



North Skelton, the Last Ironstone Mine in East Cleveland

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At noon on 17th January 1964, miners finished their last shift underground at the North Skelton ironstone mine. They followed the ore they had blasted and collected to the surface for the last time, as the mine fell silent. As the final load of ore from the Cleveland iron ore field ran along the railways to the blast furnaces of Teesside, it was the end of the Ironstone Era of East Cleveland.

Legend has it that on 8th June 1850, John Vaughan and Henry Bolckow were looking for a local source of ironstone to send to their blast furnace in the new town of Middlesbrough. Encouraged by the opening of the drift mine in Skinningrove in 1848, they decided that Cleveland ironstone was the obvious choice. Walking along the Eston Hills with mining engineer John Marley, Vaughan stumbled in a rabbit hole, and on examining a stone nearby he realised that this was the ore he was looking for. Further research showed that this was the main seam of the Cleveland Ironstone Formation, which at Eston is 4.8 metres thick. Eight weeks later, ironstone was being quarried and sent to furnaces across the area.

The massive and growing demand for iron to feed the Industrial Revolution drove ironmasters and landowners to open mines wherever ironstone was found. The iron-rush of East Cleveland had started, and with it

the growth of Middlesbrough, which became known as 'Ironopolis', one of the most important iron-producing districts in the world.

Early mines were set up where ironstone was found at the surface and then the seam of ore was followed underground via drift mines. Soon, shaft mines joined the expanding number of drift mines as the railway made its way across East Cleveland.

The ironstone seams in the Cleveland area are not flat, having been folded and faulted over time, so finding ironstone was not always easy. The ore was often hidden deep below the surface and in some places had been displaced by faults. The ironstone seams in the Skelton area form a saucer shape and the ore lies at over 220m deep. Extracting stone from these deep mines is difficult; not only was there a need to get people and machinery to the bottom of the mine and then lift the stone to the surface, it was also essential to deal with the ingress of water and prevent flooding. North Skelton mine was 120m below sea-level, and extracting the iron ore required many drains and pumps to keep the working areas free of water.

Development of the mine began in 1865 with the creation of a water-level near Marske Mill that was to help drain the mine in the future. This part of the workings became known as North Skelton. As understanding and

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knowledge of ironstone in the area developed, the mine shaft was sunk at a point further south. However, the original name stuck and that area too became known as North Skelton - despite being located south of the village of Skelton.

North Skelton Mine, commissioned in 1875, was the deepest mine in Cleveland, with a 230m shaft. Despite the long period of time and the investment needed to get started, the mine was one of the most successful in East Cleveland. At its peak - between 1875 and 1920 - nearly 6 million tonnes of ore were taken out of the ground annually. Overall, 360 million tonnes of ore were extracted during the 113 years of industrial operation.

As with most of the ironstone mines, North Skelton did not have a local population large enough to provide workers, and a new village was built to house

the miners and their families who came from all corners of Britain and beyond. Often built by the owners of the mines, these villages had rows of terraced houses with allotments, shops, schools and churches. Whole families and communities worked in or depended on the mines for their livelihoods. However, mining was a difficult and dangerous occupation and injuries and fatalities were common. Falling stones, blasts and injuries from hauling wagons could easily prove fatal.

With the import of cheaper ore and discovery of higher quality ore around the world, one by one the mines began to close. With the closure of North Skelton mine and removal of most of the buildings, headgear, spoil-tips and railways, the villages and their communities are all that remain as reminders of this once great industry which changed the landscape of East Cleveland and created modern Teesside.



Find out more

Interactive website on Ironstone Mining in Cleveland,
<https://www.redcar-cleveland.gov.uk/kirkleatham/collection/cleveland-ironstone.pdf>

Cleveland Ironstone Mining Museum, Deepdale, Mill Lane, Skinningrove TS13 4AP
<http://ironstonemuseum.co.uk/>



Derelict mine buildings in front of a spoil heap, North Skelton