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## THE MINES OF ESKDALE

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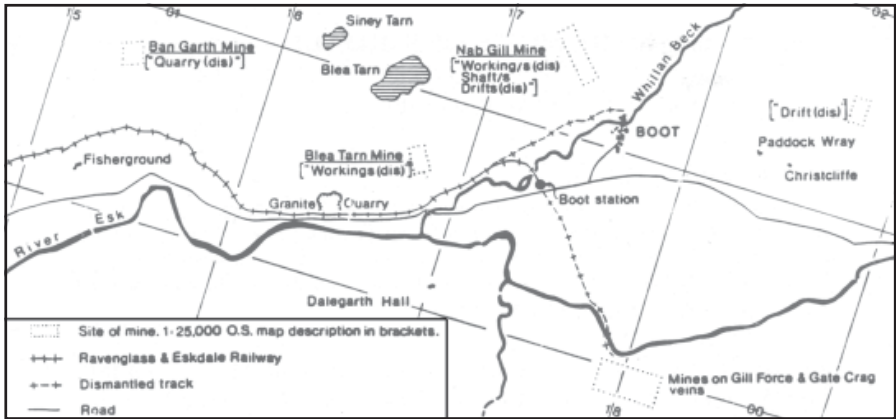
### SYNOPSIS

*These notes on the mines of Eskdale follow the Society's visit to the area on the 9th September, 1989. Since visiting the railway for the first time nearly 20 years ago, the mines of the valley have intrigued the writer as they seemed far too small to justify a railway. Over the years, research, in co-operation with Peter Von Zeller at Ravenglass Museum, has produced the following information.*

Haematite occurs in near vertical veins running nearly north-south across the valley. Similar veins occur in the Isle of Man and in Ulster. In the last century it was thought that these veins were the "mother lode" from where the iron ore deposits of Cleator Moor and Millom had originated. Just below the surface the veins of poor ore would open up into vast iron deposits. Modern thought is that the iron solutions trickled down from above (the iron comes from the red sandstone) and replaced the calcium carbonate both of the limestone belt surrounding the fells, and of the veins cutting across the fells. Thus the iron ore tends to die out quite quickly deeper in the fells.

The iron ore deposits, reddish in colour, outcrop on the surface and must have been used for "ruddle" or pigments since early times. A lump has been found in the stone axe workings around Wasdale. Iron has been smelted in the valley since at least Roman times, as the many small banks of slag testify. Presumably local ore was used. Mike Davies-Shiel tells the writer that considerable quantities of iron ore were taken from the top of Wasdale screes round about 1700 by a man called Patrickson. However, when a large new furnace was built in Eskdale in 1636, ore was carted from Bigrigg, near Egremont, to it – in 1639, for instance. In 1736, a Mr Russel was granted permission to build a weir across the Esk to power an iron forge at Eastwood Fields, probably somewhere near Dalegarth Hall. The Penningtons at Muncaster were making trials on a vein in the deer park in 1759 and 1760, while various histories and guides report the existence of iron ore in the area. Lysions, writing in his 1816 country history, reports "iron mines in Eskdale", but by 1829 Parson's and White's directory talks of mining as being in the past. In 1836 a manager was being sought for the "Corney Iron Ore Works" in a local newspaper advert.

However in Eskdale, proper mining seems to get under way in 1837 with a lease to James Read & Co. for the area north of the Esk. By 1841,



7 mines are listed in the Eskdale census. By 1842 royalties were being paid on 373 tons, 8 cwt of iron ore from Eskdale, raised by Mr Barker & Co. Barker was a prominent Whitehaven businessman who also worked mines at Bigrigg at about this date. The ore was shipped to South Wales from Ravenglass and came from Nab Gill mine at Boot. It fetched 10/6d a ton but transport costs and Royalty were 6/- a ton. The mine passed, in July 1844, to new lessees John Oxnam and Thomas Brown. In April 1845 Brown sent in a Royalty account for 97 tons 10 cwt of ore. 77 tons 15 cwt of iron ore were shipped from Ravenglass to South Wales on the vessel *Sirus* in November 1844. However, by October 1845 a Mr Isaac Johnson, describing himself as Brown's new partner, was trying to settle £140 debt with the lord of the Manor, General Wyndham. After this nothing more is heard of these two gentlemen.

Later in 1845, the Lindow brothers leased the Eskdale mines. The Lindow family were prominent West Cumbrian businessmen too. They owned a couple of forges, including the spade forge at Cleator and also mines at Bigrigg. There were a number of Lindows, all with the same Christian names so it is difficult to be sure which ones worked Eskdale. They worked the area from 1845-53 and raised a few thousand tons of ore, but for little profit. They worked mainly at an open quarry on the fell top behind Fisherground farm, at the Ban Garth mine, but also drove two short barren levels into the fell side at Nab Gill.

In 1860-3 Jos. Fearon, another Whitehaven businessman, took up the lease. He drove a new level into the fell side below the Ban Garth opencast and raised a disappointing 1,000 tons of ore. He proposed building a wooden tramway down the valley to reduce the cost of transport.

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However, he needed more finance which he sought in London. In 1866 he sold the lease to Faithful Cookson, iron master of London. Cookson was an astute operator with good connections. In co-operation with a Devon miner, W.H. Hoskings, he bought the leases of various West Country and Welsh iron mines at about this time. He also acquired the lease of iron ore mines in Ennerdale as well as Eskdale.

In the early 1870s demand for steel was increased by the Franco-Prussian War. Only Cumbrian hematite ore was suitable, and available in quantity, for producing steel by the Bessemer process. The price rose to 35/- a ton, with mining costs typically of only 5/- a ton. Furness and Cleator Moor became the richest mining areas in the world. Cookson made considerable sums of money by forming mining companies which then bought the mine leases from him for large sums. The Eskdale and Ennerdale leases were worked by the so-called *Whitehaven Mining Company Ltd.* There were almost no local shareholders though – locals were too wise about the prospects. The company was widely advertised in the press with glowing reports from Hoskings about the iron ore being found in veins 40 feet wide. This was true, but the portion of the vein which was iron ore was often only a few inches wide. The company had an imposing and respectable board of directors but all were either very busy men in other walks of life or very unknowledgeable about mining. Cookson still owned most of the shares, though he sold many of them on the Stock Exchange. The *Whitehaven Iron Mines Co.* was never quoted on the Stock Exchange because one individual, Cookson, had such a large portion of the shares. Mining in Eskdale was started only slowly, though there were plans to build a tramway from the mines to the nearest railway station and port at Ravenglass. The shareholders, thinking this tramway would never carry enough ore, insisted that the directors survey the route as a standard gauge branch line. After 2 years or so, in about 1873, Cookson was rumbled. The directors were mainly replaced and Cookson parted from the mine company in acrimonious circumstances, though having made about £25,000 on the venture. The new board decided to continue mining as the ore price was still high and also to build a narrow gauge railway up the valley. A gauge of 3 feet was chosen, the most recommended narrow gauge for railways at the time. The mine was very carefully managed, equipped and laid out. A start was made on the railway, financed partly by a bank loan and partly by shares owned 50% by the mines company and 50% by the railway contractor, Mr Oliver.

However, the mines never really made any money even with ore prices of 30/- a ton. By the time the railway was completed to Boot in 1875, ore prices were falling and the numerous levels driven in the hillside had shown just how little ore was present at Nab Gill. The Ban Garth

mine was also briefly investigated and some ore raised on a new vein called Blea Tarn, (behind Beckfoot Station on the railway). By 1877, the mining company was in voluntary liquidation and being worked by a receiver, as was the railway. In the next few years, the receiver leased the mines to several consortia formed by the Owens, father and son, mining engineers from Bristol. (A character reference sought in Bristol by the Eskdale Manor estate manager received the reply – “I wouldn’t trust the father with a shilling or the son with a ha’penny” – or something along those lines). The Owens withdrew in about 1883, though a few miners and the railway manager worked the Boot mine on a small scale to about 1885.

Meanwhile, on the south side of the Esk, another London company leased the iron ore rights in the 1870s, but nothing more is known about them. However, the Owens noticed an iron vein at Gill Force near St Catherine’s Church. In 1880 this was leased by a group led by a civil engineer called William Donaldson, who had worked on the new Midland Railway line around Bristol in the 1870s. The group was financed by the sons of the Midland Railway’s General Manager, James and Howard Allport. It called itself the *South Cumberland Iron Mining Co.* at one time. A branch line of the railway was built to this mine and extensive mining operations carried out in 1880-81. However, this mine soon ran out of ore. Despite extensive trials on veins on the south side of the Esk and also on the north side, east of Boot village, behind Christcliffe and Paddockwray farms, it had folded by 1884.

Ore prices were now only 8/6d a ton and the mines were hopelessly uneconomic. Many of the miners were West Country men who moved to Millom where there were many fellow West Country men employed. The railway somehow struggled on with a small amount of traffic in granite for road setts, building materials for the new villas being built at Eskdale Green, agricultural traffic and tourists. It was probably the poorest railway in the country!

The Nab Gill mine was briefly re-opened in the 1907-12 period when the workings were taken below the valley floor, but the iron ore vein grew even thinner and the ore poorer. The railway also struggled on, ever more decrepit, but after the mines closed in December 1912, the railway finally closed in April 1913.

Its track bed was re-laid to a narrow gauge of 15 inches in 1915 and reopened. High iron ore prices during the First World War caused the mines to briefly re-open in 1917 and close again in 1918, this time for good. A few tons of ore were left on the tips and these were eventually bought and sold to a steel works around 1960 by Eric Holland, a well known mining enthusiast and historian.

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There are also a few other small iron ore or copper trials in Eskdale and neighbouring Miterdale, but none of these were very important. In total, the valley produced perhaps 100,000 tons of iron ore over the centuries. This was the tonnage the railway was built to carry in one year. Probably only Faithful Cookson ever made any major profits out of these mines.