

How the 'Eldorado of Venezuela' Transformed a Corner of Neston

Anthony Annakin-Smith, February 2020

The story of the Anglican Smelting, Reduction and Coal Company Ltd. offers an intriguing footnote to Neston's industrial history and forms an unlikely link between the area and gold deposits 4,500 miles away.

Anglican established a large smelting works in Little Neston in 1858; it also planned to mine coal there. The company was intended to be capitalised for the substantial sum of £50,000 and tempted investors with the prospect of annual returns up to 20% (although in the end little more than half the shares were taken up)(*Figure 1*).¹ The stated objectives of the business included 'the smelting of Lead and other metals [and] crushing and reducing metallic ores'.²

Despite the proximity of Welsh lead and copper, it seems Anglican planned primarily to import gold ore from across the Atlantic. The company was linked to the recently-failed Chancellorsville Freehold Gold Mining Company, named after a gold-mining area in Virginia, USA.³ This business had set up an operation in an old saltworks on the banks of the River Weaver at Frodsham, Cheshire processing Virginian gold ore as well as small quantities of the mineral from North Wales.⁴ Anglican planned to 'avail themselves of the labour and energy' of the Chancellorsville company to make a success of the Neston venture.⁵ One of Anglican's founders, James Rigby, lived at Frodsham Bridge but in 1859 moved to Old Quay House, near the Little Neston site, to run the new company at a salary of £200 p.a.; it seems likely he had been connected to the Frodsham business.⁶ The new company's gold ore was said to be coming from South America and thus almost certainly from around Ciudad Bolivar in Venezuela, on the mighty Orinoco river. Anglican was seeking ore in the form of auriferous quartz and

¹ *Railway Record*, 7 August 1858 (N.B. the content from this source and others in this article was to be found in syndicated reports in multiple news publications. For simplicity, only a single source has been given each time); TNA, BT 31/352/1280, 'Summary of Capital and Shares', 26 August 1861.

² TNA, BT 31/352/1280, 'Memorandum of Association'.

³ *Railway Record*, 7 August 1858. See also Sue Lorimer, 'Chancellorsville Freehold Gold Mining Company, Frodsham Bridge', *Frodsham and District History Society Journal*, 46 (December 2016), pp. 5-6.

⁴ *Chester Chronicle*, 13 June 1857.

⁵ *Railway Record*, 7 August 1858.

⁶ TNA, BT 31/352/1280, 'Memorandum of Association'; Francis White & Co., *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Cheshire* (Sheffield, 1860); *Chester Chronicle*, 19 March 1859. Rigby is listed as the company's 'first local managing director' in the Articles of Association which also state elsewhere in the document that he was a 'miller', presumably connected to Sutton Mills. In the 1861 census for Little Neston he was described as a 'retired corn merchant'.

there were excited newspaper reports around the time of the company's formation of the potential of such deposits in the 'Eldorado of Venezuela' (as one report termed it) for British speculators.⁷

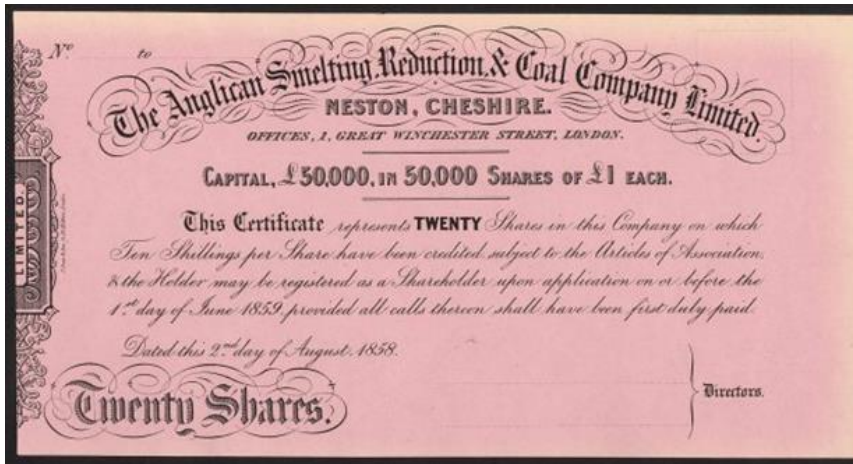


Fig. 1: One of the many unissued share certificates for the Anglican Smelting, Reduction and Coal Company Limited.

The local works comprised several buildings on the site of the old Little Neston Colliery, at the bottom of today's Marshlands Road, and the construction effort was said to have been of 'considerable magnitude' (Figure 2).⁸ Bricks would have been made in kilns on the site. To fuel the smelting operations the company planned to mine the coal 'underfoot' for which a lease was obtained at a cost of £700.⁹ They hoped to obtain coal in neighbouring Great Neston too, leasing mineral rights from Lord Edward Mostyn Lloyd Mostyn;¹⁰ one of Anglican's shareholders was Cynric Lloyd, Mostyn's nephew.¹¹ As well as using the coal within the business, the directors planned to sell it locally and to export it from Birkenhead and Liverpool; the coal could also be turned into coke, they said.¹² The making of lime, which would have required fuel to burn limestone in kilns was another part of the endeavour.¹³ Thus they described 'the coal fields [as] by no means the least important part' of the undertaking.¹⁴ They further claimed that the main reason for a railway to Neston proposed by Cynric Lloyd – the 'Hooton and Neston Railway' for which a parliamentary bill had been passed – was to access the new works.¹⁵ The waters of the Dee Estuary were inaccessible at Neston to anything other

⁷ See, for example, *The Morning Chronicle*, 19 August 1857 and *London Evening Standard*, 2 October 1857.

⁸ *London Daily News*, 2 August 1859.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ FRO, D/M 5151, Indenture between Mostyn family and Anglican Smelting Co. (1859). This indicates an intended agreement between the parties but there is no indication it was ever completed.

¹¹ TNA, BT 31/352/1280, 'Notice of the Situation of the Registered Office', 13 August 1859.

¹² *London Daily News*, 2 August 1859; TNA, BT 31/352/1280, Memorandum of Association.

¹³ TNA, BT 31/352/1280, Memorandum of Association.

¹⁴ *London Daily News*, 2 August 1859.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* See also A. Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries 1759-1855*, (University of Chester Press, 2019), p.151.

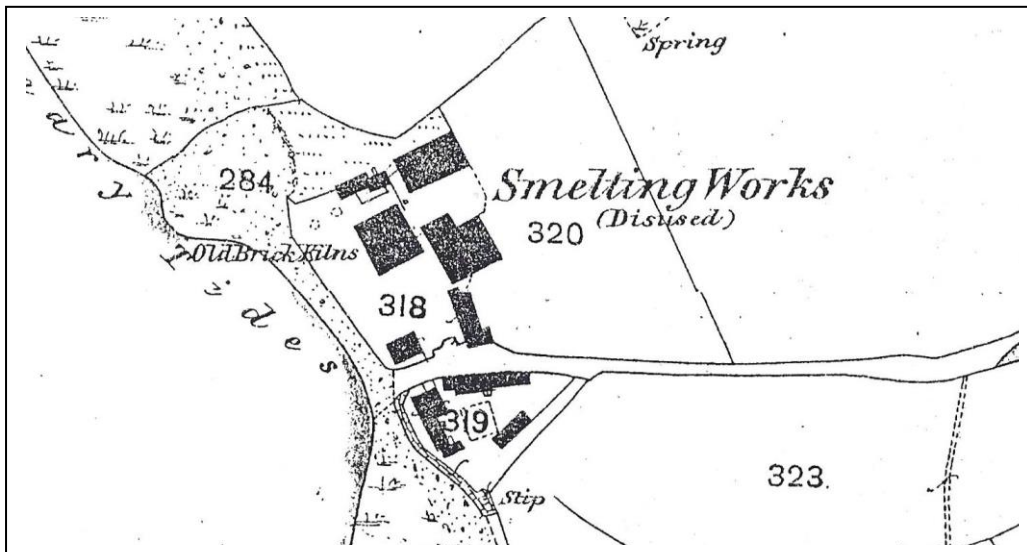


Fig. 2: The former Anglican smelting works, mapped in 1871. They were situated at the bottom of today's Marshlands Road which runs horizontally across the map.

than small craft so the ore would presumably have been unloaded at Birkenhead docks and then transferred via the existing line to Hooton and the new one to Neston (which, the plans showed, would actually terminate at the bottom of today's Moorside Lane at the south end of Parkgate, not at Little Neston; an additional stretch of mineral line would have been needed to the works site).¹⁶

A newspaper report in September 1859 indicated that a vessel had been chartered to bring '240 tons of rich ore' across the Atlantic for the company.¹⁷ It also said that the company was ready to start lead smelting. There was just a single lead smelter recorded as living in Neston at the time of the census in April 1861 census but it does seem probable that *some* smelting, whether of lead, gold or other metal, was undertaken at the works for a period of time between 1859 and 1861.¹⁸ However, this writer has yet to find hard evidence for such smelting or any evidence of coal mining occurring either (a few local men described themselves as 'coal miner' in the 1861 census but most, if not all, may have been working at mines elsewhere, returning home to Neston from time to time).¹⁹ In any event, it all soon came to nothing: a decision to wind the company up was made in August 1862.²⁰ The reason is unclear

¹⁶ Cheshire Archives, QDP 359 and Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PB/3/ plan1859/H5 (1858–9).

¹⁷ *London Daily News*, 17 September 1859.

¹⁸ Charles Nolan, a lead smelter from Dublin, who appears to have arrived in England within the previous four years (his youngest, four-year-old child having been born there). NRO, 725-B7-13-140, dated 17 July 1869, refers to 'the old smelting works' suggesting they had once been in operation. When the works' machinery etc. were sold there was no reference to them being new/unused which one might have expected if they were so.

¹⁹ See Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries 1759-1855*, p. 238 re census information.

²⁰ TNA, BT 31/352/1280 'Copy of Special Resolution'. The winding up was not complete until 8 March 1872 when the 'Return of Final Winding-Up Meeting' was completed. This probably followed the sale of the land and buildings, most likely to parties with an interest in reviving colliery working on the site.

but it seems the process for gathering the ore in Venezuela was poorly organised and lacked scale;²¹ maybe Anglican's directors and shareholders had been misled about the ease with which the quartz could be obtained. There may, though, have been other factors contributing to the business's failure: undersubscription of shares would have left it short of capital, and coal mining may have been prevented by flooding of the Little Neston works.²² The promised railway, without which it would have been difficult to transport the gold ore and export coal didn't materialise either. Thus, Anglican's large amount of plant and equipment, which included a 'double powered condensing winding engine' a large steam boiler and a crushing mill, were put up for sale by auctions in 1863 and 1866 (*Figure 3*).²³ Neston's flirtation with gold smelting was at an end.

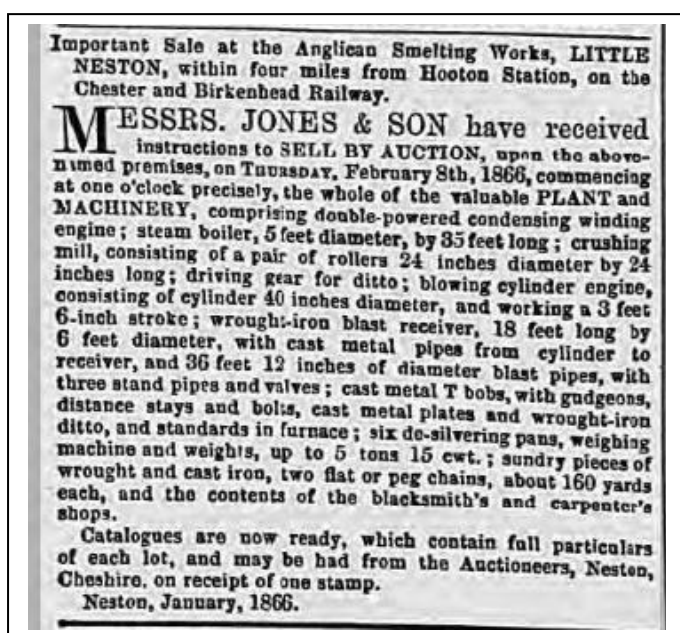


Fig. 3: The 1866 advertisement for Anglican's plant and machinery.

Chester Chronicle, 27 January.

Anglican's buildings were still standing a decade after the works closed, recorded as 'Smelting Works (Disused)' on the 1871 map. They included three large structures, one of which was almost 66 feet (20 metres) square and three other buildings, two of which fronted what is today Marshlands Road.²⁴ A tall chimney was probably in place too. The structures gave ready-made premises to the Neston Colliery Company, which started operating on the site in 1875, and accounts for the speed with which the colliery business was set up: Arthur Suker's well-known painting of the colliery area, painted the following year, shows the buildings and chimney already in place alongside newly-installed winding

²¹ *London Daily News*, 9 January 1863.

²² Isaac Slater, *Royal National Commercial Directory of Cheshire & North Wales* (Manchester: Isaac Slater, 1869), p.181.

²³ *Chester Chronicle*, 25 April 1863 and 27 January 1866. The 1863 advertisement does not explicitly mention the Anglican company. However, the sale was 'On the Premises of Little Neston Colliery' and the nature of the equipment sold, together with large quantities of coke and cast metal, strongly suggest a smelting operation.

²⁴ Ordnance Survey 25-inch, sheet XXX.2 (1871)

gear (Figure 4).²⁵ Two of the large buildings were apparently still standing at the colliery in 1899, one having been extended.²⁶ As for the smaller buildings the evidence indicates that one of the present-day houses at the bottom of Marshlands Road which is often associated by locals with the colliery – Marsh Cottage on the northern side of the road (Figure 5) – was actually built in relation to the Anglican smelting works.²⁷



Fig. 4: Detail from Arthur Suker's 'Neston Colliery and the River Dee', painted in 1876. Several of the buildings shown were erected for the Anglican smelting works. With kind permission of the Williamson Art Gallery.

²⁵ 'Neston Colliery and the River Dee' held at the Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead. The gallery appears to have read the date on the painting as 1875; however, on close inspection, this writer believes it is 1876 which better accords with the state of development of the colliery as shown in the picture.

²⁶ Ordnance Survey 25-inch, sheet XXX.2. An undated photograph of the colliery, probably taken c.1900, shows a small part of one of the remaining buildings.

²⁷ The 1871 map, and all subsequent detailed maps, show a building on the site of what is today's Marsh Cottage.



Fig. 5: Marsh Cottage, apparently built for the Anglican Smelting, Reduction and Coal Company Ltd.

Further information relating to the collieries at Neston can be found at nestoncollieries.org

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