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## Walk 7 The former coal mines of Swannington and Snibston

*A legacy of collieries and opencast sites, plus one of England's first railways*

*Distance: about 8 km (5 miles) Time: about 2½ hours*

This walk commences at the Snibston Discovery Park [1][SK 41774 14460], a major visitor attraction on the site of the former Snibston No.2 Colliery. This mine was opened by George Stephenson in 1832, at the time when he and his son Robert were building the Leicester and Swannington Railway — one of the earliest steam railways in the world, and the first public railway in the Midlands. Snibston produced its last coal in 1983 but the coal mined at the nearby Whitwick Colliery (now the site of Morrison's supermarket) and South Leicester Mine (at Ellistown) continued to be brought to the surface at Snibston until all mining ceased in 1986. This was part of the 'concealed coalfield', where Triassic strata, up to 100 m thick overlie the Coal Measures, so that the coal bearing rocks are not exposed at the surface.

Cars can be parked at the Snibston Discovery centre car park but note that the gates close at 5pm. Walk to the main road and turn left, crossing the road to follow the footpath down the left side of the primary school opposite. Follow through on to the Stephenson's Industrial Estate [2][SK 41693 15057] and turn right following the road around in a semi-circle until a footpath is reached leading up and over a timber footbridge crossing the railway. This industrial estate was once the site of a brickworks that utilised the locally mined coal and quarried the red Triassic mudstones which crop out here. Once over the bridge, follow the yellow waymarkers leading to the A511, Coalville bypass. Taking care, as this is a busy road, cross to the far side and over the stile to follow the gravel path bearing round to the left. Enter the woodland, and after 20 m turn right at the footpath, up a slope which comprises spoil from the nearby Snibston No.3 Colliery. The path leads to the site of the No.3 mine [3][SK 42030 15506] which closed in 1895 following many years of flooding problems. The mounted and preserved colliery winding wheel here comes from Ellistown Colliery (closed in 1989), and the smaller wheel was part of the emergency winding gear at Snibston No.2 Colliery. A length of railway track has also been relaid, along the alignment of the old Leicester and Swannington Railway track bed.

Cross Spring Lane and continue past a length of relaid railway track until you reach the excavated foundations of the Swannington Incline engine house [4][SK 42002 15768]. Constructed in 1832, this incline, at 1 in 17 or about 3°, was in use for 115 years. In the early days, coal was transported up the incline to serve the market in Leicester. In the latter days, coal was transported down the incline to the pumping station that was in use to pump water from all the mines that were by now disused. The original Stephenson steam winding engine is now preserved at the National Railway Museum in York. Information boards provide further details on the incline. As you descend the incline, towards Church Lane Bridge, which was renovated in 1994, you will see beds of roughly horizontal brown, Triassic Bromsgrove Sandstone in the sides of the cutting [5][SK 41914 15997].

Just past the bridge, turn left at the yellow marker post and cross the field towards the junction of Church Lane and Swannington Main Street. You have now reached the outcrop of the Coal Measures strata, although there are no exposures of the typical mudstones, siltstones and sandstones which are the dominant rock types. Turn right and, crossing to the left side of the Main Street, continue for about 200 m until you reach the Village Hall on your left. Immediately past the hall, turn left up a narrow footway until you reach the fields [6][SK 41428 16605] where you follow the yellow waymarkers across the fields. The area you are crossing, occupying much of the valley, was the site of the Limby Hall Opencast mine that was worked during the 1940s. The workings were back-filled after the excavation of the coal and the field boundaries have been reinstated so it is difficult to clearly delineate the worked areas. A tell-tale sign is the presence of concrete fence posts used widely to mark the field boundaries following back-filling of the site. The Five Feet and Minge coal seams were worked here.

On reaching Limby Hall Lane, notice the area of woodland on the north side [7][SK 41296 16721], to your left. This is the site of the Raper and Fenton Mine. Coal was transported along this lane by horse-drawn tramroad to the Charnwood Forest Canal at Thringstone. Turn right down Limby Hall Lane and after 150 m turn left at the footpath sign, head straight up hill following the left side of the hedgerow, do not cross the field diagonally.

When Gorse Field is reached [8][SK 41198 16953], the hummocky scrubland indicates the extensively worked ground, where the Minge Coal seam came to surface. Take time to wander through the site, where information boards have been provided describing the mining methods used. Numerous shallow pits and bell pits (pp.19 and 20) were sunk to extract the coal. These bell pits would have been served by horse gins to raise the coal to the surface. An example of a reconstructed gin, erected by the Swannington Heritage Trust, is seen in the north-east part of the site. Just beyond the horse gin, 100 m to the east, the site of Califat Colliery [9][SK 41218 17162] is marked by a memorial to the miners who died when the workings were flooded in October 1863. Flooding has always been a problem in the Swannington mines, and the Calcutta Colliery [10][SK 42006 16926], 800 m to the east, in the valley at Swannington Common, became the principal pumping station on closure in 1877. It served to drain all the major working mines in the Coalville district, and this continued until the abandonment of Whitwick Colliery in 1986. Looking eastwards across the valley, you may be able to glimpse the Calcutta headstock and pumping house. Together with the Snibston surface buildings and the associated two headstocks, these remain the sole reminders of 20th century mining in the Leicestershire Coalfield.

Follow the main track back through Gorse Field up to the Hough Windmill [11][SK 41038 17096] and then turn left along the footpath directly opposite the windmill.

Follow the hill crest for about 500 m and turn left down the lane. Before reaching the houses on the east side of the lane, the Five Feet coal seam is inferred as crossing the road. It is not possible to see the coal seam as it is beneath the ground, but geologists have mapped the area and believe that it is present at depth. Ignoring the first turning right, continue for 100 m and then turn right at the T junction, continuing another 80 m until you see the footpath sign on the left. Walk down the track and cross the small stream to follow the yellow waymarker posts up the hill. The Wilkins Sough, draining water from the nearby Silver Hill Mine emerged in this area [12][SK 40989 16272]. Records of the land hereabouts show coal mining took place as long ago as 1320. As you ascend the hill, you are now rising out of the Coal Measures and walking up the geological timescale into the younger Triassic Mercia Mudstone. You may remember that this was encountered earlier around Coalville and at the top of the Swannington Incline. Crossing over the hill crest, follow the footpath sign to the right of the field and descend onto an old bridleway where Triassic sandstones can be seen in the cutting [13][SK 41357 15859]. Farther down, the path cuts into the older Coal Measures rocks, but these are so weathered they are not readily recognisable.

On reaching the Swannington Main Street, turn left and then right at the Robin Hood Inn. Passing the right hand side of the pub, follow the left public byway. After 100 m, we have again passed upwards in time from the Coal Measures into the Triassic strata. About 500 m along this track, the steep rising ground on your left is all that remains of the spoil tip from the Snibston No.3 Colliery [14][SK 42030 15496]. You have now completed the circular route and can therefore retrace your steps across the A511, through the industrial estate and back to the Snibston Discovery Park. If time is available, the Discovery Park is well worth a visit, with much information on the mining and geology of the district on display. There are also tours of the surface buildings of the old colliery, which give an excellent insight into what was once the most important industry of north-west Leicestershire.

## Figures

(Figure 91) The former Snibston Colliery.

(Figure 92) Walk 7 Route map. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database rights 2011.

(Figure 93) Swannington incline today.

(Figure 94) Former railway line on the Swannington incline. Photographs © The National Railway Museum.

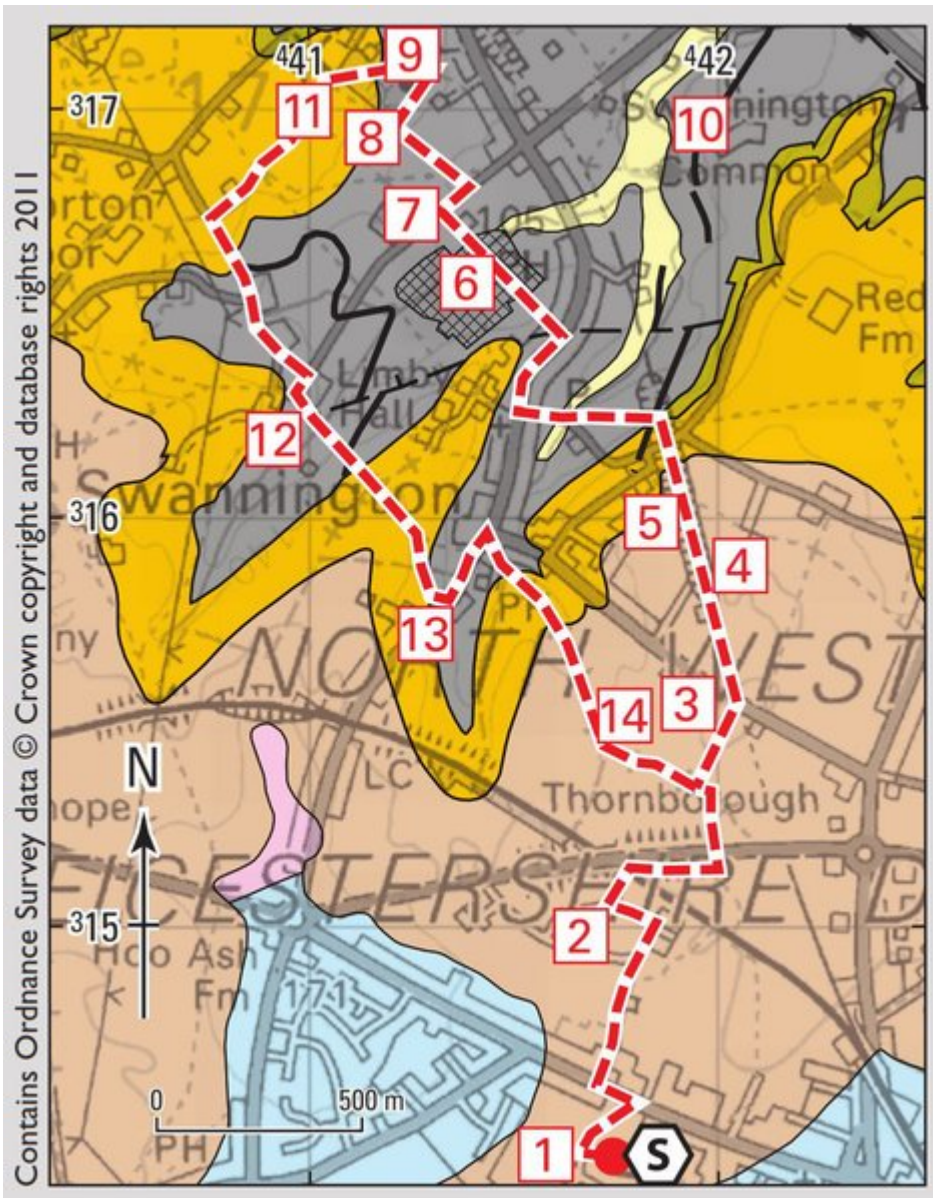
(Figure 95) View near Swannington looking across former opencast coal workings. Swannington windmill is in the distance.

(Figure 96) Model horse and winding gear for extracting coal from a bellpit. In the background is a former bellpit with winding gear.

(Figure 97) Headgear of the former Calcutta Pit, Swannington. This pumped all the water out of the Leicestershire coalfield up to 1991.



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