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MINERS OR CROFTERS?

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SYNOPSIS

The earnings of working people are often seen in terms of a weekly wage, and the income of the lead miners as limited to the uncertain bounty of working bargains. In fact there might be a sub-economy which provided additional revenue, and the miners at Leadhills have been compared with the crofters of the Scottish Highlands. Both received an irregular income from a "crop", both looked to additional earnings to provide an adequate livelihood, and both also shared political interests arising from the tenure of their land.

There are many references to British miners working allotments or even small farms; and to their wives and daughters added to the family income by such work as spinning or sewing in the home. In 1882 a correspondent to the *Hamilton Advertiser* referred to the miners at Leadhills, Lanarkshire, Scotland, as the" crofters of the hills", a term that not only applies to their sub economy but implied a social dimension as well.¹

The term crofter is in fact specific to small farmers in the Scottish Highlands and Islands. It not only refers to those who work the land and who have another occupation, usually fishing or weaving, in order to make ends meet; but also to a distinct system of land tenure. The particular problems this created in the Highlands led to a policy of direct action in the land-reform movements of the late nineteenth century, and a Crofter's Party took seats in the election of 1885.²

The term smallholder is perhaps more accurate when applied to the lead miners, but the political connotation means "crofter" has a certain pertinence in relation to Leadhills.

Supplementary sources of income applied to many communities, and many rural tradesmen had patches of land.³ There are also references to farmer-miners in the Pennines, and Lewis remarks that many Welsh farmers might work in the mines in order to provide the cash to pay the rent.⁴ Other sources of additional income included knitting and lace making.⁵

Such diversity was often seen in terms of "pretty gardens" and in the "industry" of the womenfolk. In reality the produce from the land and the earnings of the females, could provide higher living standards for some, and enable others to "get by" when times were hard.⁶



Plate I. View of Leadhills showing ground reclaimed from the moors to the north west of the village.

The Small Holdings at Leadhills

The villages of Leadhills and Wanlockhead lie among the bleak moorlands of the Lowther hills. Lead mining as a continuous industry dates from the seventeenth century; but both communities are distant from centres of population and at neither was there any significant settlement prior to the coming of the miners. Rainfall is considerable, the summer season is short and the winters severe. Nevertheless ground was successfully re-claimed for agriculture and its extent is still apparent in the green slopes that extend around and above the villages. (Plate 1.) Most lie between the 375M and 435M contours, but on the south facing hillside above Wanlockhead they approach 470M. In the 1860s the minister there, Rev. Thomas Hastings, claimed that their extent was governed by the difficulty in carrying up manure rather than the altitude of the fields. He wrote how the moorland was reclaimed by cutting and pulling the heather, and the turf was then burned and the ash dug into the exposed ground.⁷ It was a technique also employed in the Pennines.⁸

James Stirling, who was appointed agent for the *Scots Mines Company* at Leadhills in 1734, is usually given credit for encouraging the miners to reclaim the moorland and grow vegetables to improve their diet, but there is some evidence that this was the Company's intention when it leased the ground.⁹ At Wanlockhead, Alexander Telfer encouraged similar practices when he took a lease in 1734, and it seems likely that small holding at both villages began about the same time.¹⁰ The practice was probably based on experience at lead mines elsewhere, and one that originated in the very early days of the industry.¹¹

By 1790 a visitor to Leadhills wrote of the" gardens" where the miners grew "kitchen stuff', and by then the smallholdings probably had a significant place in the village economy.¹² However this writer's present research is concerned with the period after 1830, so this article particularly looks at the situation in the nineteenth century.

How much land did the miners have? A plan of "The Plots at Leadhills", dated 1850, has 617 plots marked on it, and the total area of village and plots amounts to 385 acres.¹³ The Census Returns of 1851 list 223 inhabited houses, so many must have had several plots, perhaps distributed among members of the family. No details of the names of the owners, or the size of the plots, are given in the plan, but an estimate suggests the larger were as much as 3 acres. Not enough to be called a farm, but a sizeable smallholding.

In addition to their plots the miners had rough grazing on the moors, and a "cow gang" prevented the animals straying into the mines. The herd boys were paid by the owners of the cows and probably received as much as their fellows on the washing floors, but the latter work seems to have been preferred.¹⁴

Many working people kept pigs. It was said they were "seldom kept" at Leadhills but it was customary for the miners there to be credited with "meat money" in October so as to buy a sheep and salt its meat for the winter.¹⁵

In the eighteenth century the Leadhills' miners may have fitted other work in with their bargains as they pleased. But elsewhere many lead miners took days off each week to attend to their small holdings and Samuel notes that the Rating of Mines Committee were told some miners in Derbyshire were "half labourers, half farmers".¹⁶ By the early 1800s bargain working at Leadhills was being tightened up, and in 1839 a young miner, James Gibson, complained he was "weary" from haymaking after his shift in the mines. It was work that could involve the whole family and in 1853 a correspondent to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, signing himself "ABG", wrote how the work at "certain seasons (was) provided by the women and children".¹⁷

The Cows needed shelter in the severe winters, and the cottage maintained by the writer and his wife at Leadhills includes an adjacent cow byre. It is of irregular shape but in essence it measures 6m long by 3.5m wide and 4.5m high overall including a hayloft. (Plate 2)

How large was a viable croft? Clearly this depends on the quality of the land, and a record of crofts in Caithness in the late nineteenth century shows a quarter of the total were less than 5 acres.¹⁸ The quality of such northern fields was probably similar to those in southern uplands and their size compares with miners' holdings in the Pennines. Here a



Plate II. A Leadhills cow-byre (the roof was once slated).

few were as much as 10 acres, most about 3, but there were also "families with 1/2 an acre", or "1/6 for a garden".¹⁹

Land tenure was crucial to the circumstances of the crofter and led to the Crofters Act of 1886. The Leadhills miners held the ground, which they had reclaimed, as "Kindly Tenants".²⁰ The term is a feudal one applying to land granted to vassals but held "without charter" and transferred by "possession and delivery". Although the miners paid no rent they had no title and were not at liberty to sell the ground, or even dispose of it outside the family, without the landlord's permission. In 1850 a Wanlockhead man wanted to sell his property to another miner in order to emigrate to America, but was told that such a sale was "impossible".²¹

Home-Work

The miner's family was an economic unit with all contributing to the total earnings. The plight of the women and children in colliery villages is well documented, and in the eighteenth century they worked as bearers and ore washers in some British lead mines.²²

Paid work done at home has a long, and indeed a continuing, history. The fact that the lead miners worked bargains meant their earnings were irregular in amount and infrequent in payment, the miner meantime living on credit. Any other work was welcome in that it would supplement the family income with ready money, and in many mining districts contract textile work was taken in by the womenfolk.²³

At Leadhills and Wanlockhead some of the womenfolk were occupied in spinning until around 1800.²⁴ They could earn 6d (2.5p) a day, a figure that compares with the 8d (3p) quoted for parts of Scotland in the 1790s.²⁵ On the other hand, those who knitted stockings in the Highlands earned 1/6 (7.5p).²⁶ Knitting seems to have been important in many mining communities, but in the nineteenth century, muslin embroidery, known as flowering, provided a staple domestic industry in South West Scotland; where as many as 30,000 women and children worked at the trade. A correspondent to the second Statistical Account claimed the most skilled could earn as much as 1/4 (6p) a day.²⁷

The so called Chandler Scale, as applied to plaiting straw for hats, gives a basis for comparison. In it a child of 8 years was estimated as earning 8d (3p) a week rising to 3/6 (17p) when 16 years and above.²⁸ Although plaiting was centred on Bedfordshire, it may have been widely distributed for there were Scottish agents who placed work with the crofters in Caithness and the Northern Isles.²⁹ The investigator for the Children's Commission who visited Leadhills in 1841, wrote that many of the women and girls were embroidering for agents from eight years upwards might work from six in the morning until ten at night, and such long hours "sickened them a bit".³⁰

Harriet Martineau, social observer and friend of Charles Dickens, visited Leadhills in 1852 and was greatly moved by the sight of a girl, "nine years old but so small as to look younger", toiling over her sewing to earn a few pence.³¹ Both Miss Martineau and the Children's investigator gave the impression that many girls as young as eight were working a twelve hour day. In fact an examination of the Census of 1851 only shows two nine year old girls entered as flowerers at Leadhills and the majority of the 38 females noted in the Return were adult.³² However flowering could be described as a covert industry and is likely that many householders were unwilling to admit to the labour of their little children.

Any measure of the market value of the finished embroidery must depend on the pattern etc., and in 1843 embroidered dresses sold for 9/to 42/- (45p to £1.1) and "pelerines", a sort of small shawl, for 1/9 to 3/6 (8p - 17p).³³ The embroidery was popular for "infant's gowns" and an example is now in the Wanlockhead Museum. (Plate 3)

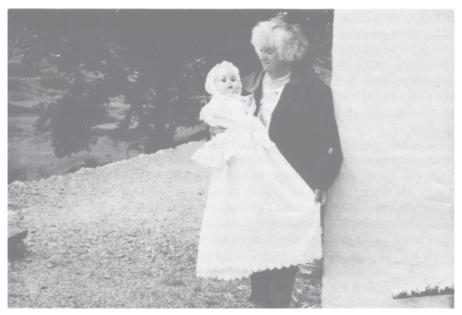


Plate III. A baby's robe in flowered cotton. By courtesy of Mrs Joanne Orr and the Wanlockhead Museum.

The Harvest

The produce from the miners' smallholdings is difficult to quantify, for the available statistics seem suspect and are at best no more than estimates. In 1839, James Gibson's father, William, wrote he had made a rick 19ft by $8\frac{1}{2}$ ft wide (5.8M. x 2.6M) from his crop of hay, perhaps containing 3 to 4 tons.³⁴ The Statistical Account of 1835 gave the total output from Leadhills as 10,000 stones (62.5 tons), a figure later repeated by "ABG".³⁵ The Statistical Account also refers to the miners keeping 90 cows, which compares with the "80 to 90" noted by Harriet Martineau.

The Rev. Hastings wrote that it took 200 to 300 stones of hay, (1.25-1.8 tons) to winter a cow, so, if this was correct, there was not enough for all the Leadhills herd and some animals were probably sold.³⁶ Such sales, along with any surplus calves, must have been of considerable cash value to the miners concerned. On the other hand William Gibson wrote of carting two loads of hay out of the village, so he presumably had enough to sell.³⁷ Little record has come to light as to the provision of hay for the horses used about the mines, but it seems likely that this was an additional market for some smallholders.

References in his letters suggest Gibson's own smallholding may have been more than a part-time interest. When his cow gave birth to a bull calf, he exchanged it for a "quey", a heifer, and in January 1840 his wife bought a "fat ewe for £2".³⁸ These references, and the possibility of a surplus of hay, suggest the Gibsons were increasing their stock, for the price of the ewe was a high one so is likely the animal was with lamb. In fact by 1864 the Leadhills miners were keeping 75 sheep in addition to their cows.³⁹

Both the Statistical Account and "ABG" also referred to a crop of 8,000 to 10,000 stones of potatoes. Working from a yield of 30 to 40 bolls per acre, as also quoted in the Account, and a boll of 16 stones, this could have come from about 16 acres of ground. And if the crop is equated to the 223 households as in 1851, each had about 40 stones. The Leadhills crop was affected by blight in 1846, but this does not seem to have been as disastrous as was the case in the West Highlands.

The harvest from the gardens would have included various vegetables. In 1792, a visitor remarked that these had a "dwarfish, stunted, aspect", but he supposed "it possible for cultivation to improve".⁴⁰ This was indeed the case and by the late nineteenth century Leadhills had its Horticultural Show. Those miners who produced a surplus from their land or animals could sell the produce but in general it could be supposed that the harvest meant less food need be bought, relieving pressure on revenue.

Writers have referred to small farmers working in the lead mines so as to provide ready money, and Samuel points out that the Kinnaird Commission were told that many of them found their farms "inadequate for their maintenance" and they needed the earnings from mining in order to survive.⁴¹

In a sense the opposite seems to have applied at Leadhills and Wanlockhead. There, the way bargains were set in the mid nineteenth century meant infrequent payment of wages and a shortage of cash. In 1839 the Sheriff of Lanark made the enigmatic comment that "he knew enough of the pays at Leadhills to have frequently, in the Small Debt Court, granted Delays".⁴² And in 1846 the miners at Wanlockhead complained they "were unable to compete with other workmen in the purchase of small articles and were forced to deal in credit".⁴³

The embroidery in particular provided families with a source of cash outside the mine economy, and one that paid a great deal more frequently than the bargains. The evidence to the Children's Commissions provide some figures. At Leadhills, the "unmarried women and girls of eight years and upwards" could earn up to 3/ - (15p) a week in 1841, while at Wanlockhead in 1844 they were getting as much as 6/- (30p).⁴⁴

The demand created by the 1851 Exhibition was said to have raised the average rate, and in that year 66 out of the 223 families at Leadhills were involved in embroidery or sewing, employing in all 86 women.⁴⁵ After this the market declined, partially owing to changes in fashion, but perhaps principally because machine-made embroidery was a cheap alternative after 1844, when Swiss embroidery looms came onto the market. In 1862 girls who had worked as flowerers were said to be leaving Wanlockhead to go into domestic service, and by the 1871 Census the number working at Leadhills had fallen to 12.⁴⁶

The wages of a domestic servant probably left little money to send home, and the void left by the decline of the flowering at Leadhills seems to have been met, at least in part, by taking in summer visitors. There are references to visitors holidaying in the village in the 1870s, and a letter written in 1905 stated that a "parlour bedroom was costing £1 a week" and although this was "excessive ... the place (was) crowded with visitors".⁴⁷

What contribution did the home-work make to the domestic income? The Children's investigator who visited Wanlockhead in 1844 reported that the earnings from flowering augmented that from the mines to an extent that some families could earn over £50 per annum and "live in comfort". He claimed this sum was made up of £25 from bargain work, £8 to £10 from "extra contracts", presumably adventure mining, and "3/6 to 6/-" a week from embroidery.⁴⁸ If these figures are accepted, then embroidery might contribute 6/-, almost one third, to the total of 19/5 (97p) earned by some families.

It seems safe to conclude that the situation was similar at Leadhills, and indeed this is borne out by William Gibson's circumstances. In 1834 one of his sons went to the University, Mrs Gibson could afford to get "gown pieces" from Glasgow, and her daughter "a furr (sic) to wear about her neck".⁴⁹

On the other hand the investigator reported there were some miners who "lived in the extreme of destitution", and Professor Smout finds wages could be as little at 4/6 (22p) a week.⁵⁰ The Census Returns of 1851 provide references to households who may have been wholly depended on the "sub economy" for a livelihood.⁵¹ For example the writer finds that out of 74 households where a woman was the "head", 8 were noted as "paupers", 3 had sons working in the mines, but no less than 38 houses had one or more females described as "Hand flowerer" or "Seamstress" and no other obvious wage earner.

In many cases the husband had probably left the village to find work at the lead mines at Cairsphairn or elsewhere, but if so money would have been infrequently sent home. In the lean years of the 1840s many of the Leadhills miners were out of work and Gibson himself may have had to get by from his sub economy.⁵²

To what extent was the produce from the smallholdings and the earnings from the flowering an excuse for keeping down the miners' wages? Sir George Denys, the Swaledale mine owner, is quoted as remarking "a bit of land makes them (the miners) stick to their homes and accept low wages".⁵³ The writer to the *Hamilton Advertiser*, quoted above, remarked that a result of the miners working their" crofts" was to allow the mining company to "screw them down to a pittance", and "ABG" wrote that "clinging to their patches of land induced (them) to accept lower wages", and that this had been further encouraged by "employment" at the needlework.⁵⁴

Proto Industrialisation

M.C. Gill's recent paper on Proto Industrialisation (P.I.) prompts a further consideration of the situation at Leadhills.⁵⁵ Taking P.I. at its basic definition of a beginning of an industry, then the sub-economy does not appear to have made any contribution to the development of lead mining in the Lowther hills. The first men to mine on the high moors seem to have come from outside the area, and the industry may have had a monastic origin for in 1239 the monks from Newbattle near Edinburgh had a lead mine on "Crawford Muir".⁵⁶ Gold mining then became an English interest, but activity was intermittent until the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ It seems to have been largely seasonal with the men living in tents which even in summer could be "blowne downe by the tempestious winds and raines".⁵⁸

Scurvy is a measure of the lack of fresh food and in 1696 a miner reported that "scurvy hath not prevented him going to the mine".⁵⁹ Professor Smout also refers to the prevalence of scurvy, and sees the reclaiming of the moors for smallholding as beginning in the 1740s.⁶⁰

The occupations recorded in the Census Returns confirm the Leadhills men saw themselves as "miners" and not "miner/farmers". The smallholding was regarded as a part-time activity, and Gill's paper refers to the place of such sources of income in the family budgets of working people. This is also a point made by Chris Whatley when he writes of P.I. that it was a "system in which the interests of under employed rural dwellers and merchants were drawn together".⁶¹ This was the case with the home-work at Leadhills, first spinning and then flowering; two activities promoted by urban merchants and later to be mechanised. Such incomes made a major contribution to the welfare of the miners, and may well have contributed to the economy of the mines in terms of lower wages levels.

It is also perhaps significant in the context of P.I. that William Gibson put any extra income towards the well being and comfort of his family, rather than towards setting himself up in some other business for example as a shop keeper. He might have done so for by 1844 five miners had opened shops which owed their "origins to the accumulations (of savings) and at once afforded a profitable investment".⁶² That such savings accrued as a result of the small holdings and the home-work seems probable.

The Political Dimension

The sub-economy also has a social/political significance and the appellation "crofters of the hills" a particular relevancy to Leadhills. In the 1880s the lot of the miners there was being compared with the problems in the Highlands where, in spite of the Crofters' Act, there was still discontent over land reforms.⁶³ The remarks made in the *Hamilton Advertiser* have already been noted, and a correspondent to the *North British Daily Mail* later wrote of hardships in Leadhills and the insecurity of the miners' tenure, and made the cryptic comment that the miners were "learning a lesson burnt into the minds of the peasants in Ireland and the West Highlands".⁶⁴ This identification with the plight of the crofter was emphasised at a meeting in Leadhills in 1888, when it was resolved to demand that Scottish Liberal MPs formed a Parliamentary party to "promote the interests of miners and crofters".⁶⁵

In a recent study of Scottish working class culture, W. Knox suggests that land reform was a starting point for the revival of socialism in Scotland in the 1880s, and there is evidence of an awakening social consciousness among the Leadhills miners at that time.⁶⁶

On the other hand, Hunt quotes references which suggest that smallholding tended to produce a more contented work-force.⁶⁷ In recent correspondence, Ian Forbes, of the Killhope Mining Centre, makes the point that the farmer-miner felt superior to his un-landed fellows and this was not a recipe for radicalism.⁶⁸ The differing situation at Leadhills may have had much to do with the way the reclaiming of ground for smallholdings came about perhaps a century after the lead mining had been established. Equally, it may be the miners of the 1880s identified with the peasant crofter rather than the small farmer.

Conclusions

The small holdings and the home-work had a place in the community's economy, but there seems nothing to suggest that they made any contribution to the growth of a mining industry at Leadhills. On the

other hand in so much as some of the miners would have found it difficult to make ends meet without the sub economy, and supported the movements for land reform, then they had an affinity with the" crofters" ...

The apparent social connections between the miners' land tenure and that of the Highland crofters seems to give a particular slant to political interest at Leadhills, and it may be that such developments there in the 1880s had as much to do with the small-holding as with the traditional engine of the mining environment.

Clearly, the implications of the lead miners' sub economy, its effect on disparities in earnings; on the fortunes of the mining communities; and in particular its social/ political dimensions, offer a field for further research.

The research for the above is part of a wider study of the social history of the Leadhills miners.

Acknowledgements

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