Soughs are underground drainage channels that ‘unwatered’ Derbyshire’s lead mines, allowing the miners to reach deeper levels of ore below the water table. Constructed between the 17th and 19th centuries, they were expensive ventures and often took several decades to build. Once the mine was reached and its water drained, the sough masters received a proportion of the lead ore mined below the old water mark (called composition payments).

Because of the long construction periods, often a new sough was started immediately after the previous one had drained the mines. In rich lead ore areas, therefore, a succession of soughs can be found, the newer soughs deeper than the oldest ones.

Conflicts and disputes

The soughs permanently lowered the water table and displaced huge amounts of water, which often created conflicts between different groups with varying interests in this water. While the miners wanted the water table lowered, farmers and millers at the surface lost public water supply and ponds. At the same time, new stakeholders were created at the tail end of a sough where it discharged. Several soughs were used for public water supply and others turned waterwheels.

Richard Arkwright vs the soughers

One of such conflicts was Richard Arkwright vs the Cromford and Meerbrook soughers. The strong and constant flow of the Cromford sough tail was one of the reasons why Richard Arkwright had selected Cromford as the location for his cotton mill factory. However, as the mines drained by Cromford sough were worked till the water line and required deeper drainage, work started on the Meerbrook sough in the late 18th century. Once completed, this sough would drain the mines, meaning that Cromford sough would dry up. This situation resulted in a long dispute between Arkwright and the two groups of soughers which revolved around issues of access, ownership and water rights.

The soughs today

Nowadays the soughs are still in place and drain water, and as such determine the level of the water table in many parts of Derbyshire. Conservation of these features is therefore a current issue, as collapse can cause flooding. Their location in the Peak District National Park sometimes brings this into conflict with the protection of natural heritage. Certain soughs form part of public water supply, and some have found a recreational use for explorers of hidden landscapes.