

BRITISH MINING No.39

MEMOIRS 1989



Bick, D.E. 1989
"Forty Years of Mines and Minerals"
British Mining No.39, NMRS, pp.28-33

Published by the
THE NORTHERN MINE RESEARCH SOCIETY
SHEFFIELD U.K.

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ISSN 0309-2199

FORTY YEARS OF MINES AND MINERALS

D.E. Bick

SYNOPSIS

It was a dusty and neglected mineral display at school which first aroused my curiosity in subjects which were to become the interests of a lifetime. A little later I met George Hall of Gloucester, who, with his father, was engaged in erecting a mill at Esgairmwyn in the wilds of Cardiganshire to re-process the old waste dumps for lead. In him I found a kindred spirit, and our paths have been more or less intertwined ever since.

The story of Esgairmwyn and the locality in the 1940s would be worth a book in itself (perhaps one day George will write it), but suffice it to say that the country was exhausted after a terrible war, with shortages and restrictions at every turn. It seemed that every obstacle was put in their way, it even being necessary to set up a sawmill at the mine to cut timber for the mill buildings from trees felled and hauled to the site for the purpose. A 27HP Humber engine drove the saw, and the cold was so intense in the winter of 1947 that a fire had to be lit under the sump to get it started. In the end the venture came to a halt before going into production, though the mill has since been modernised, and is currently undergoing trials.



Plate I. New Florence iron mine, North Devon, 1948. This was reopened during the war for a trial; the only tangible evidence of activity visible a few years later was a new toilet! The site has long since become completely overgrown and the headframe collapsed.



Plate II. Clearing the adit at Esgairmwyn, 1949. An attempt by George Hall (wearing helmet) to gain access to a blende lode shown on old plans. Bad ground brought the venture to a stop. The level is now quite run in.

Subsequently, having been well and truly bitten by the bug, we visited countless mines over the next dozen years or so, mainly in Wales, and went underground wherever possible. I don't recall we ever wore helmets, at least not to begin with; our wet-suits were gumboots and our lights, carbide. The latter with its smoky flame served to mark our names and date at the furthestmost point. That practice is nowadays greatly frowned upon, but then nobody knew or cared, nor was there the slightest indication that they ever would. Our transport was my 1928 Morris Cowley and many a time we went from Gloucester to Dolgellau and back in the day. She would do it now but not, I fear, her owner.

What with the ravages of nature and man (especially the Forestry Commission), many of those sites are now obscured, or worse, reclaimed, which is another way of saying that there once was something of interest, now there is nothing. At all events, a record of those days survives in four notebooks stained with drops of water and dirt from adits all across the land. Perhaps one day some of it may be worth publishing.

That other souls might share so unusual an interest was not apparent until we met a couple of chaps at a Cornish Engine Preservation Society meeting about 1960. Thereafter, mining societies seemed almost spontaneously to mushroom and have never looked back. Still, there was a magic about those early times that will never come again - the feeling of adventure and even elation, in journeying to remote sites which had been unregarded and forgotten for generations was unforgettable. In the sanctity of their desolation those mines somehow belonged to you.

In the 1950s, a number of metal mines or trials were active in these islands, including Parc, (Llanwrst), where they were working a foot of galena, solid and shining like silver, the finest sight underground I ever saw. Mr Gray the manager gave us an old Chilean Mill which we intended to set up for sampling, and I recall driving there to fetch it in a 7 ton Vulcan lorry with a top speed of 30 mph and practically no brakes at all. Tragically, Gray was later shot down and killed by terrorists in Africa.

During a tour in Ireland in 1958, an opportunity arose to descend 90 fathoms in the Bearhaven copper mine, then being re-opened by the Emerald Isle Mining Co. The ride down in a skip was hair-raising, and of course, thoroughly illegal in England. But we were not in England. It was however, less traumatic than going down 1,000 ft in a bucket when they were sinking Manvers Main Colliery, looking up and seeing the rope disappearing to a point in the tiny circle of light above.

Until the ready availability of oxy-acetylene soon after the war, many mines still featured huge waterwheel axles, crushing rolls etc, which had defeated the scrapman. Regrettably such dinosaur-like machinery quickly disappeared thereafter, and it was in an attempt to save something from the wreckage that in 1973 George Hall, Peter Harvey and I decided to form a mining museum at Llywernog in Mid-Wales. However, due to the difficulties of making any real



Plate III. Clay's enginehouse, Vale of Towy Mine, near Carmarthen 1957. This fine building housed a 50 inch Cornish engine, set to work in 1852. It was sadly demolished recently, it is said, when the owner was refused planning permission to turn it into a house.

contributions when living a hundred miles away, Hall and I eventually retired from the scene, leaving it in the able hands of Harvey and his colleagues. Since then a number of other similar museums have opened up in Wales and elsewhere, and there is great scope for volunteer support in helping to consolidate many sites before they crumble away altogether. It is pleasing to report that ways to achieve such aims are currently being discussed in high places.

With regard to publishing books on mining, before long I became conscious of a desire to broadcast to others something of the pastime that had rendered so much in return. In 1967, W.J. Lewis's *Lead Mining in Wales* proved an invaluable source of reference, but it was a product of the library rather than the field, leaving scope for a practical guide for those wanting to get out into the hills and see the places for themselves. In Cornwall, Hamilton Jenkin had compiled a useful series in numerous parts, but whether interest in Welsh mines could justify a similar treatment was quite another matter. George Hall proved the affirmative in 1971 with his *Metal Mines of Southern Wales*, and I launched my five-part series *The Old Metal Mines of Mid-Wales* three years later. It began with the Pontrhydygroes area simply because I used as its basis a set of notes prepared for a field-trip of the Plymouth Mineral and Mining Club a year or two before.



Plate IV. Trecastle Mine, near Conway, 1970. A splendid example of a waterwheel for pumping and winding. The purpose of the spur gear is not certain. The wheel was taken down some years ago and its fate is obscure.

The publication of a new book is ever a nail-biting experience, and having driven from Cheltenham to Cwmystwyth without selling a single copy, my spirits might well be imagined. However, there my luck changed, with an order for 50 from Mr Hoare of the Post-office. I could have hugged him. Such enthusiasm was not repeated in the next village, where after a minute examination of the contents, the woman told me that nobody was interested in the mines, and if they were, they all knew all that was to be known anyway. This valuable advice notwithstanding, the five parts eventually came out as well as several re-prints and a limited edition of 250 omnibus hardbacks which sold very quickly. Part 3 has just been re-printed, and parts 4 and 5 will be re-printed as a single volume.

Since 1974 there has been almost a flood of titles, and the total number of people interested in old mines from whatever aspect, must now be substantial. One worthwhile sequel to the series was the formation of the Welsh Mines Society in 1979, and now with about 250 members.

Although always interested in minerals, I generally do not give them much notice in my writings, believing that too much publicity kills the goose that lays the golden egg. Minerals, unlike flowers, do not grow again next year. Besides, where is the adventure if you are told where to find them? Nonetheless a few examples of unusual occurrences may be of interest.

On the dumps of a very remote and desolate mine near Dinas Mawddwy called Tyllau Mwyn or Friars Coat, my notes dated 29 December 1954 refer as follows - 'a little Pbs in calcite and also a curious black mineral like pitch.' A sample of the latter was sent to a prominent University in the West Country but without promoting any response. However, the outcome was not without a certain poetic justice when, years later, a paper from another quarter announced the discovery of the rare mineral pstilnomelane - an honour which, with a little diligence, could have been theirs. We were not very pleased either. At the same site I also recorded 'good red copper ore' in the adit, but probably its true identity is still to be ascertained.

Another interesting occurrence came to light in 1960 at a peculiar copper trial in the Old Red near Talachddu, Talgarth, Brecon. Upon its identity no two authorities could agree, the above-mentioned seat of learning confidently naming it rhodocrosite as result of X-ray diffraction techniques. It is now generally agreed to be ferro-dolomite.

About 35 years ago as I remember, we also came across a very inexplicable mineral at a small lead mine some 2 miles north-west of Rhayader-regrettably I seem to have made no notes of the visit. The lode strikes across a high hill and has also been tried above the Old Coach Road where pyromorphite was at one time on display. Wonderful specimens could be found in Wales 40 years ago, but they have disappeared by the sackload, and now we are reduced to using a pocket lens. Still, I am constantly astounded at what turns up.

Whilst on the topic of minerals, I recall encountering Sir Arthur Russell at New Consols in Cornwall in 1952, wearing his plus-fours as usual. It seems that Kingsbury preferred breeches. It has always struck me what useful and practical garments these are, and what a pity they have gone out of fashion. We could do worse than to follow their example.

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Mineral collecting is I think, the most therapeutic occupation there is, sitting upon some sunny bank, hammer in hand, beyond the sound of motorcars and with a few good friends for company. When I join the Old Men that is what I would like to do.

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Plate V. Frongoch Mine, near Devil's Bridge, 1982. Emergency measures were taken to prevent imminent collapse of the bob wall, which is still standing. The site has since been scheduled, but paradoxically this would no doubt have prevented such treatment being carried out.