

WINSFORD ROCK SALT MINE HISTORY

The beginning of the story.

Rock salt was first found in Northwich in 1670 but it wasn't until 1844, when prospectors were looking for coal with which to heat salt pans, that rock salt was discovered in Winsford.

During the 17th Century the two primary uses for rock salt were those of strengthening weak brine for white salt production and providing salt licks for cattle.

In the 1720s, the River Weaver which provided access to the River Mersey by Liverpool became a key route for salt transport, with the cattle licks being exported as far as Australia and New Zealand.

The opening of the mine.

Winsford Rock Salt Mine (or Meadow Bank Mine as it was originally known) officially opened in 1844 with the sinking of 1 and 2 Shaft. The 4ft shafts were lined with timber and puddle clay. Buckets were used to lower men and materials and for elevating the excavated rock.

1 and 2 Shaft were originally sunk to 65m (210ft) and then subsequently sunk to the current depth of 150m (500ft), which allows for better quality salt to be mined.

Early mining methods.

During the 19th Century mining production methods were basic but effective: between 1844 and 1892, one million tonnes of rock salt were mined at Winsford.

Black powder explosives, hand picks and shovels were used to excavate the rock, which was then transported in wooden barrels. Up until the introduction of electricity to the Mine during the 1930s, tallow candles were stuck to the rock and used to light the working face. Bundles of unused candles can still be found in the old cavity of the Mine to this day!

The room and pillar method of mining, which involves leaving pillars of rock salt behind to support the roof, was adopted from the start at Winsford and, during the 19th Century, the extraction rate was high at 90% (compared to current day extraction rates of between 68% and 75%) The 'rooms' that were left behind after mining had an average roof height of 8 metres and a width of 20 metres – whilst this made for a relatively safe and easy working environment compared to coal mines, it wasn't without its dangers as candles and gun powder do not mix!

The demise of the rock salt trade.

During the late 19th century the salt industry descended into chaos due to over-capacity. In 1888, Salt Union, which consisted of 66 salt operators from the area, was formed in an attempt to bring order to the market.

However, with salt also being supplied from the Northwich Mines, the market remained over-supplied. Despite having mined out some one million tonnes of rock salt, the Winsford Mine was shut down in 1892.

In 1928 the last mine in Northwich flooded, resulting in the re-opening of the Winsford Mine. The Mine re-opened with technology on its side and to a new era and rapid expansion of the mine began in the 1950's due to the use of rock salt to de-ice the country's expanding road network system. It has since grown steadily and, today, the Mine at Winsford now stretches 5km east to west and 3 km north to south.

Further information on how the Mine advanced in technology to its current day practices using the Continuous Mining Machine, can be found in the Production Methods section of this document.