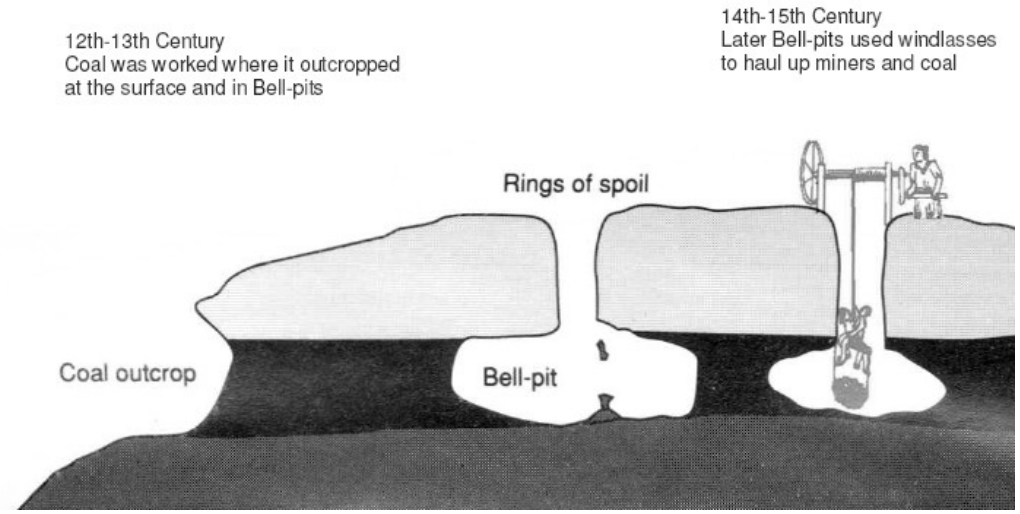
The Oldham Joneses: Where there's muck there's brass

Daniel Defoe on his *Tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain* (1724-27) coming upon the villages on the outskirts of Halifax from Blackstone Edge commented that "*...the sides of the hills, which were very steep every way, were spread with houses...the land being divided into small enclosures...then...I began to perceive the reason and nature of the thing, and found that this division of the land into small pieces,...was...done for the convenience of the business which the people were generally employed in...This business is the clothing trade,...(and) the reason is this;...that two things essential to the business...are found here...coals and running water upon the tops of the highest hills...(without which) the manufactures...could not be carried on.*"

As noted by Defoe, one critical factor in the growth of the cloth-making industry in the West Riding was the presence of coal. And indeed, it would be the ready availability of coal in Oldham that would lead to the huge growth in cotton spinning following the introduction of steam power to the mills in the late 18th century. Still, even in the mid 1600s, coal mining was already an important business in the town. Gerry Fanning in *Oldham Coal* (2001) puts forward evidence that primitive coal mines existed in the Werneth area in the 14th century. These "bell pits" or "chambers" may even have given the area its name of Chamber.



Early coal mining – bell or chamber pits.

Furthermore, there is strong written evidence presented in the Raines manuscripts (1828-78) of disputes in the early 1600s over coal mining rights between the local landowners (the Byrons of Royton, Taylors of Horsedge and the Cudworths and Tetlows of Werneth). Although, such evidence implies very early beginnings for coal mining in the area, these early mines were probably very small concerns worked by one or two men. The development of mining as a major industry with mines worked by 10s or 100s of workers would not occur until the middle of the 18th century.

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In *A history of Oldham* (1949) Hartley Bateson states that the expansion of coal mining in Oldham began with "*...the arrival in the town of two poor Welsh labourers, John Evans and William Jones, some time before 1770.*". This seems a strangely fanciful idea based, perhaps, solely on the preponderance of coalmines, Evanses and Joneses in Wales! Edwin Butterworth in *Historical sketches of Oldham* (1856) states that John Evans was the father of "*...the late Edward Evans of Dryclough...*", and K. McPhillips (*Oldham: The formative years*; 1981) seems to agree, stating of Edward Evans that "*...his father* [John] *had mined on Oldham Edge and he himself became an authority on mining techniques,...*". As for William Jones, Butterworth says that he was resident in Fogg lane, and was one of the first workers of a coal mine in the area. I can't say whether John Evans was from Wales, but I'm fairly confident that William Jones was not.

"There is abundance of good coal, and a colliery at Hanging Chadder... A family named Jones was long resident at Hanging Chadder. There is an account of the family in Notitia Cestr. ii, 102 n. Henry Jones, by will in 1678, was a benefactor to the poor. Edmund Jones in 1696 names his son Richard in his will; and Richard Jones, whose will was proved in 1722, names his son Edmund." – Thornham township, British History Online.

As can be seen from this extract, a family named Jones can be traced back to a will of 1678 in an area just west of Royton (Hanging Chadder). Likewise, the history of the Jones family of Oldham can certainly be traced to at least 1647. In 1722 a Joseph Jones, shoemaker, of Fogg lane (now King Street, the site of four Jones mansions in the 19th century) made a will that has been transcribed by the Rev. Raines. This Joseph Jones (along with James Taylor of Matthew Fold) was also named in a 6-month lease of premises to Alexander Radcliffe Esq. of Foxdenton in February 1702 for the princely sum of £225! Joseph Jones is also likely to be the one mentioned by Edwin Butterworth (1856) as a yeoman of Pits (later Fogg lane/King St), and the one baptized at Oldham Parish Church in July 1647, son of a Henry Jones. Butterworth suggests that this Joseph Jones had a son, also called Joseph, who then had a son named William (b. 1723), and that this William was the founder of the coal-mining empire to come (first pit sunk in Northmoor a few years before 1770).

Further information regarding the ancestry of the Jones family of Oldham may be gleaned from a list of Jones' wills included in the manuscripts of the Rev. Raines (wills in the Registry of Chester 1845):

John Jones of Hopwood Adm. Cum Inv. 10 June 1671
Rich. Jones of Bearshaw Will 14 Jan. 1672
Joseph Jones of Chadderton Will cum Inv. 16 Feb. 1674
Henry Jones of Hanging Chadder in Middleton Will 10 May 1678
Edm[d] Jones of Hanging Chadder Carrier Will 21 Nov. 1696
Henry Jones of Middleton Yeom. Will 29 Nov. 1698
Edm[d] Jones of Hanging Chadder Tanner Will 28 May 1714
John Jones of Failsworth Carrier Will 13 Apr. 1716
Rich[d] Jones of Hanging Chadder Yeom. Will 10 Nov. 1722

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Joseph Jones of Fogg Lane Shoemaker Will & Inv. Apr. 11 1723

Clearly, the history of the Jones family of Oldham goes back over a hundred years before 1770. Whether they were related to the Joneses of Hopwood and Hanging Chadder as implied by the list above, and whether the family involvement in the coal industry began in Hanging Chadder is a matter of speculation; nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the family brought their mining skills from the coalfields of Wales.

In fact, considering the mention of this family in several property transactions in the 17th and early 18th centuries, it would seem more likely that they were canny businessmen who managed to acquire land. W. H. B. Court in "A concise economic history of Britain: From 1750 to recent times" (1958) states that in the middle of the 18th century "*The relative scarcity of capital gave an extraordinary importance...to all those who...had acquired property*". If such land also held rich deposits of coal, then the Joneses would have been in a great position to earn their fortunes as the demand for coal increased with the use of steam power in the mills. And indeed, history shows that the family became an incredibly wealthy and powerful family in Oldham.

First and foremost this wealth and power came from coal. William Jones may well have dug his first pit in Northmoor, but it was probably an agreement with his neighbour Benjamin Marsland that really got his business off the ground. From 1799 to 1805 Marsland had undertaken several leases with the Gregge/Hopwood family of Chamber Hall to mine the rich seams of coal underlying their land in Werneth. However, prior to purchasing these leases, in 1785, Marsland had made an agreement with William Jones, and others, to "*...act as partners, joint traders and adventurers, and workers of, all other mines conveyed to them in the future.*" (Fanning, 1999). The Hopwood Colliery on Chamber lane (sometimes known as the Chamber, or Chamber Lane, Colliery) would turn out to be one of the longest-lasting and most lucrative mines in the area. As a result, the Joneses would come to own many pits in Oldham under the auspices of a variety of companies: the William Jones Co; the Joseph Jones Jr. Co.; the Leeses & Jones Co.; the Leeses, Jones & Booth Co., and the Leeses, Jones, Duncuft & Barrow Co. In addition, later generations of the family would consolidate their wealth from coal mining with earnings from other enterprises.

The William Jones that founded the coal mining business had five children who included another Joseph (III, b. 1756) who was probably the most responsible for building up the coal mining business. Joseph Jones (III) had five children amongst whom was William (b. 1797) who would become the first mayor of Oldham in 1849, and Joseph (IV, b. 1782) who would carry on the family interests in mining, but also add to the Jones portfolio by marrying Betty Lees (1815), the daughter of a local cotton magnate James Lees. As a result of this marriage, Joseph (IV) would come to own Wallshaw Mill, and so the Jones empire would now encompass both coal and cotton.

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On the left Joseph Jones III (1756–1845), and on the right his son William (1797–1857), the first Mayor of Oldham. Both images courtesy of Gallery Oldham *via* ArtUK.

Finally, in 1833 Joseph (IV) would venture into yet another money-making field. In partnership with James Buckley, Joseph Walker and Joseph Brook, he established the Saddleworth Banking Company of Dobcross which opened a branch in Oldham in 1836. This bank merged with the Manchester & County Bank in 1866, and would later be renamed simply the County Bank. In 1906, County Bank built the magnificent Baroque bank at Mumps that Pevsner described as "*astonishing*" and "*naughty*" (Alex Balmforth, personal communication).

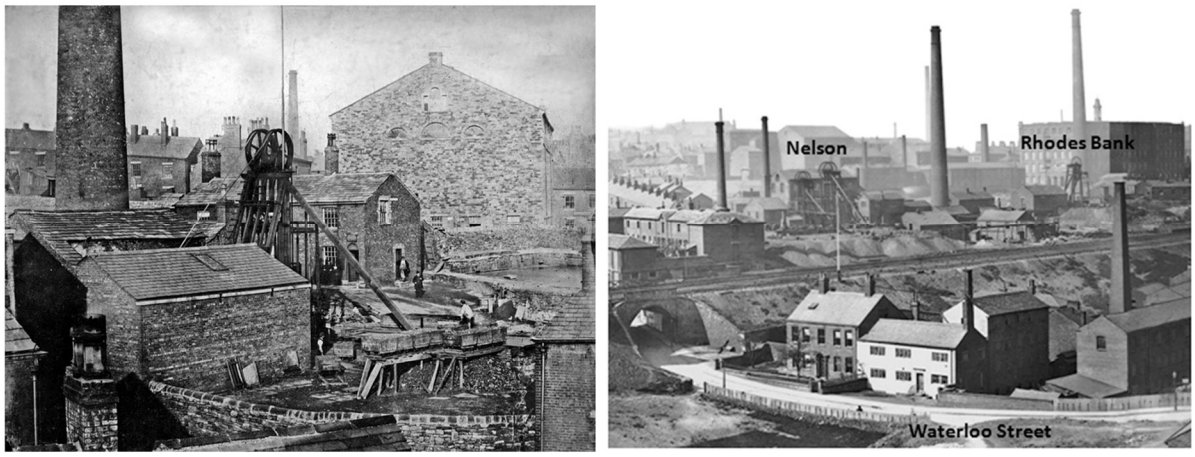


Abberley Hall, Worcestershire home of the Jones family from 1867 to 1916 when it became the Abberley Hall School. Photo courtesy of Harold Murray (The House of Moilliet).

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And so the Joneses, by the middle of the 19th century, had their fingers in many pies, and had earned huge fortunes. Sufficient, indeed, for Joseph Jones (V, b. 1816; son of Joseph (IV)) to purchase, in 1867, a grand mansion in Worcestershire called Abberley Hall.

The picture below shows the Holebottom Colliery, one of several mines owned by the Jones family. If the sinking of the pit in Northmoor by William Jones marked the beginning of the Jones family's coal enterprises, this mine may well signify the beginning of the end. In most cases the mining companies didn't own the land under which they mined. The Joneses and Leeses would lease the mining rights from the owner of the land. The Holebottom colliery was one of four pits (Rhodes Bank, Nook and Nelson being the others) run as a single entity by the Leeses & Jones Co.. These four pits stood on the Horsedge estate of Thomas Knowles M.P.. Following the M.P.'s death in May 1877, Joseph Jones (V) together with his cousins, John Joseph, William and James decided to try to purchase the land rather than coming to a lease agreement with the potential new landowner. In the auction Joseph was the highest bidder, buying the land for a sum of £3,500. Apparently the Leeses were not too pleased by this purchase and, almost immediately after the auction, sued the Joneses on the basis that water in the Rhodes Bank pit (now owned by the Joneses, but yet to have been worked by them) had been allowed to rise to such a level that it had flooded the neighbouring Nelson pit (worked by the Leeses). Ultimately, neither party seems have been a winner in the courts, and financially the Jones family were definitely losers, the Rhodes Bank pit in the 1882 Poor Rate Valuation being rated at just £50!

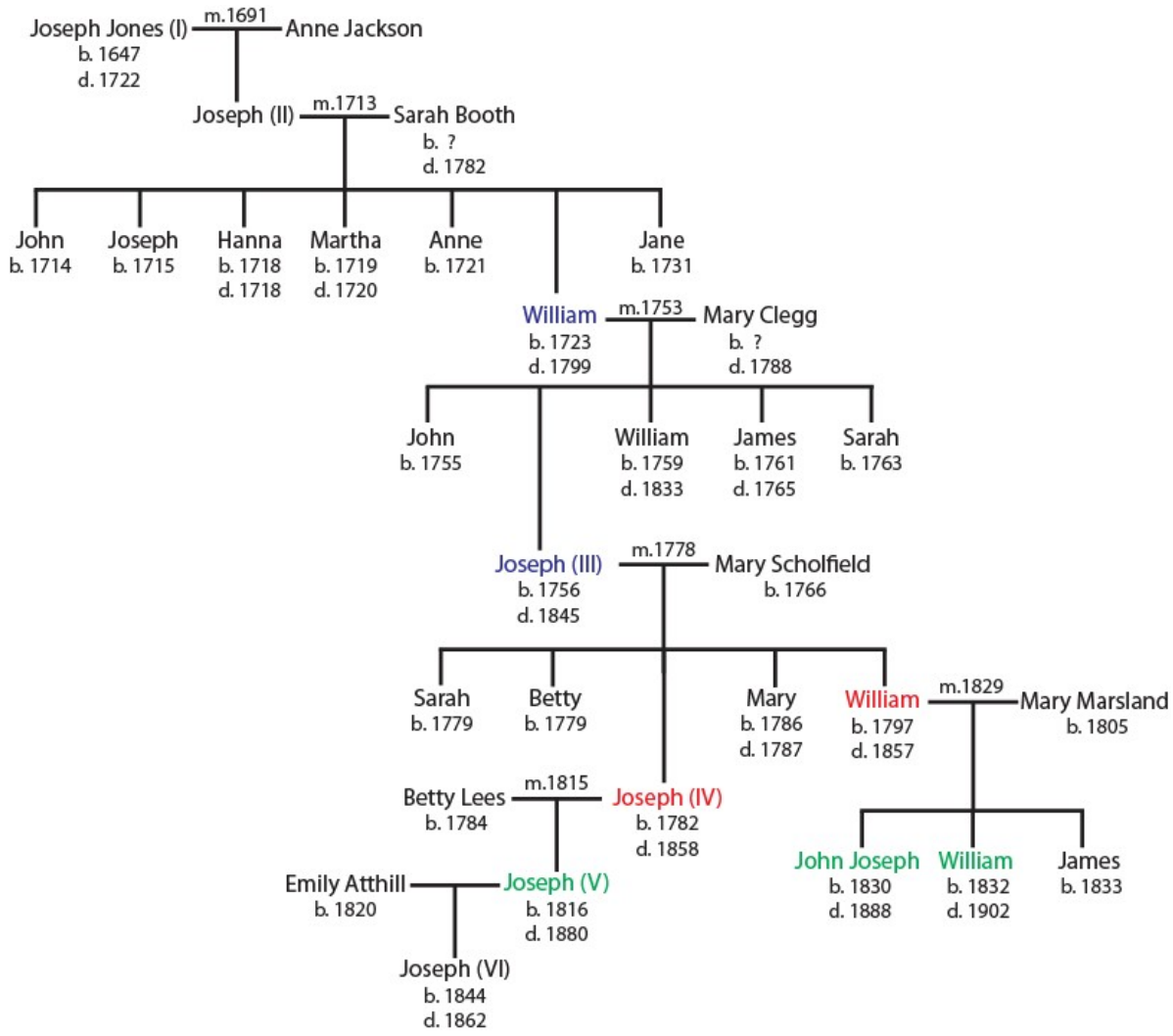


Leeses & Jones collieries in Oldham town centre: On the left, Holebottom Colliery on Moss St (now Fairbottom St) with the back of the Theatre Royal (Horsedge St) in the background (Courtesy of Oldham Local Studies & Archives). On the right, the Nelson and Rhodes Bank pits both on Gas St. (Courtesy of the Greater Manchester Museums Group) Note: The Nook Colliery was on Roughs Lane, now Bargap Rd, close to Oldham Edge.

Nevertheless, their wealth in the intervening hundred years (1770-1870) enabled the family to wield significant political power in Oldham and elsewhere. Joseph Jones (IV) stood for election to Parliament in Oldham as a Conservative candidate in the election of 1837, but was beaten into third place by the Radical reformists (the first two candidates, John Fielden

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and William Johnson, being elected). On the other hand he was appointed an Alderman in the local council following Oldham's incorporation in 1849. Likewise, his brother William was elected a councillor and appointed the first ever Mayor of the borough. William's sons, John Joseph and William Jr. would inherit Abberley Hall from their cousin Joseph (V), and in 1899 William Jr. was appointed High Sheriff of Worcestershire.



Jones Family tree: In blue: William originator of the coal mining business; Joseph (III) – perhaps most responsible for expanding the coal business. In red Joseph (IV) – responsible for diversification into cotton and banking, and William – the first mayor of Oldham (1849-50). Successive owners of Abberley Hall are shown in green. A more extensive family tree can be found on FindMyPast.

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