

Birks Iron Ore Mines

Iron ore mines at Frizington, near Cleator Moor, Cumberland

This document is intended to provide a more detailed supplement to the Graces Guide web page for [Birks Iron Ore Mines, Cumberland](#). This is a desktop study only. The manuscript documents held by Cumbria Archives and National Archives identified in the bibliography would add significantly to the narrative, but the writer does not plan to explore this any further in the foreseeable future.

Bill Swift 20 Jul 2025

A date for the start of exploration for minerals on the Birks Estate has not been found, but it is said that the first person to work this Royalty was Henry Attwood. Another, perhaps more reliable, source says that the mineral rights were leased for 21 years by the owner, **Baroness de Sternberg**, to Mr Attwood in 1842, but this lease does not appear to have survived.ⁱ The 1860 map below shows an iron shaft to the east of Birks Farm House, which may pre-date this, but what was later known as No 1 pit is shown close to Frizington Railway Station.

[Catharine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg](#) (Catherine in later texts) was born Catharine Augusta Harrison in 1791. She had inherited outright estates in Birks, Crosslacon, Frizington Parks and Arlecdon in Cumberland, together with a lifetime interest in estates at Acrewalls, Cringlegill and Arlecdon, from her godfather Joseph Steele (died 1835) of Acrewalls, Arlecdon. Some of these properties were underlain with substantial mineral deposits.

1847 Directory entry - **James Henry Attwood and Son**, Birks and Woodend Iron Ore Mines; office 33 Duke Street, Whitehaven.ⁱⁱ (Woodend is some distance away at Bigrigg, and not geographically related to Birks)

1853 The prospectus for the Whitehaven, Cleator and Egremont Railway makes specific mention of mines on the Birks Estate near to the intended terminus at Frizington.ⁱⁱⁱ The close proximity of the mine to this railway can be seen on the 1860 Ordnance Survey map below.

1855 Iron ore mines at Birks and Woodend owned by Messrs Attwood and Son.^{iv}

1858 Directory entry – James Henry Attwood and Son, Iron Ore Mine Proprietor, of 33 Duke Street, Whitehaven.^v Owner of Birks and Woodend iron ore mines.^{vi}

1859 Catherine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg died without issue on 21 Jun 1859.^{vii} Her estate was valued at some £100,000. She gave generously to charity and to nephews and nieces, but some of the property stayed in trust to provide an income stream for her charitable foundations.

1860 The executors and trustees of Baroness de Sternberg offered Birks Farm and Frizington Parks Farm for sale. In both cases the minerals and mines were reserved and excluded from the sale.^{viii} Thomas Dixon of Rheda is said to have had bought the Birks Estate at this time.

1860 (survey) 25" OS map shows an iron shaft close to Birks Farm House, and an iron pit called Birks Pit close to the railway at south of royalty. The pit near the farm may predate Attwood's

involvement, as it does not one appear to be one of the seven numbered pits later identified as part of Birks Royalty. A map 3 years later (6" OS) shows Birks Pit as coal, which is probably an error; no coal mining is known to have taken place on the Birks Royalty. There is also an iron shaft marked near Birks Road Cottage, on the opposite side of the railway, but whether this was part of the Birks Royalty is not known.

1862 Mine royalty at Birks and Crosslacon advertised to let in July.^{ix} (right - with the permission of, and with thanks to, [the British Newspaper Archive](#))

Lease of iron ore mines under Birks and Crosslacon, Frizington, dated 31 Dec 1862. Trustees of the will of the late Catharine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg to **Joseph Fearon and Henry Whittle**.^x

1865 Licence to assign mines under Birks and Crosslacon, Frizington granted by the Trustees of the will of the late Catharine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg to Joseph Fearon and Henry Whittle and another, dated 19 Apr 1865.^{xi} This was probably an assignment to Joseph Fearon and Co, below. Articles of partnership survive for Joseph Fearon and Company (the Frizington Iron Ore Mines), also dated 19 Apr 1865.^{xii}

1867 Birks owned by Frizington Iron Ore Co., manager Joseph Fearon. Comprised 2 pits.^{xiii}

1867 Assignment of interest in mines and partnership of the Frizington Iron Ore Company made by William James Fernie to Joseph Fearon.^{xiv}

1869 Partnership between Joseph Fearon, Henry Whittle, William Hughes Daunt and William James Fernie, trading as Joseph Fearon and Co., the Frizington Iron Ore Mines, was dissolved by mutual consent "some time ago".^{xv}

1871 Birks owned by Frizington Iron Ore Co., manager Joseph Fearon. Comprised 3 pits.^{xvi}

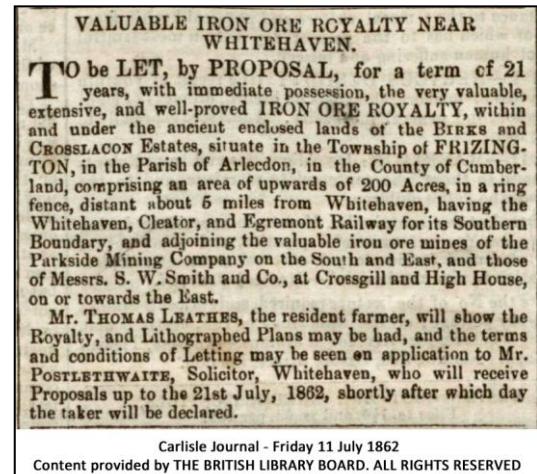
1872 Lease of iron ore mines under the Birks and Crosslacon Estate, Frizington dated 1 Jul 1872: Trustees of the will of the late Catharine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg to Joseph Fearon of Keekle, gent.^{xvii}

1873 Tenders invited to sink a shaft at Birks Mines.^{xviii} Later that year Birks was missing from a list of Hematite mines in the area, suggesting that it was not operational.^{xix}

1881 Birks comprised 3 pits, the owner being Joseph Fearon.^{xx}

1881 Lease of iron ore mines under part of the Birks and Crosslacon Estate, Frizington: Trustees of the will of the late Catharine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg to **John Wood of Maryport**, iron works manager and another. Dated 11 Feb 1881.^{xxi}

1881 Release of Cumberland mining estates: from beneficiaries under the will of the late Catharine Augusta Baroness de Sternberg to Thomas Johnston. Dated 31 Mar 1881.^{xxii}



Carlisle Journal - Friday 11 July 1862
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1882 Abandonment Plans for Birks Ironstone Nos 1 to 6, dated 1872-1882.^{xxiii}

1882 A case was heard in Chancery related to damaged being caused to the surface land by the mining operations below. The owner of the surface of Birks Estate was Thomas Dixon, and the tenant of the surface William Crossthwaite. The owner in fee of the minerals was Thomas Johnson and lessees of the mineral rights were Messrs John and Adam Woods (Wood Brothers of [Maryport Hematite Iron Company](#), which aligns with the above from 1881.^{xxiv}

1883 Owner Frizington Mining [sic], Lowther Street, Whitehaven.^{xxv}

1884 Lease of Birks Mine was assigned from Mr Wood to William Burnyeat and others.^{xxvi}

1884 **Frizington Mining Company Limited** ([Company Number 20423](#)) registered 4 Aug 1884. "Upon terms of an unregistered agreement of the 30th ult., this company proposes to take over the business, assets, and liabilities of the co-partnership trading as the Frizington Mining Company". Capital of £30,000 in £100 shares.^{xxvii} The initial directors were :—

- [Joseph Charters Brown](#), Cleator, Cumberland, iron ore proprietor
- [William Burnyeat \(1849-1921\)](#), Whitehaven, iron ore proprietor
- [William McCowan](#), Roseneath, Whitehaven, iron smelter
- [William McGowan](#), Sorbie, Whitehaven, timber merchant
- [John Moore](#), Egremont, merchant
- [William Dalzell](#), Whitehaven, merchant
- [Andrew Johnston](#), C.E., Whitehaven. (*of Strongitharm and Johnston*)

At the same time, tenders were invited to sink a shaft for the company.^{xxviii} It was also reported in November that additional bore holes were being sunk to try to find fresh deposits of ore.

Engineers to the company were [Strongitharm and Johnston](#) of 36 Lowther Street, Whitehaven; the partners [Augustus Horace Strongitharm](#) and Andrew Johnston, were both initial subscriber.

1884 Output 9,022 tons.^{xxix}

1887 It was reported in April that the Birks mines were worked by [Burnyeat, Dalzell and Co.](#)^{xxx} William Burnyeat jun and William Dalzell were two of the partners in Burnyeat and Dalzell, as was G W Wilkinson, who was to become secretary of the company. In May Walker and Peile replaced Strongitharm and Johnston as managers and engineers to the company.^{xxxi} Peile had a well established business relationship with several of the directors, as partner and engineer for Burnyeat, Brown and Co., amongst other ventures, so it may be that some of the directors wanted a change of management.

By 1888 it is apparent that the only pit working was No 7, which was probably that sunk by the new owners.

1892 5th borehole being sunk "near Birks Farm". New ore deposits not yet found.^{xxxii} Output for the year 9,447 tons, making it the least productive mine in the region at this time.^{xxxiii}

1894 Directory entry – Frizington Mining Co. Ltd., Birks Mines, Cleator Moor. Office, 36 Lowther Street, Whitehaven. G W Wilkinson secretary.^{xxxiv} Chairman William McGowan, managing director William Burnyeat.^{xxxv}

1894 On 17 Nov, 3 miners died and 1 injured when flood water swept through the mine. Those killed were David Harrison, Thomas Toye and Daniel Crone.^{xxxvi} The inquest blamed the engineers for failing to pump water from No 4 pit, but in mitigation, Walker and Peile said that they had subsequently found errors in the drawings they had inherited, so had not anticipated the likelihood of the problem.

1896 James B Kitchen, who had been manager for 10 years, left to take a new post at Pallaflat Mines and was succeeded by his son, Mr Isaac Kitchen.^{xxxvii}

1896 Output 16,195 tons.^{xxxviii}

1897 Mine closed. Men finished work on 7 June, with 70 lost jobs.^{xxxix}

1897 Abandonment Plan for Birks No 7, dated 1 Aug 1897.^{xl} See 1898 map below for location of No 7 pit.

1899 Company to be wound up. Resolution agreed at EGM on 19th Oct 1899 "That the Company be wound up voluntarily and that Robert Ferguson Miller, Chartered Accountant of Barrow-in-Furness, be and he is hereby appointed Liquidator for the purposes of such winding up." Dated this 19th day of October, 1899. William McGowan, Chairman.^{xli}

1900 In March, tenders were invited by the liquidator for all the mine plant and equipment.^{xlii} A few weeks later Thomas W. Ward of Sheffield advertised that they were dismantling the works and offered a number of pieces of machinery for sale.^{xliii}

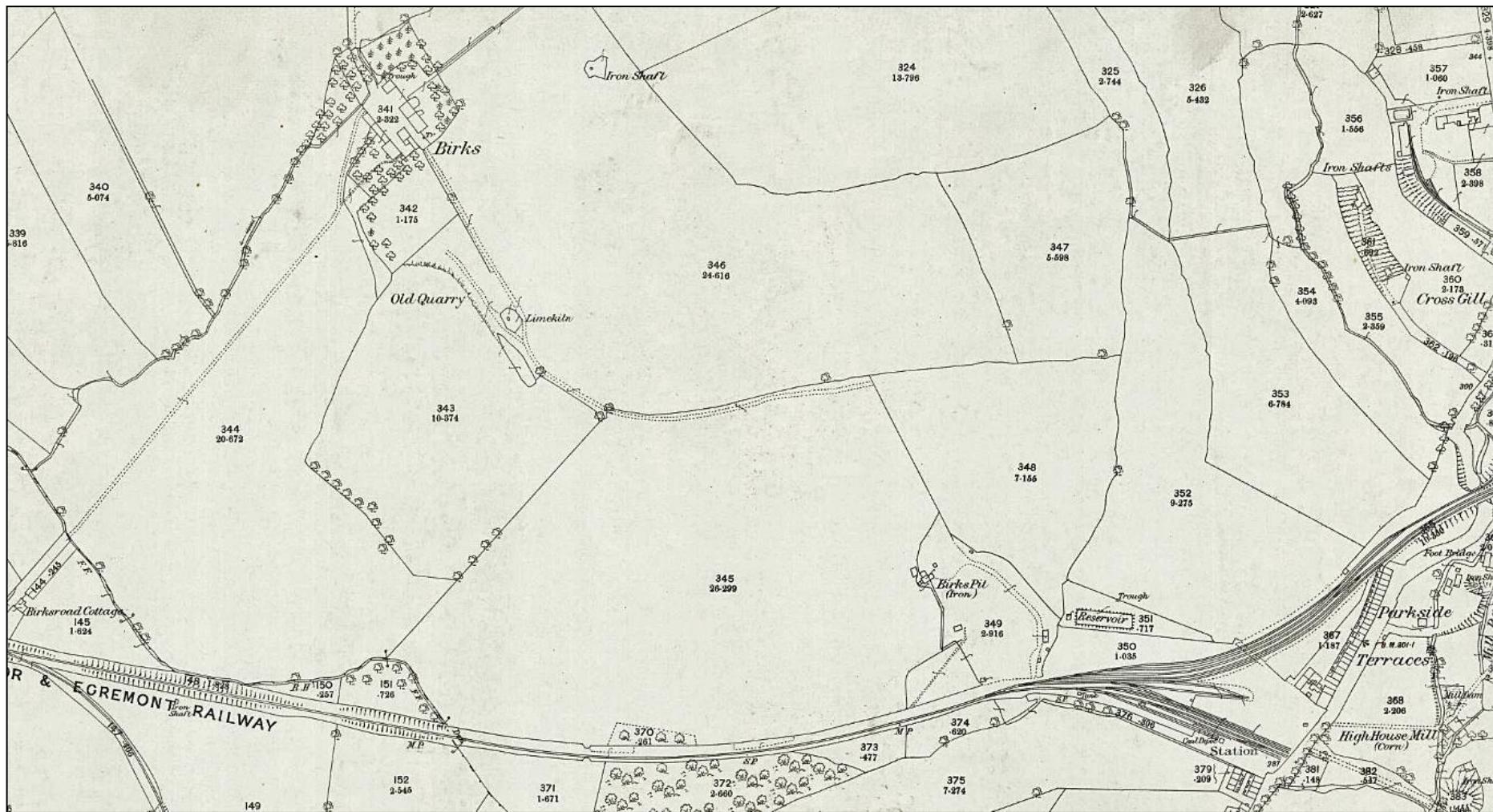
1901 Final meeting of the company held on 18th July 1901 to receive the liquidator's report.^{xliv}

1919 Lease of Iron ore mines under the Birks Estate in the parish of Arlecdon, Cumberland granted. From the Trustees of the late Baroness de Sternberg to the Parkside Mining Company. Term: 21 years from 1 July 1917. Rent: £250 p.a., plus royalties, 11 June 1918.^{xlv} At this time, Parkside Mining Co were operating the neighbouring Parkside and Crossgill mines.

1920 The Parkside and Birks Mining Company Limited ([company number 171170](#)) incorporated. On 30 Dec 1920 a license was granted by Baroness De Sternberg's Trust to assign the lease of the Birks Royalty from the Parkside Mining Company to the Parkside and Birks Mining Company Limited.^{xlvii} There is evidence that the company was owned in part or in whole by the North Lonsdale Iron and Steel Company Limited, but specifics are unknown.

1923 Ordnance Survey map shows Birks Iron Ore Works, located between the old No 1 and No 7 pits.

1934 At an EGM, held at the offices of the North Lonsdale Iron and Steel Company Limited on 20 Apr 1934, a decision was taken to wind up the Parkside and Birks Mining Company Limited due to its liabilities. J Arthur Jackson chairman, G H Muriel secretary.^{xlviii}



Ordnance Survey Map, 1860 Survey, showing Birks Iron Ore Mine. Later known as No 1 Pit.

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Ordnance Survey Map, 1898 Survey, showing Birks Iron Ore Mine (disused).

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Ordnance Survey Map, 1923 Survey, showing Birks Iron Ore Mine (disused).

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