

Thomas Newcomen Encyclopedia Article

Thomas Newcomen

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1663-1729

English engineer who invented the first atmospheric steam engine. Newcomen was born in Dartmouth, and spent many years as an iron-monger there. Finding out that pumping water out of mines was at the time accomplished through a labor-intensive process, using horses, he spent 10 years trying to create an engine that would complete the task mechanically. Newcomen's engine was comprised of a piston within a vertical cylinder and a huge beam which connected to the mine pumps. The engine was groundbreaking in that it used atmospheric pressure, so as not to be limited by the pressure of steam. The first Newcomen engine was used in a South Staffordshire Colliery in 1712, and within a few years the invention was put into use in mines throughout the country. In 1765, however, Newcomen's engine was overshadowed by that of Scottish mechanical engineer James Watt (1736-1819), who is now considered the true inventor of the steam engine.