

A History of Mining in Arigna

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THE PAST YEAR—2015, marked 25 years since the Arigna mines, near the Leitrim/Roscommon border, were shut-down for good. The last of its kind on the island of Ireland, the closure marked the end of close to 225 years of coal mining tradition. For many farming families in the surrounding area—which included my grandfather—the coal mines were a viable alternative source of income in a local economy which otherwise offered few employment prospects outside of agriculture.

Despite this, before the late 18th century, coal was not extensively exploited in the Arigna area. Regardless of the fact that outcropping coal was clearly visible in several areas on the Arigna mountains, the formerly abundant woodlands and the plentiful supply of turf rendered coal to be regarded with indifference, both as a domestic fuel, and for use in local industry.

However, the challenges faced by another former local industry—iron Working led to a change in the attitude to coal mining. There were supplies of iron ore in the mountains surrounding Lough Allen—indeed, Sliabh An Iarain, or “The iron Mountains”, derived its name from this fact.

The iron working industry started in Arigna in 1621 by Sir Charles Coote. The Provost-Marshal of Connacht, and owner of lands extending through Roscommon, Leitrim and Cavan, which employed hundreds of men—all of them either English or Dutch. The ironworks were then subsequently destroyed in an Irish rebellion in 1641. Although they were re-established by the close of the 17th century, their primary power source, the previously-abundant local woodlands, had all but disappeared by the late 18th century.



■ Loading coal at the pit head of Rover mine 1932

In 1765, coal was first explored as an alternative to charcoal, by a Mr Jones in the Mounterkenny part of the Arigna. However, despite a Parliamentary grant to establish roads to the colliery, the coal find was eventually abandoned, with no result. Coal was explored more extensively as a power source by various iron works ventures in Arigna up until the middle of the 19th Century, but due to various factors, such as frequent changes of management, fraud, misappropriation of funds and bad planning, none of these ventures succeeded in the longer term.

It was in the second half of the 1800's that coal mining as a stand-alone industry started to take hold, primarily by local promoters such as Michael Layden, who commenced his coal-mining efforts in Arigna in the 1870's. The Layden family continued to remain heavily involved with the mining industry of Arigna right until it ceased in 1990.

However, it could be argued that the modern era of coal mining in Arigna began in 1888, with the incorporation of the

Arigna Mining Company. It was formed by some directors of the then newly-opened Cavan, Leitrim & Roscommon Light Railway, in order to secure a cheap source of coal to power the railway.

There were schemes put forward during the early 1900's to extend the Cavan and Leitrim Railway to Arigna Village and the Aughabehy mining pit, which was the centre of operations for the Arigna Mining Company, from the Railway's terminus at Mount Allen. There was little progress made until after the First World War.

Construction of the extended line began in 1918, and was finished and approved by inspectors on February 17, 1920. While the line leading up to Arigna village served the area well for moving coal for roughly 35 years thereafter, the section between Arigna village and the Aughabehy pit was not destined to last long, nor was the Arigna Mining Company itself.

Various factors contributed to the demise. With the establishment of the Irish Free State came the formation

of the Great Southern Railways in 1925, which took over control of most of the state's regional railways, including the Cavan and Leitrim Railway.

This resulted in the end of the reliance on Arigna coal to power the local railway, as the management of the new Nation-wide railway company found it cheaper to power all the lines under its remit with imported coal from Wales, bought in bulk.

There was also a long legal dispute between the Arigna Mining Company and the Layden family, over what was described as "territorial rights" to parts of the Arigna mines. Legal action was initiated by the Mining Company in 1924, and finished in 1929 in the Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of the Layden family.

This whole judgement resulted in the transfer of the company's mining royalties to the Laydens, and the eventual liquidation of the company by 1931. By that same year, the Aughabehy mine was also closed, along with the railway leading up to it.

Despite the "Emergency" period providing a boom for the Arigna mines, due to

trading difficulties and energy shortages during the war period, the future of the Arigna mines looked uncertain in the late 1940's and early 1950's.

This was not only due to the end of World War II and the trading difficulties it brought, but also due to newer technologies, such as the phasing out of steam engines in favour of electric power.

However, intervention by the Government of the day resulted in a coal-powered ESB electricity generating station being built in Arigna, the first ESB power station in Connacht, in 1958.

Between then and 1990, the power station in Arigna purchased an average of 45,000 to 50,000 tons of coal and slack, mainly from Arigna, but also some from Sliabh An Iarain's Bencroy mine.

This made up the vast bulk of sales of Arigna coal, with only some 10,000 to 20,000 tons sold to other customers during this time period.

In 1990, virtually all of the good quality coal in Arigna had been mined. There were, however, vast reserves of lower quality coal, known as "crow coal", which many people hoped could be utilised by the building of an upgraded, specially-designed power station in Arigna.

However, for the Government and the ESB, the cheaper imported fuels available were a preferable alternative to building a new power station designed to use the crow coal. The arrangement between the Arigna Mines and the ESB ended when all of the remaining quality coal was extracted in 1990, leading to the loss of up to 240 jobs upon the closure of the Mines.

In 1999, the Arigna Mining Experience opened, preserving the history of the mines for locals and tourists alike, with guided tours given by some of the former miners who worked there.

ELEMENTS OF COVERDOME

Gerard Gill

*Aftermath, heavy laden,
Hanging clouds suspended
And chaotically strewn,
Grabbing at glimmers
From the West, woken wide.
Crystal and frail, stratus blue,
The other half, tainted and stained
Drags its' tentacles and stings.
The sun trails in mediant bounds,
Straining onto Pangaea
Melting away wetness.
The seeping ground draws
Mightily downwards, mingling
In the fiery sphere of inner earth.
And above in the Dome
How loud but still,
Eerie faced, charged and dark,
Short, sharp, bursting and fast.*

*For time short, Grecian sun
Pours over the brim, clad in white.
Wind motions erratically
Swaying, grabbing, grating
At expositions of earth.
Leaves of nearby bushes
Cup the sunlight, swallowing,
absorbing
And bustled by a breeze
They suspend in piercing airiness.
Night wanders onto stage
Distilling habitual light,
Frowning on daylight delights,
Elemental and partial,
The radiance of earth*

