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“These Grand Affairs”:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MICKLEY COLLIERY

by John Goodchild, M.Univ

On October 15th 1765 Samuel Aislabie wrote from Mickley in southern Northumberland to the recently widowed Isabella Wrightson at Cusworth Hall, near Doncaster. In this letter, the first in a long but only partly-surviving series of usually fortnightly letters which Aislabie was to address to Mrs Wrightson, he initially mentions his condolences upon the “*sudden & unexpected*” death of his master (her late husband), asks for the continuance of his office as steward, and reports upon recent developments in the opening up of a large and new colliery on the Wrightson estate in Northumberland. He goes on,

“I would mention the works more particularly, but as you woud (I presume) be at a loss to understand the names & terms given them I may as well Omit it til you are more Acquainted with these Grand Affairs”

and he asks if he is to go to Cusworth to discuss matters.

In the event, a series of letters from Aislabie ensued. Fifty-six of these survive, dating from and between October 1765 and February 1775. They obviously form only a part of those which were written by Aislabie, and for several of the years of this decade none have survived. Their purpose was to keep Mrs Wrightson informed of the costs, conditions, sales, transport developments, market changes and labour conditions of the developing collieries. As a series of reports by an expert in the field to an upper middle class lady of about forty (she was born in 1727) and of some obvious intelligence, but living at a distance, the letters form a unique archive, while, as they relate to the fortunes of a major new colliery of the mid-18th century on Tyneside, they are of more than purely local significance.

To understand some important details of these letters, it is necessary to consider something of the background of the situation in which Samuel Aislabie and the Widow Wrightson were placed in the autumn of 1765. Her father, William Wrightson, had married successively two Tyneside ladies and was himself a sometime Member of Parliament for Newcastle upon Tyne. His second wife, by whom he had his only child, the daughter Isabella, was the eldest daughter and co-heir of William Fenwick of Bywell, and in consequence, both before and after his wife’s death in 1745 at the age of 46, William Wrightson had had a personal interest in the Fenwick estates. In 1723 an agreement was reached – an agreement described later as being pregnant with “*the greatest consequences*” – whereby parts of the estate were to be transferred as the new Mrs Wrightson’s share, which included a colliery

at Mickley West Banks and another at Eltringham Common, with a limestone quarry at Newton. At this time these were landsale collieries only, but an important provision, made in articles of agreement of October 1723, laid down that if the coal-bearing land which became Wrightson's "*shall happen to be a Watersale Colliery at any time, then Mr Wrightson & his heirs shall convey one Moiety*" to the co-heir(s).

Although negotiations with local freeholders in 1723 had produced verbal agreements for Wrightson to have wayleave for any waggonway which he might need for a watersale colliery – "*Wayleave if Occasion through there grounds for a Very Reasonable Satisfaction*" – it was not until forty years later, and after the branches of the families concerned had grown somewhat more apart, that a sea-sale colliery was proposed. Meanwhile, the small-scale, landsale collieries were continued in the hands of a tenant, even into the period of great expansion, and in the 1750s and 1760s John Bewick worked Eltringham Common Colliery (and at West Banks into the 1770s) with a three year gap c.1768-70.

William Wrightson's wife Isabella the co-heiress died in 1745, while he died in December 1760 at the age of 84. They had built the present Cusworth Hall, near Doncaster, and their sole surviving child and heiress, also named Isabella, married a neighbouring landowner, John Battie from Warmsworth, in 1748. Immediately following upon his father-in-law's death, the latter embarked upon a major investment in the coal industry and assumed the surname and arms Wrightson in 1761.

During the earlier 18th century, coal had been worked further and further away, north and south, from the banks of the Tyne, and also further and further west of Stella, the uppermost point of natural navigation on that river. The Crawcrook waggonway, in existence itself by 1663, was extended westwards to further new pits and in 1685 trial borings were put down on Hedley Fell to over 18, 4 and 14 fathoms. In 1743 at Risemoor borings went to over 40 and 49 fathoms, in 1744 in Hedley to over 37 and 31 fathoms, and in 1745 at Risemoor again to over 38 fathoms. At Risemoor a "*Tryal Pit*" was sunk in or before 1743, and in 1745, also at Risemoor, reference occurs to "*the West Sinking Pit*" of over 38 fathoms. Certainly John Wrightson was envisaging the letting of major new mines with a watersale and a waggonway to Stella staiths in 1759, while as late as July 1762 a proposed watersale colliery at Hedley Fell was advertised as to let, with the freeholders offering wayleaves. The situation resulting from Fenwick's claim to a half share in any watersale colliery had already been discussed as a likely major difficulty to be faced and was apparently resolved satisfactorily in May 1762.

However, it was late in 1762 when John Wrightson decided himself to embark upon the necessarily ambitious colliery development scheme, and to be both coal owner and coalmaster. In November and December 1762, a further

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programme of exploratory borings proved the existence of a good 41 inch coal, and two further borings were made in 1763 at Hedley Fell. As a result, during 1763 and 1764 negotiations for waggonway wayleaves were successfully undertaken, each for 21 years and all at moderate rents, while in the early 1770s there were at least eleven wayleave leases operating, with a total annual rental of at least some £400.

By September 1762 Kell, the agent, had spoken to several of the freeholders, who were reported as being favourable to “*the Way leives ... upon verry Easey terms*”, and wayleave agreements for the waggonway extension were negotiated and then signed in 1763 and 1764.

A lease of additional coal was taken of the Duke of Northumberland at Hedley and Hedley Fell, and staiths at Stella on the Tyne were formally leased in May 1764 at £120 a year minimum rent for the existing keel berths, plus £10 for the two keel berths to be built, and additional rents for any more than 8800 waggons a year, each of 756 gallons, Winchester measure. A timber bridge had once been proposed to carry the waggonway over Red Burn, and was to be a major engineering work, with 17 wooden piers supporting a bridge 196 feet in length, with a maximum height above the stream of 36 feet: however, a great embankment was built about 1737 to carry the waggonway, and this still survives, with the Red Burn passing through it in a man-height stone culvert.

Between 1763 and 1765 (with expenditure after his death to 1767), John Wrightson spent £4930 3s 7d on opening up the colliery, and it was doubtless for this purpose that, in December 1763, he borrowed £3000 at four per cent interest from a Nottinghamshire spinster. This was later increased to £5000. The new colliery was opened to watersale in May 1766, but in July 1765, immediately prior to his death, John Wrightson had taken partners in his and his wife's new Mickley colliery and in the Hedley and Hedley Fell collieries leased from the Duke of Northumberland. They were Thomas Waters of Newcastle, an experienced coal merchant and capitalist and his own home neighbour (and tenant?) there, and George Cooke of Warmsworth near Doncaster, whose role was probably merely that of a provider of money. Upon Wrightson's death, a further interest was conveyed to Waters and in November 1765 the ownership was Widow Wrightson £250, Waters £150, Cooke £50, when an additional £450 or so was needed for the colliery's purposes. This gave them five-ninths, three-ninths and one-ninth respectively.

The series of surviving letters which relate to the colliery begins in October 1765. Most were written by Samuel Aislabie as the local estate and colliery manager, to the newly-widowed Isabella Wrightson. They cover the periods October 1765 to November 1765, April 1766 to November 1766, October 1770 to December 1771, and February 1773 to February 1775, with a surviving handful outside these periods. The earliest letter of the series

condoles with Mrs Wrightson on her husband's recent death and then suggests that in his last letter Wrightson had promised "*continuing me ye principal Agent in these Grand undertakings*". A Mr Yellolay, Waters the partner's principal agent "*in the fitting way*" (in coal dealing), was also ambitious for the colliery managership or agentship. Aislabie asks for the continuance of the agentship, which he was obviously given, and states that

"I wou'd mention the works more particularly, but as you would (I presume) be at a loss to understand the names & terms given them I may as well Omit it til you are more acquainted with these Grand Affairs"

He also asks if he is to go to Cusworth to discuss matters.

Despite his suggested simplification of fact for Mrs Wrightson's benefit, Aislabie's letters are full of detail. The earliest one tells that the (drainage?) drift at Mickley Moor Colliery was nearly finished and 14 colliers had been bound the previous evening to sink pits there. It adds that at Mickley Fell the drift was being driven more quickly in softer stone, and "*The Waggon Way, & Covering for the Trunks or Staiths are in great fowardness*". The colliery's pay bills were paid fortnightly, on Fridays, and those of October 4th 1765 were:

	£	s	d
Risemoor	17	13	6½
Mickley	7	18	3
Waggonway	67	4	9½
Staith	35	9	2

Large bills for Riga timber, ordered by Waters, were to pay, while certain estate timber was sold to a Newcastle ship builder, some to the colliery and "*3013 oak sleepers besides prop Rails &c*" were needed.

Mickley Moor Colliery was "*won*" in November 1765 (i.e. the coal was reached in the drift), and a pit was begun to be sunk to it. At the same period, it was reported that all goes "*on with great Spirit particularly the Waggon Way which is vastly expensive*". Indeed, the fortnight's pay bill had increased to £180 15s 1d for the waggonway and £60 16s 2d. for the staith – but the line, the life-blood artery for any major colliery which was envisaged to have more than a local sale, was nearing completion until,

"We have a large quantity of Fine Coals got at Mickley Colliery ready for carrying to ye. Staiths for Sale but the late great Snow hath put ye Waggon Way in great disorder by washing down ye. Sides of ye Cutts & Batterys this will take some time in repairing",

while part was still to lay with rails and sleepers in February 1766. In April 1766 Aislabie reported "*Last Tuesday ye. laying with Rails & sleepers of ye. main waggon way was clos'd* [i.e. completed] *so that it will shortly be ready*

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for ye conveyance of waggons", and over £500 had been expended – or fell due – in the fortnight.

Not inappropriately, the first pit to be opened seems to have been the Bella – shortened from Isabella, the Widow Wrightson's forename – and, in the four weeks from May 1st 1766, 392 waggons went down to Stella staiths and 244 chaldrons of coal were delivered there to Matthew Waters "*as Fitter*", and eight "*to ye. Maltsters Co.*" There was some difficulty with the waggon drivers, but two of them had been persuaded to do five journeys in two days, rather than four as hitherto, and the rest "*Begin to abate of their Obstinacy*", while an alternative return-route for the waggons was being built. When the weather permitted, "*we are very busy gettg. ye. Bye Way leveld & lay'd*", and in October 1766 some half mile remained to lay of "*ye Bye Waggon Way*". New pits were being sunk, "*bad air*" at Risemoor was causing some difficulty, and in July 1766 a violent thunder shower "*has partly washed Down a Wood Bridge of ours near Stella*". By August 1766 the upper seam coals at the Matthew Pit proved very good and at the Fell little remained to do before the Prosperous pit was opened and the colliery set to work. In fact, expenditure was increasing apace:

				£	s	d
August	1763	-	July	1765	3288	11 6
July	1765	-	June	1766	5708	17 7
June	1766	-	August	1766	464	15 8
				Total	9462	4 9

However, the opening of the colliery in May 1766 seemed to offer a certainty of the capital expenditure being repaid "*in a few Years*", and William Fenwick of Bywell, on returning home at that time, found that,

"Mickley Coals were gone down to the River Tyne in order for Sea Sale which gave me great pleasure and I wish you joy thereof as she is now become a Water Sale Colliery".

The Upper Main seam at Mickley Moor was suitable for the coastwise trade and the Lower or Under or Small Coal seam for the "*Over Sea Trade*", providing primarily "*Round*" and "*Small*" coals respectively. In 1767 the Risemoor Colliery vendor sale was stated as some 6000 chaldrons a year, the colliery being among the smaller ones of the 24 then on the Tyne.

Samuel Aislabie had a house bought and repaired for him at nearby Ryton late in 1766, and from this new house he continued to supervise the estate and the collieries, and report on both to Mrs Wrightson. It was to this house that, early in 1771, Aislabie brought a wife, a Miss Frances Smith of Wester House, a lady closely related to several esquires including Fenwick. Waters approved of the match and he himself married a few months later, to a maiden Quaker lady of Whitby with a fortune of upwards of £30,000.

Beech rails and waggon wheels were bought, fir was “*Chiefly used for ye. waggon Way & Staith*” and deal was chiefly required for use in the pits. Waggon grease cost a substantial £8 19s 0d in November 1770. In this same year, Aislabie was enjoying the professional assistance of William Brown, one of the great Tyneside mining engineers, who had worked from a youth at Throckley Colliery, on the north bank of the Tyne opposite Ryton and only a mile or so from it. He had been appointed its manager by the lessee in 1756 and he built a successful steam-pumping engine there in 1756, then a great rarity. We learn from these letters that he became joint lessee of Throckley Colliery and had three steam engines there by 1771. His fame as an engine builder spread – he built engines to 1776 – and he became a consulting engineer and “*the most eminent viewer in the north in his day.*” In about 1770 he brought what were said to be the first coal screens into use, while in 1774 he was concerned with double waterwheels for winding and built such a water gin in 1778. He also invented a mechanical coal cutter, “*known as Willy Brown’s Iron Man*”. The series of letters which begins in 1770 mentions him often. By this period Aislabie was examining the underground workings, but the technical direction was Brown’s and he was apparently also superintending the opening out of the Fryston Colliery on the Aire near Ferrybridge in Yorkshire in 1771. The vend in 1772 had been 6489 from Risemoor Colliery, and 2495 from Mickley Moor, at which latter place the top seam (via the West Pit) and the lower (from Battie) provided for the London and foreign trades respectively.

The collieries possessed 36 waggons. Pits were now worked out quickly, and new ones sunk.

The colliery was now a much larger concern in every way and the capital invested increased enormously:-

	£	s	d
1763-1765	9462	4	9
1766-1771	35032	7	10¾
1772	<u>6317</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>4¼</u>
	50812	7	0

Against this the total income from coals sold (sea and land sales), waggon horse earnings, wheat sales and sundry rents were

	£	s	d	£	s	d
1766-1771				25513	5	8¼
1772 sales only	5447	6	5			
other income	447	1	8½	5894	8	11

Over the whole period of the colliery’s opening and subsequent working, an accumulated loss of £8790 8s 10¾d had been made – some 17% of the total investment. In 1771 Brown was asked by Aislabie “*about the*

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unprofitableness of our Collieries and the Smallness of our Vend particularly that from Mickley Moor (which principally go to ye. Over sea Trade) he told me ye. want of ye. Coals being Established was ye. cause”.

A plan of Mickley Colliery of the later 18th century shews workings extending over a distance from east to west of some 11 miles, with probably 16 working pits and some twenty which were then disused. The workings on this plan, which is itself endorsed “*Coal-pitts Mickley*”, lie to the north of a downcast fault to the north called “*The Main Dyke*”, and the workings shewn were sandwiched between old workings – shewn as “*Old Waste*” – to the north of them, and the fault to the south. The old workings had latterly been undertaken by a Mr Humble, and the locations of Humble’s Old Drift, of his workings, his crank gin and the “*water Leval coal drift to the crank Gin*” are specified. Presumably the crank gin was a winding mechanism worked by an underground waterwheel. Humble’s Wood lies to the south of Prudhoe Hall, by the side of the Stanley Burn, on the 1/10560 OS map of 1895, and in the Wrightson papers one Humble is alluded to as having been at some stage a potential (continuing?) tenant and developer of the colliery, while Humble & Hodgson had at some stage worked the coal at Risemoor. The current workings shewn on the plan under consideration were apparently drained by an engine of some type, probably not water-powered, and the plan shews an “*Engine Delivery Drift*”.

A number of references to labour occur. The keelmen caused difficulty, either involuntarily when a winter storm prevented the keels’ completing the loading of a ship as in January 1771, or by their striking, as when in June 1771 they struck over the erection of coal-loading spouts at Whiteley Point and other places (sic) near Shields where no keels would be required. They returned in July 1771, but some of them attempted to break into Aislabie’s house and were fortunate to escape being shot. In February 1766 Aislabie was himself lucky to escape when the gin rope stuck as he was descending a shaft, then suddenly jolted as it came loose. In October 1770 the Press Gang were “*amongst the Sailors here & at London*”. References are made to the coalmasters’ meetings and their decisions as to changing sale prices. Presumably Waters attended these, representing the Mickley and Risemoor owners, but Aislabie only mentions their being held.

Relatively little is known of labour relations at these collieries. In April 1771 it was suggested that six, eight or ten colliers, and six lads for putting, might be sent to the colliery out of Yorkshire, and that good and constant employment could be found for them, with either houses or lodgings. In 1766, Aislabie said, “*Mickley liberty at present is a place of Rendevous (sic) for all the Idle Villains in the Country*”. The farm tenants of the estate supplied the horses required for waggoning the coals, and were of course paid for it. (The waggon pay from January 1st 1773 to August 11th 1773 totalled a large £574.) In November 1771, Aislabie reported that little was doing owing to,

“ye. Pitmen’s Bond being expired, but with much difficulty have got the greatest part of them Bound again For ye. ensuing Year upon the same terms as before excepting a little Advance owing to them in the price of hewing”

in the Top Seam at Risemoor, which Waters and Brown as well as he agreed was but reasonable at 4d for every score, or 20, corves. As need arose, the colliers were moved within the colliery and in June 1773 Waters had taken colliers from Mickley Moor to work a larger quantity of coal at Risemoor for the London market. This was to be mixed in the proportion of six waggons of Risemoor to three of Mickley Moor. When wet coals were sent down to Stella staiths early in 1775, Waters gave Aislabie himself what the latter considered an unwarranted *“lecture upon the occasion”*. In 1771 coals for London sold at 14s per chaldron of 53 cwts, or about 5s 6d per ton, and at 13 shillings for *“those Bound Coast Ways”*.

Damage occasioned by natural events has been mentioned. The collieries were fortunate in missing the main effects of the great Tyne flood of November 1771:

“Last night we had the greatest, nay a much greater Flood came down the River Tyne than ever was known in the memory of the Oldest man living”.

Great damage was done at Wylam and Throckley collieries – the latter tenanted by Bell & Brown, where three engines were worked – but only a few boards were lost from the spouts at Stella. Mrs Wrightson sent five guineas for the relief of those concerned.

In 1773 a payment of three guineas was made to the Newcastle Infirmary, as was usual amongst the larger coalmasters, and in the 1770s the usual difficulties of trade depressions, geological faults, and labour problems were met and surmounted. Colliers were re-bound, an underground *“creep”* was reported, and a new farm lease was granted *“subject to furnishing the Collys wth. a Couple of waggns. as the other Tenants do.”* A major development followed borings put down in late 1772 and early 1773. In the fourth of these, a 12 foot 2 inch thick coal was found, and *“Mr Brown acknowledged it to be a grand discovery”*. Waters had ordered the borings, at Hadley Colliery, on Brown’s advice and was enthusiastic when the coal was reached in April 1774, saying that it was *“equal to Walker [Colliery] coals’, wch. always fetch the best price at London”*. A 1285 yard long wagonway was laid to the new Spindle Bush Colliery, at Risemoor, joining the old way on Hedley Fell. It was opened in June 1776 and the coals found were very desirable, being – *“dry & very round”*. Some mixing of coals was subsequently undertaken. The coals gave, said Waters, *“great content at Market”*.

Steam came to the colliery in 1774, when an old engine was bought for £100 to be set up at Spindle Bush. Its engine house was finished in November

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1774. In December 1774, however, bad weather was delaying the engine's completion and there was also another great flood in the Tyne, but "*exceeding good Coals*" were being produced at the new Spindle and Mary pits.

And there the letters end. The young heir, now 21 (born in 1752) had been written-to about the colliery in December 1771 and had visited in 1773 and again in 1774, and was now able to manage affairs himself.

How long the colliery continued at work is uncertain, but probably into 1781. The Mickley wayleave leases fell in in 1784 and 1785 and the staiths' lease in 1787. Matthew Waters was still a partner and had earlier purchased George Cooke's share. The partnership had expired by August 1785 when Waters, then of Wallsend, esquire, released the premises to their owner. The waggonway closed in 1781. Plans by John Smeaton, in 1778, for extending the navigation of the Tyne upstream from Stella to nearly opposite Wylam, came to nought, but they would presumably have benefited the mineral wealth of this estate. In January 1779 William Wrightson was considering selling his Northumberland estate and he obtained a valuation of it at £14,700 at thirty years' purchase, exclusive of the common rights and the coal, which were not valued. He did not sell, however, and his descendants were to both build a church for Mickley and see the revival of the coal industry under their estates in the valley of the Tyne itself.

SOURCES

The information in this paper is entirely derived from letters and papers in the John Goodchild Collection, Local History Study Centre, Drury Lane, Wakefield, WF1 2DT.

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