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## Early Mining History

In the 17th and 18th centuries, coal miners in Scotland, and their families, were bound to the colliery in which they worked and the service of its owner. This bondage was set into law by an Act of Parliament in 1606, which ordained that "no person should fee, hire or conduce and salters, colliers or coal bearers without a written authority from the master whom they had last served". A collier lacking such written authority could be "reclaimed" by his former master "within a year and a day". If the new master did not surrender the collier, he could be fined and the collier who deserted was considered to be a thief and punished accordingly. The Act also gave the coal owners and masters the powers to apprehend "vagabonds and sturdy beggars" and put them to work in the mines. A further Act of 1641 extended those enslaved to include other workers in the mines and forced the colliers to work six days a week.

Even the Habeas Corpus Act of Scotland, in 1701, which declared that "the imprisonment of persons without expressing the reasons thereof, and delaying to put them to trial is contrary to law"; and that "no person shall hereafter be imprisoned for custody in order to take his trial for any crime or offence without a warrant or writ expressing the particular cause for which he is imprisoned" specifically stated "that this present Act is in no way to be extended to colliers and salters."

The process of emancipation began with an Act of Parliament of 1775 which freed the colliers in age-groups - those under 21 and between 35 and 44 were to be freed in 7 years, those between 21 and 34 were to be freed in 10 years and those over 45 were to be freed in 3 years. The liberation of the father freed the family. However, gaining freedom required a formal legal application before a Sheriff and a great many colliers continued to be bound until 1799 when an Act was passed that all colliers in Scotland were "to be free from their servitude".

See also [this page](#) for an account of "slavery" in Scottish mines

## Newspaper Reports

Whereas John Brown, James brown, William Brown, Andrew Hunter, Alexander Hunter younger, James Hunter, commonly called Factor Alexander Hunter elder, John Hunter, John Adie, James Hunter junior, James Denoven, William Hunter junior, commonly called Heritor, George Wilson, Thomas Hunter, William Hunter, James Harrower, Archibald Wilson, William Wilson, James Hunter senior, commonly called, Clerk, and James Bennerman, all bound Colliers to the coal-works, belonging to the Honourable Charles Barclay Maitland of Tillicoultry, except James Bennerman, who is engaged from year to year, have DESERTED the same; this is therefore giving public notice, so that none may employ them. And it is expected that all Coal-masters and Tacksmen of coal-works, will be rather aiding and assisting in securing them, and obliging them to return to their own works, which they have left, without giving any other reason, but that they understand they will get higher wages in some other place. [Caledonian Mercury 8 March 1766]

**Deserted from Quarrole Collierie**, near Falkirk, Alexander Love, junior, and James Love, both bound Colliers to Quarrole coal-works, belonging in lease to Carron Company. This public intimation thereof is given, that no proprietor of coal works or Coal-masters may harbour, entertain or employ them ; and certifying those that do, that they will be prosecuted therefor in terms of law. It is hoped any Gentleman to whom they may apply for work, will advise Carron Company thereof, which they will deem an obligation conferred on them. [Caledonian Mercury 7 October 1772]

**BOUND COLLIERS DESERTED** - Whereas John Russell, James and Alexander Loves, bound Colliers to Quarrel Colliery, have RUN OFF, and deserted their service ; intimation is hereby made to all coal-masters, tacksmen of coal-works, or others, who may harbour or employ them, that Carron Company, tacksmen of the above colliery, are determined to prosecute them for the penalties due by statute and common law, for harbouring or employing bound colliers, it is there-fore requested, that any Gentleman to whom they may have applied for employment, will give notice thereof to Carron Company. [Caledonian Mercury 28 April 1773]

**Coaliers Deserted – Carron 5th June 1775**

Notice is hereby given to all coal masters, overseers, and grieves, that the following bound coaliers to Calendar Colliery deserted their service the beginning of last week.

William Ann Walker, and his son Robert; Alexander Thomson, and his son Adam, David, Adam, John and Peter Thomson; James Thomson, sen., and James Thomson, jun.; Robert Burnett; John, William and James Whytes; William Reid; William Russell; and James Thomson, commonly called My Lord.

It is expected that whoever has these coaliers employed will immediately discharge them; and if any of them apply for work

<b>Housing 1910</b>
<b>Housing 1918</b>
<b>Truck Report (1871)</b>
<b>Mining District Reports</b>
<b>Trades' Unions &amp;</b>
<b>Sankey 1919</b>
<b>Health &amp; Disease</b>
<b>Ayrshire</b>
<b>Clackmannanshire</b>
<b>Fife</b>
<b>Lanarkshire</b>
<b>Lothians</b>
<b>Renfrewshire</b>
<b>Stirlingshire</b>
<b>Misc. Areas</b>
<b>Westwoods</b>

at any other colliery, they may be denied it. It would be obliging, if such coal masters who may have employed them, or to whom they may apply, would direct a line to Carron Company at Carron, with the names of the coaliers, that the Company may take the proper steps for bringing them back to their service. [Caledonian Mercury 7 June 1775]

**By Charles Beaumont, Esq. of Broomhall, Lessee of Baldrige Coal Works, near Dunfermline.** NOTICE is hereby given, that David Hill, Richard Hill; William Williamson elder, Thomas Campbell, William Penman elder, David Allan elder, Henry Allan elder, John Allan elder, Robert Allan, Alex. Hunter, Andrew Hill, James Snaddan, John Williamson, David Allan younger, Henry Allan younger, John Allan younger, John Campbell, William Williamson younger, James Hill, James Allan elder, Johns, James, and Robert Allan, his sons, Robert Snaddan, Joseph Snadden, Richard Gairdner, James Penman, George Penman, John Penman, William Penman younger, Thomas and John Allan brothers, all bound Colliers and bearers to Balridge Coal Works, have deserted the said colliery, to the great prejudice of the said Lessee. This, therefore, requires, that no coal master or others will, from and after this notice, take it upon them to employ any of the before-named persons, but, on the contrary, discharge them, if employed, in order that they return to said Coal- Works. Certifying such as do employ them after this notice, they will be liable in the pains and penalties prescribed by act of parliament, made anent detaining of Colliers, for each of the before-named persons that are detained or employed by them. [Caledonian Mercury 2 November 1776]

**Run Off, from Alloa Colliery, Clackmannanshire, North Britain, belonging to John Francis Erskine, Esq., of Marr.** James Frazer, abound pitman, aged about 22, wore his own hair, of a black complexion, stout made, very much in-kneed. Whoever gives any information, so as to apprehend the said James Frazer, either to Mr Nelson, the Black Bull and Post-Boy, or William Ritchie, at the Edinburgh Tea Warehouse, Newcastle, shall have two guineas reward. [Newcastle Courant 6 September 1777]

The following bound Colliers, belonging to Lord Cathcart's works at Sauchie, having mutinied and deserted, this public notice is given that no coal-master may entertain them. David Hunter, James Hunter, Sen. William Hunter, jun. William Sharp, sen. William Snadan, Robert Patterson, sen. Robert Paterson, jun. James Sharp, jun. Robert Hunter, James Hunter, Alexander Snadan, William Hunter sen. Robert Blair, Henry Hunter, John Snadan. William Sharp, Joseph Hunter, jun. Adam Hunter, William Sharp, jun. Peter Sharp, Robert Allan, Joseph Hunter, Sen. Alexander Paterson, James Paterson, Thomas Paterson, jun. William Cook, John Hunter, jun. Thomas Paterson, sen. James Cook, jun. George Hunter, David Paterson, David Spowart, James Hunter, jun. [Caledonian Mercury 18 April 1778]

#### **Notice from Edinburgh Advertiser 14 September 1779**

Deserted from Grange Colliery, near Borrowstouness – William Brown, bound collier to said work, brown complexion, 5 feet 7 inches high, had on when he left the work, a black coat, a red-died waistcoat, and long riking trowsers, and it is supposed he is lurking about some of the collieries in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh. From this intimation it is hoped that no gentleman in the coal trade will give him any employment. [Edinburgh Advertiser 14 September 1779]

**Colliers Deserted Their Works** - The following colliers have deserted the Coalworks of Tillicoultry, upon Tuesday the 7th current, viz. Alexander Hunter Factor, Archibald Wilson, George Hunter, Alexander Hunter Jack, George Wilson, James Hunter Clerk, Thomas Hunter Gutcher, Thomas Hunter Knows. They are all bound Colliers to the above Coal work, and are all in debt to the proprietor. It is therefore hoped and desired, that no Coal-master or Coal-Overseer, will employ them, otherwise they will be prosecuted as law allows. Not to be repeated. [Caledonian Mercury - Saturday 18 November 1786]

**Absconded** - Whereas two coalliers, viz. William Wilson and William Brown, did some time ago come from Sir John Hope's Coalliery, and engage themselves to Mr Armstrong, to work for the space of one year, at his Colliery at Drum. They should, previous to this time, have entered to their engagements; instead of doing so, they have concealed themselves, and, it is thought, about some neighbouring collieries. This is giving notice, that if these two men do not enter immediately into said service, and perform their engagements, strict search will be made, and if found, will be punished according to law. It is hoped that after this public notice, no Coal Master will encourage or employ said men. A suitable reward will be given, for information where these two men are lurking. [Caledonian Mercury 21 October 1805]

**To Coalmasters.** - Whereas John Campbell, William Blair, William Williamson, David Allan, Robert Weir, Adam Morris, Alexander Penman, Robert Russel, and Gibson Condie, all BOUND COLLIERS at BALDRIDGE COLLIERY, near Dunfermline, have absconded, and as their[sic] is reason to suppose they will be offering to engage at other Collieries, it requested that no Coalmaster or Manager will engage them. And it is also requested, that if any application is made, the Coalmaster or Manager will give intimation to James Burt, Manager at Baldrige Colliery, who will thankfully pay for any trouble and expense incurred. Baldrige, August 10, 1806. [Caledonian Mercury - Thursday 14 August 1806]

## **Coal-Working In Scotland In Former Days.**

So much has Coal now become one of the necessities of life both in respect of our homes and our industries, that one wonders how the world got on so long without it. In Scotland in earlier days our fuel was peat and wood, as in some places it is yet, and these, from their value, were then almost as carefully preserved by charter right as the land itself. It was not until the commencement of the thirteenth century that coal was known to exist in Scotland, its first discovery being due to the denuding effect of the sea on the coast of East Lothian.

Here, on the southern shore of the Firth of Forth, between Pinkie and Prestonpans, on land then belonging to the monks of Dunfermline, the valuable carboniferous strata were first disclosed. Indeed, it is to these monks and their neighbouring brethren of Newbattle that the credit belongs of first working this mineral in Scotland. And wrought thus early it must have been, as we find in 1265 that coals were supplied to the castle of Berwick at the royal expense, and that probably from the

'coal-heugh' of Tranent, which appears to have been one of the first, if not itself the earliest working colliery in Scotland. From time to time the royal accounts show that coal was occasionally supplied both to the king's palaces and to the Parliament House.

Before the end of the fifteenth century, not a few landed proprietors had become alive to the increased value of their estates through the existence of coal upon them, and by that time, among other places, there were collieries in active operation at Dysart, Reres, Largo, and Newton-of-Markinch in Fife, at Bonnington in Linlithgowshire, and at Stewarton in the county of Ayr. The following century saw them greatly multiplied, especially along the shores of the Firth of Forth, and a very large amount of capital for these times sunk in the workings. Not a few lairds, indeed, mortgaged their estates to provide the means of developing the coal, in the hope of thereby ultimately benefiting their fortunes. Most of the collieries on the Forth were what were known as Water-coal heughs—that is, they were sunk below the water-level, and required constant attention to keep the workings clear. In a Report made in 1608 on collieries at Alloa, Airth, Sauchie, and Carriden, it is stated that some of these had already cost their owners above fifty thousand merks—equal to about £3000 sterling money of that time—and that the maintaining of their water-engines alone cost no less than from, fifteen to thirty pounds sterling every week.

The common form of these water-engines then in Scotland was that of an endless chain, to which a series of buckets was attached. These dipped into the 'sumph' at the bottom of the shaft, and emptied themselves over the windlass into a conduit at the top. But half the contents of each bucket was usually spilled ere it reached the top; and if a single bolt of the chain gave way, as occasionally happened, the whole crashed down to the bottom to irremediable destruction. Sometimes hand-labour wrought these engines; generally, the motive-power was supplied by a horse-gin. But the more enterprising proprietors where it was possible erected a water-wheel. This sometimes, however, appears to have given offence, as throwing men and horses out of work, and vengeance was taken on the innovator. Such a case was that of the laird of Carnock in Fife, whose mine was flooded and destroyed by an ill-conditioned neighbouring proprietor, who, with the assistance of some others, dammed up the water in the lade and turned it into the mine. The same mischievous trick was also perpetrated upon others.

In the beginning of the seventeenth century the collieries on the Forth carried on a large and remunerative export trade. King James VI., in furtherance of his policy of Scotland for the Scots, made several efforts to stop it, and laws were enacted against the export of coal; but it was deemed inexpedient to enforce them. After he went to England, however, he made another attempt. Writing to his ministers in Scotland—whom he as effectually dragooned by letters from his Court in St James's as if he had been in their midst—he instructed them to stop this export trade, and keep Scotch coal for Scotch folk, or, at least, not to supply any strangers beyond their neighbours of England. To this the coal-masters naturally demurred, and assigned as their reasons that the home demand was really so small that almost any one of the Forth collieries could meet it, and most of them had large stocks on hand; that they had been at great expense in working the coals, and were continually so in keeping down the water; were they not to export, they could not sell sufficient coals to cover one-half of the cost of doing this alone, and the stoppage of the engines for three nights only would irretrievably drown their pits. This, of course, was represented to the king; but he only insisted the more, and did not hesitate to call his ministers simple and weak to allow themselves to be gulled with the plausible arguments of a few interested partisans, instead of looking broadly at the interests of the whole country. And as for argument—well, he would give them argument in return. 'Do not the coals daily decay? and there is no hope of any sudden new growth of them. You refuse the export of tallow and wool; but these will grow again. Consider what the state of the country will be when these coals are exhausted. As for the want of a market, I bring,' he says, 'my own supply of coals from Scotland, and so do my nobles. If your coals were sent here, they would sell quicker than anywhere else, and it would preserve the woods from being destroyed. We have a sufficient market here, in England, I assure you, for whatever quantity of coals Scotland can spare after supplying its own wants. Why, if you had an eye to your own advantage, you might make a large gain out of the business, and not only maintain your ships, but profitably employ a large number of your seamen. Look at Newcastle! Its industry speaks strongly against you, though you have greatly spoiled its trade. Foreigners find that they can get their coals free of duty in the Forth, and they no longer come to the Tyne, where they have to pay a duty, and so my revenue suffers. The dearth of coal is very great in England, and those who would hinder the restraint of the export in these circumstances are enemies to the commonwealth. Then the king adds, in a postscript written with his own hand: 'It is a shameful thing that the privat gayne of some two or three persons should be putt in balance not onlie with the weale of that whole kingdom, but even of this whole yle; and I wouder how ony doubt can be maid of the venting of thair coillis, since coillis are at this instant almost unbuyable for dearthe.' But his letter, which is dated 28th April 1609, produced no effect save that shortly afterwards a duty was imposed on all coals exported from Scotland.

For the most part, the land-owners at that time themselves wrought the coal, but there were exceptions to this. There is one lease in existence so far back as 1573 in connection with the Gilmerton cool district of Mid-Lothian. The adjoining estate of Melville was then in the possession of James, fourth Lord Boss, and his wife, Jean Semple, and they leased the working of the coal over their lands of Easter and Wester Melville for two years to a Gilmerton man, John Heron. He contracts, after finding the coal, to set eight colliers to work upon it, and they are to be partners with him in the expenses and profits of the undertaking. The lessors, however, are to bear half of the expense of the works, and to find the workers in quarrying mells and picks, wedges, ropes, forks, wheels, beams or swivels, and buckets, as required; and are to receive, beside their share of the coals won, three dozen loads yearly for the use of their house.

The co-operative or profit-sharing idea appears thus early in coal-mining. There is nothing to show what was the ordinary status of colliers about this period, but doubtless it was that of ordinary workmen. It was in the first decade of the seventeenth century that the cruel edict was framed which reduced the Scottish collier to the position of a serf or a slave. By that Act, workmen in mines, whether miners, pickmen, winding-men, firemen, or in any other service of the mine, were prohibited from leaving that service either in hope of greater gain or of greater ease, or for any other reason, without the consent of the coal-owner, or of the Sheriff of the County; and any one receiving a runaway into his service and refusing to return him within twenty-four hours was to be fined one hundred pounds Scots. In this slavery the family of the miner was involved. A concrete instance of this is afforded in a letter by the fourth Earl of Wemyss, an extensive coal-owner at that

time in Fife, which was written to his factor in 1751. In requiring him to bring back 'stragled coalliers,' he says: 'The moment a coallier leaves his work, he ought to be sent after immediately, otherwise it gives him time to gett into England, where he can never be recovered. . . . Beside the coalliers, their children should be all look't after, and sett to work below ground when capable, and not allow'd to hirr'd cattle or go to service, as many of them have done, and I wish may not be the case as yett And if you see it for my benefitt and that there's work and room for more people below ground, why don't you gett some of Balbirny's coalliers, who are now in different parts of the country and nobody's property? Pray, are Alexander Leslie's and Thomas Lumsden's children now working at the coal-work?'

Twenty-five years later, an Act of Parliament was passed for freeing colliers and salters from this 'state of slavery or bondage;' but before it could be made effectual, another quarter of a century elapsed, and a new Act was required in 1799. Perhaps, however, the heaviest part of the bondage was that endured by the females of the collier's family, who carried the coal on their backs from the working face to the hill, and whose grinding labour is only now remembered in tradition. Steam and mechanical appliances have wrought as mighty a revolution and expansion in this industry as in most others.

Though the output of a decade now may be said to equal almost all that was won of the Scottish coal during all the centuries preceding the nineteenth, our coal supply is still good for centuries to come. True, indeed, was the pedant monarch's remark that there is 'no hope of any ; sudden new growth ;' but, so far as the present is concerned, there is more to fear from the paralysis in other industries occasioned by the unhappy conflicts now so frequent between the capital and labour engaged in the winning of coal in Scotland. [Chamber's Journal 1894]

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