

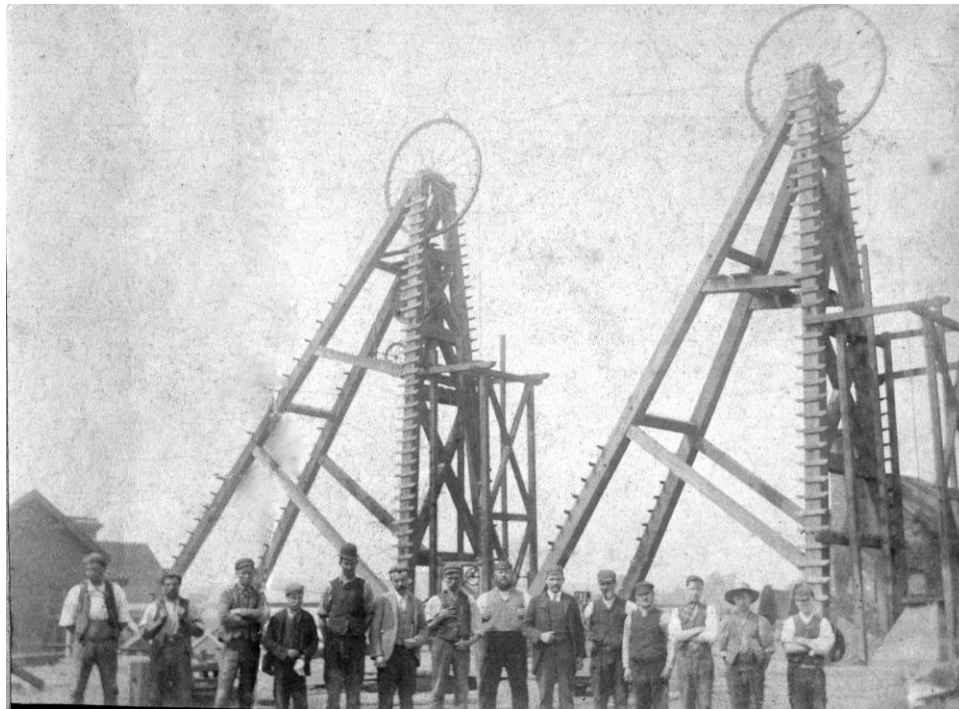
The Old Industrial Communities around the Wrekin

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Like many people in the Wrekin area, my ancestors migrated from agricultural work to fill jobs created by the early industrial revolution. For up to 200 years, starting in the middle 1700's, my ancestors had all lived in the same industrial communities: Donnington Wood, Wrockwardine Wood, St. Georges, Snedshill, New Hadley, Wombridge, and Trench Lock. The men were predominantly employed in the mines and foundries, while the women took care of the home. Working conditions could be dangerous and unhealthy, and sometimes it was hard to get enough food on the table. All too often, families had to be resilient in dealing with the premature death of a parent or infant. Nevertheless, some families were able to overcome the odds and thrive while others faced a harder struggle.

To illustrate the scope and diversity of life in those old industrial communities, I will introduce you to three families in my ancestry. The information about them was obtained from genealogical records, family anecdotes, articles in the Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News, and the Blists Hill Museum.

On my mother's side, Great-grandfather Richard Gittins (born 1836) was an "engine driver" at a colliery in Donnington Wood. He married Sarah Broxton in 1859 and they lodged with a miner's family in a two-room cottage in Waxhill Barracks where they started their family of eight children. He was an early riser and would also roust his slumbering neighbors with the refrain "Get thee up! No good lyin' abed - me missus 'as already got 'er washin' on the line!". In addition to doing "er washin'", Sarah was recognized within her community as a midwife -- at a time before formal training was required. Richard was at the colliery early to get the steam engine ready to lower the first group of miners down the pit shaft. The photograph below is of the Donnington Wood colliery and is said to include Richard Gittins. He and Sarah lived on beyond their sixtieth wedding anniversary.



An engine driver was personally responsible for the safety of miners. The demonstrator at the Blists Hill museum explained: "The steam engine driver would make two marks on the winding rope – one mark corresponding to when the miners were at the bottom of the shaft, and the other to when they were at the top. The length of the rope changed with use and the weather. The driver had to rely on the two marks, and his best judgement, to avoid crashing the miners at the bottom of the shaft, or winding them over the pit wheel at the top".

Richard's first daughter, Elizabeth, married William Latham, and she bore him eight children. William was a miner working for the Lilleshall Company, who became the famous Shropshire Miner's Agent. Among many other important roles, he went to Russia to attend a Trade Union conference as the representative of the British Miner's Federation. Richard's second daughter, Mary, had a daughter Bessie who married Sidney Wynne a cousin of Wellington's famous Greville Wynne. Greville also went to Russia, not as a trade-unionist, but as a British spy. He served 18 months in Lubyanka Prison before being exchanged for the Russian spy known as Gordon Lonsdale.

The first son of Richard Gittins, my grandfather Frederick, married Elizabeth Bloor. The photograph below shows their wedding party in 1903. By family account, Richard himself was not present in the photograph as he was unable to take time off from the colliery.



On my mother's side, Great-grandfather Moses Bloor (born 1843) was also involved with steam engines. While living in Woodhouse at the age of 17, his first job was "engineer" for a pit engine (most likely at the Woodhouse Colliery). Subsequently, while living in Snedshill, he was an "engine driver". He may have operated a stationary engine at Snedshill Iron Works, or actually driven a mobile engine on the Mineral Railway in Priorslee. He lived with his wife Emily (Richards) and six children (another child had died at a young age). Moses was also a respected Primitive Methodist preacher on the Wrockwardine

Wood circuit. By 1892, Moses and Emily had opened the Bloor Grocery and Confectionary Shop on Gower Street in St. Georges. A couple of years later, Moses died tragically at the age of 51 from a fractured skull. He had been placing a corrugated iron roof on a stable in St. Georges. He overbalanced and fell to the ground.

After Moses' death, his wife Emily and some of her children continued to run the Bloor Shop. The photo below shows the shop decorated for Christmas in about 1898. Emily is standing to the right of the shop entrance. Many years later, the shop was abandoned and fell into a very dilapidated condition. In 1973, the frontage of the shop was removed to the Blists Hill Museum where it was restored as the frontage to the Printing Shop and can be seen there today.



On my father's side, my grandfather (and namesake) John Smith (born 1871) grew up in Ragfield Row, a terrace of small miners' cottages in New Hadley. Many years ago, my sister and I were fortunate to meet a retired postman who led us to the location of my grandfather's early home – his cottage had been demolished with only broken china left to mark the spot. By trade, John was a miner and iron worker but, during an extended period of industrial unemployment, he worked for Colonel Patchett as a gardener at Haybridge Hall. John's wife, Mary Ann (Forester), died aged 40 following the birth of their seventh child. With help from his children and support from other relatives, John overcame his tragic loss and successfully raised his family. He lived to about 90 years of age.

However, his daughter, my Aunt Emily, sacrificed her future aspirations to look after John until his death -- she never married. Subsequently, Aunt Emily became a well-known figure in Hadley as the "Miss Smith" who managed the counter at Mrs. Quinn's Shop. In the December 2017 edition of the Wrekin News, Kath Parton wrote "How many village people bought their wool for knitting in the winter evenings from Mrs. Quinn. A very kind genteel lady named Miss Smith worked there for many years". Later, Emily retired to a small bungalow built on the Haybridge Hall grounds once tended by her father.

I tip my hat to my kinfolks, and to all the other good folks, who lived in the old industrial communities around the Wrekin. They were pioneers of the industrial revolution. They sometimes had to struggle with poor living standards and untimely death. Nevertheless, they persevered and their efforts began a period of dramatic economic growth as the industrial revolution spread to other parts of the UK and around the world. This economic growth led in turn to improvements in healthcare, education, housing and working conditions that benefited future generations ... my generation included. For that I am very grateful.