

Industrial Revolution Reference Library Cumulative Index

Coal and the Industrial Revolution, 1700-1869

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How important was coal to the Industrial Revolution? Despite the huge growth of output, and the grip of coal and steam on the popular image of the Industrial Revolution, recent cliometric accounts have assumed coal mining mattered little to the Industrial Revolution. In contrast both E. A. Wrigley and Kenneth Pomeroy have made coal central to the story. This paper constructs new series on coal rents, the price of coal at pithead and at market, and the price of firewood, and uses them to examine this issue. We conclude coal output expanded in the Industrial Revolution mainly as a result of increased demand rather than technological innovations in mining. But that expansion could have occurred at any time before 1760. Further our coal rents series suggests that English possession of coal reserves made a negligible contribution to Industrial Revolution incomes.

Introduction

Coal has played a curious role in the history of the Industrial Revolution. In the popular imagination the Industrial Revolution *is* coal, steam, iron, cotton mills, and railways. And for an earlier generation of economic historians—T. S. Ashton, Fernand Braudel, Roy Church, J. H. Clapham, Phyllis Deane, Michael Flinn, and John Nef—coal was indeed at the heart of the Industrial Revolution.¹ Roy Church notes in his history of the coal industry, for example, “It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of coal to the British economy between 1830 and 1913.”²

Yet “cliometric” accounts of the Industrial Revolution, produced from the 1980s on, — those of Deirdre McCloskey, Nick Crafts, Knick Harley, and Joel Mokyr, for example—make coal only a bit actor.³ Despite enormous increases in output, the coal industry is credited with little of the national productivity advance either directly, or indirectly through linkages to steam power,

¹ See Ashton (1948), Braudel (1981), Church (1986), Clapham (1926), Deane (1965), Nef (1932).

² Church, 1986, p. 758.

³ McCloskey (1981), Crafts (1985), Crafts and Harley (1992), Mokyr (1990).

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