

A BRIEF HISTORY OF "SILVER HILL" COAL MINE AT SWANNINGTON c.1684 - c.1692



BY SAMUEL T STEWART - MAY 2024

Evidence suggests that coal mining continued at a moderate rate in Leicestershire during the 17th and most of the 18th centuries. However, the Civil War in the middle of the 17th century caused disruption in the coal mining industry. The industry however recovered from this interruption, as later in the 17th century coal mining was actively being carried out in the key areas of Swannington, Coleorton, Measham and Oakthorpe.

John Wilkins who was to become a major player in the local coal mining industry in the latter part of the 17th century was the son of William Wilkins, a yeoman farmer of Coleorton whose forebears had worked and lived on the Sheldon's Coleorton estate for many years. John Wilkins was born c.1655 and in 1661 Ralph Sheldon appointed his father bailiff of the coal pits on his farm, so he would have been brought up in a farming and coal mining environment. He married c.1680, Rebecca Wollaston the heiress and daughter of a wealthy and powerful Leicestershire family, who resided at Shenton Hall, Leics. Her father William Wollaston, together with the Villiers, an aristocratic family of Brooksby, Leics, had leased the Manor Of Swannington from the Wyggeston hospital in 1662. Colin Owen speculates that John Wilkins relationship developed from the fact that Dame Ann Beaumont granted John Wilkins certain rights in Swannington shortly before her death and it was this that provided him with the opportunity to pursue his ambitions as a mining entrepreneur. By c.1700 he had become the most influential coal mine owner / developer within the area.



SHENTON HALL, LEICS

Sir Thomas Beaumont, 3rd Viscount of Swords of Coleorton and his brother, had, c.1684 carried out coal mining at **Silver Hill** (also recorded as Villier's piece), which formed part of the waste of Swannington Manor (located in the area of the extension to what is now Burton's Lane). As well as Beaumont's conflicts between the Wollastons and Villiers over mineral rights beneath the lands leased from the hospital within the manor, the Silver Hill mine experienced serious flooding and it seems that it was a culmination of these events which may have persuaded Sir Thomas Beaumont to lease **Silver Hill** coal mine to John Wilkins for a period of eight years on the agreement that no one should mine coal at Coleorton during the period of the lease. However, this would not have stopped Wilkins opening other coal mines on behalf of the Wollastons and Villiers on lands they leased from the hospital within the manor of Swannington.

John Wilkins first challenge with the **Silver Hill** mine was to solve the water problems in the pit. He must have amassed a serious amount of capital as he constructed a sough at a cost of £2000 to drain the water from the pit bottom and about 300 men were also employed in his **Silver Hill** pits. Colin Owen tell us that he was later obliged to make another sough from Thringstone Field at a cost of £300 in order to continue to work the Nether coal seam. However, water problems continued to plague the area. In 1687, he took up residence at Ravenstone Hall and leased the coal under various parts of Swannington from the Hospital for a period of 21 years at an annual rent of £400.

The life of the Coleorton pits were coming to an end and a rift developed between Wilkins and Beaumont who the latter saw his success with the drainage schemes at Swannington being at the expense of the good maintenance of his Coleorton pits. Apparently, the Nether coal being mined at Swannington was also superior in quality to that at Coleorton.

In 1692, their dispute came to a head when Beaumont's men blocked the new sough at **Silver Hill** with the result that the mine was completely flooded out resulting in its closure. In a lawsuit brought by Wilkins against Beaumont in 1694, the latter claimed that Wilkins had created a monopoly and raised the price of coal thereby damaging the Coleorton pits. Wilkins response was to claim that the Coleorton pits could not be worked profitably and Swannington could supply all the quality coal that was required

and that he had only taken on the **Silver Hill** lease on the understanding that no one should mine coal at Coleorton during the period of the eight year lease.

No figures are available for the output of the **Silver Hill** workings, but the pits earlier leased by Wilkins at Coleorton are said to have produced about twenty four loads a day. The price of coal was 6s. 6d. a load (it is not known how much a load weighed).

While the existence of such an undertaker as Wilkins is of great interest, the evidence provided about the treatment of miners throws a great deal of light upon conditions in the mining industry. A number of witnesses hostile to Wilkins testified that he had repeatedly beaten and ill treated his employees, and as the only reply made was that Wilkins had only struck his men under great provocation, and that the heavy drinking and 'other miscarriages' of the miners made strict discipline necessary, the charges of ill treatment were probably well founded. One witness declared that he was evicted from his house because he refused to work for Wilkins. The only evidence regarding wages is a statement by one miner that he was offered 1s. a day to work at **Silver Hill**. If this was the usual pay, miners' wages had doubled between 1572 and 1694. Hours of work were evidently long in some cases, for a Swannington miner mentioned that he ended his day's work about 11 at night. The evidence shows that it was then unusual to work both day and night shifts, for while witnesses brought forward by Beaumont said that Wilkins was the only mining employer in the district who worked two shifts, it was testified on Wilkins's behalf that two shifts were only worked in an emergency, or for sinking new shafts. It may be noted that two shifts were sometimes worked at Coleorton a century earlier. Injuries to miners were no doubt frequent, and the evidence given during the 1694 lawsuit contains several references to miners who were maimed or blinded at **Silver Hill**. It was said that Wilkins provided food, blankets, and medical care for injured workers at his own expense, and sometimes paid them 4s. a week while unable to work, but such treatment of miners was probably unusual. There is unfortunately no evidence about the depth or extent of the workings leased by Wilkins, but the number of his employees shows that his operations were on a considerably larger scale than those of Willoughby a century earlier.