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SURVIVING MISCELLANY

R.H. Bird.

Tucked away in the old mining districts of Britain are numerous relics of the industry with which we are concerned. Some of these are well known, others less so, or are only familiar to those near whose region they lie. The intention here is to feature by photographs a few of those remains, be they forgotten or unusual structures (wheelpits, engine houses, dressing floors etc.) or, by some quirk of fate, machinery still on site and not removed by the ubiquitous scrap dealer. It is hoped that members will contribute to this series of articles by sending in pictures of little known features that survive in situ (underground and at surface) on mining sites with which are acquainted.

It could of course be argued that by bringing attention in this way to such items – particularly items of equipment – their demise is thereby hastened. However, extant equipment usually remains on most sites by virtue of difficult access or being on private property. Whilst it is the writer's opinion that moveable remains should stay on site – in which location they are best appreciated – this, unfortunately leaves them open to vandalism or the attention of artefact-hungry collectors in addition to the scrap merchants. In such an event these items should be afforded some measure of protection either (in the case of machinery etc.) by removal to some 'freely' accessible museum or, in the case of structural remains by the vigilance of local historians who will take time to act as watchdogs should such remains be threatened bulldozer or gelignite. If destruction cannot be avoided then local interested parties could usefully record the site before it is lost forever. One might even hope that the odd bag of mortar would be forthcoming to squeeze into cracks of weatherworn masonry, so prolonging the life of immovable and non-threatened remains. Frequently, of course such relics are beyond the stage of 'the odd bag of mortar', as witness the events and condition of, the Crowns Enginehouses at Botallack; but that is another story.

To begin this series, which, given the support of members, will appear in lowing issues of the Memoirs, I have chosen a range of items encompassing sites in the far south west as well as 'up country'.

The main aim of these articles is to record features rarely highlighted; above mentioned Crowns enginehouses are too well known to warrant inclusion, whilst the same can be said for, say the Killhope wheel in Weardale and, in the extreme case, the Lady Isabella wheel at Laxey.

The Photographs

(i) Surface remains of the once great copper mines of Gwennap are surprisingly few; even the acres of tumbled deads are being steadily removed for roads tone and a large new slimes dam has been constructed in the Carnon Valley below the

Consolidated Mines. Most prominent of the buildings remaining on the sett is the massive base of the clock tower which, during the heyday of these mines in the early 1800s, was visible far and wide. If in the future the hundreds of shafts are filled and the area well and truly flattened, this at least should be preserved as a memento of the days when Gwennap copper ruled the world.

(ii) Hidden at the seaward end of the Nancherrow Valley, St. Just, is this truly magnificent wheelpit built of huge granite blocks. This housed a 65 foot wheel, (one of the largest, if not the largest recorded in Cornwall) on the site of Boswedden Hine; waterpower for crushing and dressing in Cornwall is nowhere better exemplified. The wheel was driven from the relatively insignificant stream which flows by the mine, water being tapped by a leat from the upper section of the stream. Scale is provided by the figure (bottom right).

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(iii) Large mining setts were normally delineated by the erection of boundary stones. A glance at an early O.S. map showing mining areas will reveal many such stones – particularly in Cornwall – and those marking individual workings on the Grassington Moor mining field are well recorded. However the ravages of time, assisted by modern reclamation schemes have been responsible for the destruction of numerous such markers. Generally those still extant are hidden and often difficult to locate, a case in point being this old London Lead Company stone which marked the boundary of their lease at Maeshafn Mine, North Wales.

(iv) Well known to those who penetrate the levels at Nenthead, Cumbria, is this fine fan, located in the inner recesses of Caplecleugh Horse level. Fans were one of many artificial ventilation devices installed to enable ‘close ends’ to be worked which were away from the main, natural airflow in the workings. Waterblasts, brattices, ‘stools’ – a form of brattice –, duck machines and, in Agricola’s day, flapping cloths, were all used with varying degrees of success.

(v) The Dyfngwm Mine, Montgomeryshire was the scene of a reworking in the 1930s by Hirnant Minerals. Whilst the machinery has been dismantled there remains on this site at least three kibbles, as yet undisturbed by artefact hunters (1979). The one pictured here, although the best preserved of the trio, nevertheless is totally corroded on one side but the tipping ring at its base is still visible. Dyfngwm Mine was served by a long leat which tunnels through the hillside at one point and this watercourse is well worth following to Castle Rock and beyond.

(vi) It is well known that waterpower reigned supreme in Central Wales by virtue of the prohibitive cost of coal for steam engines and a good supply of runoff streams from which leats could be dug. Although most of the wheels which, at one time must



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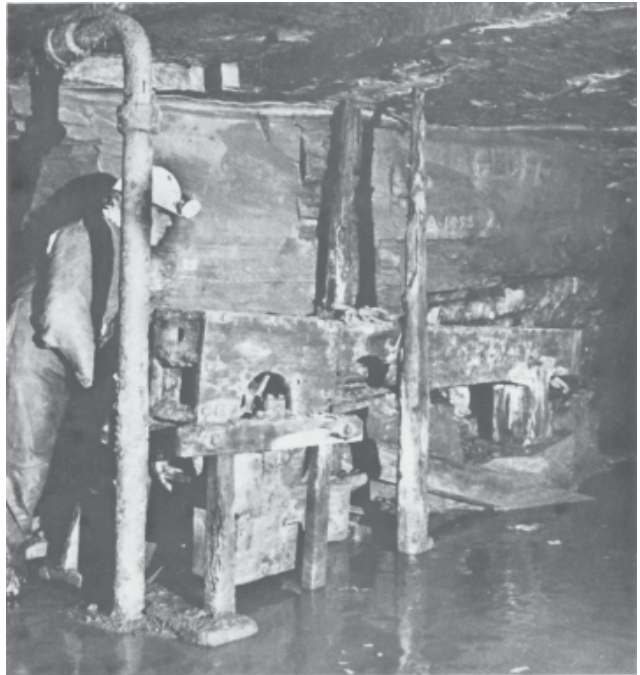


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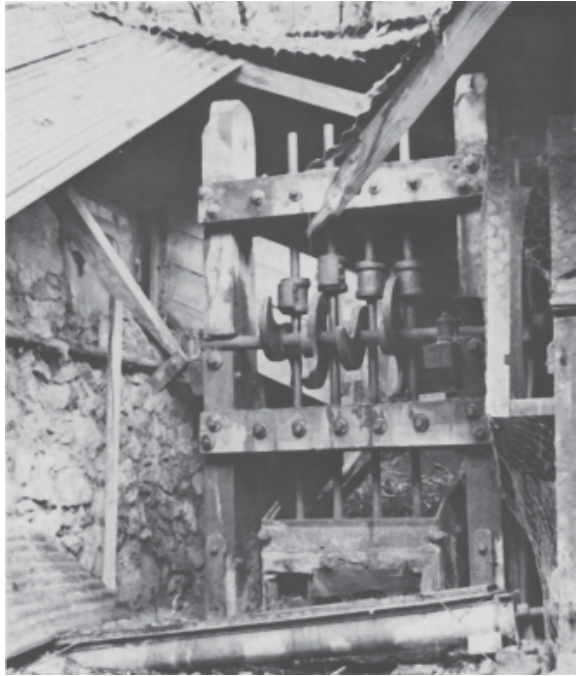


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viii



have been an everyday sight in the area, have now gone, one still comes across the odd surprising survivor. As distinct from the ponderous over-or undershot wheels the tangential reaction wheel gained popularity at a number of sites in Wales at the turn of the century. These wheels, normally termed Pelton wheels, appear to have been developed in the Californian mining district and are essentially high pressure wheels. The Nantiago Mine installed a large dressing plant in the early 1900s and to power this two Pelton wheels were erected. One still survives intact on the site, perhaps as a result of the area being on private ground.

(vii) Thought to be the last surviving set of Californian stamps in the country, this head of four stamps is located at Kelly Mine, Devon, a working exploiting micaceous haematite near Bovey Tracey. Californian stamps, as the name implies were first used in that gold mining area of the New World and later found application at mines where fine comminution of ore was required. Kelly site also boasts a wide variety of extant mining machinery from the last working by Ferrubron which closed down in 1946; features such as an oil engine, Pelton wheel, 12ft waterwheel, narrow gauge tramway, compressor, winding drum and belt transmission system are all to be found on the site. Permission to view this interesting working should be obtained from Kelly farm, since it lies on private ground,

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(viii) It can be argued that one engine house is very much like another; so it is, but that which is pictured here is about the last significant structure to remind the visitor of the one-time supreme importance of the mines of Coombe Martin. ACCORDING TO Camden 'Of the first fynding (sic) and working of the silver mines there are now no certain records'. Although the Coombe Martin mines are referred to as silver mines they did in fact produce a very rich argentiferous galena. Edward I brought 337 miners down to the mines from Derbyshire and subsequently, over the centuries, this mining region has been worked intensively and has yielded an impressive quantity of silver. After such a long period of working, nineteenth century adventurers were 'scraping the barrel' and it is from the latter era the engine house on Knap Down remains. Specks of local highly argentiferous galena are still visible on fallen boulders at the end of a concrete-covered effluent pipe that runs around the cliff from Coombe Martin beach.

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