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MINING IN THE PARISHES OF EAST BUCKLAND AND CHARLES, NORTH DEVON

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SYNOPSIS

Based on research largely carried out in the late 1970s this paper uses both documentary and field evidence to build up a picture of mining activity over two centuries in a little known part of North Devon.

Tucked away to the south-west of Exmoor, these agricultural parishes have a hidden industrial past. To the casual visitor there is nothing to show for the mining activity of two hundred years ago; close examination will however reveal evidence of workings on a number of sites.

The working of these mines reflects, to a greater or lesser extent, that carried out at a number of iron/manganese/copper deposits in the Pickwell Down Sandstones/Upcott Slates; stretching across North Devon from the coast at Putsborough eastwards to the Somerset border south of Exmoor. The shallow rich copper deposits attracted early attention with activity peaking in the 18th century. Copper working continued into the 19th century, but in the latter half of that century was eclipsed by iron and manganese. Iron had however probably been of greater economic importance locally well before the 18th century.

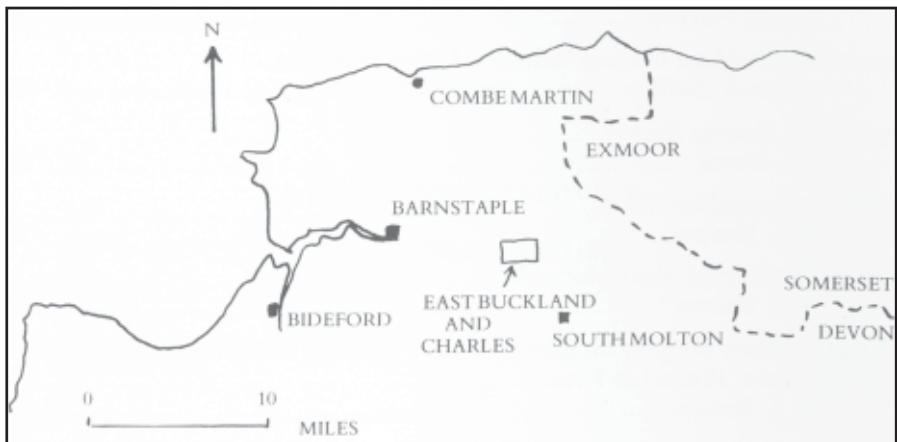


Fig. 1. Location Sketch, North Devon.

The 18th Century; Buckland Copper Mine

To the north of East Buckland village, and west of Catriage Hill, at NGR SS671319, subsidence has revealed the existence of shafts and a little to the east below Belwell Linhay, there is a depression marking the entrance to an adit: These workings along with others further north, adjacent to Middlecott Hill

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(SS676325), appear to be the remains of a mine at one time known as the Buckland Copper Mine.

The existence of copper deposits in the area was probably known in at least the 17th century. When Kahlmeter visited the Bampfylde Mine, at North Molton a few miles to the east, in 1725 he referred to the Buckland workings as being 'old' and the source of good quality ore; although at that time not worked there were plans to reopen the mine in the following spring. Some twenty nine years earlier the Bampfylde Mine had also been visited by another Swede, Cletchers, who although, referring to other copper workings in the area, makes no mention of Buckland and one must presume that it was also unworked at that date.¹

Unfortunately no evidence has yet come to light as to whether the planned reopening was successful, and it is not until 1736 that we hear more of the mines. In that year the landowner, Lord Clinton, negotiated an agreement with certain of his tenants which clarified his rights to the minerals under land in the parish. This would seem to indicate that he contemplated working the mines himself or leasing it to others; but nothing more is heard until 1748 when a mineral lease was granted to Samuel Harness, of Wash field, co. Devon, for a term of 31 years. The lease specified "a certain mine lately discovered ... and

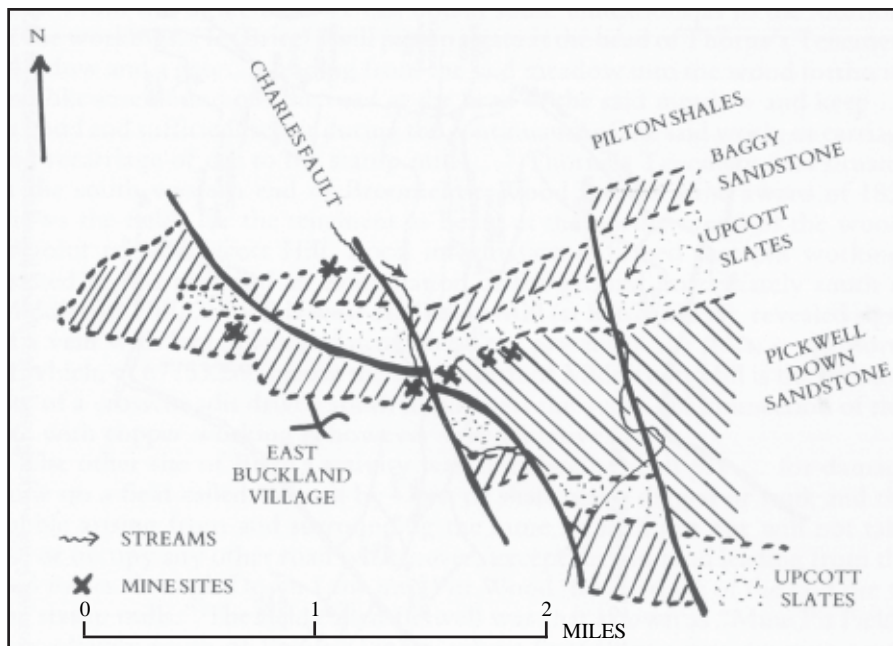


Fig. 2. Geological detail.

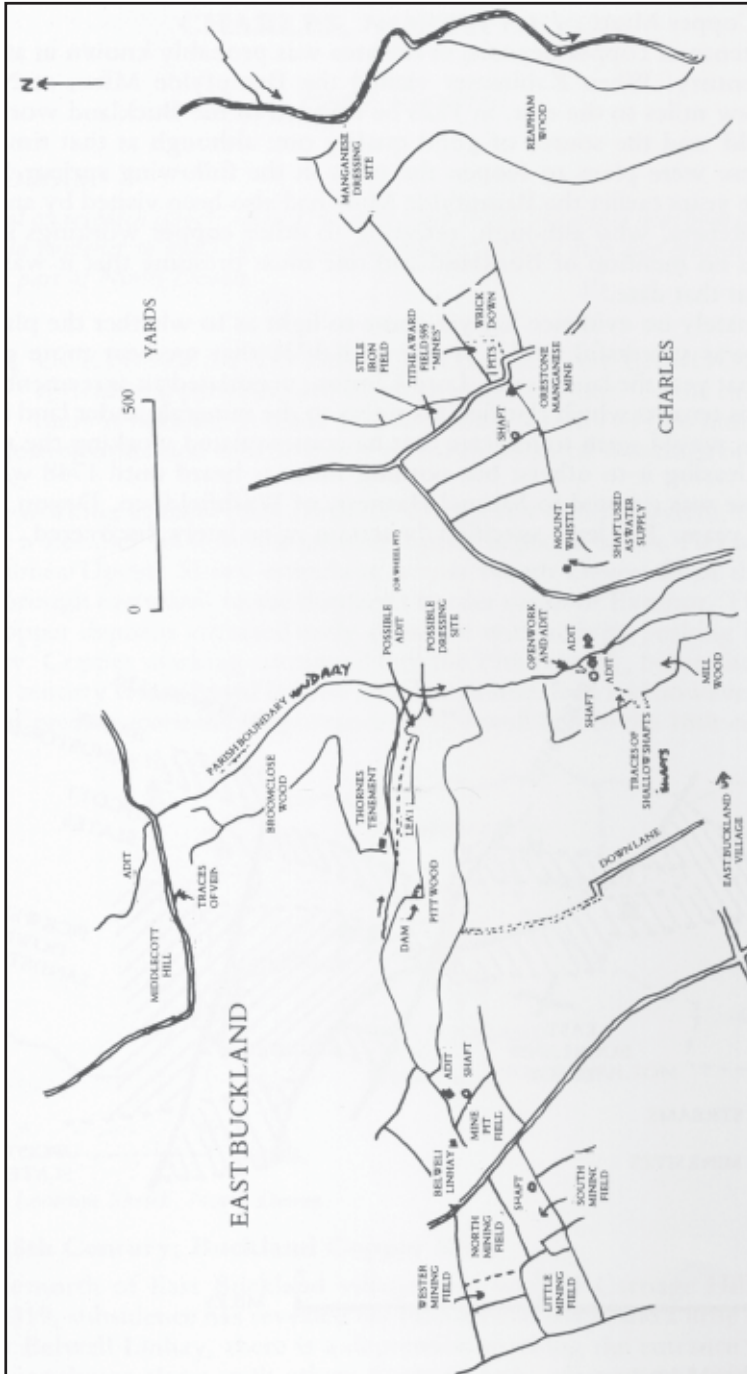


Fig.3. Detail, showing mine workings and selected field boundaries – based on OS 6" 1st edition 1889.

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within one mile of the said mine”. Again indication of its success or otherwise have yet to be found. In 1758 another lease, this time to Thomas Dyke Acland and others, was drafted but not executed and in the following year was granted to Worthington Brice, of Wood berry, co. Devon, and others. The area defined in the lease was as that of 1748, within one mile of the mine “lately discovered”, and it is through Brice’s activities that we can establish the site of the mine.

Although the lease of 1759 was granted to a partnership of four persons it became apparent that the key figure was Worthington Brice; described as a master shipwright, he was developing an interest in copper mining, having taken a lease of mines in the parish of Molland in the previous year. This was the beginning of a period of some activity which was to continue into the 1770s; the exact progress of the mine in these years is not known but by 1770 a number of shafts had been sunk and an adit driven up to drain them. In consideration of “the great expense incurred in opening up the said mines” Brice was granted a fresh lease, in his own name only, for a further 21 years from January 1770. The lease indicated that there had been no return on money expended on the mine, but sufficient ore had been produced to justify the erection of stamps and dressing floors in Pitt Wood.

Also in 1770 Brice signed an agreement with Earl Fortescue’s tenants on the amount of damages to be paid where the mine had interfered with the farming land. From this agreement we can obtain some indications as to the locations of the workings. He (Brice) “will put up a gate at the head of Thorne’s Tenement Meadow and a gate leading from the said meadow into the wood forthwith and likewise bound out the road at the head of the said meadow and keep in good and sufficient repair during the continuance of the said work, or carriage and re-carriage of ore to the stamp mills ...” Thorne’s Tenement was situated at the south western end of Broomclose Wood but the tithe -award of 1838 shows the fields for the tenement as being at the northern end of the wood, adjacent to Middlecott Hill. Local information indicated that old workings existed in this area and an examination of the ground immediately south of Middlecott Hill, 250 yards west of Hudley Mill (at SS67633255), revealed signs of a vein with large pieces of manganese ore present in the float; to the north of which, at 67753259, below the track north of Middlecott Hill is the possible site of a crosscut adit driven south to intersect the vein. The connection of this site with copper working is however very tentative.

The other site of Brice’s activity was at Belwell; “shall pay ... for damage done on a field called Belwell by a pitt or shaft being digged or sunk and the rubble arising from and surrounding the same ... shall not nor will not take use or occupy any other road whatsoever, except-the old road leading from the said mines through Down Lane into Pitt Wood, for carriage of the said ore to the stamp mills.” The field called Belwell was that known as “Mine Pit Field” immediately south of Belwell Linhay where float from a vein running south of west can be traced giving strong indications of copper. There are signs of an adit driven south from the valley 150 yards east of Belwell Linhay, at 67163199, to crosscut the vein, with indications of a shaft adjacent to the old field boundary. To the west of the road south of Catriage Hill, at 66953180, and some 230 yds. south west of Belwell Linhay, is a shaft. This is now filled

in, but it has sunk from time to time, and levels are said to run from it at a shallow depth. The surrounding fields, west of the road, are all given 'mining' names in the tithe award of 1838.

Reference has been made to the carriage of ore into Pitt Wood to the stamps; "will payor cause to be pay'd unto the said William Buckingham the sum of five shillings and six pence yearly for standing and working the stamp mills together with the pitts for washing and cleansing the copper ores." From this it is evident that the dressing floors were on those parts of Pitt Wood leased to Buckingham and from the Land Tax Assessments for 1782 and 1783 (the earliest available) that would be those parts adjoining Middle Pitt land i.e. the eastern portion of the present Pitt Wood or the southern portion of Mill Wood, which was, in the 18th century, part of Pitt Wood. It is the former which presents the more obvious signs of being used as the site of dressing operations. On the edge of Pitt Wood, on the south side of the small valley opposite Thorne's Tenement, at 67633201, are the remains of a small dam; below this and running on the south side of the stream towards the eastern end of the wood are traces of a leat. Where this leat entered the wood there is a depression, at 67963205, which may be the site of an adit entrance or possibly a wheel pit. The overgrown nature of the woodland at the time of study prevented the positive identification of the dressing floors but they are believed to lie in this area of Pitt Wood.

No figures are available for the total output of the mines in this period but some idea of production in 1770 is given in an account of ore transported to Barnstaple.

John Gill's account of ore carried to Barnstaple from Buckland Mines.

1770		cwt	qr
Sept	25	15	
	26	12	2
	31	15	
Nov	1	15	
	2	15	
	3	12	2
	7	12	2
Dec	11	15	
	15	<u>10</u>	
		Tons 6	2 2

The ore would have been shipped from Barnstaple across the Bristol Channel to Swansea where, in April 1771, John Lewis of the Middle Bank copper works signed as having received 6 tons 1 cwt 2 qrs of copper ore, the accurate total for the ore carried by John Gill, from East Buckland. The only other account for the mine which survives is that for the cutting of 2½ tons of wood for use in the workings.

By this time Brice appears to have been joined by William Dyer who had charge of the day to day running of the mine, with John Thorne acting as foreman. Work was being carried out with a view to cutting the lode in depth

where it was “expected to improve”. In the hope of attracting more capital to the venture an advertisement was placed in the *Sherborne Mercury* of 10th June 1771 offering shares in five eighths of the mine. Trouble was also coming in another direction, for, despite the agreement with Fortescue’s tenants, there were still complaints about damages caused by the mine and one tenant, probably John Gill, was in 1772 depositing his dead cattle down the shafts and harassing Brice’s miners. The mine was obviously suffering from a lack of cash for continued operations, and compensation for damages was not being paid to some tenants. When pressed for payment of outstanding royalties in 1773 Brice complained that he had lost nearly £500 on the working. The copper market was already entering a depression and the mine apparently failed along with many other much larger ventures.²

The 19th Century; Copper - North Wheal Fortescue Consols

It was not until 1814 that interest in the East Buckland mine was resumed; in that year the company working the Combe Martin Mines sent a miner on loan to the Fortescue estates and indicated their interest in taking a lease of the mines. The working of the Combe Martin Mines had ceased by 1816 and there is no evidence that the company ever took the lease of East Buckland.³ For another thirty years nothing was heard of the mines until February 1844 when Captain Richard Paull, of South Molton, petitioned Earl Fortescue for the grant of a mining sett in East Buckland parish, from Westacott in the south to Upcott in the north. Work must have commenced about that time as, on the 23rd May, Paull wrote to the estate office requesting ladder poles and stating that he intended to form a company to work the mine, to be known as Wheal Fortescue. Apparently Paull was working on an annual licence and the promise of a lease which Fortescue would not grant until a company with subscribers of some substance had been formed. In July the statutory notice was given that the ore raised was to be weighed prior to sale but details of the sale are not known; however a further parcel of nearly 8 tons was sold at Swansea in October, with another in December. By December Paull had 16 miners employed in clearing the old workings but was experiencing difficulty in forming a company as no one was interested in speculating in a mine for which no lease had been agreed.

Paull had gathered together a number of adventures in May 1845 but Fortescue still refused to grant a lease as he did not know them personally. Despite letters to the Earl a lease was still refused and on August 15th 1845 Paull wrote saying that he was almost impoverished by the working and again begging for a lease in order that a company could take over. Eventually, in February 1846, a lease was granted when two of the adventurers met the Earl’s agent to discuss the details of a sett, now to be known as North Wheal Fortescue. In addition to this sett another in the adjoining parish of Charles, to be known as Wheal Priscilla, was taken on lease; the whole to be called North Wheal Fortescue Consols.⁴

The later reports on the two, combined, setts are rather confusing; they refer to the north and south mines, with the latter including Wheal Priscilla. Five east-west lodes are referred to. On the north eastern part of the north mine, which equates with workings in the area of Middlecott Hill, a shaft had been

sunk to a depth of 15 fathoms and 5 tons of ore raised and sold. Further south on the East Buckland sett (North Wheal Fortescue) another copper lode had been cut and a winze put down 10 fathoms with a level driven a short distance west. Here the company planned to erect machinery for pumping (a water wheel?) and to raise the estimated £1000 required the shares in the company, originally 256 on which £4 10s. had been paid, were to be increased to 1024 and a call of £2 made.⁵

The boundaries of the Wheal Priscilla sett are not known, but it was claimed that the southern lodes of North Wheal Fortescue passed into it, crossing the stream which marks the parish boundary. That stream however is closely followed by the north-south Charles Fault. This apparently post mineralisation fault has a down throw to the west and displaces rocks on its eastern side some distance to the south.⁶ Nevertheless there are workings on either side of the stream; with those on the East Buckland side in Mill Wood 500 yards north east of the parish church. Here there is a small openwork and an adit on the west side of the track, at 680316, above which is a shaft and traces of other shallow shafts on a lode running approximately south west up the hillside. South of the openwork is another adit driven on quartz strings parallel with the lode. These workings are locally referred to as a manganese mine, but veinstuff picked up on the dumps indicate the presence of copper (bornite). There is no evidence that these workings were prosecuted by Brice in the 18th century and a comment in Paull's correspondence with Earl Fortescue, that the new company intended to work from the woods and would not disturb farm land, suggests that they were on a new 19th century discovery.

If the workings in Mill Wood are those of the southern part of North Wheal Fortescue we would expect to find Wheal Priscilla on the other, eastern, side of the stream; and there are workings on the hillside below Mount Whistle comprising an adit, driven east, and a shaft behind the cottage, now used as a water supply. These are however on a lode running just north of east, which has been worked for manganese on Wick Down to the east, and is unlikely to be the same as that found in Mill Wood. Such detail would not have troubled the promoters of North Wheal Fortescue Consols when they claimed to have traced the lode on the east where it had been heaved by "the elvan course"; and the workings around Mount Whistle are no doubt the site of Wheal Priscilla.

The 19th century. Wheal Charles; Copper and Manganese

The identity of the Wheal Priscilla sett is further confused by the existence in the parish of Charles of a mine known as Wheal Charles. In 1846 Captain John Harper, at the time connected with the East Combe Mine, Swimbridge, and the North Devon Coal and Cui m Company's workings at Tawstock, was credited with the discovery of both manganese and copper in the parish. This discovery appears to date from at least 1841, when the *Mining Journal* published a letter from Harper, in connection with the Treloggan Mine, dated Wheal Charles Mine, Devon, September 27th. A company had been formed to work the mine but in January 1842 the adventurers were in dispute with Harper and he was left to work it alone.⁷ Again we have no positive location for the mine; however work carried out by Dr John Rottenbury indicates that the vein

running north of east through Mount Whistle and Wrick Down would bear copper in the lower levels with manganese above.⁸ This would suggest that Wheal Charles was sited on this vein, working both copper and manganese.

The land along the line of the vein was in multiple ownership and it is difficult to define the boundaries of any mineral sett; it is possible that the workings between the stream and Mount Whistle formed part of Wheal Charles before being renamed Priscilla. To the east, on Wrick Down, the position is a little clearer. The tithe award of 1842 identifies field number 595 (at 68753183) as “Mines” and, in a sale notice for Reapham Wood and parts of North Wrick Down in 1845, they are specified as manganese workings.⁹ In fact the sale also refers to workings in Reapham Wood itself, “valuable manganese mines which have been worked with profit and advantage.” It has not been possible to trace any workings in the wood, but a small dressing floor has been found in the northern most part, at 691321. Here there are traces of manganese ore around a spring which supplied water for dressing purposes. This, and the workings on Wrick Down, no doubt formed part of Captain Harper’s Wheal Charles.

The late 19th Century to the 1st World War; trials for iron and the Orestone Manganese Mine

Although not worked on a large scale until the latter half of the 19th century, iron has been mined in North Devon for over nine hundred years. There is ample evidence of this at North Molton a mile or two to the east, with large smelting sites at Sherracombe Ford and elsewhere. The iron content at surface on any of the veins at East Buckland and Charles would have provided a ready source for local production but evidence has yet to be found of its being mined at an early date.

Stimulated by the increased demand for iron in the 1870s Messrs. Skewis and Gregory took licences to work the minerals on Earl Fortescue’s lands in these parishes, along with the minerals under West Blakewell in the south of Charles parish. Some work was carried out at East Buckland but the option of a lease was not taken up, and in 1878, with iron prices at a low level, the licences were given up.¹⁰

By the 1880s the manganese workings on Wrick Down had been reopened as the Orestone Manganese Mine. A shaft had been sunk 200 yards west of the “Mines” of 1842, at 68603178, by 1886 when the 1st edn. 6" map was surveyed. Surprisingly little is known about this mine; it had been abandoned by 1903 but was later opened again about the time of the 1st world war. Neither the mine nor its production figures appear in the Reports of H.M. Inspectors of Mines or the Mineral Statistics. In fact none of the workings in these parishes are featured in those returns; emphasising that those statistics are not a true picture of mining activity.

According to local tradition¹¹ the reopening in the 1st war came to an abrupt end when the mine was allowed to flood leaving all the machinery and tools in situ; a tale which crops up regularly in all mining and quarrying districts. This tale does highlight one feature of the Orestone Mine which is unique in the parishes; it was not worked by adit but relied on pumping to keep it dry.

Situated as it is on top of the down there was no surface water available for a wheel, so working in depth was probably not carried out until the advent, in the last half of the 19th century, of efficient portable steam engines. There is no indication of permanent buildings in 1886.

The demand for locally produced iron and manganese in the 1st war resulted in the reopening of other workings in addition to Orestone. Mill Wood was worked for iron by Mr Loosemore, as were a number of small mines throughout North Devon. Ore was carted to Filleigh Station by local farmers. Other sites were tried; below the road at Hobbs Hill, immediately west of Mount Whistle, a shaft was sunk as a trial for iron without success. Some work was carried out independent of the Orestone Mine, to the east of that mine towards Reapham Wood, where a local man remembered holding a candle whilst his father worked.¹²

In the far north of the parish of Charles there is a small working about which nothing of substance is known. On Mockham Down, at 665358, is the site of a single shallow shaft; reputed to be a trial for silver-lead,¹³ there is little to link it with the workings further south other than it is on Fortescue lands. Returning to the south of Charles; there is reported locally to be a copper working in Boundy's Wood but no evidence of this has been found.

The mines in these parishes have been active over a period of at least two hundred years during which time the emphasis moved from copper to iron and manganese. None of the workings was very large but a small production of ores did result, although not sufficient to make a mark on the mineral statistics nor warrant a reference in works on economic geology. It is unlikely that working was profitable; certainly in the case of copper losses were made, although individuals may have profited in the 19th century through the transfer of leases and the sale of shares. But the mining activity in these parishes provides us with a picture of activity elsewhere in North Devon.

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