultant report influenced the next two Dail replies. In 1944 Lemass dismissed Dromagh in particular – 'There would appear to be some possibilities in other places, but none there'. Responding to a call for the state to take over Duhalla collieries in 1956 Minister Norton responded, 'the coal seams are thin and irregular and faulty in a number of places. In some places, they peter out altogether' (Dail Debates 1941).

The entire coalfield spreading across four counties was surveyed by GSI personnel between 1988 and 1991. A two inch seam was noted at Abbeyfeale and in another unnamed Limerick location pits had been sunk on 18 inch culm: there was an outcrop at Carrigkerry in the same county. Two coal/culm exposures were noted in Clare – at Cratloe and Ulla. Five locations were recorded in Kerry – Cappagh (a culm pit), Carrigcannon (outcrop with 'trial pits'), Behevagh (seam of culm), Knocknacurra (culm pits) and Shanbally (several small seams). At Duhalla only traces of mining could be seen and it was noted that Dromagh was worked out (DMS files in GSI).

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