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JOHN GIBBONS OF OSWESTRY: AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CAPITALIST

by John Goodchild, M Univ

SYNOPSIS

The recent purchase of a manuscript volume containing a record of the financial transactions of John Gibbons of Oswestry in Shropshire, has allowed the present writer to investigate the topographically widespread and very varied interests of yet another entrepreneur whose investment portfolio seems to mirror the usual apparently haphazard acquisition of promising-looking interests. Of the investor's background nothing is known, although he may have sprung from a cadet branch of the Staffordshire industrialist Gibbons family; the accounts cover the years from 1787 until Gibbons's own death in 1811. Unusually, the Oswestry parish registers do not give his age at death, but as a son was born at Swindon in Staffordshire in c1769, the father had presumably settled in Oswestry in middle age. He was certainly there in 1786, and equally certainly he was at that time a man of sufficient means to allow of varied investments. It is indeed the variety of Gibbons's interests, and the detail which survives in relation to them, which make his story a significant one.

Coalmining

The coalfield to the south of Oswestry, that of the valley of the Morda stream, was developed significantly in the second half of the 18th century, to serve a number of new local developments. First, there was a new local market in the form of the woollen mills, brickworks and pottery of the Morda valley, and the new – House of Industry there; then the population was growing too, with domestic needs on an increased scale; and the improvement of the local roads as turnpikes, from 1752, encouraged the further carrying of coal. But it was the development of the new local reaches of canals which so much encouraged the trade, primarily though not entirely in providing coal for the burning of local limestone for agricultural lime, which was transported very considerable distances as coal and stone, then burnt and carried even further by road. The availability of the upper Severn Navigation seems not to have been of recognisable significance to the Morda coalfield.

From 1787, John Gibbons took an active part in the large-scale development both of the Morda coalfield and of certain economically ancillary concerns, and by 1798 he and his partners in Llwynymaen colliery had 140 colliers at work, as against the seventy in the nearby and doubtless rival Trefarclawdd colliery. The coalfield was to be



Surviving buildings of the Morda House of Industry. (1990)

worked until as late as 1891, but this working by Gibbons and others was its first large-scale exploitation. The first pit of Gibbons & Co's colliery is said to have been sunk on the west side of the Trefonen Road, nearly opposite to the end of Chain Lane, the colliery – typically, a group of pits – surviving until closure in the 1840s. The Llwynymaen colliery was sold immediately after Gibbons' death; just possibly, the sale of his colliery may have led to the expansion of the adjoining one, to which a long tramway was built in 1813 from the Ellesmere Canal's Llanymynech line. Proposal of 1803 for an earlier line of tramway to the collieries had failed. The Oswestry coalfield consisted of two worthwhile seams, the upper, a four foot seam of tolerably good quality, the lower six feet thick and of little value in comparison. In the mid 19th century production was some 40,000 tons a year: in Gibbons' time it could have been even greater.

The references to coal mining in John Gibbons' accounts are quite detailed, yet appear confusing in relation to the partnership interests involved. Gibbons headed a partnership which was known as the Llwynymaen Company, a coal-producing business in which he probably had a 11/16th share. Its first division of profits, or dividend as Gibbons called it, was made in 1.1788 and totalled a substantial £935. Coal being an exhausting product, it became desirable to extend the coal royalty area, and in 1790 a "Coal work" was bought from Captain (John?) Jones for a large £2200 by John Gibbons ($\frac{3}{4}$ share) and the Rev Turner Edwards, vicar of Oswestry ($\frac{1}{4}$), the lawyer's bill for the purchase of "the Colliery" being paid in 11.1791 and a half of the whole being apparently sold at cost to a group which included some of the Llwynymaen Colliery partners. Further coal was leased from Sir Watkin,

JOHN GIBBONS OF OSWESTRY

yet further coal from Capt. Jones and a Mrs Jenkins, and the colliery apparently ultimately extended into Trefarclawdd and Llanvorda as well as Oswestry. The partnership situation is one which is difficult to unravel, as there may have been partnerships involved with particular parts of the business; certainly the Cronwen Engine, possibly a water pumping wheel, as it was valued by H. Meldrum at £40.2.6, was one particular partnership in 1794, consisting of nine parts.

John Morris	2/9ths
C. Oram	1
J. Onions	1
E. Onions	1
John Gibbons	4/9ths

Morris and Oram are partners not met elsewhere in the Gibbons empire.

A major development of the colliery seems to have taken place in 1793-94, doubtless in anticipation of the construction of the new canal which was to so markedly improve coal sales prospects for it, and for which an Act was passed in 1793. Despite the fact that branches to the Morda coalfield were never built, the colliery was within reach of the main line of the canal en route to Llanymynech. Two gins are referred to in the accounts (£20), a new headgear was bought at a cost of six guineas, castings from the famed John Wilkinson's foundry and ironworks at Bersham were bought (some were for the Mostyn colliery) at c£223, and much timber was purchased, including 265 feet of ash and elm, not ordinary colliery pit prop timber. Large quantities of expensive ropes were bought:

from 1787 from Richard Clerk(e) , Bridgnorth

from 1788 from John Fletcher, Little Wenlock – a damaged rope from him was returned in 1796 and a 150 yard rope cost £13.5.0 in 1788

from W. Horton, Coalport

from Wm. Read & Co., Bristol – e.g. two ropes cost £16.13.0 in 1800: they came carriage-free (and presumably on the Severn) to Shrewsbury. The firm also supplied for Mostyn.

from John Curr, Belle Vue House, Sheffield, to whom large sums were paid in 1804 and 1807 -£514.12.3.

The John Curr reference is interesting: he was the inventor and patentee of the L-section tram plates which were so commonly used on 'the surface and underground in collieries at the time, and he was a

practical colliery man, for long the Duke of Norfolk's colliery manager at and near Sheffield. A single rope of his manufacture would cost £60 or more and a fair length for the Mostyn Colliery in 1805 cost £89.9s.

The large profits made at the colliery in 1805 and 1806, possibly as a result of the opening of new sections of the canal and indeed its connection to the outside world, resulted in yet further substantial developments. Large quantities of rails are for the first time referred to, bought from the Coalbrookdale Co. in 1805-07. Only occasionally are the number of rails referred to, but in 5.1807 600 rails cost £144.14.4. Rails also came from T. Jones at Bersham, costing £31.18.0 in 12.1805. The Coalbrookdale Co., as the Dale Co., supplied pulley blocks at £1.11.4 in 1807 and a kitchen grate – presumably in fact a range – at £6.10.1, while in 1806 they supplied “the Sawney Engine” at a cost of £275, perhaps a second-hand engine for which they were acting as agents or selling second-hand from their own estate. It too came free of carriage to Shrewsbury and then by land to Llwynymaen at £15.17.3, after which a man's time in erecting it cost £9.18.0 plus Thomas Edwards' time “putting up Engine”, £8.13.10. Fire bricks were bought for the colliery too, in 1794 or '95.

The coals which were produced are described variously as lime (burning) coals or fire coals, while the clay, which was available locally, was burnt into bricks using some of the small coal: in 1789 “Duty on Bricks” was paid, £2.12.7½. The stock of coals upon the pit bank when the new colliery was bought in 1790 were valued at a large £600. Little is recorded of the workforce, except the 140 colliers of 1798 and a reference to repairing houses at Llwynymaen. In 1809, the date of the last reference to coalmining in the Gibbons memorandum book, alder poles were purchased from Sir Watkin, while in 1798, coppiced wood was bought for £339.5.0, Gibbons leaving the ash poles standing. There is no doubt that Gibbons was the principal promoter of the colliery, and that it was indeed his principal concern: the Universal British Directory of the mid 1790s describes Gibbons in its Oswestry section as an esquire and as “Proprietor of Llwynymain colliery”, Oswestry. His partners in the Company were

John Onions	2/16ths
Daniel Onions	2/16ths
Michael Cooper	3/16ths – he was of Dawley

The financial results of the colliery as recorded by Gibbons are in the following table; it is not clear if his own royalty dues are included in the payment column, nor if those years which have no profit figure by them, were years in which no payment was made: probably they were.

JOHN GIBBONS OF OSWESTRY

	£	£
year to Michs	royalty payments	and profits to Christmas
1787	685	935
88	540	
89	475	
90	675	1020
91	822	
92	405	1000
93	917	1000
94	1004	
95	1363	2000
96	1336	
97	1212	
98	1342	1200
99	819	
1800	797	900
01	1000	800
02	998	800
03	723	640
04	758	
05	905	
06	1282	4000
07	1285	
08	639	640
09	1049	400
10	1186	
1811	502	848

– all figures to the nearest £1

John Gibbons' other coalmining interests were at nearby Chirk and more distant Ewloe and Mostyn, both in Flintshire, and although references are made to them in the account book, considerably less is known of them than is known of Llwynymaen. At Chirk, where again the new canal proffered economic opportunities, Gibbons paid £190.8.2 to Mr Roberts of Mold, possibly a solicitor, for the purchase of a royalty in 1802, the year in which William Horton was also supplying ropes for Llwynymaen and Chirk, but no further references to Chirk interests occur. At Mostyn, Gibbons had bought a 9116th interest by 1793, apparently working a coal royalty of the local great Mostyn family at a royalty of 1/8th. Here, coal was got for domestic and industrial purposes, and much slack for coking was sold too. Reference is made to coal got at the Level, and rent was paid to Mostyn for rent of his "The Mostyn



House and walled garden of John Gibbons in Oswestry, in 1990.

Water” - a power source, perhaps? Castings, ropes, a boiler, rails at 2s a yard, a “Machine”, an iron chain (£14.1.3), a mare (£7.7.0), an engine (balance paid in 1798), were bought, and sales were substantial: this was a large colliery for its period. Its manager in 1758 was one C. Boden. At Mostyn, the coal seams were up to 16 feet in individual thickness; and coal was sold from the Gibbons colliery in 1796 and again in 1803, at 5s a ton, and slack at is; so far as can be worked out, the sales of the colliery and the divided profit were, to the nearest £1

	£	£
1797 sales	1288	divided profit
98	1758	
99	1312	
1800	2476	
01		672
02		672
03	5904	1000
04	3079	1000
05		1000
06		1000
07		640
08		1000
09		1000
10		
1811		800

JOHN GIBBONS OF OSWESTRY

The partners at Mostyn were Gibbons himself and

John Onions	1/16th
Michael Cooper	1/16th
T.L. Jones	cl/5th – John Gibbons' son-in-law.

At Ewloe, again on the Dee estuary in Flintshire, the thick Main Coal was 12 feet, and here Gibbons had an interest by 1788 and took a lease, apparently in 1.1790, with a $\frac{3}{4}$ share in a capital of £2000 and with R. Lloyd as a partner: he was of Wrexham, and the ubiquitous John Onions became a partner later, possibly in 1.1795. An engine for this colliery came from one of John Wilkinson's foundries in 1795 at £457.7.0, and in 1797 there was an engine (also?) which had cost £429.7.0 and (presumably horse-powered) whimseys. In 1794 a further £400 was invested by Gibbons, and in 1793 the colliery paid him £570 in profit. In 1801, the date of the last reference to the Ewloe colliery, coals from it were sold to Milwr Mine Co., in Brynford township, a lead mining concern.

Calamine Mining

A major interest of John Gibbons' was in the mining of calamine, an ore of zinc, used in large quantities in brass manufacturing and sold by Gibbons and his partners principally – and possibly exclusively – to Rupert Leigh & Co., the Cheadle (brass) Co., who paid for it by bills of exchange. Calamine was also used for medicinal purposes, particularly as unguents. The production of calamine had increased enormously in the period 1720 to 1780, and Gibbons doubtless found a ready market at Cheadle, to which place, judging from the lack of any reference to processing other than "Sieves to Wash Calam.", the ore was sent undressed.

The partners here in 1787, the first year of John Gibbons' account book, were

John Gibbons	6/16ths
Robert Hughes	6/16ths – he managed the mines
– Croxon	3/16ths
– Simpson	1/16ths

The calamine was worked to the west of Oswestry, at a shallow depth and in various lessors' fields; in Sir Watkins' field, for instance, worked by 1787, lead was also got (18cwt in 1788, sent to Minera for smelting: the lead royalty was 30s a ton; 3 cwts were got in 1790 too), and in Mr Dorsett's (96½ cwts of lead in 1787 at 50s and 70s royalty per ton) while other lessors of calamine alone were Robert Hughes himself, manager and partner in the mines, Miss Whilton, Lord Powys and Mr Hollings.

The calamine royalty seems to have been 15s, 25s or 43s, no doubt dependent upon its depth and its quality, while a number of accounts survive to show something of the economy of the business. For example, Sir Watkins' half-yearly accounts to 3. and 10.1794 show

	£		
to 3.1794: paid damages to D. Davies	2		
G. Williams	1	4	0
weighing and drink		5	0
raising 17 tons 4 cwts at £4 and			
2 tons 1 cwts at £2.10.0	75	19	6
royalty at 15s a ton	14	8	9
total costs	93	17	3
			and profit
			£22.9.3

to 10.1794: paid to Ro Hughes raising 19 tons			
14 cwts	76	1	3
“Making a Wask & Weighing Ale”	1	10	0
royalty at 15s a ton	14	15	6
D. Davies for damage to his cottage	5	0	
	92	11	9
recd by sale 16 tons 1 cwt at £6.5.0 and			
3 tons 13 cwt at £4	114	18	3
			and profit
			£22.6.6

In this instance, the profit was divided on a different basis from the listing given above, one Leach being a partner too. A 1794 account for Lord Powys' "Mine" shows

paid expenses	14	3	4
royalty on 1 ton 2 cwts at 25s	1	2	0
	15	5	6
recd sales 6 cwt at 6s and 16 cwt at	6	16	0
6s 3d			and loss
			£8.9.4

Four contractors, each with his own employees, worked the mines – Edward Jones (who probably had a six-man team), Thos Williams, Robert Hughes and John Davies, who produced ore at variously 35s, 40s, 42s 6d, 45s and 50s a ton. The men were paid 1s to 1s 4d a day, and on making their bargains received drink as “Earnest”. Shallow shafts

were sunk, the deepest recorded being 14½ yards, sunk by Jones at 25s a yard, while others were 12, 10, 6 and 4 yards; in the year 1788-89 reference is also made to cleaning out “the Old Pit”, at 10s. The work and the workings seem to have been very wet: references are made to drawing water (often), to the purchase of a water tub (at 3s), to the sinking of a sum at a substantial £4, while subsidence occurred too, as seen above. Small trespasses occurred onto others’ properties, and two were paid for, at 12s and 5s. Shaft ropes were bought, lighting was by candles, and ale was a marked persuader of the men. Airways were cut below ground, corves were bought, a wheelbarrow purchased (at 10s 6d), Gibbons supplied timber, the blacksmith undertook unspecified iron work, underground headings were driven. The cooper was paid for repairing barrels, probably those in which the ore was sent away by road (and later by canal?), and after the working of an area was completed, the land was trenched to make it suitable once more for agricultural purposes. Sir Watkin was paid his royalty in 1789 by a six-month bill, while Gibbons lost 7s 6d via a lightweight gold coin. The calamine accounts continue from 1787 only until 1797.

Metal Mining

At a distance of some miles to the south of Oswestry, lay the village and small township (only 440 acres) of Meadowtown. Early in 1793, John Gibbons bought a half share in what he described as the “Meadow town Mine Lease” and paying half the Bridgnorth lawyer’s account for the legal work involved; here again, Gibbons took partners, Michael Cooper 1/8th, his Onion brothers-in-law each 1/16th: the amount of the Gibbons partners’ capital was £800, of which Gibbons retained three quarters. One J. Laurence appears to have been the resident manager, and he probably owned the other half interest in the mine: he was made payments on account of the mine 0££70 in 1793. The mine was probably worked for lead, and was an outlier of the famous Stiperstones mines. Profits of £347.2.8 were divided in 2.1798 but that is the last reference to the mine in the book.

For Eigergeled Mine(?)*, John Gibbons advanced £50 in 1788. He mentions it as the Welsh Mine and in 1789 he reckoned on a further expenditure by him of £50 on this mine as being likely; no further references occur to it in Gibbons’ book, and quite possibly it failed. The Pen Cerrig Mine was apparently bought-into in 1788, and it may indeed be the same as the Eigergeled one: certainly at least one sum of £50 was put into it by Gibbons. Its manager, a Mr Burton, was paid 7s a week

*ESGAIRGALED, a part of the famous Dylife Mine in the mountains of Montgomeryshire (Ed.).

and the mine's accounts for two years are recorded, presumably relating to its total finances rather than solely to John Gibbons' part interest in it: figures are stated to the nearest £1.

	£	t	c	£
11.1788 - 5.1789 expenditure	225	26.	2. 2	for 352 royalty payments)
-11.1789	528	65.	5. 2	554)
- 2.1790	159	25.	0. 2	210) 192
- 8.1790	<u>271</u>	<u>38.10. 0</u>	<u>308</u>)
	1183	154.18. 6	1424	
	by Sawyer	13.10. 0		

leaving a balance in hand of £24.14.0. The Royalty was in part at 20s and in part 30s a ton. A dividend on £20 was paid in 10.1795 by Mr Croxon, Gibbon' partner in the New Bank-and that is the last reference to the mine in the book.

Limestone

It was probably in 1800 that Gibbons first took an active interest in working local lime quarries, although earlier, in 1791, John Philips had been Gibbons' own tenant in working "Lime Rock", apparently on the Llwynymaen estate, on a small scale and at a rent of only £10. The new development was of quarries able to produce on a scale sufficiently large for the new markets which the canal was opening out, for agricultural use; surface land was cleared, a railway laid - "Nails &c in laying Rails" cost £1.17.11½ - and the first royalties were paid to Lord Powys - £63.6.9 for Freflach Wood and £37.9.11½ for Pant. The rents were £113.15.9 in 1801 and £54.12.0 in 1802, after which no references can be traced in Gibbons' book.

The Treflach Wood workings were on the flanks of Sweeney Mountain and quite close to Llwynymaen: presumably Gibbons' coal was used in the burning of the limestone, and in later years at least, a tramway ran from nearby to the canal at Crickheath Wharf. Pant was where limestone was loaded onto the canal from the famous quarries at Llanymynech Hill.

Canal and Transport

A central factor in the development of John Gibbons' coal interests, and in his limestone, timber and agricultural concerns too, was the building, opening and working of two canals which met locally as Carreghofa, near Llanymynech. The eleven mile line of the Ellesmere Canal between Carreghofa and Frankton, where the canal joined the same company's line now known as the Llangollen Canal, was authorised in 1793 and opened to traffic in the autumn of 1796, and on to Chirk in

1801 and throughout between Pontcysyllte and the main canal system in 1805. The Montgomeryshire Canal, extending 16½ miles westwards to near Montgomery was opened in 1797 and later – much later – to Newtown, in 1819; various branches were built from each canal, assisting further in the cheap carriage of limestone which was usually burnt into lime at kilns at the canal heads or alongside them. Additionally, the River Severn itself was navigable upstream as far as Pool Quay and until as late as 1890. With these waterways, the markets for both coal and limestone were much increased.

John Gibbons himself seems, however, to judge from his memorandum book, not to have invested in canal-building. In 1801 he paid the Ellesmere Canal £28.12.10 and again in 1.1803, he sent Mr Telford a draft for the Ellesmere Canal for £37.2.2; in neither instance is the purpose of the payment stated.

Gibbons himself travelled on horseback, and as well as referring to horses, he purchased a saddle in 1795 for £3.8.0 and in 1797 a pair of saddle bags at £1.10.0. He had a couple of turnpike trust mortgages for £100 each, one of which was on the Oswestry and Llanffyllin turnpike and which he received as security for a loan of £100.

Various Industrial Interests

Little is known of Gibbons' interest in Evelith Mill, near Shifnal and quite close to Dawley, where Gibbons owned another estate. Two paper mills are shown on a plan of 1808 as close to Evelith, and Gibbons received a rent for Evelith for the two years, to 1.1788, while in 3.1790 he sold to his brother-in-law Henry Onions his share in the mill for £300, which included a £100 turnpike bond.

Prescott Forge is mentioned in the book in 1788, when Gibbons paid £44 “for Prescott Co.” Dolobran Forge in Montgomeryshire was shared by 4.1788 with Mr William Barnett, one and a half year's rent being paid to 3.1788 at £50 a year. The Forge was let by 8.1787, the owners paying for repairs.

At Dawley, Gibbons owned an estate, the Langleys and the Bythams, of the value of £130 a year early in the 19th century. The Coalbrookdale Company leased coal from Gibbons here by 1803-04, and had extensive and long-term coalmining interests on Dawley. A Dawley estate law bill of 1804 was for a substantial £47.7.1.

A quite major part of the Gibbons business empire lay in farming interests, although it is not at all clear to what extent his other interests inter-meshed with these; certainly the coal was worked under a part of the agricultural estate, but did it consume significant quantities of Gibbons' limestone, burnt with his coal, or were the Oswestry markets paralleled by new ones created by the new canals, etc?

A married man with three children, of Gibbons' domestic life relatively little is known. He lived in the house called (probably later) The Poplars; in 1788 he paid rent of £18 for the house which he leased, although later at least he is said to have both owned and occupied The Poplars, and he purchased a garden at a cost of £300 in 1809. His daughter-in-law's second husband, the Rev. W.W. Owen – they married in 1810 – lived in the house for some time after Gibbons' death, until the house was sold in 1832, just before Owen's own death in 1834.

In the Town (sic) and borough of Oswestry in which he had then most probably only recently settled, John Gibbons was sworn in as a freeman or burgess in 10.1786, paying the usual fee of 40s. He was mayor of the Town in the year 10.1789-90, and subsequently coroner in 1791. He remained a member of the town council until his death.

These are some of the concerns, financial and personal, of one relatively minor late eighteenth century capitalist. His investments obviously extended over a variety of fields and Gibbons himself took a demonstrable personal interest in their development. There were doubtless hundreds of other entrepreneurs of his time and type in the industrial areas of the Great Britain of the later eighteenth century, but relatively few have left so comprehensive a record of their varied interests.

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Withered arm.

Berriew Aqueduct on the Newtown extension of the Montgomeryshire Canal. Of interest, is the fate of the engineer, Dadford, who following repeated troubles along the line (including the collapse of the Vyrnwy Aqueduct) resigned and left for the States. All this was some years after Gibbons' death. Berriew was restored in 1899 but the canal is now culverted across this structure.

Photo: R.H.B.