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THEY DID IT YESTERDAY

R.H. Bird

SYNOPSIS

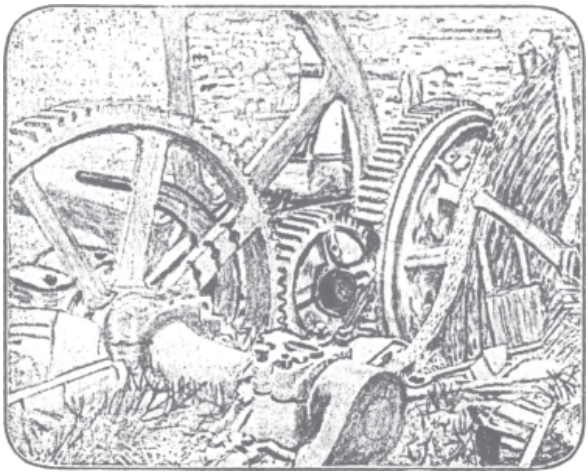
Some time ago, whilst looking through some old papers, an envelope headed "Puttrell's newspaper cuttings" came to light. These old photocopies, from material in the local reference library, were some of the first items which fired the writer's interest in metal mining, almost thirty years ago. Although full of 'journalese' and, in some places erroneous and amusing, they are nonetheless still of interest and provide an insight into underground mining exploration during the early years of this century, at a time when the overworked term 'industrial archaeology' had never been heard.

James William Puttrell F.R.G.S., of Sheffield, was a pioneer. Born in 1869, he was to become almost a household name locally and, indeed, is still remembered by those with a penchant for climbing and mountaineering in the area. Puttrell began to explore the High Peak when he was only thirteen years of age and when he was fifteen, during the early eighties, he made a lone crossing of that high and (still) inhospitable plateau of Kinderscout. This, in the depths of winter.*

Puttrell went on to make a name for himself with his rock climbing, 'bog trotting' and caving exploits, the latter particularly in the Castleton area. In 1900 the Kyndwr Club was formed with a hard core of like-minded stalwarts and, again, Puttrell became a leading light in this organisation. With his caving activities around Blue John and Speedwell mines, together with Giant's Hole, Oxlow and Alum Pots, it was only natural that Puttrell should find time to explore many of the abandoned lead workings in the district. Such activities now and then gained the notice of the local press and it is these articles which form the basis of the collection. It is believed that Puttrell pasted these 'mine related' press cuttings into the scrap book over the years.

Also included in the collection are articles written by another 'character' called Frank H. Brindley. Brindley managed – or perhaps owned – a small tools firm in Sheffield but, in addition, was a keen photographer. Latterly he ran a small organisation known as Sheffield News Pictures. He had a fine collection of photographic prints showing Peak mining remains, now long vanished (about this time, in the 1920s,

* And this, at a time before enlightened free access to these jealously guarded grouse moors. Woe betide a walker who came face to face with the cudgel-toting gamekeepers. Later mass trespasses were organised which lay the foundations for the opening of such areas. For further detail and information on Puttrell, see *High Peak* by Byne & Sutton.



the barmaster's job was not quite moribund and there are short articles – some of them written by Brindley – detailing various 'nickings' of titles in the mining field); Brindley also had a respectable collection of local minerals.

However, the latter's articles contained many ludicrous – not to say amusing – 'observations' which even his readers found hard to swallow on occasion. For example, under a heading *Horrors in the Darkness below* we are informed that his explorations in a long defunct working revealed spiders the size of sparrows, whilst in another article in 1926, Mr Brindley tells us that he climbed down a shaft which he 'found to be 550 feet deep' and since he did not possess a rope he descended (and, presumable later, ascended) by means of the stemples which were still in place. All this, moreover, with his half plate camera on his back!

One has to read between the lines, as it were, but, that done, there still comes across a flavour of pioneering spirit in the exploits. Elsewhere, in the *High Peak News* of January 31st, 1920, we are informed that Long Rake is the biggest and most important vein in Derbyshire and that *it is supposed to reach as far as Wales!* (my italics). To be fair, this is not 'a Brindleyism' but shows that newspapers have not changed much over the years when it comes to honesty or accurate reporting!

One article in the little collection is worthy of reproduction here since it contains little of doubtful integrity and well shows what mining enthusiasts were up to before the advent of serious research and modern caving equipment.

Under the heading *Cave exploring in Derbyshire and Staffordshire* it is written by R.E. Askew, a member of the Liverpool Wayfarers Club, and appeared in the *Stockport Advertiser* on October 25th 1929.

"When one resides in the vicinity of the Derbyshire moors, let him take a walk on any Saturday or Sunday morning and he will notice streams of "trampers" clad in a variety of outdoor garments – some in knickers – some in very abbreviated "shorts", but all have two essentials, rucksack and heavy boots.

Occasionally we notice a party of pioneers especially in the region of Castleton, carrying such equipment as climbing ropes, rope ladders, lamps etc. These are cave explorers. By cave I mean a natural cavity under the earth, and this is distinct from a mine, which is also a cavity or series of passages underground, only, man made, but nonetheless just as interesting and infinitely more dangerous, one having to overcome the very risky business of crossing shafts of unknown depths – there is also the danger of false floors, falling beams, etc.

One glorious day in September last, my friend J.W. Puttrell, F.R.G.S., and myself motored to Ecton Hill from Sheffield, properly equipped with Alpine nailed boots, eighty feet of rope, food and an-abundant supply of candles, with serviceable electric torches, not forgetting extra batteries.

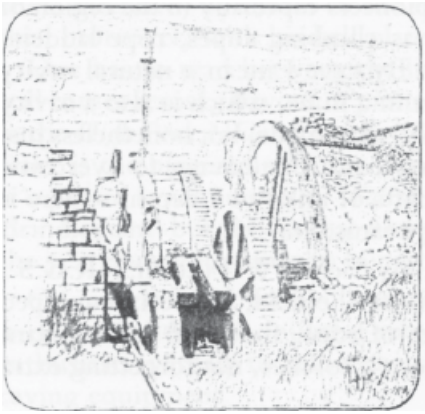
Ecton Hill ... near Hartington is ideally beautiful, it being bounded on the east by the Manifold river and at its southern extremities is the old village of Wetton. From the summit, which attains the height of 1300 feet, the view is superb.

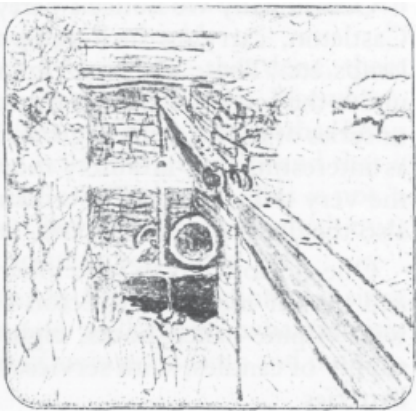
But enough of this, let us come to the main object of our visit – the mines – of which there are six, being in order of depth: Ecton, 200 fathoms, Clayton 140 fathoms, Chadwicks, Dutchman and Bag.

Electing to first explore the Dutchman, we traversed up the steep eastern slope of the hill to about 200 feet, until we came to the Dutchman's adit, an opening, strewn about the mouth with fallen timbers, about eight feet high by seven wide. Entering the level, the floor of which was covered by about two to six inches of water, we proceeded for about thirty yards, then being confronted by a concrete barrier, blocking the way, with the exception of a small opening near the roof. This was easily surmounted.

Progress was slow, as every foot of the way had to be carefully "prodded" with a stout stick as we did not wish to inadvertently step into a water filled shaft – my friend can swim but that is an art I have not yet mastered. After about 100 yards the passage forked and there we halted to examine the calcareous formation on the roof, walls, and floor of the level."

After some deviations into other levels: "... we proceeded up the left hand passage which, after about forty yards, was completely blocked by a water-filled cavity of unknown depth, the surface of which was covered by cave ice, a calcareous deposit which to all appearances looked to be a continuation of the floor of the level. It will now be seen why I have previously referred to the fact that we had to "prod" – for lack of a better term – our way.





Bridging this awful place, and just awash, were two slimy boards, roughly about 15 inches wide. The problem now was – to cross. Were these boards practically rotted by the action of the water and age – for the mines have not been worked for over fifty years – or were they sound? The only way to settle the question was to walk over them, and as we were explorers intent upon unearthing the mysteries of the far, unknown, beyond, we roped together. I am glad to say that the planks did their duty well; we both crossed safely and I must say our feelings were expressed by big sighs of relief when we attained the other side. Here we found several rather interesting small passages diverging right and left, all of which ended in a "pocket", where signs of active mining for the valuable copper were easily discernible.

Further on we came to three roughly hewn steps leading to a small rock platform from which a gully, about ninety feet in length, led upwards at an angle of forty five degrees. The floor was richly encrusted with a beautifully smooth calcareous deposit, which made it very difficult indeed to find adequate hand and foot holds during the ascent. We reached the top without mishap, and the numerous artificial chambers we then found – some forty to sixty feet long, nearly as broad, and twenty feet high – gave a good hour's exploration.

This part of the mine had every appearance of being a natural formation, but nevertheless it was not so, every ounce of earth and rock having been delved by mere man.

We entered Dutchman at 3.15 and one can easily see the amount of work to be done therein when I say that we came out again into the crisp mountain air and the crescent moon was already gaining power, and the greater stars were shining, jewel-like in the cloudless evening sky.

The car had been left a short distance away, at a height of about 800 feet above sea level, and on our regaining this we found the windscreen, body and wings covered with a respectable coating of ice. Starting up with some difficulty, thus ended the first of our exciting series of visits to the Ecton Mines.

It would be as well to add a warning as to the dangers existing for the unwary on the surface of the hill, in the form of numerous shafts no wider than four feet across which go straight into the bowels of the earth, one of them being 1200 feet deep, of which appalling depth 900 feet is occupied by water.

Many of these awesome holes are entirely unprotected, unfortunately. In certain parts one can notice an inoffensive cairn of loose rocks, about five feet across; one would be well advised not to step on any of these, as this is someone's primitive way of "sealing" a shaft head, no planks or anything of a like nature are to be found under the stones, which are held in place by one piece only acting as a keystone – do not trust these

cairns, as a matter of fact, to use the words of a friend of mine fully experienced in cave work, "go slow" when attacking some of the wonders and mysteries of Ecton Hill".

Finally, again, the *High Peak News* of 29th October 1932 ...

"Some excitement was caused in Castleton on Saturday night by the finding of what appeared to be an abandoned car on the top of Mam Tor. The car was first noticed early in the evening, and was again seen close on midnight. The police were advised, and on enquiries being made it was found that the car belonged to a party of men who, led by Mr J.W. Puttrell, the well known explorer, were searching the depths of one of the mines about Castleton" .... Some things never change!

The accompanying pencil sketches by Frank Monks are derived from Brindley's photographs, which were used to illustrate an article titled" A tour amongst the derelict Derbyshire lead mines", which appeared in the *Quarry Managers Journal,* in February 1925. In the article, Brindley describes how he came across this rusting machinery (replete with brasses in the bearings) which had somehow survived the scrap drive in the First World War.

The remarkable collection of mining gear comprised twin Cornish boilers – with an ash tree growing out of the ashes of the last fire – a winding and pumping engine, linked by a short run of flat rods to the shaft spears, a roll crusher and a winding reel, still with its flat rope attached. The site was Coalpithole Mine.

Monks, who sketched from these photographs, was a work colleague of the present writer in the 1960s; he was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident shortly after completing these illustrations.

A huge and historically unique collection of Brindley's photographs is believed still to exist.

A lead mine explorer about to descend a shaft on Longstone Edge in the 1920s. Seemingly, there remained a number of ancient windlasses about the mines here, which were pressed into service by these intrepid individuals at this time. But for the quick reaction of one of the winders, when the iron spindle fractured on a jackroll hereabouts, this dubious practise would undoubtedly have cost one explorer his life; another jackroll was found half a mile away and a replacement and rescue effected!

R.H. Bird
41 Windsor Walk
South Anston
Sheffield S31 7EL