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HERRING DAY, PLAGUEY WOMAN AND PIT LIFE

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SYNOPSIS
Superstition has rather fallen foul of the electric light and the T.V. soap opera, but the reality of superstition for history's miners provides an interesting glimpse of attitude and everyday workplace experience in the old collieries. This is the case especially in districts with a long mining history such as The Black Country.

Staffordshire's mining history can be traced to the 13th century and probably much earlier from the existence of ancient bell-pit workings. The Manor of Sedgley was opened up for coal extraction by the 13th century and mining was active about Dudley during the reign of Edward II. Mining practice consolidated rapidly and the formalisation of tenure about feast days respected the labour needs of mining and harvesting. The Feast of St Michael and All Angels on the 29th September and the Feast of Annunciation or Lady Day on the 25th March, were a recognition of the labour demands of seed time, harvesting and coal mining in tiny communities, where cropland needs meant mining was often part time.

Feast days and religious faith recognised village survival and indeed personal existence at a time when life expectation was limited. Superstitious response to doing the right thing on the right day guaranteed survival until the next religious festival and so on, of course it did not always work out that way as evidenced in the church registers and their accounts of colliery fatalities. William Prise was killed in a coal pit at Dudley in 1581; Alexander Parke died there too on 24 November 1658, and there must have been many more; it is therefore little wonder that miners often paid lip-service to customs and old beliefs; left overs from religious custom of doing the right thing to survive.

The Black Country miners practiced many customs, amongst which was that of Shrove Tuesday – the eve of Lent – when the charter masters and butty colliers invited all their men, from the "doggy" to the loader and pony drivers, to a free dinner of grey pease and bacon, prepared in the nearest local pub. The same men followed a similar exercise on Good Friday, that almost marked the end of the Lenten season, when a free meal of fresh herring and pit beer was given. The working day was up to noon and thereafter no work was done on what was the most solemn day in the Christian year, it was known locally as "Herring day" and seems to have been a good excuse for heavy drinking.

Wrench series postcard view of colliery girls coal sorting on mechanical screens. The girl on the left carries a fore-shortened pick axe for coal breaking.

It may be remarked that the drinking abilities of the Black Country miners caused not a little surprise to 19th century moralists. A charter master who was rich enough to be dyspeptic, was advised by his doctor to drink port wine in preference to the vast quantity of beer he had been taking. The prescription went down well and the charter master turned up at the doctor's feeling much better but complaining of the cost of the cure. The doctor naturally asked how much wine had been taken, the charter master replied as much as the beer, which beggars description. It is questionable whether some of the miners could have been in a fit state to work on after their feast days, even if requested.

The Wednesbury miners would under no circumstances work on Good Friday or old Christmas Day; in other localities the custom prevailed on New Year's Day and New Year's Eve. It is interesting to note that observers writing in the Victorian period could not assign a reason as to why those particular days were observed as holidays, which is a reflection on the work ethic of the time and the lack of statutory holidays. That a fear existed that some catastrophe might happen if the custom of pea feasts or herring holy days were ignored is possible but the wish for an honest holiday may also have had a part to play.

A Black Country Gin Pit, one of series of Black Country postcard views published by John Price & Sons at the beginning of this century.

The miners recognition of signs and warnings shows more clearly their age old superstitions. The Black Country miners responded to a number of signs and warnings and these were:

1. To dream of a broken shoe foretold danger.
2. If a woman was encountered at sun-rise on the way to the pit, the men would turn back as they thought it a sign of danger and death.
3. Dreams of fire were harbingers of danger.
4. A bright light seen in the mine was cause to flee.
5. If Gabriel's hounds had been about the works, then no work was done that day.
6. Foul smells were a bad omen.
7. Ghosts and spirits could be chased off with a bible and key held in the right hand and the Lord's Prayer recited.

The shoe played an important part in Black Country folklore and a 16th century record stated that a Wednesbury miner dreaming that one of his shoes fell to pieces ignored the warning and was killed the following day in the pit. The account of fear of a woman was probably engendered by the Staffordshire horror of the "plaguey woman". It seems to have been a common enough fear, though treated with contempt by some mines' managers. One

colliery which used a woman as a knocker-up to rouse miners for work in the morning soon found that their men refused to come and the woman had to be given the road before the miners would return. The name “plaguey woman” would seem to be self explanatory in meaning, though not in origin which is unclear, as the *plaguey* person can be vexatious in either gender! Whilst warding off the dangers of the pit with bible and key was naive in the extreme, the other warnings showed a good general appreciation of the display of gas and the changes in ventilation which could be encountered below ground. The link with Gabriel’s hounds may well have been to do with ground movement sounds or perhaps the simple feeling of not being alone in the dark of some do ok or cranny in the mine. Gabriel’s hounds may also equate with the migration of geese at night, which was seen as an ill omen and is certainly the most amazing sight to see and to hear. Perhaps it was therefore no wonder that pit ghosts were also regularly encountered.

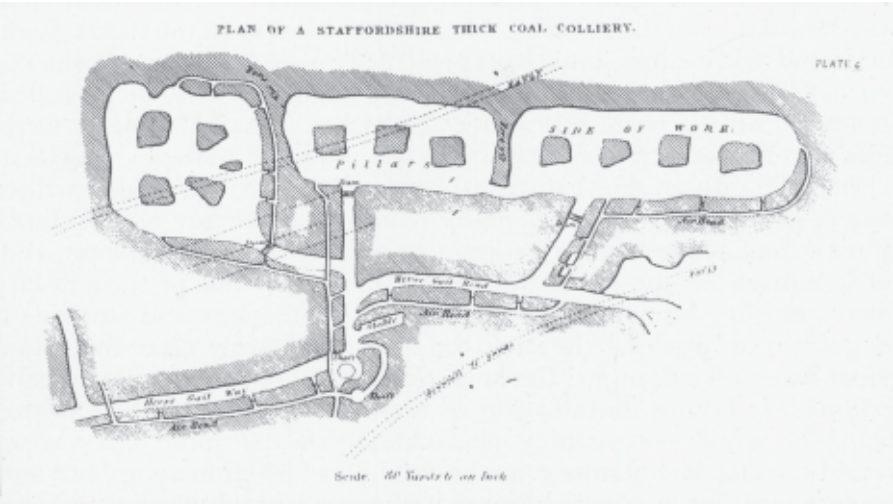
Pit ghosts often equated with violent death below ground and were probably the general cause of suspending work in a mine after a fatal accident. Black magic practice was also supposedly possible in the murky depths of the pit with the observation of certain formalities, such as the placing of a crust of bread and a piece of cheese and a cross knife and fork at the mouth of the shaft, and then reciting the Lord’s Prayer backwards. Ill-omen dreams, probably from snaffling the cheese and bread, would lead miners to take a

Working coal in the thick coal seams of South Staffordshire.

day off work and the dream of a headless man was enough to close a colliery for a day. Equally curious was the belief that the pit ghost would follow the thief, that the ghost of a miner killed at work would follow the person who stole anything from his corpse and would give no mercy until restitution had been made. Also found below were imps who if treated right would help work and if not would hinder, age old universal superstitions which however absurd were all too real in the mines' confines. The so-called seven whistlers of Staffordshire folklore may have had no connection to Snow White but then the mines were no Disney World and aspects of pit life must be considered in that light. Curiously on the subject of dwarf or elf names of the cartoon world of today, the Staffordshire miners of old and nicknames such as Nosey, Red Face, Bullhead, Pigtale, Spindleshanks and Cowskin, which no doubt reflect the physical experience of the workplace.

The workplace experience of the Staffordshire miner was as brutal as any of his worldly contemporaries; some of the incidents encountered in historical research give an interesting insight into their social behaviour.

Minerals were raised in "skips" or baskets, and so at first were the men, but by the mid 19th century "doubling" was the practice. The miners inserted their legs in certain loops of chain, which were the "doubles", and held on to the main chain with their hands, to be raised or lowered in the shaft, a



Plan of a Staffordshire Thick Coal Colliery.

Illustration of miners descending a shaft on "loops". Although this is described as being at a colliery in Wielliczka in "Underground Life" by Simonin (1869), the Staffordshire mode of descent and ascent would have looked similar to this.

contemporary account likened them to a "cluster, like a swarm of bees". Men riding this way in the shafts, with their hand held candles, must have presented a ghostly sight in the shank. Equally odd were the baskets of men riding in the shaft with the so-called "bonnets" on the chain just above the basket. These "bonnets" were plate iron and shaped like great umbrellas and were a safeguard against debris falling down the shaft from above. They were also supposed to protect against a colliery lads' prank, when an active boy would climb up the group of men on the basket, just before ascent from the pit, and perch himself on the chain above their heads just out of their reach. There, during the ascent he would enjoy their oaths and threats of vengeance; on reaching the shaft top he would spring clear and away before he could be caught. But sometimes it did not work out so easily and one boy got his thumb jammed between the hook and ring of the chain: the whole weight of 8 men pressing on that joint. He was so afraid of losing face that he rode the slow lift of 300 ft in agony but not one sign of suffering would he give. Rather surprisingly the boy did not lose his thumb from the incident and it is an insight into peer group behaviour.

Black Country breeze washers ,from a real photo series of John Price & Son. The figure of the woman to the right of the picture was drawn in on the plate for printing.

Colliery boys also chose to light gas for the amusement of watching the fire flame along the roof of the working; contemporary account from the mid 19th century hints that there was little real appreciation of the danger of explosion. The older miners were no better and the urge to “make wages” left little time for basic safety. The men would handle gunpowder as if it were sand, and candles were dealt with as if tallow, the copper “skewers” which were provided for safety were thrown aside for steel ones, easier to work with perhaps but if steel hit flint, the spark was enough to fire the mine, and there were many explosions across the mining field.

The demands of labour condemned the Staffordshire miners to a singularly difficult life, they were obviously not unique in this experience but what is noticeable is that technical advance generally came from other mining fields and there were few outstanding characters in mining expertise. The misfortune of capital intent masters was certainly a cause and profit appears to have been at the expense of safety and social concern. A lengthy article in the *Edinburgh Review* April 1863 suggests that all was not well with the Staffordshire Mining District at that time and was a problem inherited. This

was shown in the case of a coalmaster who would give the boards to help make a coffin for any miner killed at work, but would do nothing else.

Tremenheere the Inspector of Mines and other do-gooders were remarkably active in the area and improvements were achieved. The reality of Victorian industrialisation probably did more to end superstition than any other cause. The harsh reality of mining no longer had time for spooks and the wage packet was reason enough to deny a nightmare omen. The reaction to the industrial process was both violent and positive, Staffordshire suffered much industrial strife whereby improvements were slowly gained, also improvements were achieved through the miners' natural independence which was to be seen in much extra-curricular activity. A pig-stye converted to a conservatory was a nice touch and many battles were fought for prize gooseberries. The fruit season also saw Black Country pit girls travelling far afield on fruit gathering, gangs of these girls on "working-holidays" serviced the fruit market needs of London for many years.

Pit girls played an important part in local pit culture, especially in the pit head holiday festivities. On Easter Monday, the men roamed the colliery in gangs and would claim the privilege of heaving, as it was called, every young female encountered – the girl being lifted as high as possible and saluted in her descent. The girls got their revenge on Easter Tuesday when not a male was safe and exemption from horse-play was possible only by a ransom equal to the man's station in life. The "plaguey woman" perhaps became the most shrewish of the gangs of girls intent on revenge in a male dominated world.

Pit culture and superstition were an important part of colliery life and whilst some beliefs might be condemned as a metaphysical excuse for avoiding reality, just occasionally reality was just as weird. The aspirations of a Black Country baker to be a coalmaster, attracted by the magic of colliery profit, was as much an absurdity as the pit imps.

Henry Jones was a moderately successful grocer and baker at Brewood, near Wolverhampton, who chose to expand his business empire and took a small colliery at Tipton, hopeful it would increase his riches. He had not the least mining experience but undaunted he took up the pit in 1901, paying £15 for plant and tools and agreeing a moderate royalty on the coal drawn. He quickly found the pit was not paying and gave it up after 3 months, having incurred a loss of about £50. Henry Jones then struggled on for a while but the loss on the colliery and his over-stretching his capital left him soon bankrupt. Jones soon appeared in the Wolverhampton bankruptcy court before Registrar Kettle. Kettle in the course of examination asked Jones whether he had had any experience of colliery management at the time of taking up the Tipton Pit. Jones replied that he had not, Kettle retorted:

> "Well, to my mind for a grocer to take a colliery without having had any experience of the working of it seems most absurd."

This little curiosity matches much of the business experiences of the '80s enterprise economy, where business speculation is not that different from some of the superstitious behaviour of bygone years. The superstitious and peer group behaviour of workers gives interesting social insights to history. The urge to "do the right thing" seems almost a human failing and sometimes the "right thing" was very wrong. As previously noted in the article *Miners, coiners & conjurers: some Cornish tales*, miners' superstitions were a means of coming to grip with reality and there is much need for a study of pit culture generally. However, as a final comment, there seems sometimes very little to differentiate between the absurdity of superstition and the reality of absurdity in business practice.

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This article has been developed from:
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"The Black Country" in *The Edinburgh Review* April 1863, pp.406-443.
The history and description of fossil fuel, the collieries, and coal trade of Great Britain. 1841.
additional material has been sourced from news paragraphs in *The Colliery Manager.*

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