

### The Black Cat Mystery.

The Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal was built essentially as a coal canal serving the numerous small collieries and pits in the Irwell Valley and around Little Lever, and Radcliffe. One of those pits was the Black Cat Colliery about half a mile north east of Mount Sion Works at Radcliffe, just off Cams Lane. The 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map marks it as Old Engine Pit – and that is a clue in solving an intriguing and enduring mystery.

On the bank of the River Irwell on the Radcliffe side of Mount Sion Works is a little-known structure known as the Mount Sion waterwheel. (SD 767 065) A small indentation is shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS on the riverside) There is some indirect evidence suggesting it was working by 1830, but it is no ordinary waterwheel for it has special rocking beams fitted above the wheel on two columns of masonry. The wheel, 12 feet in diameter, 5 feet in breadth was fed directly from the nearby goit. The function of the wheel was to pump water from the goit up to a higher level storage reservoir nearer to the old bleach works.

So what has that to do with the Black Cat and the canal? When I first saw the waterwheel some 40 years ago it struck me that the beams were surely from a Boulton and Watt Steam engine but it was not until recently it occurred me what might have happened.

I recall seeing a document (1797) in the Wilton Estate Office that alluded to a ‘fire engine’ used at Black Cat for – I guess – pumping water from what was then a wet and shallow pit. The construction of the Cockey Moor Culvert (mentioned in the preamble to the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal Act 1791) a tunnel that drained the collieries from Ainsworth, and Radcliffe, emptied into the Irwell at Mount Sion and including water from Black Cat. The pumping engine would no longer be needed when this linked to the pit, and Mount Sion lost an important supply of water as it went straight into the River Irwell. Another look at the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map clearly shows a ditch running south east to what was called in my younger days ‘The Creek’ once an important source of water for Mount Sion Works and later the Canal. (Roughly SD 768 071)

Could the rocking arms have belonged to the early Black Cat Boulton and Watt Pumping Engine? Could the essential parts of the Boulton and Watt engine have been the basis for the Mount Sion Waterwheel, the wheel taking the place of the boiler position? Only a shallow lift was required of about 20 feet to get the water into the storage lodge, it was a practical solution to their loss of water from Black Cat.

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Acknowledgement to Harry Taylor of Radcliffe for his help in locating the drainage ditch which is still largely intact.