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NOBODY LIKE THE CAPTAIN: MEN OF THE MINES

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SYNOPSIS

The great vigour with which 19th century metal mining was pursued generated considerable interest in the agents of this industry, the mines captains. These men became popular and sometimes not so popular subjects for the journalise of Victorian writers. Their memoirs whilst wrapped up in the most fearful adjectives, do though give some insight to the nature of these mining entrepreneurs. In the years 1857-58, George Henwood who was closely involved with the Cornish mining industry penned a series of articles on notable miners for The Mining Journal, the accompanying notes on mines' captains and those associated to the industry have been developed from this source.

Henwood would seem to have been on good terms with many of the Cornish mining gentry and it was they who provided him with much of the grist of his tales. As Henwood was writing in the mid 19th century, the memories of old men allowed an oral history contact back to the latter part of the 18th century. Men profiled included William Burgess senior, a hotel keeper about Pool and Camborne, who as a young man had had a close association to local mining:

“when the place echoed with water driven stamps; when the place swarmed with half-clad buddle boys; when there were no tramroads, few ore waggons, and when pairs of mules were as common as horses.”

Henwood's short biographical sketch of Robert Mitchell of Truro was also of interest for the same reason, as at the time of Henwood's essay Mitchell was in his 87th year. Mitchell was the principal managing agent for the firm of the Copper House Company and as their agent it was his duty to travel to and from London and work with the men of the East India Company, in relation to that Company's eastern monopoly. Henwood commented that it must have been very arduous as communications were then so poor and certainly in Mitchell's younger days there was scarcely a road that could take a cart in Cornwall. Ore was then shifted on the backs of mule trains, their packs taking about 1½ cwt. The mule trains consisted of 50 to 60 animals under the command of a “driver” who was assisted by dogs in the trekking of the mules. Mitchell further remembered how tanners offered their wares in driblets for a guinea or so at the melting houses: The main source of tin in Mitchell's early days was from the workings of Tregoss Moor, Carnon Stream and Nancothen, a period of mining when exploration seldom went below adit level and the drainage engines were the so-called “skipjacks”.

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Many mines' captains' personal histories were the meat of the Victorian ethic of the self-made man, numerous captains had worked from boyhood in the mines. Henwood identified Captains such as Andrew Anthony of the Providence Mine; Philip Hawke of the Queen of Dart Mine, Asburton, who had started as a "bal-boy" at St Agnes and similarly John Wilkins of Porkellis Moor, who had followed much the same course of achievement. Obviously the rise to importance was not always easy and Henwood hinted that Captains Absalom and George Bennett of Tolvadden had not had an easy career.

Looking at the careers of individual mines' captains points to a variety of experience for such men as Captain Robert Billing of Ashburton. He was reared at Poldice and worked at several of the local mines including Great Wheal Busy. Billing's work also took him to South America for a period, a not uncommon course and when he returned he was the manager of several small Cornish mines until he became Captain of the South Plain Wood mine. He carried out many trials and found the vein worked in the Queen of the Dart Mine, so-called from the vein having been first seen in the bed of the River Dart. Billing also discovered the King Lode, which was a continuation of the Queen Lode, being slightly heaved by a cross-course. He was also involved in the working of the Knight of Dart Lode, toward Hemerdon Wood and carried on many local workings to considerable personal profit as is suggested in his ability to finance the working of a sett at Tamar at his own expense.

Captain John Champion of East Wheal Rose was another notable miner who had been responsible for the mechanisation of that mine. He had also been at East Wheal Rose at the time of its flooding when 42 died and he himself had barely got clear. His departure from the mine came with increasing concern that it was being worked beyond the Company's means and the mine did indeed fall on hard times. Champion was later at Newlyn East and then Cargoll, about the time Henwood penned his article.

The fluctuations of mining success was shown in the experience of Captain Dalton of Wheal Christopher. He had been at Trenance when that mine had produced the largest piece of native copper then raised in the British Isles, but as was suggested by Henwood, hope told a flattering tale and the enterprise eventually foundered. Dalton then chose to live on consultancy work which took him to Cumberland and many other British mining areas until he established at Wheal Christopher. But once there any opportunity was thwarted with the fall in the price of tin, which denied mining opportunity. The enterprise of Doctor Daniel of Trelissick was a similar helter-skelter of success or failure with the working of the Great Towan Mine at St Agnes,

with much faith and little financial gain. It was only the finding of so-called "black ore" which saved Daniel from total ruin. It was notable for the ease with which it could be wrought and the tribute was a farthing in the pound; according to Henwood the mine returned a guinea a minute profit for many years.

Technical ability amongst the mines' captains was also of note and John Edwards of Tywarnhaile Mine owed his career to his achievement in placing 5 engines on the mine.

Notable amongst the more able captains was Nicholas Ennor of Wiveliscombe, who had enjoyed a wide range of experience as a miner at Drake Wells, a quarry man at Delabole, and a manager at Treburget. Ennor was at almost continual war with the mining fraudsters, a battle he generally won through his wide knowledge and general experience. He was also an efficient capitalist for at a charge of £2 2s for the mine reports he prepared he made a good if hard living. This is hinted at in the necessity for him to cut short excursions due to accidents, also the number of mines he covered on his rounds was quite remarkable, and he visited at least 92 Cornish mines up to the period ending May 1857.

Mining management also of note were the company pursers, for example Nicholas Henwood, purser to South Dolcoath, Wheal Cock, Wheal Union and other mines in the Lizard District. Henwood attributes him with being the first exporter of Serpentine from the Lizard District to Bristol, where it was used for the manufacture of Epsom Salts. He also wrought Steatite at Gw Greaze, which was used in the porcelain manufactory of Messrs Flight, Barr & Barrs of Worcester. His cross investments also included china clay working at Pennance and in the Parish of Buddock, additionally his profits were ploughed into the Western Hotel, Penzance. It may also be noted that Nicholas Henwood was the father of George Henwood his biographer, so there may have been some family pride reflected in this account.

George Henwood himself was of some interest not only in his regular contributions to *The Mining Journal*, but also in his own mining work. He had first gone underground at South Dolcoath and from then developed a wide knowledge of mining that led to his carrying out surveys in many districts. Henwood himself noted his visit to the Wensleydale Mines, which was a sett some 13 miles long and 11 miles wide, being made up of numerous small and shallow lead veins.

According to Henwood some were flat and some were found to be perpendicular, lodes of lead and copper also being got in his survey, in which he was accompanied by a miner named Peart (of Hawes, Yorkshire), who was himself a notable mineral surveyor.

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George Henwood claimed only the slightest of family ties to William Jorey Henwood whom he profiled in one of his accounts. Jorey Henwood was a “practical and scientific miner” who had gained much experience with the Cornish Colour Company at Pendeen. He gained international recognition as deputy assay master to the Duchy of Cornwall and his remits took him to North and South America. His literary works included *Observations on metalliferous deposits and subterranean temperature*, 1871.

Henwood’s continued profiles included such men as Captain Josiah Hitchins of Tavistock, who was credited with the finding of the lode of the Devon Great Consols. The gossan had been worked but Hitchins explored further and got the main vein some fathoms lower. Hitchins was latterly both mining engineer and mine inspector, his travels took him through Devon, Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and to the continent. Similarly Captain William Hollow of Lelant, who started as a tin streamer, then worked underground as a tributer, and rose through the ranks to being an agent and acting as “toller” or scrutineer for several of the well-to-do Cornish mining families. Also Captain Thomas Lean, Marazion, who was a successful adventurer and established

Valentine’s series view of Levant Mine at the end of the 19th. century. The view shows the white-washed engine house, containing an old beam engine which, following the mines closure in 1930, was the first item to be preserved by the Cornish Engines Preservation Society, that later became the Trevithick Society.



Wheal Virgin, Treverbyn and other mines grouped about Marazion. Lean seems to have survived the fearful knock these workings took with the fall of tin prices in 1834 and became a reporter on the developments of the Cornish mines' engines. He was of particular note as a friend of Captain Henry Francis of Goldsithney, the original of the remarkable Francis Family of mining speculators.

Engineers also attracted Henwood's interest and he profiled Michael Loam of Redruth. Loam was the originator of the Tresaven man engine which had risen from the challenge of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic's wish to create a machine to raise miners from their work place to shaft top and save on laddering. It was successful as a machine and relatively safe, for accidents according to Henwood were due mainly to careless behaviour. Henwood cited a tragic case where a child taken below ground by its parent, had fallen from the father's grasp to its death, after panicking with the noise of the machine in the shaft.

Henwood also profiled William West, an engineer from St. Blazey, who was a maker of many of the engines that featured in *Browne's Cornish Engine Reporter*. West's first engine was at South Dolcoath, where Henwood had first experienced underground mining sometime about 1822, when Dolcoath had been under the reign of Captain William Bawden of Pengiggion Moor.

The profiles also reveal the international influence of Cornish miners, from Ireland to India and every hole in the hedge enroute. The Thomas Family were a Cornish mining family who enjoyed Irish connections for a considerable period of their working lives. Captain William Thomas of Coosheen was the son of Captain James Thomas, who was for many years agent at Dolcoath and the first cousin of Charles Thomas the manager at the mine. It may be noted that Father James' mining experience originated in Cook's Kitchen c1790s and he had handed on a great knowledge of mining to his son before William went to Ireland. William had himself worked for a number of years as a tributer at Dolcoath and his experiences served him well in the managerial position at Coosheen. He worked almost 18 years in Ireland and explored mineral reserves about Cork and Kerry. He was also noted for his paternalistic work during the Irish Famine, when he established a fishery both as a food and work source for the locals. His work at Coosheen was of considerable importance for he arrived about the time the lode was lost by a heave, however he managed to track the direction of the lode across 96 ft. with a cross cut at a cost of £30. This ability was noted in mining circles and in his later years he was active about Staffordshire, Lancashire, Westmoreland, Cumberland and Wales.

The Isle of Man was also served well by Cornish miners and men such as Captain Edward Bawden, a native of Ludgvan, near to Penzance, worked at Foxdale. Laxey also attracted Cornishmen, according to Henwood Captain Richard Rowe, a native of St. Agnes, saved the Laxey mine from disaster and financial ruin. He carried out extensive surveys on the Isle of Man and his abilities were recognised in the substantial house that the Laxey Mines Company built for him at the village of Laxey.

Wales also attracted the skills of many Cornish miners as for example Captain William Pascoe of Camborne, who worked at various Welsh mines. Similarly William Verran of Llanidloes originated from Cornwall, from Bisscoe Bridge. His early mining days were spent at the notoriously difficult Carnon Tin Stream Mine. At the time Henwood wrote of him, Verran was active in South Wales.

Henwood in his biographies regretted the tendency of Cornish miners to hunt fresh fields, the tendency for emigration was a harsh reality of the fragile Cornish mining structure at the time Henwood penned his articles. Men such as Captain Andrew Anthony saw their futures overseas and for this Henwood was sorry. Quite often things did not work out as the emigrants hoped, Captain William Heath, for one hated his early posting to Brazil, where he worked at gold washings and jacotinga workings, and was only too happy to return to Devon and Cornwall. He was of most note as a contributor to *The Mining Journal* and for his condemnation of Berdan's gold experiments. Others had departure forced on them, as with Captain William Hensley, a native of Camborne, who had his first captaincy at Roskear and developed a surveying practice in his later years. He was a great big mal),, being an imposing 6 ft 3 ins. in height and it always used to surprise people how this big man could climb or crawl through the most difficult levels and passageways. Hensley worked for a period in South America and also carried out a survey of Jamaica; the reality of home trade depression forced him and his family finally to Australia. Australia and Asia became the homes for many Cornishmen and it can be noted that Captain John Wilkins, the "bal-boy" of St. Agnes, became quite an authority on the Indian subcontinent and its minerals resources.

Subject biographies tend to bring up all sorts of strange characters and Henwood's work was no exception. There were numerous examples, starting with Captain Peter Blight of Marazion, who being good natured became the butt of many practical jokes simply it would seem to tease him into some reaction. One example involved Blight's 13 geese, amongst which was an elderly gander, at least until Blight woke up one morning to find 12 of them missing. The old bird was though still wandering about the yard, but it had a little bag tied round its neck, inside of which was 1/6d in coppers and a piece of paper of which the following was penned.

“Captain Blight, Captain Blight,
 We wish you good night,
 For we cannot stay any longer,
 We’ve bought all your geese,
 At three halfpence a piece,
 And left the amount with the gander.”

One wonders what Blight thought of the carry on and what was the market value of geese at that time.

Captain Broad, Newlyn, Penwith, Cornwall, was another oddity, a military man who in later life, at least according to Henwood, took up mining as a hobby. He was not a successful speculator and any mines that proved good under his superintendence did so more by chance than anything else. Henwood was critical of him for being too willing to:

“stake his last shilling on a favourite scheme, whether right or wrong.”

Captain Henry Francis of Goldsithney surprised Henwood with his general moonlighting approach to mining, being involved in many enterprises and then dropping them as quickly for the next caper in speculation. Francis was acquainted with many mines’ captains, among whom was Captain Thomas Lean of Marazion.

The Gundry Brothers, also of Goldsithney, attracted Henwood’s attention for the Chancery case over Wheal Vor, which in 1857 was then the longest on record. Akin to *Bleak House* the Dickensian extravagance of Chancery over Wheal Vor led to the loss of all profits and there was hardly a pound between the Gundrys when they died in poverty.

The profit to poverty mining cycle was also experienced by Captain Henry Pascoe of the Long Rock Mine, Ludgvan. Pascoe had built his money on his ability as a copper dresser and invested in the Long Rock Mine, about midway between Penzance and Marazion. The Long Rock was generally nearly covered by a full tide but the presence of a good lode of galena and antimony and also the locality of tin and copper attracted Pascoe’s interest. Pascoe succeeded in cutting and shouldering a shallow shaft, which was then worked by a steam engine from the shore via a series of flat rods. Severe weather wrecked his endeavours and robbed him of any profit, for which he became something of a local joke and disappointed and in financial distress he fled Ludgvan. Henwood states that nothing more was heard of him, A.K. Hamilton Jenkin suggests he returned to his old trade as a copper dresser.

Pascoe was unfortunate but there were others who at least in Henwood’s view got their just deserts, such as Edward Scott of Penryn, whom Henwood

regarded as a reckless adventurer and stated that:

“Reckless adventure is not legitimate mining, and should not be reckoned as such.”

But there were others who chose reckless adventure as a form of living, but in this instance not in mining. “Tom the Devil” was a miner from the Parish of St. Just who had a local reputation for fearlessness. He was noted for his daring sea rescues and had some notoriety as a raider of birds’ nests about the Botallack Cliffs. The Cornish Chough nesting on the cliff ledges were then common targets for egg thieves and collectors, and in response to one of these so-called naturalists, Tom undertook the task of taking a Chough’s nest eggs. Tom went down the cliff face on a rope and then having crossed to the nesting ledge let go of the rope. Attempting to catch the rope he tumbled off the ledge and down the face of the cliff into the sea, the watchers above thought him drowned, but he surfaced and indicated that he would swim to Pendeen Cove, which he was able to manage, with his companions following along the cliff top. Tom’s angel was good to him that day, for the reality of death from cliff falls was never far away.

Death often surfaces in the humour of miners and Henwood cited Andrew Vivian’s coffin humour jibe against a pompous banker. Vivian was a mines’ captain in the Camborne area and his business often took him to London, on one occasion in the company of a west country banker, a methodist and notorious for his sanctimony. The banker was keen to find a good lock for his bank and he together with Vivian was at a London Locksmiths, where the banker had the locksmith distracted with his demands. Vivian was looking on with wry amusement when the locksmith finally slammed down a great big lock on the counter, stating that even the Devil would not open that one. Vivian told the banker he should buy it, and the banker on asking why was told he could put it on his coffin, which was the end of that relationship.

Nobody like the captain may generally have been the case but some of the ordinary men such as “Tom the Devil” were exceptional, just as were the wrestling fraternity amongst the miners. The two James Warren were men of note and were distinguished by the soubriquets of “Great Jem” and “Little Jem Warren” in the fighting world, both men hailed from St. Just which also added to the confusion of their similar names, so “Little Jem Warren” was also known as the “Little Hercules”. “Great Jem’s” main claim to fame was not in the ring but in his rescue of many of those aboard the Brig “Cambria” when the boat foundered in the Bay of Biscay. The “Cambria” had been bound for Mexico with a mixed manifest of goods and people, including Warren and 39 other Cornish miners, then travelling to work in the silver mines of Mexico.

Wrestling was a generally accepted sport for the Cornish miners and the mines’ captains shared the enthusiasm of their men for their local heroes.

The Warrens' employer Captain Grenfell of Botallack, gave his pugilistic workers considerable support, additional help coming from other captains such as Chenalls of Parkenoweth.

Henwood's studies suggest that the old miners were remarkable men, the many sketches presenting an insight into early Cornish mining, the problems faced by mining captains, the international impact of their experiences through migration and perhaps most importantly some idea of how the men were regarded within their own communities. This is quite an important concept for too often the mining captains were the names at the head of the business books, with little personal information. The study of who was who in old mining brings the historical study to life and whilst the business book may be the real source of the economic historian, there is something more real in the "thieving" of the Captain's geese.

Finally, Henwood in his biographies referred to the term "Camborne Boys" in reference to miners, in doing so he defined the origin of the name as having been used to describe hailstones. He surmised that it was because they made a great rattle but when examined were found to be nothing but worthless water. It was a derisive term and Henwood was at great pains to state that "his" miners did not belong to that group of men so nick-named. In doing so Henwood suggests that there was a still greater community of miners, small fry who seldom featured in the annals of mining. Obviously this was the case with the labour intensive nature of the industry but it is a great pity that so many of the players in the mining industry are lost to posterity and there is much yet to be researched.

**Reference list of personalities noted in Henwood's series
"Mems of mines and miners," from The Mining Journal 1857-58**

Name of person	Series Part No.	Issue date	
ANTHONY, Andrew	22	21 November	1857
BAWDEN, Edward	11	11 June	1857
BENNETT, Absalom	22	21 November	1857
BENNETT, George	22	21 November	1857
BILLING, Robert	16	12 September	1857
BLIGHT, Peter	20	17 October	1857
BRAY, Thomas	26	5 January	1858
BROAD,	11	11 June	1857
BURGESS, William	15	5 September	1857

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CARNE, Joseph	4	2 May	1857
CHAMPION, Benjamin	23	12 December	1857
CHAMPION, John	9	27 June	1857
CHENALLS,	5	30 May	1857
CLARK, James	25	26 December	1857
CRAIG, William	10	4 July	1857
DALE, John	21	7 November	1857
DALTON,	28	13 February	1858
DANIEL,	7	13 June	1857
EDWARDS, John	25	26 December	1857
ENNOR, Nicholas	9	27 June	1857
		(see also advertisement in this issue)	
FRANCIS, Henry	9	27 June	1857
GRENFELL,	12	18 July	1857
GROSE, Henry	19	24 October	1857
Gundry Brothers	21	24 October	1857
HARRIS, Henry	26	5 January	1858
HAWKE, Philip	21	24 October	1857
HEATH, William	12	18 July	1857
HENSLEY, William	13	15 August	1857
HENWOOD, George	10	4 July	1857
HENWOOD, Nicholas	15	5 September	1857
HENWOOD, William Jorey	4	23 May	1857
HIGGS, Samuel	16	12 September	1857
HITCHINS, Josiah	8	20 June	1857
HOLLOW, William	27	23 January	1858
LEAN, Thomas	8	27 June	1857
LITTLE, John	20	17 October	1857
LOAM, Michael	10	4 July	1857
LYLE, Joseph	8	20 June	1857
MARTIN, William	8	20 June	1857
MARTYN, Michael	27	23 January	1858
MIDDLETON,	21	7 November	1857
MITCHELL, Robert	23	12 December	1857
OATS,	5	30 May	1857
ODGERS, Joseph	5	30 May	1857
PARRY,	27	23 January	1858
PASCOE, Henry	15	5 September	1857

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PASCOE, William	19	10 October	1857
PERRY, R.	24	19 December	1857
PRYOR,	28	13 February	1858
RICHARDS, William	8	20 June	1857
ROWE, Richard	11	11 July	1857
SCOTT, Edward	23	12 December	1857
SYLVESTER, John	21	24 October	1857
SYLVESTER, Stephen	27	23 January	1858
TEAGUE, Thomas	7	13 June	1857
THOMAS, Charles	9	27 June	1857
THOMAS, James	17	19 September	1857
THOMAS, William	17	19 September	1857
“Tom the Devil”	2	2 May	1857
VERRAN, William	15	5 September	1857
VIVIAN, Andrew	5	30 May	1857
WALL, Jemmy	1	2 May	1857
WARREN, James “Great Jem”	2	9 May	1857
WARREN, James “Little Jem Warren”	2	9 May	1857
WEST, William	10	4 July	1857
WILKINS, John	24	19 December	1857
WILLIAMS, Michael	7	13 June	1857

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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