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MINERS, MOONSHINERS AND MISCHIEF GALORE

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SYNOPSIS

The uses and abuses of old coal workings were manifold, apart from their uses as convenient repositories for man's rubbish. A microstudy of early newspapers has revealed another side to early mining and the extra-limitary goings on of the mine workers.

Little effort was made to protect abandoned workings in the 18th century; unless easily packed with debris from new sinkings, masters claimed it was uneconomic to fill them up. Open shafts were therefore put to use as common coups and also agricultural disposal. There is evidence that old workings were a dumping ground for rabid cattle, this being practiced in the mining district of Renfrewshire. Rabid cattle were walked to the pit and there slaughtered, their corpses being thrown down.[1] As a response to a serious environmental hazard there are parallels to the present day burying of hostile pollutants, the dustbin economy most certainly never changed. Similarly animal cruelty is no different as evidence in the "Dog Pit" at Shettleston, Glasgow:

"... merely a large opening in the ground which was fenced around and was so called from the fact that someone had dropped an unwanted dog into its depth."[2]

Some of the workings in this area were so shallow that the miners could set their time by the sound of the mail coaches as they stormed by overhead.[3] Time was very much on hand for the many who fell down old and unprotected shafts, for they could have a long wait for rescue. The most notorious of these "man-traps" was the so-called "Sodger's pit" in the Woodside area of Glasgow. It claimed at least five persons in its time, though all were got out alive, and was so-named from the misadventures of Lieutenant Spearing, who fell in and was trapped for 7 nights in September 1769.[4] Spearing who had been wandering in the wood was reaching to collect beech nuts when he tumbled down the shaft, had he been near some other pits he might have come on something stronger.

On Saturday 29 July 1786, Archibald Brodie, supervisor, and Messrs McDonald, McFarlane, Rowan, Lawrence, and Faithfull, all excise men went to Shettleston, with an officer and 22 men of the 63rd. regiment, then stationed in Glasgow. Their plan was to raid four illicit stills known to be down in the old coal workings.

Once the pit was reached and surrounded, McFarlane together with a soldier were both let down the pit. When they got to the pit bottom via a winze rope, they found the workings blocked off from the pit bottom, excepting a small hole which gave access to the workings. The two men planned to get into the workings, but a large fire was burning in front of the hole, it was presumably

to encourage ventilation through the workings from other shafts, and it blocked their way. The two men started to kick the fire apart but this alerted the moonshiners inside. McFarlane and the soldier suddenly found themselves fighting for breath as sulphur was thrown through the hole and on to the fire. Both were nearly suffocated before they were pulled clear by their companions. Once the shaft was cleared of the dense smoke, the excise men tried once again and Messrs McDonald and Faithfull descended, with two soldiers. But again they were chased off for the moon shiners put green thorns on the fire through the hole before retreating far into the workings. Thick smoke blocked any attack and the excise men had to be pulled clear to join their already well smoked companions at the surface. After five hours work the excise men had to leave the distillers, still very much in the possession of the pit.[5]

A similar raid on Carntyne on Monday 9 March 1787 by officers and men of the 63rd. regiment, got 3 stills together with drink and wash. The poteen was taken to Glasgow, the waste and the unfinished spirit was destroyed at pit bottom.[6] Further raids by excise men in the area got brewing utensils to the value of £40 Sterling, breaking up what had been a major moonshining operation.[7]

Glasgow was not alone as a centre for pit head poteen, the Shieldshill Colliery was the centre for a raid in 1802,[8] this pit was near Linlithgow. Sauchie in the east was another trade centre, where the stills of a Tillicoultry weaver named Robert Benny thwarted the efforts of the local excise men to track them, for they were well buried in the waste of Sauchie Colliery. The Sauchie miners were aware of Benny and his gang, and by threats they forced him to supply them with free whisky, otherwise they threatened to tell Downie, the local excise man. The miners paid many visits to the stills, a rope having being placed down the shaft to where Benny had them, the men would lower themselves to the working by it and also climb back up the shaft via the rope.

One morning a very drunk miner fell back down the shaft to his severe injury. His friends went for help and soon a group had congregated around the pit head. Downie who was passing joined them out of curiosity and was not a little surprised to find Benny, whom he promptly arrested. The excise men later went down and smashed up Benny's stills, the latter getting 3 months in jail for his deceit.[9]

The secondary usage of old mine wastes for poteen making points to their shallow nature. This is suggested by the need to maintain reasonable ventilation, not possible at any great depth without mechanical plant. It would also have been difficult to take stills to any great depth. Pits were ideal camouflage as any smoke would have been dissipated up the shaft, rather like fire-lamp smoke of a going colliery. That stills were established in each case for some time before discovery points to their acceptance in the local social fabric, especially at Sauchie where the miners thought they were on to a good thing, at least until the moral enforcers turned up.

Morals and mischief

The very savagery of the miners' existence meant they were not past taking the law into their own hands when opportunity presented itself, especially when

it came to getting their own back on oppressive authority. A group of miners found an excise man much the worse for the" demon drink", indeed stone cold drunk. Realising this, the men lifted him carefully and carried him down with them into the pit. There they left him in the air current at the shaft bottom, they themselves going forward to the work faces. The warm air slowly revived the drunken officer 'till he suddenly came to in real alarm. He heard only the dripping of water and in the pitch dark he could see at a distance the flame flickering lamps of the face workers. It was probably no wonder that he thought he was in hell and was heard to cry out:

> "Oh, I was a gauger in the other world, but I dinna' ken what I am to be in this ..."[10]

The distilleries themselves were important customers of the coal mines for fuel, perhaps none more so than that at Kilbagie, Kincardine. The miners got their own back on this market manager with a vengeance. An error in the distillery one late February morning in 1856, sent 1,800 gallons of whisky streaming out the door and down the street. The miners coming on morning shift were met by the tumbling waves of whisky. Some ran to the distillery to help but more ran for whatever they could use to lift the drink. Chamber pots, mugs and buckets, even miners were soon down in the gutter lapping up the stream of whisky.[11]

Industrial accidents sometimes brought benefits to some though seldom could that be said of mining accidents. The Alloa Colliery flooded from old waste in late December 1825, some miners barely getting clear. Presumably the breach was to the rise as the water was soon streaming from an air pit to the dip of the workings, from whence it streamed into the River Devon. The River Devon, then an important salmon and trout river, was soon brackish and clay clouded, destroying the fish stock. As the dead fish were washed up on the bank they were quickly lifted by the local miners and their families, farm workers and all in the know, all keen to supplement their normal pallid diet.[12]

Poaching and foraging for food were constant pastimes in the many mining areas. Potato raiding was common by the Shettleston miners, for example in May 1832, 10 bags were taken from a farmer in the area and divided up amongst the miners. At another local farm, some 30 bolls of potatoes had been taken.[13] Miners would also ambush fruit carts coming in to Glasgow from the fruit gathering areas of Lanarkshire. The carts would be upset, the carters chased off and the fruit taken.[14]

The Bishop Hill and the "Fairy balls"

"It was announced last week that gold was discovered in an English shire, and this week we have it stated it abounds in the hills of Fifeshire. Next week we may have the pleasure of announcing that it is discovered in the Irish bogs; so in the event of every country having diggings of its own, each will be enabled to retain its own rascals, and thus Australia and California will be relieved of at least one half of their fears."[15]

Thus was announced a remarkable fiasco which affected the textile and coal industries of Fife and surrounding areas for the month of May 1852.

It arose from a son's letter to his old mother, full of the moonshine of the California diggings. His descriptions soon had her prospecting about Falkland, eventually she took herself up the Bishop Hill, Kinross. There she found what she thought was a major strike in the Clattering well Quarry. She began her work at once and soon had two rooms of her house full of the stuff. There she kept it well under lock and key, but the secret was soon out and a local gold rush was begun. The "Scottish California" was centred on the quarry, though exploration was done as far as Largo Law, and soon an average of 300 were digging daily. Contemporary accounts suggest as many as 600 were working the area in the first 2 weeks of May 1852:

> "… hundreds of work-people provided with picks, shovels &c., had repaired to the 'diggings' in the hope of making their fortune."[16]

Weavers took farewell for a fortnight, with their wives to follow on, once riches were assured. Indeed so great was the speculation that the gold-diggers worked the Sundays. They could not rest and the sabbatarians certainly did not rest as they turned out and stoned the diggers 'till they stopped. But others worked at night or were up from early morning, like a party of 30 who had walked most of the way from Edinburgh, and were out on the hills with cooking pots as crucibles.

The attraction was so great that local coal miners were quite prepared to give up their colliery jobs. On average they earned 15/- per week and the allure of prospecting was too attractive. Clues as to why the gold rush took place are evident in the great popular interest in the overseas diggings reported in all of the contemporary papers, but locally it was fool's gold, only the promise of fairies. Before the bubble burst many local pubs had taken in bags of the rubbish as payment for drink, even a pig had been got in exchange for a sack of the stuff. More serious was the effect on coal mining interests, for miners from Alva, Halbeath, Lochgelly and Oakley, were all at the gold diggings, and the collieries almost at a standstill. There is no doubt they survived the labour shortage with the policy of "binging", a common protection against possible short falls in production.

What is so interesting about the whole event is how poorly work reward was seen by weavers and miners that they were prepared to grasp at straws, to seize at the "fairy balls" as that was all the gold really was.

The "prospectors" were working ironstone nodules, occurring in a baked shale immediate to the limestone. The limestone quarriers were very well aware of these so-called gold nuggets and had given them the disparaging name of "fairy balls". The "prospectors" were probably also attracted by an impure nodular cornstone in the Upper Old Red Sandstone, to the north east of Benarty Hill. That they even thought about cornstone, an earthy concretionary limestone of poor quality, says little for the jobbing miner. However, great quantities of these ironstone nodules were dug out and carried off as gold. They were sent for testing to chemists, such as Robert Hogg of Glasgow, who responded with icicle letters on the value of the finds.

Every ounce of bread in the Kinneswood area was eaten up well before the bubble burst. Every pawn ticket was used up once the bubble burst, many had

to pledge all to get home from the "diggings". The only people to benefit from this event were the peddlers of refreshments, opening a great tent on the hill top, crowning this rather silly episode of Scottish mining history.[17]

The working class were not alone in their gullibility, citing one example of the many trials for coal about Scotland illustrates this. Coal was sought for about Lanark moor in the mid 19th. century, borings and trials being supported by local subscription. Some coal scrapings were found and this encouraged further local investment. The miners brought a quantity of coal and took it down the trial shaft late one night, and next day they carried it to the cross at Lanark for a great bonfire of triumph. As a result more money was put in the Miners' hands; they decamped with the proceeds.[18]

The extra-curricula aspects of mining history set the miners' life experience in the broad scope of contemporary evidence and give a wider appreciation of the social existence of the miner.

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