

The Cotgrave Mine

Overview

There can be little doubt that the single most significant thing to happen in Cotgrave concerned the opening of the coal mine in 1963 and an obvious measure of this is the sudden dramatic increase in village population. The 1939 census records this as being 704, while in 2001 the number was more than ten times greater – 7373. Something over 1500 mining families took advantage of The National Coal Board's offer of tied accommodation (complete with furnishings!), together with the attraction of working in a

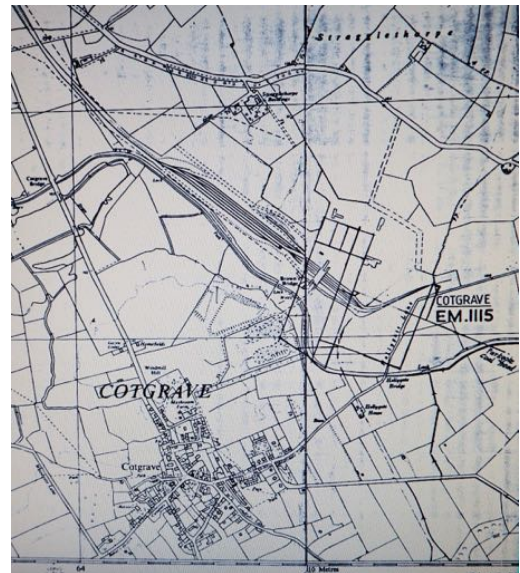


'modern' mine (complete with showers!). Initially, some 500 miners came from the recently closed Radford mine, north-west of Nottingham, then in 1966 the offer was extended to mining families from Durham in the North-East (together with a small number from South Wales). While one can appreciate the personal upheaval involved, on the one hand, in their moving from well-established, family-friendly environments with long mining histories, there must be equal sympathy for the trauma experienced by a small farming community, numerically swamped by an alien invasion on such a scale. The village had absolutely no history of mining. Bear in mind that Cotgrave, though located close to the edge of the Nottingham Coalfield, was certainly not part of it, the Cotgrave mine being the very first to be opened to the south of the river Trent. Here was a social experiment on a grand scale which inevitably carried stresses for both parties. Though there were numerous examples of miners moving between established mines within, say, the Nottingham Coalfield, as elderly mines closed down and new ones opened, the Cotgrave experiment involved not only much greater distances (and, implicitly, major severance of family ties) but a complete change of environment – for both sides. It also involved a much larger scale – typical UK mines employed something like two to five hundred workers, compared with Cotgrave's two thousand, and this, alone, was something of a new experience for the incoming workforce. Many of the men found the sheer size of the Cotgrave facility impersonal and unfriendly, compared with the much smaller mines from which they had been obliged to move. There were, indeed, quite a number of changes of mind but almost all were the result of wives, rather than men, being unable to cope. The lack of family connections – mum in the next street, aunts in the next village, cousins no more than a few miles distant – proved to be more than some wives could deal with, while their husbands could always rely on that masculine fellowship which was an essential feature of close working in dangerous and difficult conditions. Clearly, the vast majority stayed on and made the best of a sometimes stressful situation. They had, at least, the consolation of speaking a common dialect, Geordie accents still being commonplace in the village even today (2018). But perhaps one should rather be asking how the Nottinghamshire minority managed to cope with this sudden influx of alien sounds?

It cannot have been easy, particularly for the elderly. And there was, of course, a serious side to the ‘language’ problem, it being important to make sure the miners, themselves, could understand one another – this could be a matter of life and death. What other aspects of village life might be affected by this influx of relatively youthful humanity? In this context, it is interesting to compare quite different ways of looking at things and two Cotgrave residents I spoke to on the subject reflected opposite points of view. An elderly lady expressed shock at finding groups of youths enjoying a fight on Saturday evenings, just outside her house (no doubt on the way home from the pub), while a much younger man remembered the delights of Saturday evenings spent in the Miners’ Welfare. Prior to the arrival of the ‘alien hordes’, there would, of course, have been no snooker tables or dart boards to help pass leisure time. Add to this the excellent entertainments provided on a regular basis in the impressive concert hall and one can appreciate the positive side of the new regime, as seen by the local populace.

Meanwhile, if the opening of the mine represents the most significant happening in the village, its closure in 1993 surely counts as the second most significant occurrence. All the rhetoric and promise of a wonderful mining future for this ‘modern’ and progressive mine had come to nothing. Men who had committed themselves to this golden future when in their twenties were left jobless in their fifties, too young to face genuine retirement, too old to learn a new trade. Two thousand able-bodied men were suddenly thrown onto a job-market far too small to accommodate more than a tiny fraction of them. It was not so much the loss of earnings – National Coal Board redundancy terms could scarcely be described as miserly – but the shame associated with the inevitable feeling of uselessness.

The story is told of the ex-mineworker, then working as a car washer, doing his best to avoid meeting the village Rector, Brian Barrowdale, for sheer shame at his new occupation. Barrowdale had been a friend to all his parishioners and, notably, made a point of offering total support to those involved in the 1984-5 miners’ strike, often turning up on picket lines in his black cassock and (rumour has it) sometimes wearing a tin helmet! Even so, this poor chap just couldn’t bring himself to meeting his friend in the village street – such was the social stigma associated with loss of status. Mention of it, also offers the opportunity to list the strike as, perhaps, the third most significant thing to happen in Cotgrave. It involved only a tiny fraction of the workforce, the vast majority of Nottinghamshire miners opting to continue working, but it still evoked strong feelings, feelings strong enough to leave deep scars in the village social structure. Even today, it can be an extremely difficult subject for many of those involved to discuss. Let that, in itself, be proof of its importance, however distant and irrelevant it may seem to us today. Perhaps we should remind ourselves again of the numerical differences between the old farming workforce, measured as little more than a couple of hundred strong, and the new mining community, which, at its peak, amounted to two thousand. Anything relevant to this latter must inevitably take on a greater significance – keeping an appropriate sense of proportion is far from easy. So, how did it all come about?



Mining in Nottinghamshire

Coal mining in Nottinghamshire has a long history. To quote but a single example from its early days, we might simply note that the Ancaster stone used by Sir Francis Willoughby in the 1580s to face his magnificent new home, Wollaton Hall, was paid for out of coal-mining profits. Indeed, mining represented one of the most important industrial concerns in Nottinghamshire during the seventeenth century. The early mines were all shallow – once a surface seam was exhausted, miners simply moved on to the next one, the structure of the industry being somewhat haphazard and small in scale. Most of the coal was sold locally, transport being a major cost. Even in the middle of the eighteenth century a large proportion of Nottinghamshire coal was sold into the city of Nottingham itself. However, improved technology associated with the industrial revolution – steam-powered drainage pumps, canals and, later, railways - changed the economics of coal production and marketing so as to stimulate the development of deeper mines, employing greater numbers of workers, and much wider distribution of the ever-increasing amounts of coal.



Cotgrave, itself, was witness to one aspect of all this when the Nottingham-Grantham canal was opened in 1797, specifically for the transport of Nottinghamshire coal into Lincolnshire. It flourished until 1841, when it was sold to a railway company who (surprisingly?) allowed it to decay. However, it was the nineteenth century which saw the greatest increase in coal-mining – the 1870s saw no less than sixteen new mines opened in Nottinghamshire, with another twenty-five following over the period 1880-1910. Coal production reached 3.1 million tons in 1854, twelve million in 1880 and over 24 million in 1900, this latter figure being more than 10% of national output. By 1907, the Nottinghamshire industry employed over 35,000 men.

There was a downside to all this, of course. When a coal seam was exhausted, it was necessary to move on – there was no going back to easier pickings. Each new mine involved miners moving to new locations and gradually it became clear that coal was not an infinite resource. This is reflected by national figures, showing a gradual reduction in annual production between 1913 and 1990 from 260 to 130 million tonnes, while the number of men employed fell even more dramatically, from 1.1 million to only 100,000. Clearly, productivity was improving as the smaller, less efficient mines were closed.

FIG 1. UK COAL PRODUCTION
Deep mined and opencast, 1900-1992

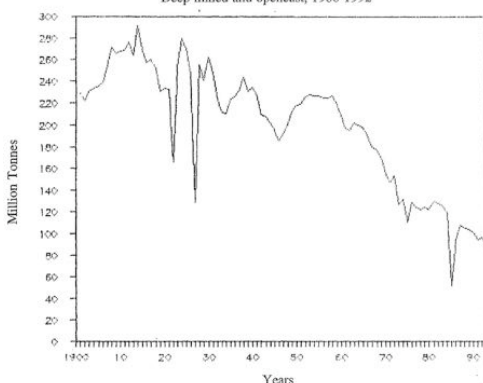
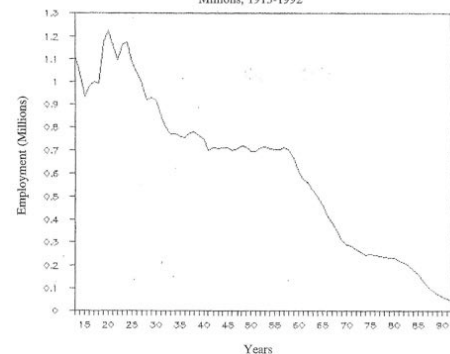


FIG 2. EMPLOYMENT IN BRITISH DEEP MINES
Millions, 1913-1992



There has been much argument, of course, concerning political ramifications, so it is interesting to look at data for the number of mines closed under the various Prime Ministers:

Government	Mines Closed	No. of Years	Rate (Number per Year)
Atlee (Lab)	101	4	25
Churchill (Con)	78	4	20
Eden (Con)	35	2	18
Macmillan (Con)	246	6	41
Home (Con)	24	1	24
Wilson (Lab)	235	6	40
Heath (Con)	26	4	6
Wilson (Lab)	18	3	6
Callaghan (Lab)	4	2	2
Thatcher (Con)	115	11	10
Major (Con)	55	7	8
Blair (Lab)	12	10	1
Brown (Lab)	1	3	0.3
Cam./Clegg (C/Lib)	2	5	0.4
Cameron (Con)	1	3	0.3

Only the most biased commentator could read political subterfuge into these figures (witness the carnage during the Wilson years) – it is clear that the main driving force for mine closure was one of commercial viability – though looking at it now from the viewpoint of global warming and pollution control we can see it as being inevitable. But let us not forget that, at the time, each closure had serious personal consequences for a great many hard-working individuals.

Nottinghamshire coal output was no exception to the national trend. From 1995 to 2007 it fell from just over eight million tons to about two-and-a-half million and 2015 saw the closure of the last working mine, that at Thoresby. Having said that, it should not be forgotten that during the 1960s a large fraction of the nation's electricity supply came from the burning of coal and it was never going to be an easy task to replace that with some other source, be it oil or something less polluting. It was in this troubled context that we must view the decision to open the mine in Cotgrave.

Cotgrave Colliery 1958-1992

Coal had been found near Cotgrave during the early 1950s and there appeared a possibility of using Cotgrave mine-shafts to extract coal from the huge area represented by the Vale of Belvoir. It was therefore decided to go ahead and open a new mine on a much larger scale than had been common in the past – this, indeed, was to be one of the National Coal Board's 'jewels in the crown', one of only very few new pits to be opened in the 1950s.



A grand opening ceremony was mounted in 1954 at which Princess Margaret, accompanied by the NCB boss, Lord Robens, was to cut the first sod. Perhaps it was prophetic, in view of later problems, but the ceremony had to be moved from its planned position to a dryer spot – high heels having a tendency to embarrass their wearer when planted on waterlogged turf! The first of two shafts was sunk in 1956, the second in 1959, the so-called ‘sinkers’ being recruited from relatively local mines in the Nottinghamshire Coalfield,

particularly from Calverton. Then, in 1962, when serious mining operations were due to begin, some 500 miners and families were tempted to move from Radford (NW of Nottingham) by the offer of tied houses, purpose-built by the NCB. A similar scheme, in 1966, attracted many more mining families from redundant mines in the north-east of England. As emphasised in the introduction, over a period of about five years, the Cotgrave population shot up from something like 700 to slightly more than 7000.



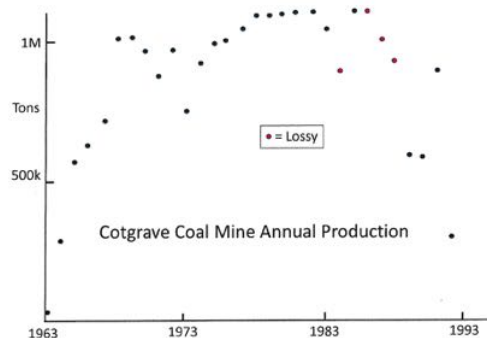
The mine was located in what is now the Cotgrave Country Park and the new Hollygate housing development, with access from the Stragglethorpe Road. The two shafts were designed as being 24 feet in diameter, No. 1 being 729 yards and No.2 626 yards deep. However, parts of the concrete linings were attacked by sulphates present in the strata and the necessary repairs reduced the diameters to 22’ 6”’. This was just another problem to bedevil the workings, much angst being caused also by drainage difficulties and instabilities, not foreseen in early calculations of performance. The twin-



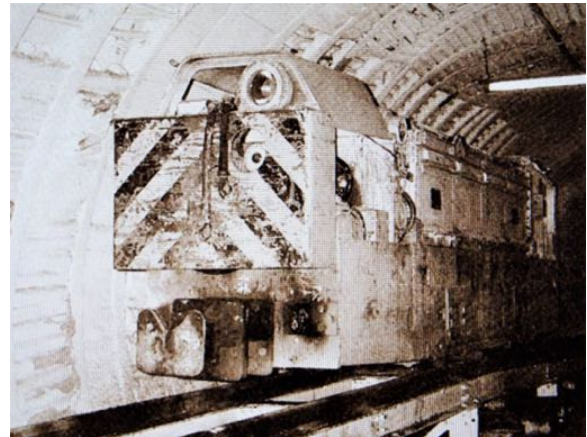
towered headgears were a modern innovation, giving the mine an unusual appearance, quite different from typical winding gear. They housed 1800 HP Koepe multi-rope winding engines which could raise about 560 tonnes, at something like 37 windings per hour. Below ground, coal could be transported by a series of 2’ 6” gauge battery-powered locomotives. In spite of the early promise of the availability of many seams, only two were seriously worked. These were known as ‘Deep

Soft’ and ‘Deep Hard’. The former was worked from 1964 to 1979 but had to be abandoned as a result of excessive floor lift, the latter from 1968 to 1990. Preliminary experiments with the ‘Blackshale’ seam were abandoned in 1992 when the future of the mine itself was under threat.

Production actually began in 1963, with output reaching 270,000 tonnes in 1964, from 596 men. An output of just over 1 million tonnes was achieved in 1968/9, with 1,279 men. Maximum output, achieved in 1980/1, was 1,238,506 tonnes with 1,808 men



Typically, the annual output per Cotgrave miner was in the region of 600/700 tonnes, which may be compared with figures of order 300/400 for the country as a whole (at the same time). The whole of this production was shipped by special trains to the Radcliffe-on-Soar power station, a major part of the effort required to maintain the nation's electricity supply. Though the mine was initially profitable, ever-greater problems with water and instabilities strained productivity to a maximum and there were several yearly losses in the 1980s (one as much as £10 million) which meant that, overall, the mine lost money. Clearly, commercial considerations were saying it was time to cut losses and close the mine and, though the large numbers of threatened job losses led to a stay of execution, ultimately, in 1993, the decision was made and the shafts were filled in. After just thirty years promise had turned to disappointment and Cotgrave was a very much sadder place. It was said, that there were still vast quantities of coal left in the ground but it was obvious that geological problems were of a much higher order than could ever have been predicted – the final outcome was probably inevitable.



However, it would be wrong to put all the emphasis on negative aspects – there was much to be seen in a favourable light. Several extracts from Angela Franks' little book 'Nottingham Miners' Tales' are worth quoting. For example, Cotgrave miners were generous in contributing to local charities, such as a children's ward at QMC. This included an annual Skegness to Nottingham walk which raised £2,000. It is also worth emphasising the strength of comradeship built up within mining communities. She tells the story of the ex-miner who later took a job as a local maths master and was having a difficult time interviewing a burly Cotgrave miner who accused him of 'slippering' his son. That was until he mentioned the fact that he had also been a miner, from which point the two of them exchanged recollections of their days in the mine, the Cotgrave man ending the discussion with the admonition "If he upsets you again, just belt him!"

We also learn some interesting facts concerning life in the Cotgrave mine. It was obvious that no-one was allowed to take cigarettes down the mine and any miner caught with them on his person could immediately start looking for another job. However, there were permissible alternatives in the shape of chewing tobacco or the taking of snuff and it seems there were numerous varieties, such as white snuff, brown snuff strawberry snuff and, no doubt, other exotic possibilities. Stan Stanton, who started work in the Cotgrave mine in 1972 recalls that several of his colleagues came from other disciplines, including one who was qualified as a schoolteacher. When asked why he preferred working in the mine, he replied that he could earn more money than he ever could as a teacher! Rates of pay couldn't have been all that bad! Safety was a serious matter, of course and Stanton refers to the case of miners who were responsible for driving the trains which drew trucks of coal back to the mine shaft. There were strict rules concerning the number of such trucks and he relates several examples of miners who broke the rules and suffered frightening consequences on account of the steep gradients encountered due to geological problems. In several cases, drivers were obliged to leap off the train and leave it to crash out of control! Sadly, he also describes how a friend of his was killed when taking an illegal ride on the coal conveyor belt. Life could be both hard and dangerous, no matter what the advantages of up-to-date technology.

The 1984/5 Miner's Strike

The 1984/5 strike was one of the most violent and divisive confrontations ever experienced in the UK. It lasted for a year and was seen by many as a personal battle between the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Arthur Scargill. It followed an earlier strike over mine closure which was successful in defeating Edward Heath's government. This latter success had been built on the fact that, at that time, the country was short of coal stocks but Thatcher made sure this was not the case in 1984. It was notionally a battle to oppose mine closure and Scargill took the extreme view that no mine should ever be closed on financial grounds – even when the remaining coal was difficult to extract. The strike started in Yorkshire and was strongly supported there (also in Wales) but Nottinghamshire miners were, to say the least, rather lukewarm about it. Only 20% voted in favour of strike action initially and support later fell to 15%. The excessive actions of Yorkshire pickets probably did little to help.

Looked at from the national viewpoint, the NUM was seriously divided, the Yorkshire, Kent and South Wales branches, for example, favouring strike action in the interest of saving jobs, while the Nottingham and Leicester branches voted against. The crucial factor was that Scargill never allowed the Union a National vote – there were only votes at Area level. This ran against earlier practice (there had, for example, been a National vote in the successful strike against the Heath Government) and probably arose because he feared any National vote would go against striking. The view of the Nottingham Branch members was that a strike would only be legally valid if there was a National vote in favour, so their decision to continue working was based on previous practice. Their opponents accused them of being 'scabs' but they maintained they were acting on strict NUM rules. They were also accused of voting against strike action because they were confident that jobs in the Nottingham area were safe, whereas, in fact, several Nottinghamshire mines were being closed, so there was no firm evidence to support such accusations. A particular bone of contention was the use of pickets from the Yorkshire area (largely from Doncaster) in an attempt to persuade Nottingham miners not to work. What is more, I understand that the NUM actually paid cash-strapped Nottingham University students to act as pickets at the Cotgrave site! Also of major concern was the violent behaviour of many of the pickets. Stan Stanton, a Cotgrave miner, remembered going through picket lines: "There were thousands of them – I've never seen so many pickets in my life. They were kicking cars --- so we decided to go in on the bus. And they were throwing things at the bus and shouting 'Scabs'" He also commented on the fact that many Yorkshire pickets became rowdier and rowdier during the afternoon, having spent lunchtime in pubs, making him wonder how supposed striking miners could actually *afford* to get drunk! Scargill claimed that crossing a picket line was totally unacceptable behaviour but one must surely question the validity of such argument when the pickets came from a different area or, even more so, when they were non-miners doing the job purely for money. This situation simply emphasises the important (though often overlooked) fact that the NUM was not a truly National Union – it was only a federation of Area Unions. What right, therefore, had the Yorkshire miners to influence Nottingham miners' decision to continue working, when there had been no National vote for or against strike action? However one might answer this question, there can be no doubt over the ultimate union catastrophe – large swathes of Nottingham miners left the NUM and formed their own Union, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, or UDM. Quoting again from Stan Stanton: "The problem was that Cotgrave had UDM and NUM people working side by side and some people never spoke to their friends ever again. --- We had a particular family, the son was a big UDM man and the father was an NUM and I don't think they ever spoke again.". Such was the intensity of feeling engendered by this ill-favoured strike.

An interesting feature of all this was the fact that, though a majority of the Cotgrave workers came from Durham, Cotgrave voted very much in line with other Nottingham branches. Whilst I have almost no hard information concerning the participation of Cotgrave miners, one might suppose they would be aware of the somewhat parlous financial state of the Cotgrave Colliery – in 1984/5 the activity made its first significant loss of £7.852 million! – whilst it was probably not altogether clear that things were to get very much worse towards the end of the decade. What is clear is that a small group of Cotgrave miners (estimated to be roughly 5% of the workforce) did join the strike and that feelings ran high between them and their working colleagues. As we saw above, it was a strike which divided families, communities and, indeed, the UK as a whole, to such an extent that those concerned still find it difficult to discuss it, even today, some thirty years later.

Fatal Accidents

There are ten fatal accidents recorded at the Cotgrave Colliery:

Aston Knight 34, Walter Street Nottingham	37	09-07-1959	Fell from winding tower onto surface
David Walter Brown Northwood Avenue Darley Dale	28	29-11-1961	Electrocuted – on the surface
William Patrick Paddern 18, Manor Road Keyworth	46	07-04-1962	Fell down shaft
Harry Addin Taylor Goverton Bleasbey	42	13-07-1965	Fell down shaft
Charles Edward Woodward 16, Lawrence Street Nottingham	48	16-10-1965	Caught in Machinery
Alexander Massie Ringleas Cotgrave	?	18-12-1977	Caught in Machinery
William Robert Cummings	45	1982	Hit by Machinery
Steven Henrye Wiczorek Colston Gate Cotgrave	26	09-04-1983	Crushed by Machinery

James Wildeman ? ? ?

Stuart Martin 28 01-09-1989 Electrocuted Underground
Walnut Road
Bottesford

Sociological Aspects

It would be easy (but, perhaps, naïve?) to imagine that the coming of the mine had a seriously disruptive effect on Cotgrave village life. However, the impression I have gained from talking to (an admittedly small) selection of people is that there was surprisingly little animosity between farmers and miners, or between their respective wives and families. On the one hand, it was clear that there could be no competition for jobs between the two communities, their respective skills being worlds apart. On the other hand, the coming of the miners in such large numbers meant that it was inevitable that village facilities must surely improve to cater for rapidly increasing demand. Two obvious examples of this concerned shopping facilities and health provision. Prior to the miners' arrival, the village was served largely by a couple of local butchers' shops (Beaumont's and Brumpton's) and by a travelling vegetable lorry and a baker's van. Choice was therefore somewhat limited. Initially, the miners' wives were obliged to make do with such facilities but it could only be a matter of time before the pressure of increasing demand led to the opening of more shops and the availability of wider choice. On the new miners' estate a small Co-Op 'Wooden Hut' offered limited provision but, for the most part the wives were obliged to walk down to the old village, where John Beaumont expanded his butcher's shop to include a range of vegetables and other daily requisites (It has, more recently been taken over by Sainsbury's in the shape of a small supermarket.) The more significant improvement came in the mid-1960s when the Precinct was developed and the whole village much appreciated the improvement in shopping facilities. It also saved miners' wives the long walk from the new estate to the centre of the village. On the other hand, postal and telephone services were still located at the village centre, the only telephone kiosk being just opposite the Post Office itself. Imagine having a three-quarter mile walk to make a phone call!

Medical services were certainly primitive by modern standards. Prior to the enlargement of the village, the only way to see a doctor involved a visit to a very small surgery located in the present-day veterinary building in Candleby Lane. A doctor could be consulted only on certain days in each week and under conditions which today we would certainly find totally unacceptable. The surgery was so small that patients were obliged to queue outside (even in the rain!) and there was no privacy whatsoever – those waiting could hear every word exchanged between patient and doctor. It was only in 1969 that a new surgery was opened in the Precinct, a development obviously stimulated by the increased demand and much appreciated by local people as well as by the newcomers.





The opening of the Miners' Welfare in 1966 was a particularly important development and one which was used by villagers as well as miners for the enjoyment of a variety of cabaret acts, musical events and, of course, bingo. It clearly offered a facility which was largely lacking in the days before the village expanded. A new pub, the Black Diamond was opened in Owthorpe Road specifically for use by the mining community but many of the miners preferred to join local villagers in the Manvers Arms and the Rose and Crown. The Miners' Welfare also provided excellent

facilities for sports. There had, of course, always been cricket and football clubs in the village, (though the former became buried under a spoil heap from the coal mine!) but the welfare offered a range of sporting activities, including football, rugby, cricket, judo, wrestling, boxing, athletics and snooker. It was obvious that the increased size of the village led to considerable expansion in the range of sports made available.

While the NCB built some 1500 homes for the incoming miners and their families, they made no attempt to provide any other facility. In particular, the roads in and around the new estate were left in a disgraceful condition, nor did the NCB make any contribution to the building of schools. It took some time before things improved in these respects but by 1966 the roads had been improved sufficiently that a regular, hourly bus service (Barton) ran from the estate to Nottingham – again, a development appreciated by both communities. The only school in Cotgrave was the Church of England Primary School originally opened in the 1860s for one hundred pupils. It was clear that a much larger facility was urgently needed and the Candleby Lane Primary School was eventually opened in 2006 by combining three earlier schools. It has places for approximately 600 pupils.

John Orton 2018