

Jet Mining

(An extract from a chapter of the book "Great Ayton – A History of the Village by Dan O'Sullivan")

Another extractive industry in the area was jet, but much less is known about this because jet mines, although numerous, were usually small, and individual mines tended not to acquire names, special characteristics or documentary records. During most of the nineteenth century hard jet fetched a good price and it was mined extensively both in East Cleveland and along the edge of the moors between Roseberry and Kildale, among other places. The mines typically took the form of a series of parallel drifts into the side of a hill, with headings also driven at right angles to the original drifts at regular intervals, so that the plan of the mine finally looked like a chequerboard, with square pillars of rock left in place as support. The following graphic account of working conditions comes from a book on Great Broughton, but applies equally to the Ayton area:

Stripped to the waist, two jet pickmen worked in an opening eight feet wide and seven feet high. Two more men wheeled the material out. Since the only light came from candles used by the pickmen, who had to buy their own from their wages of 4s. a day, two grooves were cut in the floor to guide the barrows. One was used for entering, the other for coming out. On the tip two sorters raked the shale with small-toothed rakes, combing out the fragments of jet. Each week a carrier went to Whitby market, having collected jet from several workings.

From the 1870s the importation of Spanish jet reduced the industry's profitability and at the same time it seems that jet jewellery ceased to be quite so fashionable. Today a little jet is still mined round Whitby, but none locally. The only remaining signs of the industry are the characteristic series of small spoilheaps dotting the hillsides at regular intervals along the same horizontal plane.