

Background Information:

What is Coal?



Coal is a rock. It is usually black and can be shiny. The rock is sometimes flaky or dusty, and will often break very easily.



A piece of coal from the seams below Caphouse Colliery.
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Coal is a sedimentary rock. This means it was deposited on the surface in a layer through a natural process. Layers of coal are called seams; layers of rock, strata.



Coal seams and other layers of rock in an open-cast mine.
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Coal comes from trees and plants that once formed giant swampy jungles. When the plant life died, it did not rot away, but instead became buried by layers of sand and mud. Slowly over time, the layers of dead plants became buried deeper underground, and were squashed by the layers of sediment above. Over millions of years these layers of dead plants became seams of coal.

In the United Kingdom, coal seams are found in a variety of places, including Yorkshire and Lancashire, the East Midlands, Kent, the North-East of England, South Wales and in parts of Scotland. These seams were deposited over 300 million years ago.

Coal is different from many other rocks. Because it has been formed from the remains of woody plants, it can be burned. This means it can be used as a fuel for fires and furnaces, and as an energy source to make gas and electricity.

During the Industrial Revolution, a lot of coal was needed to fuel steam engines that powered factories, trains and boats. Today some people still use coal for fires at home. Coal is also used as fuel in some electricity generation plants.

In order to get coal, mine workers have to dig deep underground. Working underground can be difficult because it is dark and because there is not much space. Mining coal is also very physical work, and there are many dangers.



Find out more about coal, how it was formed and how it can be used on site at the Museum in the Coal Interface Gallery and on the underground tour.

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