The Western Area of the National Coal Board was formed on April 1, 1974, by the merger of the Board's Staffordshire and North Western Areas and the North Western Sales Region. The Western Area is now responsible for 19 collieries, employing about 20,500 mineworkers in the Staffordshire, Lancashire, North Wales and Cumbrian coalfields. Output from the collieries is about 11 million tonnes of coal a year, and 1.5 million are produced from opencast sites. The Area is also responsible for sales of about 17.5 million tonnes of coal and other solid fuels a year within boundaries stretching from the Scottish border down to Shropshire.

Staffordshire
The coalfields of Staffordshire and Shropshire lie west, north-west and north of Birmingham; the intermittent industrial belt from the Black Country to the Potteries owes much to this fortunate proximity. But the mining districts, stretching from the area near the Wrekin to Mow Cop and the Pennine foothills, can provide contrasts in landscape as well as variety in coals. The Cannock pits cluster near the huge 16 square-mile lung of the Chase, half moor, half forest, with its deer and grouse. The approach to the six Potteries towns, which Arnold Bennett chose to make five, is by way of being some of the finest dairy farmland in the country; here where the stone wall country comes tumbling down, it is only a short journey from the deepest pit shafts in Britain to some of the highest peaks.

Geology
The North Staffordshire field, triangular and troughed like a saucer, is one of the richest and most compact in Europe for number and variety of seams. On average, there are more than 20 workable seams of carbonising and general coals, most of them in the Middle and Lower Coal Measures. Cannock Chase has the only deep mining left in the South Staffordshire coalfield, which is roughly elliptical and 24 miles from north to south and eight miles across near Wolverhampton. It has a horst formation — a combination of upstanding faults resulting in the Meses being lifted nearer the surface — but beyond the so-called boundary faults to the east and west the coal seams lie at depth below the younger Triassic rocks. Some of these reserves are being exploited by Lea Hall Colliery, one of the largest in Britain. Mining of the famous South Staffordshire Thick Coal, one of the keystones of the Industrial Revolution, ended in 1968.

In Shropshire, the Coalbrookdale field has far fewer workable seams than Staffordshire, and they lie in the Lower and Middle Coal Measures. The last deep mine in Shropshire, Granville, ceased production May 1979.
History
Mining in the seam outcrops of Staffordshire and Shropshire is recorded from the 13th century onwards and for a long time it served mainly local needs, although the Shropshire pits shipped coal down the Severn. The needs of the local iron industry became an important factor in expansion, particularly after coke made from local coal had been successfully used as a substitute for charcoal in the 18th century. The town of Ironbridge and Darby's iron bridge (1779, the first in the world) spanning the Severn Gorge are monuments to past industrial activity which receded but is now growing again around the new town of Telford. First canals and then the railways opened up an enormous market both for coal and manufactured goods; and in the 1850s, when the South Staffordshire mines began to decline, there was rapid expansion of deep mining farther north, in Cannock Chase, to maintain supplies.

With clays, coal and ironstone (often worked from the same pit) ready to hand, North Staffordshire's pottery and iron trades developed rapidly in the 18th century. The driving of the Harecastle canal tunnel by James Brindley in 1770 revealed for the first time the startling concentration of the area's mineral riches - tunnellers exposed six workable seams of ironstone and 26 of coal. From that point onwards the growth of the Potteries was assured.

Development
North Stafford and Cannock Chase developed as the main producers in the West Midlands. Since nationalisation in 1947 millions of pounds have been invested in the Staffordshire coalfields. Three of the North Staffordshire pits - Hem Heath, Florence and Wolstanton - have been rebuilt and others continue to be developed. A scheme to link Hem Heath and Florence to form a two million tonnes a year mine complex has been completed. There is a £50 million scheme at Silverdale Colliery to gain access to some 50 million tonnes of reserves. In Cannock Chase is Lea Hall Colliery, the first completely new mine in Britain to be built by the National Coal Board and the first to be planned with an adjacent power station. The other two Chase mines have been rebuilt.

Since 1980, North Staffordshire collieries have been supplying methane gas - extracted from the workings for safety reasons - at the rate of over 10 million therms a year to local industries involved in the manufacture of bricks and tyres.

Left: Pithead gear at Hem Heath Colliery, Stoke-on-Trent, which is now linked with nearby Florence Colliery.
Top: Winding towers at Parkside Colliery, Newton-le-Willows, Merseyside.
Right: Bringing coal to the surface up the new drift at Silverdale Colliery, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire.
Above: Drilling to prove further coal reserves in Staffordshire
Top: A reclaimed opencast coal site on the side of the M6 near Wigan.
Right: Pit and power station complex. Lea Hall Colliery's neighbours are two power stations.
Open cast
Surface mining in Great Britain is controlled by the NCB Open cast Executive. Open cast sites in Staffordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire are controlled by the Central (West) Region with headquarters at Ash Hall, Ash Bank, Stoke-on-Trent. The sites in the Lancashire, North Wales and Cumbria coalfields are controlled by the North West Region with headquarters at Anderton House, Lowton, Warrington.

A feature of open cast mining in Staffordshire is the erection of several coal preparation plants, of the most modern concept and design strategically situated close to the rich open cast reserves and linked to adjacent railway lines. This means that the coal can be transported to power stations by rail and minimum use is made of public roads.

In the Greater Manchester area - mainly round Wigan - the reintroduction of open cast mining following the increased need for coal is helping to reclaim land scarred by previous industrial activity. In Cumbria a large disposal point receives and grates coal from all the sites in the county.

Open cast mining was first introduced into Britain in 1942 and more than 400 million tonnes of coal have been won by this method over the last 40 years.

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The National Coal Board's 195 collieries are divided for control purposes among 12 Areas, of which the Western Area is one. These Areas are the vital management level between the Board and the pits and each is headed by a Director who is personally responsible to the National Board. These Areas are very large businesses, employing an average of 20,000 men and each Area is a bigger concern than many nationally-known firms.

Area Headquarters: Staffordshire House, Berry Hill Road, Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 2NH (Stoke-on-Trent 49201)
Area Director: J H Northard
Marketing Director: A Alderson
Area Public Relations Officer: S W Oliver
North West office: Anderton House, Lowton, Warrington, WA3 2AG. (Leigh 572404)

Opencast Executive (Central Region) Ash Hall, Ash Bank, Stoke-on-Trent, ST2 9PU.
(Ash Bank 3611)
Regional Director: D Davies
Opencast Executive (North West Region) Anderton House, Lowton. (Leigh 572404)
Regional Director: J Mck Guyan

Collieries
Output figures for the year 1981/82.

NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE
Florence, Longton: Three shafts sunk 1874/16, deepest now 828m; major reorganisation cost £7 million; two production levels, shallower for general purpose collieries, deepest for coking coals; 1,249 men produce one million tonnes from Rowhurst and Yard/Ragan seams.

Hem Heath, Trentham: Originated from outlying shaft sunk 1924/5, cuts adjacent Stafford Colliery; new coal-winding shaft 1,048m sunk, old shaft enlarged and deepened to form completely new £80 million colliery to exploit 254 megatons of reserves. General purpose and coking coals produced from two workings; 1,790 men produce 2,400,000 tonnes from Wingham, Rowhurst and Yard/Ragan seams. Now linked underground with Florence and new drift completed to form two million tonnes a year complex. Coal from the two mines brought to the surface at Hem Heath is treated in a new preparation plant.


Silverdale, Newcastle-under-Lyme: Four existing shafts, sunk over 100 years ago, survivors of many in vicinity; coal-winding shaft deepened to 611m after 1918. Iron ore also produced until 1922. First North Staffs. colliery to change over extensively to modern form of retreat mining; 870 men produce 422,000 tonnes from Rowhurst seam; new drift from north face completed 1976 and all coal is now brought up the new drift. £50 million development scheme for two further drifts announced May 1976. Due for completion 1984.

Victoria, Biddulph: Most northerly colliery in Staffordshire. Four shafts sunk 1850/60, 571 men produce 167,000 tonnes from Ten Feet seam. Pit closed production July 30, 1982, with miners transferring to other North Staffs. collieries.

Wolstanton, Newcastle-under-Lyme: Combined mine formed with Deep Pit and Sneyd by concentration on two deep shafts in Britain at Wolstanton; new coal-winding shaft 1,042m deep commissioned 1961; upcast shaft deepened to 1,047m and enlarged. Two original shafts sunk to 412m in 1918/20 to work ironstone seams. Reconstruction and modernisation cost £11 million; early 1968 decision to concentrate future production on deeplying carbonising seams and end mining of general purpose coals nearer surface; 1,219 men produce 450,000 tonnes from Crockhedge seam and Butter Cross, point of yearly (September) Horn Dance at Museum of Staffordshire Life, a new foundation, is at Shugborough Hall, Great Haywood, nr Stafford, home of Earls of Lichfield; Trentham Gardens on SW edge of Stoke-on-Trent, rose and Italian gardens in Chatterley Whitfield Mining Museum, Britain's first underground mining museum, opened in May 1978 on site of the former pit; Ironbridge Gorge Museum, nr Telford, a complex of museums depicting the story of the industrial revolution, with Coalbrookdale Iron Bridge, the first structure of its kind in the world and Britain's best known industrial monument.

LANCASTER
Agecroft, Pendlebury: New shaft (sunk 1958) on site of old pit (1888) is over 885m deep; 900 men produce 441,000 tonnes from the Trencherbone seam with output going to adjacent power station.

Bickleyshaw, Leigh: Sunk 1877/81, 713m deep; 883 men produce 905,000 tonnes from Cromboue, Trencherbens, Rams and Peacock seams. Reconstructed in 1960s and in 1957 all production and coal-winding concentrated in Nos. 1 and 4 shafts leaving Nos. 1 and 2 for ventilation. Now linked underground with nearby Parsonage and Golborne collieries so that output can be switched to coal mines.

Points of interest
Near or within easy reach of Staffordshire collieries: Coton Hall, near Highley, remodelled ancestral home of American Civil War Gen Robert E Lee; Bridgnorth, busy Low Town connected to High Town by funicular railway, streets of black and white houses, St. Mary Magdalene Church by Telford; A5 which also leads west to Wellington, Shrewsbury to Cannock, mining town on edge of 3000-acre Chase rising to 256m and prehistoric Castle Ring; Lichfield Cathedral City, birthplace with museum devoted to Dr Johnson; on from Rugeley (near Lea Hall Colliery) is Abbots Bromley, attractive old market town.

Parkside, Newton le Willows; Chatterley Whitfield, surface at Hem Heath is treated in a new preparation plant.

Cannock Chase
Lea Hall, Rugeley: First new mine to be planned and brought into production by the NCB to exploit virgin extension of the Cannock Chase field. Water-bearing ground had to be frozen 213m deep before sinking of new shafts to 398m began in 1954; production started 1963. Lea Hall reached peak output of 1 million tonnes 3 years after opening; in 1986 became the first British pit to reach yearly output of 1.5 million tonnes; £10 million scheme to exploit more reserves announced March 1977. Miners produced 1,816,404 tonnes in 1974/5, a record for a single British pit. Output 1,071,362 tonnes in 1981/82 with 2,283 men working Shallow and Deep seams.

Littleton, Cannock: Original sinking lost through flooding c. 1977; deepest present shaft 500m completed 1896/97; £7 million scheme now completed to link underground districts, and build new coal preparation plant and loading facilities; 940 men produce 855,000 tonnes from Beccles, Park and Eight Feet seams.

West Cannock No. 5
Hednesford: Sunk in 1914, shafts now 355m and 316m deep; £11 million reconstruction included merger with West Cannock No. 2 and Walsallbury and Valley collieries; 713 men produce 311,272 tonnes from Yard seam. World tunnelling record of 251.4m in five days set April 1981.

Blypton, St Helens: Sunk 1877, reconstructed completed 1958; 824m deep; 1,371 men produce 450,000 tonnes from Rushby Park and Trencherbens seams; linked with CEC power station. First pit with complete electronic installation to monitor and record underground operations from surface. £1 million scheme to improve coal winding facilities completed July 1977.

Cranton, Wiston: Sunk 1914/22, depth 486m; 535 men produce 236,612 tonnes by retreat method of mining from the London Deep seam.

Golborne near Warrington: Sunk 1882, depth 549m; 845 men produce 514,680 tonnes from Florida, Cromboue and Plokker seams; now linked underground with Bickershaw.
Colliery (in production in 1964) with access to large reserves; depth 810m; 1,712 men produce 853,824 tonnes from the Lower Florida, Ince Six Foot and Wigan Four Feet seams.

Parsonage, Leigh: Sunk 1920, depth 906m, 533 men produce 354,905 tonnes from Rams seam. Now linked underground with Bickershaw so that output can be wound and treated at Bickershaw.

Sutton Manor, St. Helens: Sunk 1908; reorganised 1952/7. No. 1 shaft deepened to 760m with 4km of new tunnels giving access to further reserves. Further concentration 1988. All output now wound up No. 2 shaft; 818 men produce 378,598 tonnes from Wigan Four Feet seam.

CUMBERIA
Haig, Whitehaven: Sunk 1914, 366m deep; 882 men produce 471,170 tonnes from under the sea in Bannock and Upper Metal Band seams. First retreat mined face began 1971. Surface now reconstructed including new coal preparation plant.

NORTH WALES
Bersham near Wrexham: Two shafts were sunk in 1868; coal wound from 584m. Mechanised in 1961, work started in 1963 on driving two dipping tunnels to tap additional reserves; 848 men produce 212,113 tonnes from Two Yard seam.

Point of Ayr, Ffynnongroes, Clwyd: Sunk 1873, 311m deep; 689 men produce 471,659 tonnes from Dunog and Stone Coal seams. Reconstruction completed 1957. Offshore exploration in 1978 proved existence of over 20 million tonnes of reserves in Dee Estuary. Named as site for two pilot oil-from-coal plants to be built at a cost of over £35 million in the 1980s.

Points of interest
Near or within easy reach of North West collieries:
Wrexham Parish Church (five-storey ornate tower); Gresford Church (peal of bells one of 'Seven Wonders of Wales'); St. Asaph (small city and one of smallest cathedrals); Holy Trinity, Warrington; Bolton's restored half-timber Hall '-th' Wood (and museum); Wigan museum with mining interests.