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Industrial  
Ownership and  
Relations at  
Prestongrange

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PRESTOUNGRANGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
<http://www.prestoungrange.org>



## FOREWORD

This series of books has been specifically developed to provide an authoritative briefing to all who seek to enjoy the Industrial Heritage Museum at the old Prestongrange Colliery site. They are complemented by learning guides for educational leaders. All are available on the Internet at <http://www.prestongrange.org> the Baron Court's website.

They have been sponsored by the Baron Court of Prestongrange which my family and I re-established when I was granted access to the feudal barony in 1998. But the credit for the scholarship involved and their timely appearance is entirely attributable to the skill with which Annette MacTavish and Jane Bonnar of the Industrial Heritage Museum service found the excellent authors involved and managed the series through from conception to benefit in use with educational groups.

The Baron Court is delighted to be able to work with the Industrial Heritage Museum in this way. We thank the authors one and all for a job well done. It is one more practical contribution to the Museum's role in helping its visitors to lead their lives today and tomorrow with a better understanding of the lives of those who went before us all. For better and for worse, we stand on their shoulders as we view and enjoy our lives today, and as we in turn craft the world of tomorrow for our children. As we are enabled through this series to learn about the first millennium of the barony of Prestongrange we can clearly see what sacrifices were made by those who worked, and how the fortunes of those who ruled rose and fell. Today's cast of characters may differ, and the specifics of working and ruling have surely changed, but the issues remain the same.

I mentioned above the benefit-in-use of this series. The Baron Court is adamant that it shall not be 'one more resource' that lies little used on the shelves. A comprehensive programme of onsite activities and feedback reports by users has been designed by Annette MacTavish and Jane Bonnar and is available at our website <http://www.prestongrange.org> – and be sure to note the archaic use of the 'u' in the baronial name.

But we do also confidently expect that this series will arouse the interest of many who are not directly involved in

educational or indeed museum services. Those who live locally and previously worked at Prestongrange, or had relatives and ancestors there (as I did in my maternal grandfather William Park who worked in the colliery), will surely find the information both fascinating and rewarding to read. It is very much for them also to benefit – and we hope they will.

Dr Gordon Prestoungrange  
*Baron of Prestoungrange*  
*July 1st 2000*

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*Management and Unions declaring Prestongrange as 'Managed by the NCB on behalf of the people' in 1947  
East Lothian Council, David Spence Collection*

## INTRODUCTION

PRESTONGRANGE colliery is situated near Prestonpans, on the edge of the old County of Haddingtonshire, in East Lothian. The 21st Century will witness it entering its 900th year as a known mining concern. Its story has been a long and dramatic one.

Known events begin with the monks of Newbattle Abbey, who were granted the right to excavate coal around the turn of the 13th Century. Thanks to the dearth of surviving material the earliest years of coal production at Prestongrange have an almost mythical quality. Colourful images of coal-fired boiling salt-pans tended by an army of eager monks taking a break from illuminating the scriptures are set against secular developments in landholding and social hierarchy.

In later years, serious issues come to the fore such as slavery, the dangers of working in the mines, and the role of coal in the gradual development of the Scottish economy. With the material extant from the 18th Century comes a greater appreciation of some of the personalities involved, even though these are exclusively those of the mine-owners rather than the colliers.

The history of the colliery at Prestongrange really comes alive, though, in the 19th Century. This, after all, was when coal became the keystone of the modern Industrial Revolution. Throughout this period there was a belief that there was money to be made in coal. The estate owners of the period, the Grant-Sutties, made it their business to ensure that the mine was constantly worked and developed.

The running of Prestongrange presented its managers with challenges that often proved difficult to overcome. Repeated market crises, lack of managerial skill, and the colliery's Achilles' Heel – flooding – constantly undermined efforts to make the mine a commercial success. This forced the abandonment of three successive commercial ventures in only twenty years during the last quarter of the Century.

The early decades of the 20th Century were the golden-years of the industry, and under the management of the Summerlee Company the colliery reached its peak. Throughout this period, however, the miners and their families

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never shared in the great financial rewards reaped by the coalowners, and this generated much resentment.

The 19th and 20th Centuries also saw the miners break the shackles of slavery and force an improvement in their circumstances. But it was a slow process. The social and economic advances of the age increased the expectations of greater rights and freedoms, and later better pay and working conditions, leading to a struggle between the miners and the Prestongrange lairds which was sometimes bitter and violent. The successful struggle of the colliers and salters to break the shackles of serfdom in the 1790s had later echoes in the industrial disputes of c.1870–c.1930, though the gains made by the miners in the latter period were far less in the context of the times.

The tide of progress expansion turned after the First World War. The collapse of the British economy in the 1920s and 30s was followed by coal losing its pre-eminence as an industrial resource and fuel. After WWII, the pace of decline at Prestongrange accelerated rapidly, despite the initial flicker of hope offered by the National Coal Board. With low morale among the workforce clearly in evidence in the early 1960s, the pit ceased working in 1962.

Since that time, Prestongrange has in some senses been reborn – as a visitor attraction. It is now a fine example of East Lothian's industrial heritage and is in the care of the Prestongrange Industrial Heritage Centre.



## PIONEERS AND SLAVES 1200–1811

THE FIRST known coal-owners of Prestongrange appeared well over 800 years ago in the form of cistercian monks from the abbeys of Holyrood and Newbattle. In 1184 they were granted the use of a healthy portion of the lands of Tranent by local magnate, Robert de Quincy. Around this time the monks made a settlement near the shore of the Firth of Forth which became known as Preston, meaning Priest's town. The name 'Prestongrange' refers to the farmhouse and granary, or 'grange', which the monks erected nearby. The monks were industrious herders of oxen and sheep, and they shepherded their livestock on the meadows near the grange, where they also conducted another activity, peat cutting. They cut their peats in a part of the meadows known as the Tranent peaterie, where there are numerous surface-deposits of coal, or 'heughs', which the monks began excavating at some point in their early history.

It's difficult to say with complete confidence how the monks first discovered coal at Prestongrange. A well known local antiquarian writing at the turn of the 20th Century gives two alternate accounts from local tradition of how the monks may have stumbled upon this hidden treasure. One is that the monks may have uncovered the coal cutting peat, while the other places the find in much more dramatic circumstances. As they watched their flocks in the meadows by night the monks kindled fires around them, possibly for warmth, more probably in order to hold at bay the wild animals that wandered the country in those days. One night, they inadvertantly lit a fire directly on top of a barely concealed coal outcrop, causing the ground to catch fire, and in this most spectacular fashion the coal was discovered. Whether or not either of these traditions is accurate, we know that by around 1210, a charter had been issued by Seyer de Quincy, a descendent of Roger, granting the monks the right to quarry coal.

It should be remembered that the dating of these early charters is not in itself a completely reliable indicator as to when the lands of Prestongrange were first used for coal extraction, or for other purposes. The wording of the charter of 1184, for instance, indicates that the monks had already been using the land for several decades. Similarly, the 1210

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charter does not preclude the possibility that they had been taking coal from the ground several years prior to that date (how else would the signatories of the charter have known that the coal was there in the first place?). What we can reliably assume is that it was decided some time around 1210 that the monks needed permission to cut coal, which is quite a different matter. If these charters in fact confirm what were already well established activities, it could be suggested that the abbeys had been cutting coal since the time of Newbattle's establishment in 1140, perhaps earlier.

Their use of coal demonstrates that apart from being centres of religion and learning in medieval Scotland, Newbattle and Holyrood were also early centres of industry. Coal burned more slowly than wood, and had a much greater heat output than peat, making it ideal for heating large buildings like castles and monasteries. It was also used to distil sea-water to make salt, a vital food preservative in the days before refrigeration. The monks set-up a manufactory in which huge open iron pans were filled with sea water and boiled until the water evaporated to leave salt crystals. The name Prestonpans or Salt-Preston evolved as the area became synonymous with the monks' activities there, and salt-panning was to continue at Prestonpans for hundreds of years. Other sites where this early activity took place can be identified by the suffix 'pans' to place-names such as Kennetpans and Grangepans. The coal excavated at Prestongrange was also used to some extent by blacksmiths instead of charcoal, and masons used it to burn limestone in the making of mortar for buildings.

To transport coal and salt, a road was constructed from Newbattle Abbey to Prestongrange some time during the 12th or 13th Centuries. It became known as the Salters road. Recent research suggests this example of a medieval road may be typical, contradicting the conventional wisdom that roads in this period were poor or non-existent. Part of the Salters road still exists today in places. Perhaps the most easily found is where it crosses the Maidens Bridge over the South Esk near Newbattle golf course. The Maidens Bridge may date from around 1165, underlining the probability that the cistercians were transporting coal by that date.

Although they made many advances, these early industrialists found that the Prestongrange coal contained flaws and impurities which undermined its usefulness. They quarried what was referred to in the Newbattle charter as both *carbonarium*, coal, and *carbones marinos fodiendi*, or

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‘stinking sea-coal’. The coal did indeed ‘stink’, and as a result was unpopular in two important respects. In an age before the introduction of the domestic fireplace and ‘lum’ or chimney, such an unpleasant substance could not be used to heat the ordinary home, or for such purposes as smoke-curing foodstuffs. As a result, the main fuels used by ordinary people continued to be charcoal, timber and peat. Meanwhile, the sulphur in the coal which caused the foul smell was an even more serious drawback. Sulphur and other impurities restricted the use of the coal in metal refining, preventing it from realising its full industrial potential.

As the monks expanded their operations in close proximity to the Forth, they would have also encountered a more serious problem. Flooding. The seam which they worked was the one which outcrops nearest the surface, known as the Great Seam. Initially flooding would not have posed a serious problem as, probably until at least the 14th Century, the monks’ excavations were of the most primitive type, being simple surface excavations. As time wore-on however, they began to tunnel for considerable distances into the coal crop. Burrowing through the Great Seam, they extended their tunnels beneath the Forth at a distance of 10 feet below sea level. Some of the old workings made by the monks are still in existence but the methods they used to prevent water pouring in remain a mystery. The answer may lie in the way the monks built their tunnels. They would leave the upper part of the coal unexcavated, instead fashioning it into the form of an archway, which may have had some bearing on the flow of water. Alternatively the monks probably had to make sporadic forays into the tunnels to excavate when they could, and then abandon them whenever flooding became a problem. They almost certainly relied on nothing but the grace of God to prevent the roof caving in. As later visitors have observed, some of the old workings are just like the vaults of a cathedral.

Despite such difficulties, Prestongrange seems to have prospered during the 15th Century. According to the accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, coal from the Prestongrange area helped fuel the fireplaces of the Royal Household of James III (1460–88). We don’t know precisely how much was used, only that it was ordered in “loads”. Uses to which coal was being put by this time continued to include the burning of lime in kilns, as well as boiling pitch for caulking ships, melting lead for windows and bullets and blacksmith’s work associated with making cannon.

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Although its expansion was mainly due to local factors, the success of the mining operation had a great deal to do with its exportation further afield. Evidence that coal was a widely sold commodity is found in government records from 1425, when the Scottish Parliament seems to have been sufficiently concerned about illicit trade costing the government money, it passed an Act requiring local authorities to appoint invigilators. Geographically, Prestongrange was well placed to participate in a wider marketplace. It and the other earliest known mines of importance in Scotland were all driven into the hillsides of the Lothians, south-east Fife and Clackmannan – all on the edge of the Forth estuary. Before the arrival of canals, turnpike roads and waggonways, coal seams which outcropped near tidal waters were the only ones from which coal could be easily transported over great distances, by ship. The beauty of having such an operation located on the east coast in particular was that Prestongrange managers could export their coal not only to other parts of Scotland, but even further afield, to mainland Europe.

The export trade seems to have been small but regular. Andrew Halyburton, an early Scottish Ambassador in the Netherlands, records a number of coal shipments in his ledger between 1492 and 1503. The Newbattle inmates used pack-horses and carts to transport coal and wood down the Salters Road in some quantity. These commodities were then exported along with salt to Scandinavia and the Netherlands. In return came luxury goods such as oysters and French claret.

By the 1520s, the import and export of goods through the area was so extensive that a new harbour was built nearby to facilitate trade. The natural sea haven in which the harbour was built seems to have already been a longtime place of shelter for seafarers, and a busy east-coast port. Permission to build a harbour on the lands of Prestongrange was granted at Newbattle on 22 April 1526 by Royal Charter. It seems that the grant was made not to the Abbot of Newbattle, but for an enterprising local magnate called Alexander Acheson, who renamed the port Acheson's Haven. For over a hundred years the Achesons were highly successful traders through the port and it rivalled Leith in its importance for a time with the erection of a custom-house whose jurisdiction covered an area stretching from Portobello to the mouth of the Tyne. The haven, which later became known as Morisons Haven, can still be found on the map, but is now landlocked.

The coming of the Achesons represented wider national

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changes which were afoot as the position of the old religious houses was weakened towards the mid-16th Century. Nevertheless, it seems the monastic industrialists still wielded control of coal production in 1548. The monks of Newbattle were among those called on to provide extra coal for an army of between six and eight thousand men as they battled to eject an English occupying force in nearby Haddington. During the previous year the Scots were defeated at the Battle of Pinkie, at Haddington, and local inhabitants were forced to hide underground in the mines to escape the invading English army.

In the 1550s, with the onset of the Reformation in Scotland, four centuries of development ended in catastrophe for the monks at Prestongrange. It might be added glibly that this was the least of their worries as their monasteries and property were destroyed. While the Reformation didn't penetrate the whole of Scotland for at least another hundred years, in the area in and around Edinburgh the Reformers quickly took-over the old political, social and industrial hierarchies, and monastic orders like Holyrood and Newbattle were put to flight.

There is a well known saying respecting the Reformation, however, which is that many religious and secular officials "didn't lose their jobs" as a result. In the case of Newbattle, although the monastery was smashed, the Abbot himself was brought under the influence of the Reformed Church. Coal operations did suffer during this period, however, as in 1563, the export of coal was banned for a time. The process of restructuring at Newbattle was complete when the son of the last Abbot, Mark Ker, was made a loyal follower of the new hierarchy and created Baron of Newbattle in 1592 – a title which included the lands of Prestongrange.

Also in 1592 an Act was passed which exempted miners from taxes, charges and proclamations, whether in time of peace or war, and all their "families, guids, and gear," taken under regal protection. Further, it was declared that "any wrong or oppression done to them directly or indirectly would be severely punished, as done contrary to his majesty's special safeguard."

That same year another Act of Parliament declared "That for the better punishment of the wicked crime of wilfully setting fire to coal heuchs by ungodly persons, from motives of private revenge and spite, this crime should for the future be treason, and that whoever was found guilty of the same should suffer the punishment of treason in their bodies, lands and goods." A known case arising from this Act was that of a

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Lothian coalminer who had set fire to a coal-heuch. He was hanged at the Mercat Cross of Edinburgh and beheaded. His head was then sent out to the mine where he had worked and impaled on a pole by the pit head as a warning to others.

The next Act of Parliament connected with mining has rightly been described by a historian of the parish as “a horrible one”. This was the infamous act of 1606 which recinded all former acts and reduced colliers and salters to a social status which was little short of common slavery. By this Act their service was to be perpetual. In other words, if the owner sold the work the labourer had no option but to go with it. Karl Marx traced the origins of the 19th (and 20th) Century class-conflict between workers and industrialists to the effects of this Act, which created the slavery of ‘serfdom’.

Centuries before this, the monks of Newbattle had used slave labour in the mines, but that regime had long since been done away with. In those days, in order to provide labour for their mining and salt-panning works, the monks utilised a regime of slave owning known as neyfship. We know that under that system colliers were ‘owned’ by their masters, but little detail has survived as to the character of that relationship. The last successful claim for ownership of a collier through neyfship was in 1364.

The 1606 Act was motivated by simple economic imperatives. As mining operations progressed, the landowners needed larger amounts of labour to work the coal faces. By 1620, a Forth-valley landowner, Sir George Bruce, was said to have a pit shaft on his lands at Culross which extended for a mile underground, and this would have required extensive human resources. But mining remained desperately difficult and dangerous work in those days, and as a result was an extremely unpopular occupation. The only assured way of establishing a secure labour force, therefore, was to place people in bondage.

Women and children suffered terribly as they too were driven down into the mines to undertake some of the most arduous tasks. Because of their small size, boys were made to cut coal in tight, confined spaces, whilst women and girls were mostly given the task of bearing coal up to the surface. This was a terribly arduous task, known as ‘hewing’, which required large baskets full of coal to be hauled up steep wooden ladders and treacherous gangways. This situation only began to be relieved latterly, when the mechanised system of the “gin” was introduced. This device, which comprised a



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bucket on the end of a large pulley wheel driven round by a horse was cumbersome and slow, but it relieved the toil of the hewers to some extent and remained in operation well into the 19th Century.

One of the chief culprits responsible for the 1606 Act was the Earl of Winton, whose reason given to explain its introduction was one which ironically hinted at the future, when miners would one day fight back: "...it was feared that in the course of time people would not be found willing to engage in such arduous and unenumerative labour".

Around the same time an extensive programme of restructuring of landholding was being undertaken by the crown. This process resulted in the creation of the Barony of Prestongrange in 1609 which seems to have been accomplished by severing the lands of Preston from its ancient bond to Tranent, and then dividing it in two. The new lands may have initially been named East and West Preston, but became known as Preston and Prestongrange respectively. In 1617, the barony of Preston was granted by charter to Sir John Hamilton, and it included the village of Preston and town of Prestonpans, while the new baronetcy of Prestongrange had already been acquired by one Sir George Morison.

This first Baron of Prestongrange came from the north-eastern corner of Scotland. His father held the lands of Troup in Banffshire and Pitfour in Aberdeenshire. Comparatively little is known about George Morison himself, as indeed is the case with the subsequent Morisons of Prestongrange. It seems that they continued, however sporadically, to work the coal at Prestongrange. They also took over Achesons Haven, renaming it Morisons Haven, and continued trading through that port.

George Morison was succeeded by his son, Alexander. The Prestongrange lairds were the patrons of the parish of Prestonpans and records show ministers being presented with office by Sir Alexander in 1638 and 1647. In 1682 the next Sir Alexander Morison of Prestongrange was fined 900 merks for failing to prevent a riot from occurring when the local schoolmaster took the pulpit under the direction of the diocesan Bishop. The minister, James Buchan, had been deprived of his office for his involvement in the religious controversies of the time. Alexander could count himself lucky – his neighbour Sir William Hamilton of Preston had been fined 1800 merks "for looking on and laughing".

Around 1710 the parish minister, the Rev. Robert Horsburgh, complained that his church was unsafe because of

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the extent of the coal “wastes” beneath. For some months his congregation was obliged to meet in a barn at Preston. Repairs were eventually executed after long litigation. Meanwhile, in 1711, Sir James Morison of Prestongrange, who had recently been involved in a dispute over the rights to the Prestongrange Coal Road access, married his daughter to John 5th Viscount Arbuthnott, later a Jacobite who supported Prince Charles in the '45 Rising.

The estate passed out of the hands of the Morison dynasty and, in 1746, was purchased by William Grant, the Lord Advocate of Scotland, at a judicial sale. William was one of three sons and five daughters of Sir Francis Grant of Cullen, a judge and political writer. Francis Grant was a remarkable character. At the Convention of Estates of 1689, whilst only 28 years old, he had given a famous speech supporting William of Orange in which he argued that King James VII had “forfeited” his right to the throne. Although a committed supporter of the Union of 1707, Grant nevertheless defended the right of the Church of Scotland to maintain its independence, and the right of Scots to choose their own monarch.

William’s career was equally distinguished. He followed his father into the legal profession and quickly became a high-flyer at the Scottish bar. He also attained a senior role in the Church of Scotland. In 1737 he was appointed Solicitor General and rose to become Lord Advocate in 1738. William also inherited much of his father’s politics, and was instrumental in defending the government from the Jacobite Rising of 1745–6. After the Rising was defeated he advocated leniency in the subsequent prosecutions of the Jacobites, arguing that severity would only serve to undermine efforts to encourage Scots to accept the Union with England. Despite being largely ignored in this, he was left the credit of having performed his duties “regulated by a principle of equity, tempering the strictness of the law.” William took a seat on the bench of the House of Lords in 1754 as Lord Prestongrange, later becoming Lord Justice Clerk. He was one of the Commissioners for improving the fisheries and manufactures of Scotland, and afterwards one of the Commissioners for the Annexed Estates which dealt with lands confiscated from the Jacobites. He died at Bath in 1764.

The spectacular career of William Grant contrasts with the period of relative inactivity which seems to have set in at Prestongrange under the Grant succession. Most of the second half of the 18th Century witnessed the colliery being left in a



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state of disuse. According to the Rev. John Trotter, a Prestonparish minister writing in 1791, it had not been worked since at least 1760. This is backed up in evidence taken by a Royal Commission of 1841–2. The evidence also tells us about the conditions endured by the collier-serfs of Prestongrange during the 18th Century.

The 1842 Commission reveals that collier-serfs experienced breathtaking cruelty at the hands of the Lords of Prestongrange. If they wanted to work the colliers often had to seek coal-hewing employment at other nearby collieries. However, their bondage to the Barons of Prestongrange prevented them from attempting to find work elsewhere without permission which rarely, if ever, seems to have been given. The Commission itself was set up to head-off a wave of public sympathy which had built up as a result of a growing middle-class awareness of the awful conditions perpetuating in the mines. It is a valuable document in the history of 19th Century social reform.

The grim treatment of colliers by the Lairds of Prestongrange is attested to by the evidence of two independent witnesses. The examples of treatment of colliers which they refer to seem to relate primarily to what they witnessed in their own lifetimes, although there is little doubt that this was a continuation of an established pattern. The laird being principally referred to, therefore, would be William Grant's heir, John Carmichael of Castlecraig and 4th Earl Hyndford. John succeeded to the baronetcy of Grant of Prestongrange in 1764 as a result of his earlier marriage to William's eldest daughter Janet in 1749. The Grants' attitude towards their colliers was harsh even by the standards of the day, as is revealed by the eloquent testimony of those who had suffered under them.

Interviewed by the commissioners in 1841, the 81-year-old Walter Pryde recounted how he was first yoked to the coal work at Prestongrange when he was nine years old. At that time he and his family were all "slaves to the Prestongrange Laird". Walter remembered that even if they had no work at the colliery he and his family couldn't look for employment elsewhere without a written license and agreement to return, and even then the laird or the tacksman selected their place of work. If they did not do as they were commanded, they were placed by the necks in collars known as 'juggs' and fastened to the wall. An even more brutal punishment was being "made to go the rown", in which the victim was tied facing the horse at the gin, and was then made to run round backwards all day.

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At this time the Prestongrange hewers were paid four pence for a tub weighing four cwt., and could send up to six to eight tubs, but had to pay their own bearers out of the money, so that they never took more than 8s to 10s a week. Walter added that the money “went much further than double would now”, suggesting that in respect of pay at least, things were not much better in 1841 than they had been in the days of serfdom.

An insight into the terrible living conditions colliers’ families had to endure is given when Walter stated grimly that of their 11 children, five were still alive. He continued by remarking that there were few men who lived to his age who had worked in the pits. He added that his wife was 82, and incredibly she had worked at coal bearing until she was 66 years of age. Walter said that he and his wife were very poor and would die were it not for their neighbours and son, “who has a large family and can ill afford to give”.

Another ex-colyer at Prestongrange, Robert Inglis, aged 82, recollected that his Father and Grandfather had been “slaves to the laird of Preston Grange”. After the works had stopped, presumably some time in the 1760s, he and his family received license from the then tacksman, Mr Peter Hunter, to work a nearby colliery. But, Robert added, “we could not get work, as the neighbours kenned that the Laird of Prestongrange would send the sheriff after us and bring us back”.

The totality of the bondage was so great that the lairds had the power of taking colliers who had left to join the Royal Navy, or to bring back any who had enlisted in the army. Robert’s evidence highlighted the “ill feelings [which] existed towards colliers and salters years past”, when he testified that they were commonly buried in unconsecrated ground. His evidence ends with the statement, “If colliers had been better treated they would have been better men”. Such simple logic strikes at the heart of the issue of social reform, and why it was so necessary.

The lifetimes of Walter Pryde and Robert Inglis were turbulent years in the history of Scotland as ordinary people across the country expressed great dissatisfaction with those who owned the nation’s wealth and power. In 1797, people from the Parish of Prestonpans, which included Prestongrange, were involved in protests which culminated on the 29th of August in an event known as the ‘Tranent militia riot’. This led to the subsequent massacre by government forces of a dozen people, and injury to twenty others. Most of the protestors were colliers.

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While Prestongrange's neighbour, the Laird of Preston, led local civil forces against the protestors, the wanton brutality shown by British soldiers demonstrates the unbridled hatred of collier-serfs that existed within their ranks. One soldier mocked a wounded man by pretending to shoot him in the head, while another shot a woman in the face at close range, firing the bullet in front of her so that the gunpowder burned her features.

The Scottish civil authorities turned a blind eye to the atrocities in Tranent, but by this time the state and the coalowners were being forced to react to a workforce which was increasingly unprepared to enter into work in mines under such conditions. The astute political partnership of Prime Minister William Pitt and his Scottish Home Secretary Henry Dundas brought the complete abolition of serfdom in 1799. But this seemingly great act of statesmanship was not borne out of concern for those in bondage – quite the opposite, in fact. It was considered on one hand to be a necessary evil if they were to curb the peoples' desire for more radical reform, and on the other it was a response to the economic realities of the day. The demand for coal was increasing and the industry needed labour. The politicians hoped that giving colliers freedom would both satisfy the needs of the coalowners and at the same time foster loyalty and obedience among the people to the existing hierarchy.

John Carmichael Grant of Prestongrange did not live to see the abolition of serfdom. He was survived by Janet, until she too passed away in 1818. The baronetcy of Grant of Prestongrange was then succeeded by her nephew, Sir James Suttie of Balgone, whose accession marks the beginning of the modern industrial age at Prestongrange.

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### INTO THE INDUSTRIAL AGE 1818–1894

DURING THE tenure of the Grant-Sutties, industrial coal production at Prestongrange began in earnest. The connection between the houses of Grant of Prestongrange and Suttie of Balgone from which Sir James Grant-Suttie traced his inheritance had been established in 1757 with the marriage of Janet's younger sister Agnes to James' father, Sir George Suttie of Balgone. Sir George had been a keen advocate of 'Improvement', an ideology focused particularly on the development of commercial agriculture, and a forerunner of 19th Century industrialism. He would no doubt have been impressed by the Century-long advance of the Industrial Revolution and its enormous impact on coal mining operations at Prestongrange. A symbol of the dawn of this new era, and a major local factor behind the development of Prestongrange during this period, was the extraordinary transformation of the city of Edinburgh.

In just a few decades, Scotland's capital overturned its noxious image as 'Auld Reekie' to reveal the gleaming 'Athens of the North'. Spurred-on by the wealth flowing from Britain's colonial trade, many of Edinburgh's elite gentry, bankers, merchants and lawyers simply abandoned their dwellings around the impoverished 'Auld Toun', migrated across the Nor Loch, and took up residence in the gleaming neo-classical New Town. Although the vast bulk of Edinburgh society continued to dwell in somewhat less utopian circumstances, the whole city nonetheless witnessed a profound change. As the 19th Century rolled on, industrial advance caused a further heightening of commerce, wealth and social expectations. The changes which took place in Edinburgh during this time were to have a direct impact on the coal fields in the Lothians as the achievements of the city, as well as burgeoning industrial enterprises around and about it, were matched by a growing demand for fuel. By 1825, only 60 years after the first plans for the New Town had been drawn-up, Edinburgh's transformation was virtually complete.

The year 1825 also heralded great changes at Prestongrange. On one hand it saw the demise of the mine's oldest customer, Prestonpans, as a result of the removal of duty on cheaper salt from overseas, while on the other it witnessed the colliery's

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own development as a serious mining concern. A Newcastle mining engineer, Matthias Dunn, took out a lease at Prestongrange from Sir James to mine coal on a much larger scale than anything which had gone before.

Another sign of industrial ‘take-off’ occurred in June when a second mining agreement was made, this time with a Portobello developer named William Lindsay. The agreement allowed Lindsay to quarry stones at the Land Eye quarry at Prestongrange for one year. Lindsay was to pay £25 rent and an eighth of all sales above £150. Meanwhile, a great deal of fencing, draining and enclosing was going on on the estate, and threshing machines were now being used in the fields.

Matthias Dunn, meanwhile, continued his operation for thirteen years. In 1829 he sunk two shafts, 28 yards apart, to work deeper coals. One 10 foot square shaft was for winding and the other, 10 feet by five, was used for pumping. He would soon introduce a revolutionary new development which markedly improved water management within the mine, and would later be adopted elsewhere. Twenty-three fathoms of cast iron rings known as ‘tubbing’ were placed in the shaft. It was estimated that this prevented feeders of water equal to 1150 gallons per minute from flooding the pits.

But Dunn’s operation also experienced great difficulties which eventually combined to force him to quit. His capacity to trade outwith the Lothian area was limited as he and his contemporaries faced stiff competition from south of the border. During this period much of the coal sold beyond the Tay was English. The coal fields of the Forth valley were high-cost producers and, it seems, were unable to compete extensively with the well-organised mines and coal shipping of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Meanwhile, despite his technical advances, Dunn found that flooding continued to be a major problem at Prestongrange. In unfavourable circumstances, he gave-up the running of the colliery around 1838. His lasting achievement was to provide a good platform for further exploitation of the Prestongrange coals as and when the market made it viable. This next occurred during the tenure of the second Grant-Suttie of Prestongrange, Sir George, who succeeded his father in 1836.

Sir George Grant-Suttie (1797–1878), an officer of the Scots Fusileer Guards from 1817–18, had the colliery up and running again by 1848. He seems to have made some good returns, such as in 1855 when he sold almost £2000 worth of coal. But Sir George found, as Dunn had before him, that

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flooding continued to be a major problem. His neighbours, too, experienced similar difficulties. In January 1860 Sir George received a letter from C & A Christie, owners of nearby Walliford colliery, requesting permission to dig a ditch to drain water out of their coal workings and onto his lands at Walliford.

By this time, the employment-structure was significantly altered as a result of the increased emancipation and improved lot of working people. In 1843, the Mines Act had prohibited the employment of women underground and boys under the age of ten. This was a move supported by Sir George (although he had not yet had experience of running the mine at Prestongrange). To the Royal Commission of 1841–2 he remarked, “...I beg leave to state to you my conviction, that the employment of women in the mines of Scotland is one of the reasons which tends to depreciate the character and habits of the collier population; and that to remedy this evil a legislative enactment is required...” But he also added that government should act to keep miners wages low as they were “already too high”.

Sir George’s true position on labour relations, a deeply conservative one which was hinted at in 1841–2, was revealed when he began running the mine at Prestongrange. His 1848 Notice of Contract between himself and the miners and other colliery workers which was more strict than many for the period, and although it did have some clauses which entertained philanthropic gestures, the tone was generally oppressive and seems to betray a yearning for the days when mine-owners could treat their colliers as they pleased. Sir George was not alone in his attitude to his workforce. His neighbour, Lord Lothian, was also noted for his hard-line stance on working conditions.

In an amusing aside, Sir George’s sometimes reactionary and conservative approach to life in the changing world of the mid-19th Century is highlighted in a letter of his from 13 March 1850. He describes being thwarted in an attempt to meet his neighbour, Lord Aberdour to discuss the boundary between their two estates, by that most vexing by-product of the modern age – the railway timetable: “Ma[de] an attempt to meet you at Dalmahoy to-day, which failed from my having got out at Gogar in place of Ratho, and after walking to within sight of your gate finding that I had not more than time to get back for the quarter to four train. – So much for the *Railways*.”



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It is questionable whether Sir George would have had the capacity to engage successfully with the advancing modern world without the efforts of his ‘right-hand’, a man named Edward Yule. Yule performed the roles of estate factor, colliery manager and agent and while he seems to have been competent at certain of his duties, the running of the coal mine presented him with a tough challenge with which he didn’t have a great deal of success. Several of the colliery’s business relationships on record from Yule’s time in charge ended in disaster. In fairness, the mid-19th Century was an evolutionary period full of uncertainty and unprecedented challenges, and between them, Sir George and Edward Yule were able to keep Prestongrange colliery a going concern for nearly a quarter of a Century.

The evidence surviving from the 1860s portrays Prestongrange as lurching, rather than striding, through the industrial age. In April 1865 Prestongrange began trading with a coal agent in Edinburgh by the name of James Orr. Orr’s premises in Edinburgh was in Mary Kings Close, an old hidden street under the Royal Exchange, infamous for having witnessed terrible scenes of plague, persecution and fire in the 17th Century and now widely believed to be haunted. Officially the company’s address was 14 Royal Exchange, but it was an unpropitious location nonetheless.

Orr was paid a commission of seven and a half per cent on the value of the coal he sold. His agreement included taking responsibility for all bad debts and paying for his coal monthly at a price proportional to its value on the Edinburgh market. He was also allowed a temporary arrangement to help him get started of 16 shillings per week to assist in paying the wages of the men employed in his depot. Some time in 1867, however, Orr became seriously ill and for many months was unable to attend to business. As his condition worsened, his wife’s brother Gilbert P Simpson was brought in to manage the business. James Orr died around the beginning of August 1868.

After Orr’s death, Yule seems to have rather mismanaged affairs by allowing things to amble along on a string of verbal agreements and assumptions. A verbal agreement was made that Simpson should carry on the agency on his own account, and enter the company in the Colliery Ledger in the name of G P Simpson. After that date the coals were also invoiced in Simpson’s name. In October 1868, Simpson brought down his younger brother, John, from England to join him in the

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business and it was then carried on in the name of G P Simpson and Co. Yule drew out a memorandum of agreement as to the agency which he left with the Simpsons for signature but it was never returned to him.

Despite this, Yule continued to act on good faith. Simpson arranged with Mrs Orr that he would carry on at the Prestongrange Agency for her benefit till the end of December 1868. Yule later stated that he believed that this was probably why the agreement had not been signed and returned by the Simpsons, as in effect the company was still legally in the possession of James Orr's widow. At the same time, several of the monthly accounts between August & December 1868 were paid by Mrs Orr's cheques and Yule later said that he believed they must all have been paid in this way.

Things became increasingly messy in the new year. In January 1869 Gilbert Simpson backed out of the Agency and became manager of Dykehead Colliery near Motherwell, leaving his brother John to carry on the business. Around that time Simpson agreed with Mrs Orr that she should take care of the agency's outstanding business for the months of October 1868 to January 1869 and that she would send Yule a cheque for January's sales when they became due. Yule seems to have been apprehensive at this point that he didn't have the opportunity of seeing Mrs Orr personally and that his applications for payment of the January sales had to be made through her two brothers.

The payment for January's sales was not received, and it was so often deferred that Yule later claimed that he then began to doubt whether Mrs Orr had made *any* arrangement with her brother that she would pay for the January sales. Yule seems to have written a stern letter to her on the subject on 7 July. She then acknowledged her liability and handed over £20. Mrs Orr then refused to accept any further responsibility for the debt and Yule seems to have been left with at least £40 unrecovered. This relatively minor affair was a harbinger of worse to come, however.

In June 1871 the colliery ran into trouble with a coal merchant in Leith, James Dykes (later Dykes and Hawks). Throughout the course of the year, Yule was consistently unable to keep-up the agreed level of coal supply. He cited in his defence mining difficulties, but Dykes seems to have gained the impression as time went on that he was being treated like a mug. He observed that on several occasions when others were receiving wagons from Prestongrange, he was also due yet



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received none. At almost every turn he had to write to Yule asking where his next payload of coal was. After a time, as Yule continued to claim mining difficulties were the source of the problem, he suggested that if he could supply Dykes with dross, then the demands of the contract would be met. Dykes accepted, but remarked acidly; “It is a strange thing that you can send the dross and not the coal. Do try and treat me a little more in accordance with our contract and avoid this extra expense...” He later added that “of course you are aware at what fearful loss other collieries have carried out their contracts ... this would be but a “flea-bite” [to Sir George] in comparison to them”. The affair further degenerated, as the colliery continued to fail to supply the requisite amounts of coal on time, and ended in litigation in September 1872.

That same year, views were exchanged in respect of a proposed Mine-owners Association showed that Sir George had a draconian attitude towards his workforce, reminiscent of the days of bondage, that was out-of-step with the prevailing mood of other coalowners. He wrote from his holiday villa on the French south-coast that he wanted a confederacy of mine owners which stipulated that men could not be employed unless they presented a certificate from their former employers. The proponents of the Association remarked that such a condition was “of doubtful legality”. Further, the Association was to lay down rules for the regulation of miners’ wages, which Sir George also opposed. Sir George’s individual obstinacy reflected the mindset of many of the landowner-industrialists of the day – they were just not used to the concept of modern regulatory bodies and associations. The Lothian mine owners tried several times without success to organise themselves into a long-term federation to protect their interests from the increasing threat posed by organised labour, but until 1907 they were usually only able to convene at moments of crisis. That year, however, they formed a long-standing Association which would also liaise with a body ostensibly designed to ease tension in the industry, created in 1899, the Scottish Coal Conciliation Board. But such developments were part of a later era of modern industrial relations which was only beginning to emerge during Sir George’s tenure.

In May 1872 Sir George entered into a one-year contract to supply the Edinburgh Gas Light Company with 3,000 tons of Parrot Coal, even though the colliery was still failing to meet his obligations to Dykes and Co. in Leith. This new contract

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again proved disastrous for both parties, and also ended in litigation in November of that year. Severe flooding of the seams meant that Prestongrange had been unable to supply Edinburgh Gas Light with anything like what had been agreed. The Edinburgh Company doubted whether this had been the real reason behind the poor supply, and the colliery was forced to procure an independent report on the state of the Parrot Coal seam. Sir George was vindicated by the report's findings in 1873, which mentioned that the mine was so badly flooded the engineer was unable even to get near the Parrot Coal seams.

As early as the winter of 1871–2 Sir George decided that he had had enough of trying to run the colliery and was exploring how he would permit an independent party to set-up a company to work there. The fatigue Sir George felt at this time seems to be attested to later by his refusal to become a director of the new company despite repeated pleas that his experience would be of great benefit. He stated that; “I must decline to becoming company director... as I reside so short a period of the year in Scotland.” This is unlikely to have been the main reason, as he had already happily run the colliery himself for many years as a mostly absentee landlord. He was now, though, in his mid-seventies. A combination of old age and weariness at having struggled for so long to successfully work the mine seem to have contributed to his decision to relinquish the running of the operation.

On 25 September 1873 a 99-year lease was entered into between Sir George and the three partners of a new company, Englishman R L M Kitto, Mathew Loam from Liskeard, and Thomas Brental, also an Englishman, from Middlesbrough. The company was to be called the Prestongrange Coal and Iron Co.

It was agreed that the sale would encompass all property connected with the running of the mine. Legally, there were two basic types of property, ‘moveable’ and ‘immoveable’. The ‘moveable’ property, which alone was valued at £18,000, was basically anything which was used by the mine but was not physically ‘nailed to the ground’ in some way. This vast array of items included wagons, buckets, blasting tools, fire lamps, pithead cages, the sawmill with its four saws, and the horses with their carts and harnesses (except for one pony which Sir George wanted to keep). ‘Immoveable’ items were things which were stuck to the ground, like winding apparatus, rails, certain ropes and rods, and the pit engines and their engine-

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houses. The distinction between the two types of property was important, as ‘immoveable’ property was also heritable, and therefore automatically became the property of Sir George’s heir when he died. The engine at No.1 pit was described as “One Beam Engine 60” Cylinder with walking beam and balance beam complete”. The engine at No.2 was recorded as being “One Horizontal Engine 12” Cylinder 4 flat-stroke in good working order”. The process of defining what property was ‘moveable’ as opposed to ‘immoveable’ was a complex one which seems to have taken up much of Sir George’s time as he prepared the colliery for sale. It is an interesting example of changes to landed estates wrought by the Industrial Revolution, demonstrating that new ways of thinking were required to make sure that pieces of mechanical property especially were given appropriate legal definitions.

In 1874, Prestongrange Coal and Iron began trading as a limited company. It used two shafts in its operations, one at Morrisons Haven and the other at Birslie. The No. 2 shaft was redeveloped to work the Jewel Seam and No. 1 shaft used to pump the massive amounts of water from the mine. A beam pumping-engine made by Harvey and Company of Hayle in Cornwall was installed. It was shipped to Morrisons Haven and erected in a massive stone pump-house at the head of No. 1 shaft. The front wall of the house was six feet thick to support the weight and motion of the thirty-three foot cast iron beam. The machine was so vast that the pump rod alone weighed 100 tons. This huge engine would remain a Prestongrange stalwart until its final decommissioning in 1954.

It’s not clear whether the decision to purchase this engine was inspired by Sir George, but he certainly seems to have been a fan of Cornish engineering. In 1860 Sir George got himself into trouble for appearing to slander a Scottish engine maker, James Landale. Landale threatened legal action after Sir George remarked that Cornish-made pumping engines were superior to those manufactured in Scotland.

If the Grant-Suttie management team was fairly lacklustre in terms of its business skill, the new partnership was a seriously weak regime – though it did face a serious and unexpected downturn in the coal market which hit just as it was trying to establish itself.

Just as Prestongrange Coal and Iron was making a massive outlay on equipment and machinery, it found itself faced with a serious economic crisis. When the directors entered into dialogue with Sir George in 1872 the value of coal was as high

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as it had ever been, but by the time the company started trading in 1874 the markets had slumped. The company tried to offset its financial problems by cutting miners' wages to one shilling per day and extending working hours. This was in contravention of the 8-hour day maximum which the government had introduced in 1873.

The miners responded to these measures by going on strike. The *Scotsman* newspaper reported that out of 2,000 men on strike in the Lothian area, 800 were from East Lothian, 140 of whom were from Prestongrange. With the direction and financial support provided by the fledgling Mid and East Lothian Miners' Association, the miners held out for seven weeks. On 20 May 1874, Mathew Loam wrote to Sir George stating; "I am now returned from Preston where we have had a meeting to make our financial arrangements for the current year. As these will involve many heavy payments for the new machinery etc, and we are deprived – through strikes and other circumstances – of a large portion of our returns, upon which we had relied, I write for myself and co-lessees to ask if you will kindly defer the payment of the last instalment of your purchase money and commute it into a permanent loan, when due in September next, at interest from that date".

Suttie gave his consent to the debt being turned into a loan, but both he and Yule seem to have been unhappy that the company had run into such severe difficulty so early on. When the company wrote to Sir George on 4 September requesting that Suttie's lawyers prepare the necessary documents for the agreed loan, they did their best to make encouraging noises about the company's progress with its development of the site; "You will be glad to learn that in a few days, extra exertions will be made to complete the new works."

Despite advances procured from the general growth of the coal industry, poor management and flooding in the pits seem to have formed a plague which refused to leave the colliery. While there is little surviving detail of the years 1875–6, it seems that it had sufficient trade to keep its head above water, but little else. The lack of managerial foresight is highlighted by the fact that the directors didn't get the accounts audited until 1877 – over three years after they began trading as a limited company.

That same year, operations at the Birslic pit had to be suspended for several months due to a rash of water flooding into the workings. Because much of the water drained into other areas, the company were unable to extend new excavations as

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planned. They wrote to Yule requesting that he make arrangements “for the carrying of this water, and cutting [of] any connections [from the new areas] which lead into old workings”.

In January 1878, the future was looking very doubtful for the company. Its Annual Report to its shareholders made clear that the output from the new Morrisons Haven pit in particular had not lived-up to expectations: “although steady progress has been made during the past year, it has not been so rapid as your directors could wish, or were led to expect at the end of the previous year. Twelve months ago our Mining Engineer was most sanguine that our Morrisonshaven pit would now be giving us 500 tons of coals per day. As a fact, however, only during the past few months has a maximum of 400 tons a day been reached from the whole of the pits [with] Morrisons-haven seldom exceeding 250 tons, or just half of what we had hoped to get by this time.”

While 1878 was a very sad year personally for the Grant-Suttie family, the financial condition of the colliery company, too, was deeply depressing. Sir George died in August 1878 at Grantham House, Putney Heath, Surrey, aged 80. He was succeeded in 1878 by a third generation Sir James (1830–78) whose tenure would be sadly brief, lasting for only four months. Meanwhile, the Company blamed its worsening financial state on the continuing depression in the coal trade and the “unavoidable” delay in the development of its property. On the face of it, these claims seemed to hold water. However, Sir George and his agents seem to have become suspicious that the company’s directors were not in such a dire financial state of affairs as they claimed.

In its anxiety for the future of the operation, the estate seems to have engaged in some ‘snooping’ into the condition of the company. They contacted an English bank who dealt with the Prestongrange Coal Co. to try and find out some information on the health of the company. On September 2 1878, the bank wrote back to Sir James Grant-Suttie’s lawyers stating that they understood the company to be doing reasonably well. It was, as far as they understood it, “a going concern”. Further, they had information that the company was negotiating the purchase of some houses near the works for some of the colliery management staff which suggested that “things were not so very bad.”

On 8 August the company’s lawyers tried to shift the blame for the colliery’s poor state of affairs onto the estate. They argued that the company had gone to great expense in erecting

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very powerful machinery to work coal on the foreshore and under the sea-bed of the Forth with the assurance from the late Sir George that his baronetcy included mineral rights to these areas. As it turned out the crown had retained the right of ownership of the coal under the sea, and it prevented the company from working there. Had the company been able to work this coal they would have had access to a field with vast potential extending for some 2,500 acres. Further, they stated that Sir George had also assured them that there was 80,000 tons of Great Seam coal available at the Morrisons Haven pit, provided the water was pumped out. What they discovered was that there was nowhere near 80,000 tons available, and instead had to fix expensive underground machinery to work coal from a neighbouring estate. Sir George made them pay wayleave so that they could work the Jewel Seam at Birslie, only for them to find that after a large outlay on equipment the water levels there were twice as heavy as at Morrisons Haven.

To add insult to injury, Sir George had still insisted that the company pay their fixed rent in full, despite these problems having come about as a result of his overblown claims about the mine's potential. They asked that they only be charged royalties on the coal which they actually wrought, and that they be freed from paying what they considered to be an "excessive" amount of fixed rent, arguing that the field was incapable of supporting a fixed rent of £2,000.

An omen of further misfortune was the early death of Sir James Grant-Suttie in October of that year. He was only 48 years old. This left the estate to the fourth Grant-Suttie, George, who was only eight when he succeeded his father. On 23 November 1878 the company wrote to the young Sir George's trustees reporting a considerable loss for the previous year. They stated that the directors and their shareholders were aware of the fact that they had not only failed to make any profit, they had also been unfortunate enough to have suffered very heavy losses in several "unprecedented" business transactions. The immediate upshot of this was that the company was unable to pay a dividend to its shareholders. The situation was so bad that four of the Directors had had to tide the company over "the recent depression" by each paying £1,000 to the Company's bankers. But in mitigation they added that, notwithstanding the lack of success that the company's operations had met with so far, in the face of high rents, mining difficulties, and continued commercial depreciation, they were thankful that the company's position was not worse.



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The company wrote to the young Sir George's trustees in December 1878 stating that "without very considerable concessions the works cannot be carried on, with them however, the present time of depression can be tided over, and steps taken so that, immediately on the revival of trade, the estate may be developed to its fullest capabilities." Two days later, the Company issued its Annual Report which detailed the depressing situation for the benefit of the company's shareholders: "Your Directors are doing their best in these difficult and anxious times to keep the works going on a limited scale, and without further loss, but the time is not distant when the constitution of the company will require revision and modification commensurate with the altered condition of things". In other words, a minor miracle was now required if the company was to be saved from collapse.

Acting upon a recommendation by one of their own agents, the estate relented on the issue of fixed rent and agreed to reduce it to £1,000. It was recognised that if the company folded, a fixed rent of £2,000 would stand little chance of attracting new interest given the amount of coal which could be extracted at that time. They also realised that it was imperative that the mine be kept open, even if it had to be run somehow by the estate. If the Morrisons Haven pit were abandoned and the wastes allowed to fill with water the expense of pumping it out again and repairing the mines would be prohibitive.

The company directors were then permitted to surrender their lease.

In February 1879, the Prestongrange Coal and Iron Company ceased trading having run up large debts. It owed £35,000 to "a Scotch bank", had incurred losses of between £6,000 and £10,000, and was unable to pay the second half of the rent for 1878. It was recommended that the trustees of the young Sir George sequester the property of the colliery immediately. The company then went into voluntary liquidation and was run by the liquidator, Frederick Walter Carter until 1881. The company was forced to hand over the steam engines and other machinery which were sequestered. The demise of the Company at a time when the coal trade had still not recovered had dire consequences for the estate.

F W Carter attempted to sell the lease throughout the winter of 1880–1. The lease, which including the expensive plant and fittings which had belonged to the lessees, failed to find a purchaser even with the considerable modifications of its

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conditions, such as the halved rent. In the spring of 1881 Carter intimated his intention to cease working the Colliery.

A saviour was eventually found in 1882 when business partners John Greis, Robert Stephenson and Charles Ellison moved in and set up a new company. The new men received considerable concessions from the estate to help them make the running of the colliery a success. These concessions were doubly essential since the value of coal was still in serious decline at this time. The sale price had been reduced from £60,000 to £45,000. As well as the reduced rent, the new men also got wayleaves reduced from two pence to one penny per ton, breathing space to make up losses and the right to expand the coal works by boring at Morrison's Haven and sink a pit there within five years.

The new company was to be called the Prestongrange Coal and Fire-Brick Company, and in September of that year it became the official owner of the colliery. However, while it was certainly better organised than the previous company, Prestongrange Coal and Fire-Brick met with limited success. Indicative of this was the company's plan to sink a 3rd shaft at Morrisons Haven, which never came to fruition.

Prestongrange Coal and Fire-Brick continued working the pits until a slump in the market and strike action by the miners forced it to relinquish the mine in 1894. It was around this time, however, that the coal trade entered a new phase of prosperity far in excess of anything witnessed before, and Prestongrange itself was soon to expand greatly under new and dynamic ownership.



## MAJOR PHASE AND EVENTUAL ECLIPSE 1894–1962

THE PRESTONGRANGE Colliery and estate was sold by the 24-year-old Sir George Grant-Suttie to the Summerlee and Mossend Iron and Steel Company in 1894. The coming of this new owner heralded a dramatic and long-term upturn in the fortunes of the colliery. At this time only two seams were being worked, the eight-foot thick great seam and the four-foot Jewel seam. The Summerlee Company, which was much larger than any of the previous companies, was able to re-equip the pit, sink a third ventilation shaft and open out the deeper Beggar seam. This helped increase output to 500 tons a day, increasing the colliery's competitiveness. The quality fireclay produced at Prestongrange which went to make firebricks, tiles and pipes also increased in volume. Morrisons Haven began exporting a large amount of fireclay products as well as coal. There were two berths for the fireclay works and four coaling berths, all connected by railways or tramways to the colliery and kilns. Vessels of up to 280 tons could enter the harbour and by 1900, almost one a day was leaving with exports. The company went on to manufacture 5,500 tons of clay products a year.

The commercial success which the Summerlee company brought to Prestongrange owed a great deal to the pedigree of its founding family, the Neilsons. Over the course of the 19th Century, three succeeding generations made their mark in the engineering, coal, iron and steel industries. By the time they acquired Prestongrange they had established themselves as major players in the West of Scotland business world.

For over fifty years until the Prestongrange colliery was nationalised, the Neilsons lorded over the affairs of Prestongrange, its miners and their families. The new company moved many mining families from Lanarkshire to Prestonpans to work their newly acquired pit, building a street of brick upstairs-downstairs housing and brashly naming it Summerlee Street. This was indicative of a level of overbearance on the miners' lives which would come to be deeply resented in future years.

The leading partner in the Summerlee Company was John Neilson, a third-generation member of the family. In order to

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appreciate what John Neilson and the Summerlee Co. brought to Prestongrange, some understanding is perhaps required of the role which his father and grandfather's generations played in establishing the foundations on which his success was based.

The first generation of the Neilson dynasty were two brothers, John Neilson and James Beaumont Neilson. James became a star of the industrial age after he invented the hot-blast process, patented in 1828, which enabled blackband ironstone to be successfully smelted using local splint coal in small furnaces – drastically reducing costs of production. James was therefore very much a catalyst whose iron-smelting process enabled a whole host of ironmasters to spring up in the west around Airdrie and Coatbridge. James Beaumont's brother, John, on the other hand, earned his reputation at his Oakbank Engine works and foundry where all branches of mechanical engineering from boilermaking to blast furnace and colliery engines were made.

For the second generation of the Neilson family, the 1830s saw the launching of their notable careers as engineers and iron founders. The elder John Neilson's sons, Walter, William and Hugh, formed an energetic trio which ran the iron works at Summerlee and Mossend. Walter in particular demonstrated from an early age his abilities as a first-class engineer. In 1843 William formally founded a partnership of the Mossend Iron Company which ran a malleable iron works for the manufacture of wrought iron at Mossend, near Holytown. By 1868, Summerlee, which was by now a co-partnership of Walter and Hugh, had eight blast-furnaces. Like many of their contemporaries, the Neilsons owned or leased their own coal and ironstone mines not only in Lanarkshire but in several counties in Scotland.

By 1886 the three brothers had passed away, and the third generation of Neilsons united the two works into one company, the Summerlee and Mossend Iron and Steel Company. The chairman of the company was John Neilson, the son of Walter. He was accompanied by a proliferation of the dynasty which resulted in nine members of the family being registered as partners. Mossend later closed due to the effects of poor labour relations and diminishing returns. Meanwhile Summerlee, with John Neilson at the helm, grew in strength by concentrating more on coal and pig-iron. In fact, a most important part of the company's business by this time was coal mining.

The acquisition of Prestongrange in 1894 marked the

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beginning of a period in which the Neilsons began to really push themselves into the coal trade. Within fifteen years, the number of miners employed by the company rose from 1,700 to over 4,100. By 1910, the company had eight mines, had ditched the unprofitable Mossend works, and was focusing itself solely on iron and coal.

For all their great achievements, however, the Neilsons, like so many coal owners of this period, valued their own profits far and above the livelihoods of the miners and their families. When problems arose with the system of coal production at the pit, or there was a slackening of the coal market, the coal owners sought to ensure that the miners absorbed as much of the impact as possible by cutting wages and extending working hours.

In March 1912 miners at Prestongrange, along with twenty-three other pits in Mid and East Lothian, joined colleagues across Britain in strike action, demanding a minimum wage of six shillings per day. The existing set-up was grossly unfair, since, although a man and a boy would usually make a joint earning of ten or eleven shillings per day – the man making seven and the boy three – some men never made more than about four shillings a day. Poor earnings were due to circumstances beyond the miners' control such as old age, lack of strength or skill, or having to work difficult seams. During the strike the miners were financially supported by the local Miners Association. It lasted for five weeks and won the concession from the government of a Minimum Wage Bill, which proposed impartial boards whose job would be to work out the rate of minimum wage in the various districts across the country, according to the prevailing conditions in each. But it was not the victory that the miners had hoped for – there was still no fixed national minimum wage.

The post-war spirit of rewarding the workers for their efforts during WWI was partly responsible for the miners winning some statutory improvements in pay and conditions in 1919. But when the coal market collapsed the following year, faced with falling profits, the coal owners opted for their traditional tactic of squeezing the workforce. In response, Prestongrange miners were involved in a three-month long national strike in 1921. This forced further concessions from the government. But in July 1925 a further squeeze from coal owners caused Prestongrange miners to join colleagues in strike action again. This dispute was but a precursor for *the* industrial conflict of the Century in Britain, which took place the following year.

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Through the spring and early summer of 1926 there was a gradual build-up of tension between the Prestongrange miners and the Summerlee Company. On 2 February several complaints were laid before the board of the Mid and East Lothian Miners Association that the 7-hour day ruling was being violated. In February, 500 men were left idle at Prestongrange's No. 2 pit for eight days as a result of an industrial dispute in the haulage industry. The conservative-leaning local newspaper, the *Haddingtonshire Courier*, sought to soften the situation by reporting a "general slackness" in the East Lothian pits at this time. At first this was attributed to bad weather and a resultant lack of shipping, but by the end of March even the *Courier's* conservative reporting could not hide the crisis which was looming. The paper seized on evidence of a slight improvement at the beginning of April, but by the second quarter of that month things had begun to get even worse. 50 pit ponies were withdrawn from Prestongrange on 28 April – an indication that Summerlee was expecting a long fight.

On 30 April, there was a packed emergency meeting at Prestonpans town hall to discuss what action the miners should take in response to the wage cuts and redundancies being imposed by the government and the coal owners. They opted to fight back with strike action, and on 7 May it was reported that the East Lothian pits had closed down completely. The mining families of Prestongrange had joined workers across Scotland and the rest of Britain in one of the most significant events to have occurred in these islands in the 20th Century, the General Strike of 1926. During the strike, the deadlock between trade unions and the government was so great that it brought the whole country almost to the brink of a political revolution.

Within weeks the government's anti-strike general, Winston Churchill, skilfully orchestrated every resource at his disposal – radio, print, civil and military forces. Interestingly, in East Lothian as with elsewhere, the police as a highly visible arm of civil authority were the focus of particularly intense hatred from the miners. In Tranent the police station was stoned and policemen were attacked. Meanwhile, Churchill successfully called the TUC's bluff. Was it really prepared to attempt a workers revolution? The answer was no. The TUC called off the strike and demoralised workers went back to work having won nothing. But while other industries returned to work, hundreds of thousands of miners remained resolute, and continued the strike.

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Miners at Prestongrange were no exception to this. On August 13, a crowd of 6,000 turned out at Prestongrange park to greet A J Cook, the General Secretary of the British Miners Federation. He received a rapturous response when he told the audience that the Federation would surrender nothing to the coal owners and the government. On 8 October, Prestongrange miners voted by a large majority to reject government proposals aimed at ending the deadlock. They agreed that the proposals fell far short of what was required. Miners across the country carried on their strike into the winter, but after many hard months they were eventually forced to concede defeat. It was a decisive victory for the status-quo, and a workers' revolution was never a serious prospect after that.

It is not hard to understand why the miners were particularly strong in resisting the punitive measures imposed by the coalowners and the government during times of economic depression. Coal was at the base of heavy industry, and as a result felt the hardest impact when the economy contracted. From their point of view, miners worked in an essential occupation which was still one of the most difficult and dangerous, and yet they were also being robbed of their livelihoods.

A sense of the unfairness of the miners' circumstances is perhaps captured by a deeply tragic occurrence that took place at Prestongrange on the 9th of April 1926. A miner named John Reid was crushed to death in the Three-foot seam when the roof of the tunnel he was in collapsed. The inquest into his death took place in June while the miners were locked in confrontation with the coal owners and the government. Shortly before 10 o'clock on the morning of 9 April, Robert Martin, one of the men working in the Three-foot seam, heard the distant sound of a hutch coming down the passageway towards him. As the hutch seemed to be drawing nearer, he heard a rumbling sound. Robert alerted a nearby colleague, George Archibald, and the two men went to investigate. About fifty or sixty feet (15–18 metres) down the passageway they found the hutch standing by a pile of stone and rubbish which had fallen from the ceiling. All that could be seen of John Reid was the light of his lamp which shone out from beneath the rubble.

The men had to go round by another road to the other side of the rubble before they could reach the stricken man. They cleared away the stones to find John in a sitting position with his head bent right down to the floor of the tunnel. He was

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dead when they found him. A boulder weighing four to five cwts. had smashed against his neck with another large stone resting on top of it. It was reckoned that a freak movement of the roof had caused one of the supporting timbers to split, allowing eight or nine tons to fall on him.

This event is perhaps coldly symbolic of the manifest unfairness of the miners' situation. The evidence given by the witnesses demonstrates that, after hundreds of years of development at Prestongrange, the possibility of a horrific death in darkness and isolation was something which the miners still faced every day of their working lives. Just as it was the miners and not the Neilsons who bore the personal costs of accidents in the mine, so it was the miners and their families who shouldered the collapse in the coal market.

While the effects of the industrial disputes following the post-war depression left many miners and their families with nothing, by the time John Neilson died in 1935 at the age of ninety-five, he had amassed a massive personal fortune. Thanks to the favourable circumstances he was born into, he had been able throughout his life to use his talents to their full potential, leaving his children a portfolio of shareholdings in J & P Coats, Distillers, ICI, various railway interests and an estate worth almost £155,000. Had the Neilsons and their fellow coal owners a greater appreciation that their money would never have been made without the efforts of their miners, a great deal of misery could have perhaps been avoided

After the heady days of the early 20th Century, the coal trade went into a long decline from which it never recovered. The vast British Empire began contracting rapidly. As the colonial peoples were regaining their freedom, trade opportunities in every sector of British industry diminished. The ship building and heavy industries were in a state of collapse, and as they had been major consumers of coal, this spelled disaster for the industry. There were other new threats as well. Alternative forms of energy, oil especially, were starting to impinge on coal's traditional market territories.

Between the mid 1920s and the outbreak of the Second World War, the Prestongrange workforce was decimated and its trade greatly reduced. While it had, in its small part, helped the state-run war machine achieve victory in 1945, after the war the mine was a shadow of what it had been thirty years before. Prior to 1939 a large export trade in its clay products had been carried on with Denmark, Holland, Germany and



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other European countries, but after 1945, sales were only in the home market.

The harbour at Morrisons Haven was now a derelict. Since 1914, coal and bricks had been sent away by rail and road. Despite its obsolescence, however, the harbour did, by the 1950s, find a new and novel use for itself as a 'swimming pool' used by local youngsters – thus continuing to at least provide some sort of benefit to the local community.

Subtle evidence of the decline of the colliery's size and standing is also found with the combining of Prestongrange and nearby Prestonlinks Miners' Galas into one event in 1946, and the changing of the name to the Town Children's Gala.

As part of its post-war national reconstruction, the Labour government attempted the rehabilitation of the coal industry by bringing the collieries under national control, and as part of this process the National Coal Board bought Prestongrange in 1947. The full complement of coal seams at Prestongrange were now being worked. From shallowest to deepest there was the Great Seam, Diver Seam, Clay Seam, Five-foot Seam, Jewel Seam, Beggar Seam, No.1 Diamond Seam and No. 2 Diamond Seam. The NCB carried out extensive redevelopment work at the pit which included new pit-head baths which were opened in September 1952 by sixty-six year old William Cunningham, a miner who had spent nearly all of his fifty-two working years at the colliery. Such events were supposed to encourage optimism, but again it was a hope that soon subsided.

In 1953 Prestongrange had a workforce of only 660, and it was remarked that the colliery was now becoming "highly mechanised". The plethora of varied occupations which used to exist at the mine had gone, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish the different roles of colliery workers. The majority of its employees still lived in East Lothian, taken to and from the colliery by bus. The NCB provided canteen services which were used by at least half of the employees. Another benefit was the Welfare Institute, and recreational facilities which were under development. The residue of earlier political struggles was evidenced by the continued survival of a small Communist Party organisation. Alongside the colliery, the Brick and Fireclay works continued their operations in which around 120 people were employed. Although the principle products were made by machines, many things were also hand-moulded. These works were described at the time as "modern and equipped with the latest machinery."

As with the rest of the country in the post-war era of hope

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in the future, expectations of the NCB at Prestongrange were initially high. They soon subsided, however, as demand for coal bottomed-out. Coal increasingly gave way to oil, gas and nuclear power. Domestic consumers in the Edinburgh area increasingly used oil, gas and electricity to heat their homes. In 1960, meetings of the Colliery Consultative Committee were dominated by the problem of absenteeism and low morale. During most of that year, almost a fifth of the entire workforce was absent and there were repeated problems with theft and vandalism. The local trade union representatives gave poor attendance at the meetings, and didn't seem to contribute much when they did turn up. This sorry state of affairs is perhaps most poignantly illustrated by the poor showing and support for the colliery football team.

The NCB itself does not seem to have been a particularly conscientious landowner. It attempted in 1951 to build an aerial ropeway from Prestongrange that would tip waste directly into the sea. This raised the prospect of total despoilation of the coastline, as had happened elsewhere. Their "dastardly proposal" was only thwarted when the Town Clerk of Edinburgh served them with an interdict.

With even the newly built super-colliery at nearby Monktonhall already facing an uncertain future, Prestongrange was deemed surplus to National requirements and shut down in 1962. Some miners were lucky enough to be relocated to other nearby collieries, but even for most of these, the writing was on the wall as dozens of collieries throughout Scotland closed over the course of the 1970s and 80s. One thing that the miners all shared was the certainty that their occupation was fighting a losing battle against an array of aggressive outside factors. Like other workers, many erstwhile Prestongrange miners and their children have since witnessed years of uncertainty and unemployment amidst the ever-changing character of the late-20th Century Scottish workplace.



## EPILOGUE 1963–2000

ALTHOUGH ITS life as a working mine was at an end, the curtain by no means went down for good on the mine at Prestongrange in 1962. More than a glimmer of light has been brought to its latter-day history by the creation of the Industrial Heritage Centre, which is flourishing today. It was set up by former colliery manager and local MP, David Spence, who arranged the purchase of the site after it was closed by the NCB. Prestongrange's pump-house had become a listed building in 1940, and on this basis Spence managed to prevent the NCB from moving in the demolition gangs in 1963.

The Heritage Centre announced its maturity in the late 1980s with a flurry of advertising which highlighted the role it played in providing a valuable educational resource as well as being a pleasant visitor attraction. At present, highlights of the site include the survival of the Grant-Sutties' massive Cornish pumping engine as well as the working pugs, tough little workhorse locomotives, formerly used by the Summerlee Company. The Heritage Centre ensures that, while the Prestongrange miners and mineowners are now long gone, their fascinating 1000 year history will continue to illuminate the 21st Century.

## CONCLUSION

THE RELATIONSHIP between the industrial owners of Prestongrange and their miners has been a consistently fascinating one. The distinction of the earliest mine-ownership on record in the British Isles leads on to a history which clearly reflects the general patterns in the development of the coal industry and labour relations in Scotland, whilst also having its own unique features.

The Prestongrange Lairds and coal owners like Sir William Grant, Sir George Grant-Suttie and John Neilson provides the story with an array of interesting characters whose careers help explain prevailing attitudes and developing patterns among the old landed and later capitalist elite.

Colourful events such as the Battle of Pinkie, the Tranent Massacre, and the General Strike of 1926 punctuate the importance of the colliers as a human resource, their own worth as a hard-working people, and their long and often tragic struggle for emancipation and justice.

While the industrial history of Prestongrange is worthy of a much more significant study than this one, it is hoped that this small contribution nonetheless succeeds in highlighting the major developments and personalities involved.

### **Some Further Reading**

*Prestonpans and Vicinity: Historical, Ecclesiastical and Traditional*  
by Peter MacNeill (Leicester, 1902)

*Mining in Mid and East Lothian* by A.S Cunningham (Edinburgh, 1925)

*Mining The Lothians* by Guthrie Hutton (Edinburgh, 1998)

*The Story of Prestonpans from Contemporary Records 1790s–1950s* Edited by Sir John Sinclair (East Lothian District Council, 1995)

*Essays in Scottish Labour History* Edited by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh, 1978).



*Rescue Team, Prestongrange Colliery  
Scottish Mining Museum Trust*



*Prestongrange Bowling Club, First Bowl by W. Ford, J.P., B.E.M., on 25th April 1953  
East Lothian Council, David Spence Collection*