

AN IMPORTANT EARLY RECORD OF COAL MINING IN COLEORTON

The following article has been posted by Trevor Stewart on the Coleorton Parish Council website as an addendum to the book entitled "**A History of Coal Mining in Coleorton & the Local Area**" which was written by him.

The Sheldons were very much involved in the early productive mining of coal in Coleorton from the early sixteenth century which continued for around two hundred years. Although their coal mining activities and extensive land ownership in Coleorton are recorded several times in the book, the catalyst for this more expansive record came as a result of Kenneth Sheldon's contact with the Coleorton Parish Council's website. Kenneth has kindly contributed details of the history of the Sheldon's from his own genealogical research. This provides fascinating reading and it appears that like the Beaumonts, they are one of the few families in England whose tree is firmly rooted in the soil of the days of "William the Conqueror".

THE SHELDONS by KENNETH SHELDON

In medieval England the Sheldons of Warwickshire and Worcestershire were something of a rarity - they were Anglo Saxons who prospered and in time ranked among the wealthiest in the land.

Their fortunes waxed and waned over nigh on a thousand years before the line abruptly died out in the early 20th century.

They first appeared in the parish of Sheldon, now a busy suburb of Birmingham, but back in the early years of Norman rule it was a simple rural village. A well-managed village, though, as records show it was one of the few manors to have prospered between the 1066 invasion and the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086.

The family story begins with Owen de Scheldon, who appears in the Warwickshire Pipe Rolls of 1189/90. Then Anselm de Scheldon is documented as lord of the manor in 1220, holding "half a knight's fee". He was succeeded by Henry de Scheldon, who in the 1250s built the first church in the village, dedicated to St Giles.

Sir Henry, as he became later, was entrusted by the king, Edward I, with various duties, including acting as a King's Commissioner, an early equivalent of a circuit judge, in Warwickshire and Leicestershire.

Around the time of the Black Death, a Ralph Sheldon moved his family to nearby Rowley Regis in Staffordshire. During the reign of Henry IV (1399-1413), one of his descendants, John, also moved on, leasing the manor at Abberton in Worcestershire, due in no small part to his marriage to Joana de Cotton, the daughter of the wealthy Norman John Cotton of Cotton Hall, Cheshire.

During the reign of Edward IV (1461-1483), William Sheldon, the eldest son of Ralph and Joyce Sheldon of Abberton, purchased the manor of Beoley.

This was the time of the Wars of the Roses and William was a great supporter of the House of York, which no doubt brought him into contact with Richard Neville, then Earl of Warwick and known as 'Warwick the Kingmaker', from whom William purchased Beoley.

William fought alongside the ill-fated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth and as a consequence was deprived of all his estates by the victorious Henry VII. Fortunately though, his lands were restored to him before his death in 1517.

He died without issue, and Beoley, together with substantial other properties across the county, passed to his brother Ralph (1468-1546) who built sufficiently on his brother's legacy to provide each of his sons with substantial lands and properties for their own families.

The Sheldons had already acquired great wealth through their sheep farming and weaving activities, and Ralph, quite late in life, acquired land at Cole Orton in Leicestershire in around 1533, possibly at the behest of his eldest son William, who benefited from the rental income. Thus began an association with the village that would last for some 200 years.

That Ralph and William could see the potential for coal was far-sighted for Henry VIII's time, since its use as a fuel did not come into general use until the reign of Charles I some 80 years later.

In Ralph's will, "all such Colles as be gotten at Colle Orton" were bequeathed to William (c1500-1575), who took the Sheldon name to the zenith of its power and influence.

A contemporary of William described him as "the richest commoner in England", who used his inherited wealth to build a vast portfolio of properties and investments.

He was also fully involved in day-to-day life in Tudor England, serving variously as solicitor to Catherine Parr, the only one of Henry VIII's six wives to survive him, as MP for Worcestershire in the 1540s and 50s, a noted solicitor, a justice of the peace, the holder of a number of crown appointments and a businessman whose interests ranged from salt to weaving to mining.

Though clearly a wealthy and powerful man, William also had a philanthropic side and was keen to see new industries develop to provide means by which future generations might make a living for themselves and their families. He financed the setting up of tapestry weaving at Barcheston, Warwickshire, recruiting those skilled in the art from continental Europe to pass on their knowledge to local weavers.

What became known as Sheldon Tapestries were prized possessions in many of the great houses. To this day some fine examples of the work can be found in many local and national museums.

He also deplored a practice employed by many of his wealthy land-owning contemporaries in the Midlands, by which they purchased large tracts of land and 'emparked' it, force-evicting tenants farmers and, in some cases entire villages, in order to retain the land for their exclusive use. His own father in law had done just such a thing when he secured the manor of Barcheston in 1507, depopulating the village to provide pasture for his sheep.

In his own, lengthy will, William had more to say on the subject of mining, declaring: "Whereas I have compounded with Mr. Winter and the Earl of Huntingdon to make a sough or drain in Cole Orton to get coals therefrom, my executors are to continue making the same as the coal will be beneficial to my heirs and a great commodity to a great number of the Queen's Majesty's (Elizabeth I) subjects to have the said coals at reasonable prices for their fuel, my son, Ralph, to have the issues of my Manor of Cole Orton and of the said Coal mine, in taile maile, with contingent remainders."

There is some evidence to suggest that William also invested in mining in the Warwickshire coal fields, notably around Bedworth.

FURTHER INFORMATION FROM TREVOR STEWART'S BOOK

The evolution of Coleorton is an extremely complex subject, and much of the available research data is conflicting, however, for those interested, this subject is covered in some detail in Trevor Stewart's book.

In 1533 William Sheldon owned the chief rents of Overton Saucey (eventually became part of Coleorton) and his brother and successor Ralph was also an extensive property owner in Overton Saucey in the last quarter of the century. Records suggest that the Sheldons continued to own significant amounts of property and coal mines in Coleorton for most of the 17th century.

In view of the dominance of the Beaumonts and Willoughbys at Coleorton and Newbold, it is surprising to discover that even there other pits existed outside their control. Some of these were referred to with some annoyance by George Willoughby in a letter to Sir Francis Beaumont in 1570 in which he said "Mr. Sheldon's and Mr. Winter's pits have done much hurt this year than ever they did before, and so I fear hereafter will yearly do hurt". The Winter family owned the manor of Worthington for many years, so it is likely that some of the pits referred to lay in the Newbold area.

There is every indication that Swannington was as an important centre as Coleorton, and might have been capable of an output of 8,000 tons of coal. If the pits of Sheldon and Winter at Coleorton and Worthington respectively were sufficiently important to cause George Willoughby concern, they must have had a significant output.

In the seventeenth century, apart from the Beaumonts, the Sheldons also continued to operate pits on their Coleorton (Overton Saucey) estate, generally leaving the business in the hands of their tenant farmers. In 1638, William Sheldon, having recently inherited the lands, leased one of the farms to Robert Wilkins of Coleorton. It included arable lands in

three open fields and various closes, meadows and pastures known as Ferney Piece, Colepit close, Partree Close, Birchin Close, Nether Close, New Close, and Lying Crofts, some of which contained coal pits.

In 1661, when Robert Wilkin's son William renewed the lease for 99 years, he agreed to pay a fine of £60, an annual rent of £3 6s 8d and to allow Ralph Sheldon free access to any parts of the farm in order to dig coal pits and fell timber. The latter agreed however, to pay William 20 Marks per annum to act as his mine bailiff, provided he would supervise the working and maintenance of the pits whenever they were in use.

Moreover, George Sheldon owned a pit on Thringstone Moor, lying between Coleorton Carr, Swannington Moor and Sir Edward Aston's land, and another pit in Overton Quatermarsh (became part of Coleorton) between Parson's Close and another "great water pit" developed jointly by Ralph Sheldon and Richard Beaumont.

The last record we have of the Sheldon's in Coleorton was when a Messr's Richard Parrot and John Metcalfe were negotiating for the purchase of the manor of Overton Saucey (became part of Coleorton). In 1730 this was finalised with property changing hands for £3,400, when Parrot and Metcalfe became co-owners, with William Sheldon proving a mortgage of £2,000.

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Kenneth Sheldon

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