

## Lowca - Industry & Innovation

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## Industry & Innovation

Life in Lowca once centred around several industries - an iron foundry (1840 - 1921), a coke and chemical plant and also a coal pit. Most people in the village worked in these industries

### Iron

In 1800, brothers Adam, Thomas and Crosby Heslop established an iron foundry and engineering business by the mouth of the Lowca Beck. The company was known as "Heslops, Milward, Johnston & Co." which was taken over by local iron mining partnership Tulk & Ley around 1837 which began a long tradition of locomotive manufacture.

Tulk & Ley attempted to move into the shipbuilding business in 1842-3, constructing *Lowca*, the first iron ship ever launched in Cumberland. The *Lowca* was a 121 ton iron schooner and was launched on the 26th July 1843.

The *Lowca's* maiden voyage was from Ardrossan to the Cape Verdes but was unsuccessful and the ship had to be towed to Londonderry by steamship after losing both masts in a gale. The *Lowca* was refitted but only sailed from Londonderry in January 1844, again bound for the Cape Verdes. She subsequently took a salt cargo to Rio Grande, then carried on to Valparaiso, Chile. She is reputed to have been the first vessel with wire rigging to round Cape Horn

In 1857 the business was sold again, to Fletcher Jennings & Co who continued locomotive production and supplied the specially commissioned Talylyn Locomotive No 1 to carry slate from the Welsh

mines on the Talyllyn Railway in Snowdonia.

Other goods such as bridge girders, and blast-furnace shells for the burgeoning local iron industry, were also produced. By then nearly two hundred locomotives had been built and the company acquired limited liability as Lowca Engineering Company Ltd.

In 1905, the name changed again to the New Lowca Engineering Company Ltd but it was short-lived. Orders had fallen and, after a disastrous fire in 1912 all production ceased, the company being finally wound up in 1927.

## Coal

Lowca also had large reserves of coal, which were mined for centuries, providing even more employment than the engineering works. In 1911 a chemical works was established to exploit the latest coal by-product technologies. The chemical plant was 'shelled' by a German U-boat (V24) during WW1 (16.08.1915 at 4.25am) the target being the coke ovens at Lowca. When the shelling began, a valve operator on duty released flaming gas into the atmosphere, which convinced the Germans their target had been hit and the U-boat submerged. In fact there was only limited damage and no injuries.

Unfortunately, the explosion at Lowca No 10 Pit in 1946 was not so harmless, and killed 15 men. At the time of the explosion the pit was producing about 3,000 tons per week from the Main Band seam. 770 people were employed, 240 (30 being women) on the surface, 195 at the coal face and 335 elsewhere below ground. The Main Band in the No. 2 District where the explosion occurred was 1½ miles from the shaft.

The explosion occurred about 2 hours after the start of the day shift on a Monday morning. Normally there were about 250 men underground but on this day only 208 were at work. (This level of absenteeism was common for a Monday morning and was known to have "saved" more than one man who had not turned in. That the explosion was one of firedamp is without question. The source of ignition is however a mystery.

## Rail

The village used to be served by Lowca railway station on the Lowca Light Railway which connected with the Cleator & Workington junction railway at Harrington. In 1909 the Workington Iron & Steel Company took over both Derwent Ironworks and Lowca Colliery but experienced difficulty in getting employees to the works at Lowca, an awkward location perched directly on top of unstable cliffs above the coastline. The problem was solved two years later when Harrington & Lowca Light Railway was granted permission to operate its own workmen trains over the tracks to Rosehill Junction and then over the mineral line to Lowca Station.

The services were successful and in order to introduce public passenger trains formal authorisation was obtained for the Harrington & Lowca Light Railway. It opened in June 1913 with four trains each way between Workington and Lowca but it only lasted twelve years and the tracks were subsequently taken over by United Steel Company (later British Steel) the successor to the Workington Iron & Steel Company.

## Bricks

Micklam brickworks, also at Lowca, produced firebricks (heat resistant) from Harrington clay to line the stoves of the nearby Moss Bay Iron Works.

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