



This document is with a copy of the following article published by the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland. It is provided for non-commercial research and educational use.

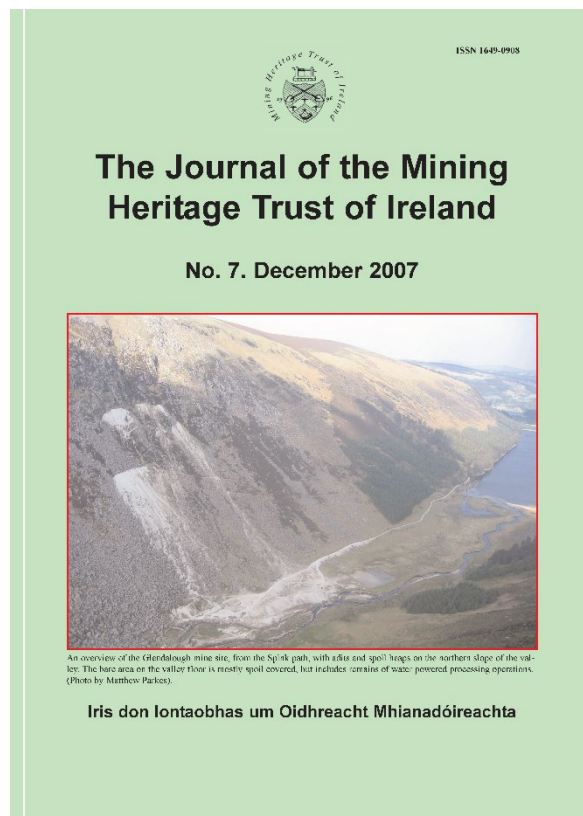
The Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland formally ceased its existence in 2019 but has provided a continuing website of resources with free access for those interested in the activities of the organisation in its various formats from 1996-2019, and in Irish mining heritage in a broader sense.

Cowman, D. (2007) 'The Mining Company of Ireland and the Collieries of Slieveardagh, County Tipperary' *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 7, pp. 37-44

Copyright of this article remains with the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland whose archives, intellectual assets and library have been transferred to the Natural History Division of the National Museum of Ireland. Please contact [naturalhistory@museum.ie](mailto:naturalhistory@museum.ie) for any enquiries relating to the MHTI.

This cover page must be included as an integral part of any copies of this document.

Please visit [www.mhti.com](http://www.mhti.com) for more information.



An overview of the Glendalough mine site, from the Spink path, with adits and spoil heaps on the northern slope of the valley. The bare area or the valley floor is mostly spoil covered, but includes remains of waste processed processing operations. (Photo by Matthew Parkes).

Iris don Iontaobhas um Oidhreacht Mhianadóireachta



# THE MINING COMPANY OF IRELAND AND THE COLLIERIES OF SLIEVEARDAGH, COUNTY TIPPERARY

By Des Cowman

**Abstract:** The Mardyke area of Slieveardagh was only one of the many leases taken by the Mining Company of Ireland (MCI) following their formation in 1824. They brought a professional expertise to an area that had been haphazardly mined by generations of locals. Much of their endeavour over the next 60 years was to acquire the mining rights to the entire coal-field to expedite drainage and eliminate competition. In this they were continually stymied. A report of 1854 is explicit about that but also reveals much about the workings over- and under-ground. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 7, 2007, 37-44 .

## MINING PRE-MCI

That there had been a long tradition of mining along the edges of the coalfields of Slieveardagh is suggested by the place names in Irish - Gleann an Ghuail (Glangoole - glen of the coal), Claise an Ghuail (Coalbrook in English, but literally "coal-pit"), Garran an Ghuail (Garranacool - coalfield) and probably the word black (dubh pronounced duff) in Curragheenduff and Clashduff with possibly Blackcommon. These most likely were sporadic small workings from an Irish-speaking past for which no records are likely to remain. However, the aspiration, or irony, of "New Birmingham" to the west of the plateau goes hitherto unexplained. Despite MCI's best efforts such individual workings continued through the 19th century and indeed outlasted the company.



**Figure 1.** *The Irish here should really be translated as "Coal Pit".*

A report on part of Slieveardagh in 1817, notes Killenaule as being "*in the midst of a highly cultivated and populous country thickly interspersed with noblemen's and gentlemen's seats*". It implies that there were pits in the town itself, run perhaps by a Mr. Gahan. Edward Worth Newenham had also sunk many open-casts for shallow culm and thirty two pits for culm. The deepest of these was 150 feet which was unwatered by the simple device of two large barrels dipped into the water and lifted by a two-horse whim.

Newenham's colliers had to pay from five to twenty guineas for the services he provided, but he also kept half the material

raised. His sinkers got 2/2d per day, labourers 10-12d and boys proportionately for hauling the coal wagons underground. The operation had in fact ended by 1817 but he had been getting one shilling per cwt of coal and six shillings per ten cwt. of culm. The price had since gone up by a third, benefiting other mine owners like Charles Langley (Anon, 1817, in NLI ms 657).

He was the third generation of his family mining at Coalbrook. He had bought a 14hp steam engine for his mine in 1812. The report on his operation in 1817 mentions "*frequent disappointments*" and "*combination amongst the colliers who, when coal is scarce at the surface, often demand an increase in wages*". The report nevertheless estimates the total amount of coal/culm on the Langley estate at nearly 7.5 million tons worth £4.3 million (Griffith, 1817 in NLI ms. 657). No wonder MCI were attracted to the area although they never raised anything like these inflated claims.

## MCI DEVELOPMENT, 1825-'35

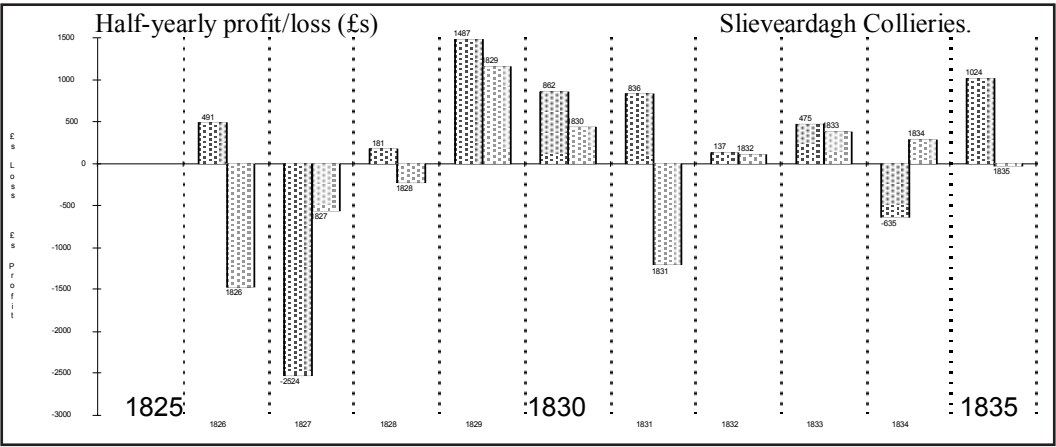
What was known when MCI investigated the area from 1825 was there were two seams of coal outcropping at the edges and dipping towards the centre to form a basin. Local people had been working the outcrop rim by means of pits but the vast concave of coal remained untouched for lack of expertise and investment. (Hardiman 1881 & Memoir 1921). This the Mining Company of Ireland was prepared to bring to the area.

One difficulty was that the plateau was owned by a number of landlords and traditionalism in this remote upland may well have impeded the leasing of the mineral rights to the entire area, necessary to maximise profit. An additional and associated problem which transpired was that water had run into the marginal pits and seeped down the dip saturating the entire centre of the basin. This meant that pumping/draining ideally had to be co-ordinated for the area as a whole (MCI, 2<sup>nd</sup> Report 1840). The reality was that the company had to sink shafts into the centre of each concave basin to pump it out and run levels from there to the sloping coal-seams. (Parl. Gaz. 1846, p. 249)

That pumping was needed was evident straight away (although the full picture did not emerge until the early 1830s). The com-

pany secured leases at Coolquin and Mardyke (both from Messrs Palliser, Tighe and Ponsonby) as well as Lickfin (from Fergus Langley), Gurtinancy (W.F. Tighe), Glangoole (Sir Audrey de Vere Hunt) and Ballyglavin (Earl of Carrick) (MCI 1<sup>st</sup> Report 1825). They ordered a large (40 inch) steam engine in 1825 for the Mardyke but the mining boom (see Cowman 2001) had created such a demand for engines that it did not arrive until the following year coming into operation in the latter part of 1826 (MCI Reports 1825 and 1826). Meanwhile the company had been sinking the engine shaft, extracting whatever could be got from it and Coolquin (hence slight profit in early 1826 - bar chart) had been building houses for their overseers as well as mine offices, etc. plus negotiating other leases now that the significance of their operation became evident locally. Thus they acquired the right to Hill and Forth which they opened immediately (MCI, 1<sup>st</sup> Report 1826).

The bar-chart (MCI Reports and Accounts 1825-1835) shows losses particularly high in 1827 but this was associated with further development work, especially underground, so that coal output reportedly increased from 300 tons in January of that year to 2060 tons in December. (MCI 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Report 1827). Progress was inhibited the following year however by labour difficulties which broke out again in late 1829 (see Cowman 2001). These being resolved apparently to the satisfaction of the company (whatever about the workers), output increased around 1830, particularly to meet a strong local demand, much of it for lime-kilns in the area. It was hoped that a wider market would be opened up once the Grand Jury built the promised road from Ballingarry to Urlingford but this did not happen. Nevertheless towards the end of 1830 it was decided that a second steam engine was needed, to be placed at "Boulanalea" (Bolintlea?) (MCI Reports 1829-'30).



**Figure 2. Bar chart of MCI Reports and Accounts 1825-1835.**

It is not clear at what stage the diverse water problems in Slieveardagh became apparent. Certainly in 1831 another steam engine had to be got for Mardyke for winding and pumping. It began working on 15th December of that year. Then in 1832 the steam engines from the abandoned workings at Tullyhana in Roscommon and Audley in west Cork were moved to Ballygalavan and Bolintlea so that MCI now had five steam engines in the area. Meanwhile it seems that a long-term decision was made to drive an adit from the slopes of the plateau at Forth & Hill into the heart of the coal-field to drain it completely so that there would be no need for steam engines (MCI



**Figure 3. The ivy covered bob-wall of one engine house at Mardyke on the right with a more intact engine house in the background.**

Reports 1831-'32). This was to take five years to complete and even then was only a partial success (q.v.).

Meanwhile the company had been extending their lease-holding to Commons and Curragh and decided to erect steam engines on both, notionally bringing to seven the number of steam engines on the plateau in 1834 although reports of 1836 and 1844 give only five (*MJ* 1836, report p. 25; *Parl. Gaz* 1846, p.249). The dramatic change which these brought about on the highland landscape along with ancillary building was further added to by the building of houses for workmen, fifty in all being erected by late 1835 (MCI Reports 1833-1835; *MJ* 1836, p. 23). While figures are not available to indicate how much total investment was made over this period of ten years in Slieveardagh, it was paid for by increasing coal sales from the mines as indicated by the modest profits indicated above.

### DIFFICULTIES 1835-'45

The labour difficulties experienced by the company in the 1830s are related elsewhere. (Cowman 2001) However development work continued although the company had still not achieved its objective of having a monopoly on mining in the area. The original simplified view of a great basin to be drained by one adit was no longer seen as viable once the complexities of the coalfield became more apparent (see below). Socially things would seem to have quietened down by 1843 to judge by the company's comment that a drop in demand for coal had led



to the workers being put on a four day week rather than have any sackings: *"an arrangement duly appreciated by the deserving men employed for whose benefit --- it was adopted"*. That year the company paid the shareholders a dividend of 22½ % (MCI 2<sup>nd</sup> Report 1843).

The category of *deserving men* is defined more fully in 1845. These were *"grateful for the employment given to them"*, and the wages of 2/6d to 3/- per day as against local farm labourers wages of 8d to 10d. They appreciated the *"houses of a better description"* provided for them by the company. Their children could go to the company's school and then be employed as clerks; cheap food was made available to them in times of scarcity as well as *"good medical aid when required"* (MCI 1<sup>st</sup> Report 1845).



Figure 4. The sad remains of the offices at Mardyke.

An independent observer in 1841 concurred, adding that at Mardyke there was a temperance hall, a savings society and a lending library with a school about to be opened. He commented on the *"neat ranges"* of houses built by the company (Roper 1841). A further account adds a *"loan fund"* which in 1843 distributed a huge sum of £4737 in 1508 loans among a workforce of under 300, making a profit of £18 (Parl Gaz., 1846, p. 249). There were no women or children employed in the mines there except for a few boys opening doors for the mining teams. His only complaint was the *"suffocating smell"* of sulphur in the engine house. He compared this favourably with Coalbrook nearby which was privately run by the Langley family. There, an equal number, about four hundred, were employed as at Mardyke. However, few were at work as it was Fair Day. Also the engine had broken down and might not be fixed for a week. None of the benefits enjoyed at Mardyke seem to have been there; he mentions the absence of school, sick fund or doctor (Roper 1841).

FAMINE

The company's best customers had been local farmers who used the culm to burn lime. Even by November 1845 it could be asserted that *"lately the demand for coal has been so much increased that the coals are drawn off as rapidly as they are raised"* (MJ 8th Nov. 1845, p. 361, report from *Dublin Merchantile Advertiser*). By late 1846 the company made no mention of two successive years of potato crop failure and simply blames the fact that farmers can no longer buy culm as being due to *"want of enterprise ---which is supposed to be consequent on the failure of the potato crop"*. The miners were

again put on a four-day week but were sold Indian meal at cost (which included transport charges). The MCI directors hoped that soon *"the prevailing panic amongst farmers would subside"* (MCI, 2<sup>nd</sup> Report, 1846)

By early 1847, with the panic obviously still extant the company put the workers on a three day week as 50,000 tons of coal built up on the surface. By the end of that year some workers were down to two days work per week (MCI, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Report, 1847). Over the next few months (early 1848) a quarter of the workforce were discharged into a starving landscape while the company waited *"anxiously for revival of agricultural prosperity"*. When this did not happen the formal decision was taken in 1849 to abandon culm as there was no local market for it, the following table (MCI, 1<sup>st</sup> Report, 1849) being used to justify this (Figure 5). However the chart (MCI summary table in 2<sup>nd</sup> Report 1853) shows a levelling-out of culm sales between 1848 and 1851 with only a modest drop in coal sales.

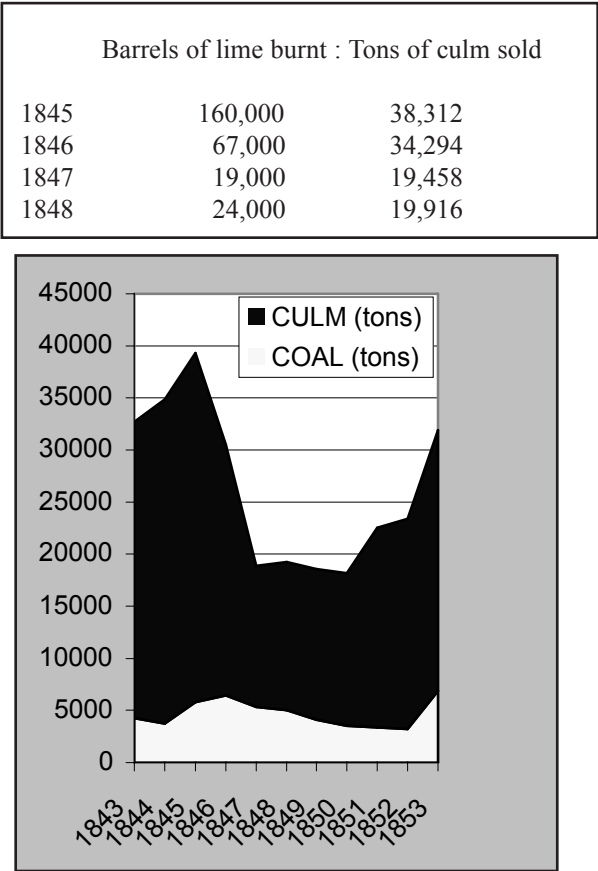


Figure 5. Culm production figures -see text for explanation.

It is difficult, therefore, to assess what strains were put on the company's overstretched philanthropy over the remaining famine years. The census figures for 1851 suggest life had been preserved, at least at the declining operation in Mardyke. Out of a pre-famine 118 persons there, 111 survived. However, it would seem that complex social processes were at work. In 1841 there had been 7.5 persons per household, and ten abandoned houses in the village. In 1851 a similar population lived amongst 15 abandoned houses but at a more comfortable average of 5 per household. However, the population in the surrounding townlands had dropped from 60 to 30 (Census 1851). Possibly some of these had moved to the Company's new cen-

tre of operations at Earlshill where 18 new houses had appeared by 1851 augmenting the 1841 community of 340 by another 32 people who seemingly lived in greater comfort than previously. That this may have arisen out of MCI's paternalistic concern seems evidenced by comparison with the Langley family's colliery at Coalbrook nearby where only fifty people in 8 houses survived out of 216 people living in 33 houses. It would seem that reticence about lack of support for famine victims was matched in MCI's case about reticence in telling their shareholders what they had done. What did offer future hope for a revival was the extension of the railway which would allow local coal to be sold in Dublin, Cork and Waterford (MCI 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Report 1848).

## "REVOLUTION!"

On the Friday/Saturday 29/30th July Slieveardagh became historically part of the European revolutionary movement of 1848. It is unlikely that there was any anticipation locally that most of Ireland's revolutionary movement, all four of them, would arrive at Mardyke that Friday evening. Why William Smith O'Brien, Thomas Francis Meagher and the two other Young Irelanders chose to come to Slieveardagh after a week of endeavouring to fan the flames of revolution in famine stricken Waterford and south Tipperary goes unstated (Power 1995). It does make a certain amount of sense as there was enough of the peasantry still employed here, and with a past reputation for violence (Cowman 2001), to make this remote area attractive to them. There was also the possibility of explosives although the leaders never requested such. Smith O'Brien with a price of £500 on his head specifically appealed to the colliers to protect him from arrest. He told John Pemberty, the engineer in charge of Mardyke, that if the company tried to suspend the works he would take them over (Hodges 1849, Cullen and Pemberty).



**Figure 6. Monument at Commons commemorating the arrival there of the Young Ireland leaders.**

Accompanied by a crowd of excited women and children the revolutionaries then proceed by horse and cart to Commons where they stayed the night at a local hostelry. Apparently sufficient colliers turned up the next morning for Smith O'Brien to write a letter to the directors of the MCI requesting them "to prevent the inhabitants of the collieries from suffering inconvenience in consequence of the noble and courageous protection offered by them to him" and asking that the entire proceeds of coal and culm sales be devoted to paying the miners. However, if the company "distress the people by withholding wages or

other means" he would urge the colliers to seize control of the mines themselves and "if (sic. - not *when*) the revolution succeeds" he will nationalise the company's property. However, "if the Mining Company observes a strict and impartial neutrality" their property will be protected (Hodges 1849 letter).



**Figure 7. This is presented as the "cottage" where the police sought refuge and which they defended against the colliers. Strangely the hill on which it stands is called Warhouse.**

Smith O'Brien apparently anticipated a long siege. That Saturday morning he and the others addressed the crowd of about five hundred and told them that Ireland would be free within a fortnight. The crowd then accompanied him to Commons colliery but stopped about fifty yards outside the gate leaving him to proceed in alone (apart from being trailed by an inquisitive small boy!) to requisition materials to build a barricade. There, about noon, he demanded from John Lamphier, the pay clerk, a cart and boxes. The clerk refused as did one Tobin so Smith O'Brien tried to push out the cart himself but gave up after a few yards and went back to the crowd. A few others whom the clerk did not recognise as employees then went in and started ringing the works bell. Meanwhile a party of police were seen proceeding from Ballingarry and the crowd moved to cut them off. The police took refuge in the Widow McCormack's "cottage" (Hodges 1849, Lamphier). The gunfire that was exchanged across her cabbage patch comprised the entire revolutionary violence and lasted until a relieving force of police dispersed the crowd. The four Young Irelanders were arrested shortly afterwards.

This absurd incident leaves many questions unanswered. Lamphier answered "yes" when questioned about whether the colliers were anxious to protect Smith O'Brien. He affirmed that some of those involved were unemployed colliers out of work for about three months. No comment was made about the fact that none of them entered the gates of Commons colliery, remaining about 50 yards away. Nor was it explained why the police had been withdrawn from the barracks at Commons three days before. Nor is any reason given why John Pemberty of Mardyke and William Pimlett manager of a colliery owned by a Mr. Barker at Bawnleigh should both choose to spend that Friday night in Lamphier's house on the mine at Commons (Hodges, 1848, Lamphier, Pemberty and Pimlett). There may have been other forces at work which the Young Irelanders



were not aware of. It has not emerged what if any measures were taken against those colliers who, having respected the company's property, nevertheless were involved in violence.

### POST-FAMINE RECOVERY

By early 1850 up to 50,000 tons of culm had been stockpiled. They cleared 7000 tons of it by the end of the year and 9000 tons the following year, thanks largely to being able to tap into the Dublin market. Amongst the new customers there were Guinness'. However, not until early 1853 was the entire stockpile cleared (MCI, Reports 1850, '51, 52 and 1st '53). Development work had meanwhile continued over the famine years. An engine (probably the winding engine) had been moved from Mardyke to Earlshill in 1848/'49 (MCI, Reports 1848, 1849 and 1st '53).

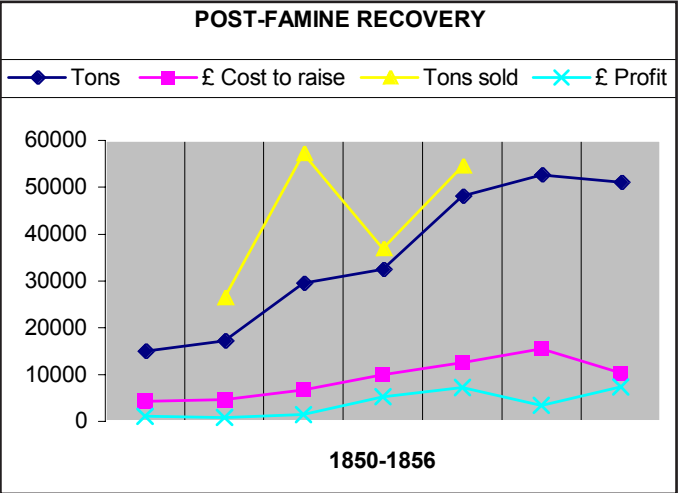


Figure 8. Chart of MCI Report and accounts 1850-1856.

The chart (MCI Reports and Accounts 1850-'56) shows the process of the recovery to 1856 (Figure 8). Sales figures are incomplete but sale of the backlog in 1852 is clear. Generally increased cost of raising coal presumably meant more employment and profit guaranteed that the mine would stay open. 1856 represented a peak in profit however (£7,305), dropping to under £2000 in 1859 but averaging about £3,500 to 1865. (MCI Reports 1856-1865)

In 1850 it was again proposed to run one deep adit to unwater all the collieries (MCI Reports 1st 1849 & 1st 1850). Before embarking on this, however, the company sensibly commissioned a report on the entire colliery area to enable long-term planning to take place. In July and August 1854 a Scottish engineer named Lansdale visited Slieveardagh along with company secretary Purdy Allen. Together with colliery manager Owen Cullen they drew up a survey which gives insight into how the various workings were operated. As an edited version of this has already been published (Cowman 2004 based on typescript report) a brief summary follows as well as the hitherto unpublished recommendations (Lisnacon typescript). The recommendations praise MCI's underground operation but state that "The drawing of the coal to the surface is clumsy as well as costly". It recommends "small portable steam engines working at high speed with wheel and pinion turning a large drum for large wire ropes passing over large pulleys --- kept well tarred to prevent oxidisation".

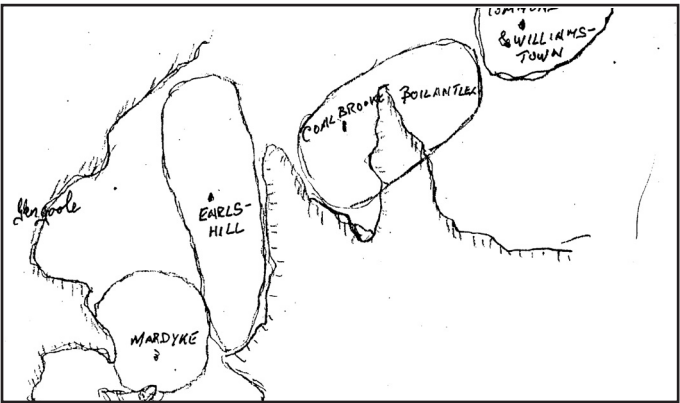


Figure 9. The four coal basins on Slieveardagh Plateau.

The main report (Typescript 1854) makes clear the complexity of this coalfield. Seemingly, nine seams of coal had originally been laid down. Tectonic forces then warped these into a series of both lateral and longitudinal undulations. Erosion then removed most of the coal leaving only a series of basin-shaped seams (Figure 9). The report identifies three groupings of these - at Mardyke (four small basins), Earlshill (one basin over five miles long with nine seams), Coalbrook and Boilantlea (four small basins) and Commons (one basin apparently with two seams). The company had leases on most of this area.

However, as the report makes clear, by 1854 the company had not been successful in eliminating competition and coordinating the development of the four the coal basins. Subsequently they seem to have made a concerted effort to do deals which would give them a monopoly. Almost £15,500 is shown in the company's balance sheets as being paid out for "securities" to Langley in 1853-'54 while another local landowner at Gorteen, Byrne, got over £8,500 (MCI Reports 1853-54, balance sheets.). This is not deducted from the notional profit shown in Figure 8, nor did it transpire that it eliminated competition.

The total workforce given in the report is only 83 - presumably a fraction of the pre-famine figure and much less than the probably anachronistic and suspiciously neat figure of 500 formally logged for 1853 (Thom 1855). There was still an accumulation of surface coal but it was nearly cleared by then and "every practical effort" was being made to sell coal more widely mainly through arranging cheaper transport with the railway companies to get coal to the major cities and through maintaining their contract with Guinness', despite Welsh competition (MCI Reports 2nd 1850). By early 1856 the directors were able to refer to "the improved feeling in the country generally" to express optimism about selling culm to local farmers (MCI Reports 1st 1856). However, the premonition of the threat from Welsh coal came closer to home the following year when it was reported that "in places within easy distance of Slieveardagh, culm from Welsh collieries is sometimes being used ---". The company's response was to quote a letter from Rev. Dickson of Limerick lauding the superiority of Tipperary culm (MJ 1852, 501 quoting Dublin Mercantile Advertiser).

As figure 8 shows, profits were somewhat unreliable. Nevertheless the company were continuing to buy out the leases of the competitor mines - a further £17,000 was paid to



**Figure 10. Ivy covers the remains of the engine house and its surrounding wall at Lisnamrock.**

Henry Langley in 1855-'56 for Coalbrook and £6,300 for Glangoole colliery. Another £1150 paid for premises in Thurles brought such expenditure at Slieveardagh to nearly £13,500 in these two years - considerably more than the notional profit made there (MCI Reports 1855 & 1856, balance sheets). MCI continued to get whatever purchases or leases they could get - Garranacoole 100 acres for 41 years in 1870; Williamstown and Commons 1071 acres at only £10 p.a., strangely because of "a lunacy matter" (MJ 1891, p.978, review re sale).

Nevertheless, a drop in 1858-'59 is attributed to an unaccounted-for "increased competition in the locality" (MCI Reports, 2<sup>nd</sup> 1858). There is insufficient evidence to chart all such competition but naturally landowners were going to act in their own perceived best interests when granting leases. Guy Luther, for instance, let the mining rights of Crohan, Glenmorne and Carhue, presumably subdemominations of Lisnamrock, to two locals - farmer John Sparrow and collier Thomas Mara on 1<sup>st</sup> Nov. 1841 with various conditions. Similar land was let again in 1859 by Luther to a John Faulds of Ballinulty for stated royalties on coal/culm with specifics for measuring output (Luther Papers, PROI ms 5645). In Glangoole Pat Maher's team was working independently (Memoir 1860). Other independent colliers are mentioned in the 1854 Report - St. John, Crawley (he had a steam engine and eight employed), and McCarthy.

Whether weaker competition was bought out is not explained, nor why the price of culm dropped again in 1861. The shareholders are favoured with no explanation of the declining profits in the following years to 1865 (MCI Reports and balance sheets 1865-'75) but they are told about new leases - Foilacamin cost a considerable £7,070 in 1868 for instance and new leases were obtained for Lisnamrock and Coalbrook in 1873. The following year saw further investment there with new engine house, workers' dwellings plus carpenters' and smiths' workshops (MCI Reports 2<sup>nd</sup> '67, 1<sup>st</sup> 1873 and 1<sup>st</sup> 1874).

Manager Owen Cullen drew up a survey of Earlshill in 1869 but died before it was completed. He was succeeded by J.H. Lamphier who completed the plan in February 1872. Houses are shown but there are only 14 of them in the locality. Six basin-shaped coal seams are shown and named, the lowest being "Main Coal". A shaft cuts them all and at its bottom a

drainage adit runs to Glangoole. About half way up another undefined level runs beyond the coal seams in the opposite direction. Two shorter shafts are shown with two levels to the main shaft. This seems to indicate quite limited working on the seams although an undated note on the map, signed by a later manager, John T. March, may have been offered as explanation: pits were made "*many years ago by former miners, particulars of which are not now forthcoming*" (Box File 274-3). Presumably these were flooded and posed a high risk if driven upon unexpectedly.

Nevertheless, the colliery proved to be significant for the company at a time when its other enterprises were losing money. For instance, even though Slieveardagh made a profit of £2,256 MCI's overall loss in the second half of 1870 was £2,080 (MJ 1871, p. 4, report half-AGM). Likewise for the same period two years later the company's modest profit of £260 would have been a substantial loss but for the colliery's profit of £4,500 (MJ 1873, p.32, Dublin Correspondent).

This colliery continued to produce respectable tonnages of coal through to the late 1870s and with the prospect of a branch of the Dublin-Cork railway coming to Laffins Bridge two and a half miles away (as distinct from the existing railhead at Thurles fourteen miles away) meant that a company siding there could open up the urban market along with wider rural markets for coal and culm (MCI Reports 1<sup>st</sup> 1880). While the siding was ready by the end of 1881 problems associated with the land war were reported to have "unsettled" the workers and "seriously interfere with the work". No details were given but additional problems in relation to pumping were related to shareholders (MCI Reports 1<sup>st</sup> 1882).

## DECLINE, 1880s

These difficulties may well have been more fundamental. The Geological Surveyors in 1881 found the richest Mardyke vein to have been "long worked out" and that mining was now only being carried out on one thin (18 to 20 inches high) seam at Lisnamrock. Pumping could well have been a problem since the main shaft was well over a quarter of a mile deep (243 fathoms). That the high output of earlier days was but just a distant memory is specified by the surveyors: "*No details can be obtained as to these workings as they are almost forgotten by those formerly engaged there*" (Hardiman 1881).

That there were still sanguine hopes for coal mining at Slieveardagh in the mid-1880s is exemplified by a son of the locality with 15 years mining experience and who later went on to develop the first coal cutting machines and mine conveyor belts. He was Richard Sutcliffe who took a lease on the north eastern portion of the coalfield (described just as "Kilcoole") in 1883. He moved there from Castlecomer the following year to supervise the mining. It lasted only 18 months. The reasons given by his sons for this failure were three-fold.

- (i) Lack of experienced miners in the area
- (ii) As the coal produced was smelly and difficult to burn, British coal was preferred locally.
- (iii) There was a decline in the use of culm in lime kilns due to the growing use of chemical fertilisers (Sutcliffe and Edward 1948).

Presumably the same consideration affected MCI's operation. The active colliers were already moving away from what they saw as diminished opportunities, joining the accelerating flight abroad. Ironically, the railway which they had hoped would bring their coal out was bringing Welsh coal in as well as, presumably, imported fertilisers so that the local culm market too was diminishing. Nevertheless, the company continued the habit to stymie others by leasing whatever coal area they could. Thus a 41 year lease was taken in Gorteen (from the Boulick Estate) as late as 1886 (*MJ* 1891, p978 sale details re leases). However, the shareholders of MCI were told nothing of this but offered either distracters from the main issue or a series of excuses.

The distracter in 1883 was that an examination of the stock at Slieveardagh had revealed overestimates of the coal on hand at the company's sheds at Thurles and Callan of 100 tons as well as at the coal banks at the mine itself (MCI Reports 2<sup>nd</sup> 1882). Over the following years the shareholders were then given a series of excuses for this colliery - not so much lime was now being burned; the good summer of 1885 meant that everybody had enough turf; the price of imported coal was particularly low; there was an (unexplained) fall in the sales of culm (MCI Reports 1<sup>st</sup> 83; 1<sup>st</sup> 84; 1<sup>st</sup> 85 & 1<sup>st</sup> 87). A more serious "excuse" was provided for a drop in production from 9036 tons raised in the first half of 1887 to 5590 tons in the second half. Because of "*certain parties illegally raising and selling coal, the property of the company*" (MCI Reports 1<sup>st</sup> 1887). This cannot have been straight-forward theft because the company had to take legal action referring six months later to the "prolonged and expensive struggle" there which they claimed was "practically ended". Tonnages raised, however continued at the lower level of 5528 tons and a year later had dropped to 1974 tons (MCI 2<sup>nd</sup> Reports 1887 & 1888).

Meanwhile, the centre of operations seems to have transferred from Earlshill (no sign of mining remains there now) to the Commons area ("Blackcommons") where by 1891 there was a colliery village and agent's house along with school and police barracks (rented from MCI) and a coal-pit known as "Glasgow" (*MJ* 1891, page 978, sales details). However, as MCI "*narrowed its operations*" there in the late 1880s "*a few enterprising residents have been afforded the opportunity to push their fortunes*". One of those is named as Patrick O'Connor, presumably from one of these families waiting in the wings for an end to MCI in the area. Amongst other "*private owners and lessees (who) were trying their fortunes*" in 1889 at Ballinacarra near Killinaule were Patrick McCormack on a narrow seam (maximum 14 inches high) who paid his miners 3/6d per ton (Basset 1889).

At this stage apparently it was decided to close the colliery and sell off the accumulated stock. At least one pit was immediately closed (MCI Reports July 88; MCI Reports Jan. 89 referring to unrecorded decision of previous GM). In late 1889 "only small coal was being worked" and by mid 1890 MCI's mining operations had stopped altogether although the company were still selling off stock (MCI Reports 1<sup>st</sup> 89; 1<sup>st</sup> 1990). One of the private collieries continued to be worked at Gorteen and Failnacorn until October 1895 under MCI's ex-manager, John T.

March. The reason he gave for closure was that falls had blocked the drainage level and that water had backed up the incline (Box File 275). However, there were other opportunities; March was managing a 68 person operation on behalf of Slieveardagh Colliery Company in 1896 near New Birmingham and at Commons. The Langley family continued at the same time at Lisnamrock with 27 men managed by a James Webster and there was another small (7 people) operation also in 1896 run on the western edge of the plateau by a Ballingarry Colliery Co. under a G.B.Hackett (HMI Report 1896).

However sixty five years of systematic mining was a long time for one company such as MCI in an area such as Slieveardagh. Their failure was corporate rather than mineralogical as the 1896 continuations indicate. It was worked again at various times in the 20th century. For instance between 1911 and 1913 annual production was over 8,000 tons (Min. Stats.). There was also a major phase between 1954 and 1971. Details of these operations must await another chronicler prepared to wade through the many Slieveardagh Box Files in the GSI and the Dail debates of the 1940's on the potential of Slieveardagh..

## REFERENCES

- Anon 1817, at back of NLI ms. 657, Hibernian Mining Company transcript report 1824/25 of sites investigated. Possibly transcribed by the same hand as of Griffith (below). It seems to be citing him for report to Dublin Society.
- Basset, G.H. *The Book of County Tipperary* ----" (Dublin 1889), p. 25 & 399.
- Box Files, Slieveardagh, as numbered by GSI.
- Cowman, D. 2001, "Combination, conflict and control: colliers and quarrymen in Tipperary, 1825-45", *Saothar* 26, (Irish Labour History Society 2001), p. 27-34.
- Cowman, D. 2004, "Documents on Mining History", no. 1 *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 4, December 2004, p. 41-44.
- Griffith, Richard 1817, back of NLI ms 657, transcript by John Galloway (same hand as Anon 1817 above), Sec. of "Consolidated Funds", this seemingly being a grant application supported by Griffith.
- Hardiman - Memoirs. Of Geological Survey, *Geology of the Leinster Coalfields* by Edward T. Hardiman, (GSI 1881), , frontispieces; p. 86 and 90.
- Hodges, John George, *Report of the trial of William Smith O'Brien for High Treason at the Special Commission for County Tipperary held at Clonmel, September and October 1848 --*, (Dublin 1849), p. 411 evidence of Owen Cullen, MCI's agent; p. 394 evidence of John Pemberty and Pimlett, p. 370. Smith O'Brien's letter is cited on page 475.
- HMI Report 1896 from HM Mines Inspector John Gerrard in [www.tidza.daemon.co.uk](http://www.tidza.daemon.co.uk) (site posted by Peak District Mines Historical Society Ltd.).
- Lisnagon 1854 typescript. This had seemed to have been a separate report on MCI's colliery at Lisnagon in west Cork. At the end of it however were recommendations for each of the collieries.
- MCI - Mining Company of Ireland twice-annual reports to their shareholders, as per number/dates given. The first report



- was usually issued in July with the second report normally in January of the following year.
- Memoir 1860 -*Memoirs of the Geological Survey, Explanation to accompany sheet 145 Tipperary* (London 1860), p. 12.
- Memoir 1921 - *Memoir on the Coalfields of Ireland (Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Resources and Industries of Ireland)*, Dublin 1921, p. 65
- Min. Stats.-: Mineral Statistics giving annual production of mines, published by HMSO.
- MJ - Mining Journal, page numbers per bound annual set.
- Sutcliffe R.J. and Edward D., *Richard Sutcliffe, the pioneer of underground belt conveying*, (Surrey 1948), p. 38-9.
- Census of Population PP 1851, Vol. II, Munster, Co. Tipperary, Barony Sliveardagh, Parishes Killinaule and Ballingarry, townlands as indicated in text.
- Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland ---1844-1845 ---* Vol. III, (Dublin, etc. 1846), "Slieveardagh"
- Roper. - PP. Reports from the Commissioners -2-: Childrens' Employment (Mines), 1842, vol. XVI, p. 871-2, report Frederick Roper, dated Dublin 10th June 1841
- Typescript copy of the 1854 report, provenance unknown, is in the Heritage Centre, Killenaule. I thank Sean Watts for this.