

An Ancient Underground Railway

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THE earliest “underground railway” of which we have any detailed description, and probably the first in the world, apart from small mineral lines running into adits, was built in connection with the East Kenton Colliery in Northumberland, and is depicted on the plan of collieries and wagonways on the Rivers Tyne & Wear published by W. Casson in March, 1801. By that time it had existed for three decades. Kenton Colliery is of considerable antiquity, and in the early part of the 17th century employed some 400 to 500 carts & wains in carrying coal from pits to the River Tyne. The 3-mile underground railway-or “subterranean wagonway”-was begun about 1770 by Christopher Bedlington and was therefore commonly known as Kitty's Drift. It extended to the River Tyne at Bell's Close (near Scotswood Bridge). The builder is stated to have been a partner in Liddel, Bedlington & Company, the then owners of East Kenton Colliery, and is also referred to as the Agent to the Montague family of colliery owners, through whose estate the railway ran. Most of our knowledge of the line in its working days is derived from descriptions in *The Picture of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (1870) and in *The Cylopaedia* by Abraham Rees (Article “Coal,” Vol. VIII, dated 1819) from which the following quoted particulars are extracted.

The pit “which can be entered with the greatest ease and safety is in the vicinity of Newcastle, viz. East Kenton colliery, the property of Messrs. Knowsley and Chapman. Having previously obtained permission of a viewer, or some other person concerned in the colliery, a small hand lanthorn must be provided, a light being necessary for each person. It is also advisable to take a change of dress, at least of upper cloaths : strong boots to keep the feet dry, and an old hat. Being thus prepared, proceed to the steath, which is by the river side, about four miles above Newcastle, a pleasant excursion by water.

“When there, in some of the men, who have been apprised of your coming, will assist in seating you on a set of small empty coal wagons, capable of containing two persons each, seven of which are drawn along a railway by one horse. As soon as you are placed, with your candles lighted, you set off at full speed, with a boy in the first waggon, for a charioteer, into a tunnel, or subterranean passage six feet high, about the same breadth, and three miles in length. It is particularly necessary to guard against putting your hands suddenly out of the waggon, as the tunnel in most places, is only wide enough to admit the waggon and horses, and you are of course by doing so in danger of receiving an injury; but by sitting quietly, you ascend very smoothly, till you arrive at the place where the men are at work.

“At your first entrance into the tunnel you are struck with the noise of the waggons, which being fastened with chains to each other, and going sometimes at the rate of ten miles an hour, make a sound resembling thunder. The passage is in general hewn out of solid rock, composed of metal stone, a sort of schistus. Where there is not rock, it is arched with brick or stone. The water from the pit runs down by the side of the rail-way to the river Tyne.

“The waggons are deep and square; wider at the top than at the bottom, and are fast at all sides. The bottom has hinges, and can be let down to discharge the coals, of which these waggons contain about three bolls each.

“At intervals there are double rail-ways; and where you come to one of these your driver stops his horse, and a dead silence approaches. When he is past, your driver renews his speed, until he reaches the next interval, when he repeats his call, and should no answer be heard in return, he proceeds.

If, by the negligence of the boys, the waggons should meet where there is no double rail-way, the boy with the empty waggon unlooses his horse, which is taught to turn round, and force the waggons back with its breast, until they reach the double part, where they can pass each other.

“The air up the tunnel is cold, but perfectly pure, but as you approach the workings a considerable

degree of warmth is felt.”

The railway through Kitty's Drift was abandoned in favour of the system of loading coal direct from the wagons into the ship's hold, and a surface wagonway was constructed during the first decade of the nineteenth century which crossed the Great North Road at the County Hotel, Gosforth, and ran down the back of Roseworth Terrace by the church to a junction with the older Bigge's Mail Wagonway, by means of which it reached the Tyne at Wallsend. Kenton Colliery was closed soon after the opening in 1810 of Coxlodge Colliery, wither the trade was transferred; the miners retained their houses, and the old engine shaft at Kenton continued to pump water from the new royalties. Kitty's Drift continued to prove of service as an outlet for mine water but its railway days were over. So far as can be ascertained, only wooden rails were used in the tunnel. The replacing line to Wallsend was the famous Coxlodge wagonway which was laid with Blenkinsop rack rails, upon which rack locomotives built by Fenton, Murray & Wood, of Leeds, began work on September 2, 1813.

