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LEAD MINING IN DERBYSHIRE

by
Joan G. Guthrie.

Lead mining and smelting is the oldest industry of Derbyshire. Much of the original mining was opencast. The earliest reference to Derbyshire lead mining is in one of Pliny's works written in A.D. 77 which notes that there were then laws limiting the amount of lead which could be mined.

Pigs of lead have been found bearing dates from about A.D. 20, and the oldest known mine in the county is claimed to be Odin Mine at Castleton, worked by the Danes. The story that it was also worked by the Romans is dubious.

The Domesday Book 1086 records that there were three mines at Wirksworth and one each at Crich, Ashford, Bakewell and Matlock. Mining was at its peak in the 17th. - 18th. centuries but by the end of the 19th. century only one or two mines remained. The majority were by then worked out or abandoned due to an abundance of water which provided a major difficulty in the area. Today there is one remaining mine producing lead ore - Glebe Mine at Eyam.

The industry was governed by curious laws which have existed for centuries and although a poem by Edward Marlow, printed in 1653, and a book entitled "*The Articles and Customs of the Kings Field in the High Peak of Derbyshire*", published in 1601, give detailed accounts of the customs and mining rights, these were not confirmed by Acts of Parliament until 1851 and 1852.

In certain parts of the county anyone may search or dig for lead without asking for the permission of the landowner or occupier and the latter cannot claim compensation. This is subject to the condition that the miner finds lead ore and pays a dish of lead to the Barmaster. The miner is entitled to sufficient surface on which to deposit his hillock of waste material; a way to the road or highway most convenient from the mine, and a waterway to the nearest stream of running water. The only satisfaction the owner gets for annoyance and loss is right to sell any other material other than lead which the miner may bring to the surface.

The miner had to pay dues to the Crown; the Duchy of Lancaster; (in the hands of the Duke of Devonshire under lease since 1690) in High Peak or the Arkwright family of Cromford under lease from the Crown in Low Peak (wapentake of Wirksworth); the Barmaster and in some localities the church.

The royalty to the Crown was a certain rate per dish (approx 472 cubic inches of ore). The Barmaster still carries his dish when he measures the ore of the now remaining mine. The standard dish for the Wapentake of Wirksworth is of brass and is kept at the Moot Hall, Wirksworth.

Mining was extremely simple - in soft veins pick-axes were used - hard veins were fist broken by lighting fires at the face. In 1670 gunpowder introduced from Germany where it was first used in the Ecton Copper mines. Tarred straws were used as fuse these being lit by hand.

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The volumes of water were far greater than the pumping machines could cope with, and before steam engines were introduced soughs were driven to carry away the water. The Hill Car and Meerbrook soughs are the longest in the country. The former near Youghreave is four miles long and took a total of 21 years to drive costing over £50,000. The Meerbrook sough which drains Wirksworth lead mines and empties the water into the Derwent near Whatstandwell was commenced in 1773, is three miles long and cost £45,000.

Crushing and sorting was carried out on the surface, often by women. Horses were used to pull the heavy stone crushing wheel round, until the invention of mechanical crushers. A similar method was used to pull the kibbles up the shafts. Steam engines for hauling and pumping were first used in 1730.

For anyone interested in the area there are some interesting examples of the above mentioned machines just inside the entrance the Moulridge Mine N.G.R. 191591.