



Rosedale and the Industrial Revolution

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Tourists arriving in Rosedale 150 years ago (and there were a few even then) would have noticed a landscape of two parts. The upper dale-sides were covered in industrial installations resulting from the ironstone extraction and processing which was at its height, with a railway looping around Dale Head above the farms of the lower dale-sides, their fields full of crops and livestock. Miners poured in, along with railwaymen, attendant tradesmen and their families, from across the country and beyond. In the centre of this activity, Rosedale Abbey village was experiencing an almost total rebuild as significant amounts of money came into the dale for the first time in hundreds of years.

Mining was not exactly new to Rosedale. For many centuries, ironstone extraction had been carried out on a small scale. Excellent quality freestone provided blocks for buildings, and jet mining was a lucrative business during the mid 19th century, when pannier-loads taken by donkey to Whitby could make £500 for a few impecunious miners. But what was to happen in Rosedale through ironstone extraction was beyond the imagination of the community.

The first mines at Hollins (Low Works) at Rosedale West Side opened in 1856. The ironstone attracted big investors due to the unusually high content of iron, a geological anomaly which is still not fully understood.

George Leeman, the York MP and railway magnate, joined forces with Alexander Clunes Sherriff, a Worcestershire MP, and Isaac Hartas, owner of the local Wrelton ironworks. By 1861 the need for a railway to transport the most valuable ironstone in Britain had been addressed with the opening of an 11.5-mile stretch from Rosedale to the Ingleby Incline, running across a deserted moorland landscape. This line was built in 15 months through two winters by itinerant navy gangs: the remains of their turf huts can still be seen near Dale Head. The connection onward to Battersby Junction and then to the processing plants of Cleveland and Durham allowed the partners to expand their business. By 1865 both sides of the dale were linked by rail, and mining activity increased due to world demand. Calcining (roasting) in three sets of gigantic kilns allowed transportation with less cost, and the high-grade ore made Rosedale an important player in the Industrial Revolution.

More than 100 miners' and railwaymen's cottages were built at the height of the boom. Miners' families formed their own communities on the exposed hillsides while farmers got on with their lives as they had for centuries. Many of the tenant farmers lived on the poverty line but in some cases, a son would find a job in the mines or on the railway, bringing in much-needed extra income.

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Spare bed-space could accommodate a miner or maybe two or three, rotating (known as hot-bedding) as a shift ended.

This change and influx of people must have proved both daunting and exciting for the farming community. Benefits came from more schools and chapels, more money spent in the two inns, greater variety of goods in the shops, and a policeman. The behaviour of some of the incomers left something to be desired so police cells were opened for offenders to 'cool off' before appearing at the magistrates' court in Pickering.

Well over ten million tons of iron ore were transported across these bleak, often snow-covered, moors in the course of the railway's 68-year history. From periods of high production of armaments during the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s, to the decline in the 1920s after the First World War, men and their families came and went in their hundreds. The population fluctuated accordingly.

It rose from 755 in 1851 to 3,024 in 1871, and reportedly a great deal more later in the 1870s. But in the 1920s the price of iron dropped, in 1929 the railway closed, and by 1931 the industrial age in Rosedale was past: the population was now just 498.

The visitors who walk, cycle and ride the railway line nowadays are often unaware of its industrial past and the importance of Rosedale's 'magnetic', high grade ironstone to the iron production of Cleveland and Durham. The remains of the giant kilns still dominate the landscape and the dale is still marked in many places by ruined dwellings and other structures to remind us of 70 years of mining. The remaining cottages make comfortable homes in a glorious setting. Farming continues, albeit on a reduced scale. Now the curlew and the ring ouzel fly unhindered through clear air, and rare plant species thrive in what was once a heavy industrial landscape.



Find out more

Former industrial sites can be visited on walks from Blakey Ridge and Rosedale Abbey.

Rosedale History Society, <http://rosedale.ryedaleconnect.org.uk/history-contacts/>

'Land of Iron' heritage project, <http://www.northyorkmoors.org.uk/looking-after/landofiron>

'Rosedale Mines and Railway' by R.H. Hayes and J.G. Rutter (1984)



Calcining kilns, Rosedale