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Peat exploitation on Thorne Moors. A case-study from the Yorkshire-Lincolnshire border 1626-1963, with integrated notes on Hatfield Moors

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PEAT EXPLOITATION ON THORNE MOORS

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ABSTRACT

In its industrial heyday, Thorne Moors was the most extensive commercial peat operation in Britain. It became closely tied to nearby Hatfield Moors, and at both the methods of exploitation were essentially the same. Although much of Thorne Moors is situated in Yorkshire, the eastern extent lies in Lincolnshire. Recognizable differences in scale and methodology existed between the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire parts.

After regional drainage in the 1620-30s, there was increased trade in the peat of Thorne Moors along the River Don. A succession of uses included unrefined and refined fuel, products from carbonization and distillation, and moss litter for working horses. From the mid-19th century, companies were formed to exploit the new uses, especially moss litter, and export became increasingly focused on railways. In 1896, the British Moss Litter Co. Ltd was set up (restructured 1899) to assume the Thorne/Hatfield interests of several smaller companies, including the Anglo-Dutch Griendtsveen Moss Litter Co. Ltd. The British Moss Litter Co. was acquired by Fisons Ltd in 1963.

Following a contextual history, descriptions are given of both muscle-powered peat winning and transportation methodologies. These comprise exploitation in the 17th and 18th centuries, an examination of the 19th century writings of William Casson, and written allusions spanning 1863-1963. Information is imparted on the Griendtsveen Moss Litter Co. In addition to creating a 'Dutch' peat canal system, this company introduced an immigrant Dutch workforce, proficient in their native methods and intended inter alia to retrain local workers looking for employment with Griendtsveen. Dutch methodology persisted alongside the local methods for c.60 years. Accounts are also presented of the evolutionary limit of indigenous peat winning, and the use of narrow gauge railways. Finally the transition to mechanisation of peat cutting and narrow gauge haulage is outlined.