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**A NOTE ON THE
APPLICATION OF PHOTOGRAPHY TO MINING**

R.H. Bird.

Extract from the Mining Journal, 1863:-

Sir, - An idea has occurred to me, which certainly appears worthy of consideration, if not of general adoption, amongst mine agents and mine adventurers – I allude to the representation of the surface work by means of photography. It would prove the most ready means for the agent to explain what he has done, and would give the adventurers a better idea of his ability than any report which could be written.

I am aware that in the case of established mines the application of the art would be useless, unless to show the increasing size of the heaps of ore, because otherwise the appearance at surface would remain unchanged; but in the case of new, and even of progressive mines, it would be very valuable. In the case of the Welsh gold mines, for example, if the shareholders had photographs weekly, they could judge for themselves the number of men employed, and also the ability with which the surface works had been laid out. I would not follow the suggestion so far as to teach the mine captains to photograph for themselves, because I think their time could, or, at least, ought to be better employed; but as photographs can now be obtained from professional artists at about 6d each, say, 5s. a week, would keep the adventurers well informed.

Again, in the event of railways, water-courses, &c., being necessary, photographs of the surrounding country, and of the proposed routes, might be useful- but as it will be only requisite for one series of views to be taken by each captain, there will be still less necessity for him to make the study of photography part of his practical education.

COLLODION.

Whilst the above may not be the first reference to photography as applied to industry, it is nonetheless, an interesting fact that its potential usefulness was realised at an early date. The writer has used the pseudonym 'collodion' which was the name given to a wet plate process invented by F. Scott Archer in 1848. This process required the coating of a glass plate with iodized collodion and sensitized with a solution of silver nitrate and potassium iodide. The plate required exposing whilst still wet – hence the name 'wet-plate'.

The idea of mine captains turning their hand to photography for the benefit of shareholders seems an absurd idea, more particularly since these worthies would need bulky mobile darkrooms to prepare and develop their negatives. Mine captains had far more important things to occupy their time and hence the writer's suggestion to employ 'professional artists' as budding photographers were termed at that time.

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One cannot help feeling that ‘Mr. Collodion’ had a vested interest in the idea and was a member of the latter profession’.

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That pictures were taken of metal mines at this early date is indisputable, since Gwynedd Archives Service hold a number of mid-nineteenth century prints of the Dolgellau gold mines and there are many pictures of the Cornish mines at surface taken in the 1860s or even slightly earlier. But it was not until almost the turn of the century that ‘progress pictures’, as such, were instigated by the mine owners. For example, Messrs. Bennetts of Camborne were responsible for numerous fine views of surface installations at mines within their area – not to mention the now famed underground pictures from the camera of J.C. Burrow and the lesser known H.W. Hughes – and it is to be regretted that before this relatively late date there was little if any outside photographic interest in industrial subjects such as metal mining. Indeed, in the 1860s photography was regarded more as a pictorial medium than a recognised tool of commerce, although there were of course the odd exceptions.

As a matter of interest, the above reference to the Welsh gold mines underlines the feverish activity that made up the ‘great gold rush’ of the 1860s, most of which, as was later found to many investors cost, was ill founded. Had ‘Mr. Collodion’s’ suggestions been taken up seriously by any cost-book or joint-stock company working the area – with their numerous widely flung, gullible shareholders – then no doubt he would have been able to operate his own very lucrative ‘gold mine’ without ever having to go underground’.

41, Windsor Walk,
South Anston,
Sheffield S31 7EL.

FOOTNOTE: For much interesting information on this subject vol.77 (1977) of the Camborne School of Mines Journal is worthy of perusal. The author, W.J. Walton, gives details of early attempts to obtain photographs in the St. Just Mines in 1865 by a photographer named Debenham using collodion plates and magnesium ribbon. The latter light source was later replaced by ‘flashpowder’ and even gunpowder was occasionally tried for this purpose.

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