

BRITISH MINING No.41

# MEMOIRS 1990



Skillen, B.S. 1990

“Miners, coiners & conjurers: some Cornish Tales”  
British Mining No.41, NMRS, pp.7-13

Published by the

THE NORTHERN MINE RESEARCH SOCIETY  
SHEFFIELD U.K.

© N.M.R.S. & The Author(s) 1990.

ISSN 0309-2199

**MINERS, COINERS AND CONJURERS:  
SOME CORNISH TALES.**

Brian S. Skillen

**SYNOPSIS**

*Cornwall's old mines have a peculiar mystery and sometimes it is possible to glimpse the more outre aspects of their past from the gossip columns of old newspapers or the pages of old journals and much worn books.*

The very closeness of nature generated a respect amongst the labour force tempered with superstition when nature played her tricks. Odd fancies were easily born in the creaking depths of mines, geological activity would have given the fairy miners a certain reality.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the rumbling earthquake that shook many old workings on 15 July 1717 may well have seemed like devil's work in such emotionally charged working conditions. In the Carnoth adit in St. Just, the shock was experienced at 108 ft.; in the Bodsadzhil Downs workings the effect was at 180 ft. In the Huel-rith mine, in the Parish of Lelant, the earth moved under the miners. In the Herland mine, in the Parish of Gwinear, the quake was experienced at 360 ft. The dull rumblings experienced at 420 ft. in the Chacewater workings affected the miners greatly for they were generally a superstitious lot.<sup>2</sup>

Superstition played its part in the wild and beautiful landscape of parishes such as that of St. Just. There open shafts and adits of old workings generated both a fear and respect of old men's workings. Penn told a story of a Cornish tin mine notice exhibiting a warning to all and sundry in the following terms:

“Please do not fall down the shaft”.

perhaps it was for fear of disturbing whatever was below,<sup>3</sup> and the consequences of falls could on occasion be strange.

When in 1792 a local man went missing about St. Just his friends all feared for his safety from the many open old workings. They checked many of them over the following few days but failed to find him. It was about a week later that another man went out to look for missing cattle. Crossing the fields he spied in the distance a figure astride a burrow, the bank of earth surrounding an old shaft opening. The man was hopeful that the other had seen his cattle, called out but got no reply. He was then making his way across the field when to his surprise he saw the figure vanish. Perhaps stopping a moment, the man wondered whether the figure he had seen might be a guard for some smuggler's hoard, it being then common practice to hide contraband goods in old workings. In any case the man approached with increasing caution and he may well have been hopeful of a drop of smuggled spirit, but the groans coming from below left him gulping with fright. However he soon regained his composure realising he had located the man who had been missing the previous few days. Assistance was soon got and the men climbing down the shaft found the missing man

## MINERS, COINERS AND CONJURERS: SOME CORNISH TALES

much injured. The rescue worked well and the man was soon got up the shaft and home to recover, still alive thanks to the assistance of some other form of “spirit”.<sup>4</sup>



*Figure 1. A view of the Botallack Mines, Cornwall, c1860s.*

Miners were enthusiastic smugglers and were not past dealing with the law, the excise officers getting a good beating if caught. Sometimes mistaken identity led to the wrong person getting a beating,<sup>5</sup> hence the caution of the above man’s approach to the shaft.

According to A.K. Hamilton Jenkin the old Cornish miners were adept in smuggling and extra-legal practice. The stannary towns on which local monies were centralised encouraged other forms of subversion.

The old moorlands between Helston and Marazion were the common adventure grounds of many youngsters and one group out rambling in late July or early August 1792 were kicking up peats when they found a hidden chimney head. Too good to miss, and much like all youngsters, they all crowded around and peered down into the dank smoky hole and there below they spied a grate and cinders. An old shaft close by encouraged their bravado and climbing down they found a long passage cut to a cavern where they found a coiner’s den. Moulds for crowns, half crowns and shillings were found, so too old pewter dishes enmasse, which would have been melted down and mixed with base materials to look like silver, also tunnelling equipment. The local magistrates were soon alerted and a warrant was issued but without any success, for the coiners had fled.<sup>6</sup>

Coiners and spirits were much the romance of the old Cornish mines but mundane reality attracted equal interest. Journals such as *The Penny Magazine*

show clearly how Cornish mines were on the popular itinerary for many. Interesting glimpses are provided of social conditions often from blatant voyeurism. One traveller had an eye for the “Bal Maidens” of Tresavean, 8 miles from Falmouth, and he described how he and his friends visited there one November day and:

“occupied some hours in observing the mode of raising the ore, and also the manner in which it was broken and crushed: the process is extremely simple. The larger pieces or blocks are broken with hammers by women, called “Bal Maidens”, many of whom are very good looking; but they seem to require warmer clothing, and must find their occupation painful and tiresome; they were all without stays ...”<sup>7</sup>

On the subject of warmth another source noted that the girls often had their ankles protected by thick woollen bands in winter - much as the style of the present.<sup>8</sup>

Exploring the undersea mines of the St. Just District rather dampened the ardour and warmth of the correspondent to the *Penny Magazine*. His visit coincided with the engine boiler blowing, the pumps failing and water coming tumbling into the workings. The water running in took him somewhat aback and he had doubts as to whether the engine was *ever* able to cope. The bleak cliff-scape about Botallack and Levant also shook him and he found the slippery ladder-ways down to the pit entrances scary and where there were no ladders the path every bit as slippery and bad, so much so that he almost skedaddled over the cliffs. He noted the regular deaths of cliff guides who, from careless disregard, often went down into the sea after losing their footing.<sup>9</sup> But no matter the difficulties of access there were many visitors to these mines, each with their own impressions and tales to tell.

The anonymous writer of *Cornwall: its mines and miners* described how:

“On the very summit of the beetling cliff you behold the mining apparatus overhanging the sea. You see a chimney smoking loftily at the tops and another puffing less loftily about half-way down. Then lastly, closer to you, and almost close to the sea, is a third smoking chimney, connected with a small mining office. On one side of the cliff tall ladders enable the miner to ascend, and he must have a sure foot and a strong head who can comfortably tread those ladders, round by round, the sea roaring under him, and almost flinging its raging spray after him as he gets higher and higher!”

He further went on to describe how:

“To gain even the entrance of the mine is no slight matter. You do not go straightly and evenly to the shaft’s mouth, as in other mines on level ground. But you have to pick your way down to a small counting-house, erected on a cliff or prominence half-way between the summit of the rock and the ocean. You must go there to find the mining agent who will accompany you. What an accumulation of mining gear you must pass! long chains stretched out over the bell-cranks and posts - wooden platforms looking like battered remnants of wrecks - and yet supporting large beams of timber and heavy coils of rope. Here, there is a little, creaking, crazy-boarded shed - there, a broken-down post or two - and there again, you must wind round by the rocky path amidst chains and cables and ascending loads.”

Laddering took the visitor’s breath away, the miners readily took the visitor’s money as well. But in that case he could get a piece of ore chopped out and claim he had done it himself, indeed there is general evidence to suggest “below ground souvenirs” were a profitable side line for the miners. Who could blame

## MINERS, COINERS AND CONJURERS: SOME CORNISH TALES

them for they must have had great patience to wait for visitors huffing and puffing at the foot of ladder-ways. The additional gimmick of Botallack's undersea location provided extra pay for many miners, visitors gladly gave up to 1/- or more for ore chopped out from within feet of the sea (sic). Then

"We may as well reach the daylight once more. We have only to scramble, crawl, walk, creep, crush, climb, and grumble as before, and we shortly behold the bright sunlight, and are fanned by the refreshing breeze of that ocean, the echo of whose sound we have so faintly and yet fearfully heard under its depths. At the counting-house, gallons of water are waiting us, and tallow, mud, ooze, and iron rust, all give way to the application of soap. Off go our miners' caps, and woollen jackets, and wide inexpressibles, and away we go too, having received many thanks for the half-crown each of us has left wherewith to drink our health under the sea."<sup>10</sup>

The above description is a nice visual and a bit of the hard stuff would have been necessary for climbing in the ladder-ways of Huel Vor, all 1,200 ft. into the workings:

"... an affair of no trivial exertion, as the iron ladders were quite vertical, and their steps a foot asunder. The machinery for clearing the mine from water was in the same shaft, which rendered it necessary to use caution lest our dresses should be caught by the enormous rods, as an accident of the kind would have consigned one, a mangled corpse, to the bottom of the abyss. It is to be hoped that some plan will eventually be adopted to enable the miners to ascend and descend by a machine, instead of being compelled to undergo the violent labour caused by the present mode; for after six hours below, the additional exercise of an hour's climbing by such a series of upright ladders, as it were, up a large chimney, is so exhausting, that the health of the people is injured, and the term of their existence shortened. The rushing of water and noise of machinery, which it may be easily conceived is on a stupendous scale when I state that it raises water from a depth of 1,250 feet, together with the reverberation of the reports caused by the blasting of the rock, had an extremely awful effect."

Superstitions also attracted this writer's attention and he noted how whistling was forbidden below ground but that the miner could sing as much as he chose, but from the above description one is left to puzzle on what he might have sung of.<sup>11</sup>

Ladder-ways were generally toilsome and difficult, so too the trek through some of the workings and the story of a blind miner working below at Botallack is surprising. A blind man, whether blind from birth or on account of accident, worked as an underground labourer at Botallack. No date is available for the duration of his labours but he was apparently long below from the dread of being compelled to accept parish relief. Whatever the case he supported a thriving family of nine children and was knowledgeable enough of the workings to act as a guide for his fellow labourers. Blind fate played nasty tricks on this poor man for the rocky hearts of management saw little use in him and sacked the man. Even more cruel was his eventual death for having gone to work for builders in St. Ives he died in a site accident after a fall from scaffolding.<sup>12</sup>

Blindness need not be physical for the caprice of Cornwall turned many against her. One who was evidently not impressed wrote thus:

"Oh! Cornwall, barren, wretched spot of ground  
Where nought but rocks and stones are to be found;  
Thy barren hills won't find thy sons with bread,  
Or wood to make 'em coffins when they're dead!"<sup>13</sup>

These lines provoked a vigorous defence but there was much truth in the matter especially considering the miner's lot. The extravagantly mendacious nature of much of the mining, the near Munchausenism of Cornish mining history, could prove attractive, especially to one character, whose arrest warrant read as follows:

“... a long-faced man with small eyes, crooked nose, red hair under his stumpy perwig, and a jerky gait,” his name was Rudolph Erich Raspe.<sup>14</sup>

Rudolph Erich Raspe, born at Hanover, Germany, in 1737, was the author of the mock heroic chronicle of the marvellous travels and exploits of Baron Munchausen. Munchausen was based on an old German soldier, Hieronymus von Munchausen (1720-1797), who was a teller of tall tales as the gospel truth. Raspe had little grip of truth which was a great pity for he undoubtedly had some abilities, principal of which was to stay a step ahead of the law and even when it did catch up with him he managed to get clear and escape to England. For his study of mammoths during the Ice Age, the Royal Society of England had made him an Honorary Fellow, something he was able to play on and gained support from Horace Walpole and other admirers who at first paid his way. He was kicked out of the Royal Society once they were aware of his criminal behaviour and he fled westward from London to Cornwall, where as a result of his general smattering of geology he became an assayer at Dolcoath. There he wrote the work for which he became known: *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, 1786. Beyond the reach of the real Munchausen his book became a great success, had it been otherwise it would have been a grand case of libel but in truth Raspe gained very little from it financially.

Raspe was in the Dolcoath area from c1782 to c1786, it was not a continuous stay and his principal time about the assay office was up to 1785. Jory Henwood collected many tales of the “old conjurer's” activities and he quite caught local imagination with his fire and brimstone activities that sent small boys and grown men scattering from the office doorway where they had stopped to watch this startling man. Cornish mining slang and reminiscences of Cornish scenery are scattered throughout Raspe's tale and it seems he had some fondness for Cornwall but he eventually got the urge to move once more. His renewed wanderings took him to Scotland and Wales, then eventually to Ireland, where he arrived in none too good health about October 1793.

Raspe cast a hopeful eye at the Irish mines about Arklow but had little favourable to say of them or their management. The derelict copper mines of Muckross, near to Killarney, attracted him, perhaps for the wish to be a great big fish in a tiny pond. He arrived in the shadows of Macgillicuddy's Reeks sometime in 1794 and there for a few weeks he set about impressing the locals but the “old conjurer” was far from well and no magic could save him from spotted fever.<sup>15</sup>

Raspe may have suffered from self love but the Cornish miners as a group, when work took them overseas, suffered from only one thing and that was love of homeland. The fuchsia was introduced into Ireland by Cornish

## MINERS, COINERS AND CONJURERS: SOME CORNISH TALES

miners,<sup>16</sup> nostalgia went a step further in the Australian goldfields where a Cornish owned snackbar displayed a notice proudly proclaiming:

“Here’s where you get a meal like your mother used to give you”.<sup>17</sup>

The outre aspects and anecdotage of mining life add flesh to the bare bones of business history. Exploring these often reveal connections that are surprising, the escapades of Munchausen amongst the Cornish men whilst not unknown is one such connection and had there been time for Raspe, well there might have been a Munchausen amongst the Irish. Certainly the adventures of the wonderful Baron do not become so far fetched considering Botallack or the descent into Huel Vor. The frightening clamour of the Huel Vor Shaft suggests that the miners had more to fear than ghosts, their superstitions were a means of coming to grip with reality.

### REFERENCES

1. *Cornwall: its mines and miners*. 1855. p.287.
2. PENN, Peter (edit) *Cornish notes and queries* (1st. series) 1906. p.312.
3. *ibid.* p.275.
4. *Gentleman’s Magazine*. September 1795. p.739-740.
5. *Cornwall: its mines and miners*. 1855. p.291.
6. *Morning Chronicle* 10 August 1792.
7. *Penny Magazine* 5 September 1835. p.351.
8. *Cornwall: its mines and miners*. 1855.
9. *Penny Magazine* op. cit. p.351.
10. *Cornwall: its mines and miners*. 1855. p.45-51.
11. *Penny Magazine* op. cit. p.351.
12. PENN, Peter op. cit. 1906. p.310.  
*Cornwall: its mines and miners*. 1855. p.53-54.
13. PENN, Peter op. cit. 1906. p.310.
14. MAGILL, Frank N. (edit) *Cyclopedia of world authors*. Vol. III. ODE-Z Rev. edit. New Jersey. 1974. p.1467-68.
15. *Gentleman’s Magazine*. November 1856 p.588; January 1857 p.2.  
CARSWELL, John *The prospector: being the life and times of Rudolph Erich Raspe (1737-1794)*. 1950. p.178-179; 184-185; 254-257.  
HARRIS, T.R. *Dolcoath: Queen of Cornish mines*. Trevithick Society, 1974, p.23.  
HENWOOD, W.J. *Observations on metalliferous deposits and on subterranean temperature*. 1871. p.644-645 (notes).

16. SOMERVILLE-LARGE, Peter *The coast of West Cork*. 1985. p.195.

17. PENN, Peter op. cit. p.274.

Source notes:

The view of Botallack Mines and the cliff-scape access comes from:  
SIMONIN, L *Underground life: or mines and miners*. 1869. Figure 102.  
Facing page 396.

The winze shaft view is from the same source, being Figure 103. p.397.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The journals and newspaper files of The Mitchell Library, Glasgow, have been a source of research material.

Brian S. Skillen.  
46 Munro Road,  
Jordanhill,  
Glasgow  
G13 1SF



*Figure 2. Winze shaft in an old Cornish Mine.*