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**THE DISCOVERY OF A HUMAN SKELETON IN  
BUCKDEN GAVEL MINE**

by

A.R. Nichols

It is the practice of the Society to collect and preserve interesting relics found in disused mine workings, and to further interest in such matters the Society occasionally arranges an exhibition of these items.

The rise in the number of organisations interested in lead mines has led to the disappearance of most of the more interesting items left in the mines by the 'Old Man' when the mines closed down. There is, however, always the exception and the event which occurred on Saturday, 7th March, 1964, was not only unexpected but was also unpredicted and it is highly unlikely that such a find will occur again. Unfortunately we were not to discover this unusual relic neither were we to preserve or exhibit it.

A party of Birmingham University students were exploring the mine when they discovered a body blocking their way along one of the levels. Needless to say they did not wait to see what was going to happen but [15] hastily retreated after giving their find only the cursory of examination's. On reaching the bottom of the rise they rapidly consumed a number of cigarettes and decided that the police should be notified.

The Buckden area is covered by the Upper Fell Rescue Association and it was their members who found themselves called out by the police at 5 pm on the 7th March having been notified that a body had been discovered in the Gavel Mine at Buckden and that they should say nothing of their mission to anyone else. The police said that the body was dressed in wellington boots, boiler suit and caving helmet and that flesh still remained on the body and that as they were concerned the case would, until proved otherwise, be treated as a case of murder.

The necessary equipment was carried to the mine in three Land Rovers using the old mine track, whilst the main party made their way by foot up the gill.

A soup kitchen was set up in a tent near the mine entrance and this was greatly appreciated as snow was falling rapidly at the time.

A party of about ten led by three of the Birmingham University students entered the crosscut and made their way to the foot of the rise which led to the section of the mine in which the body lay. Whilst preparations for climbing the rise were being made other members of the party laid telephone wires along the crosscut.

## THE DISCOVERY OF A HUMAN SKELETON IN BUCKDEN GAVEL MINE

The rise, a 60 foot one, situated on the left hand side of the crosscut at the junction with the level marked 'No.1 North Vein', on the survey which appears in the N.C. & M.R.S Newsletter Volume 1 Number 3, 1963. It was found, however, that this rise could be climbed if one first ascended the adjacent 30 foot rise on the right hand side of the crosscut, the two rises being connected by a short level. From this short level it was easier to climb the remainder of the 60 foot rise. To make it easier to carry in the equipment, a timber was placed across the top of the 60 foot rise and a ladder hung from this. From the top of this rise a series of workings led to the top of another 60 foot rise – a 30 foot ladder was hung down this rise in order to gain access to a level which led off at this point – a timber taken in to the mine was used as a belay. Along this level lay the body.

Up to this stage of the events it was thought the 60 foot rise which was being descended, was totally independent of the crosscut, this was soon proved wrong when members of the party still in the crosscut went to investigate a loud rumbling and found a pile of old timbers and stones lying in the crosscut at the foot of a rise, these had been dislodged by those up above lowering the 30 foot ladder. Once it was realised that this rise connected with the crosscut a further ladder was added and access to the workings was made this way.

The first action was to photograph the body as it lay – this was done by a member of the Upper Wharfedale Fell Rescue Association – the film was taken out of the mine and developed by the police who unfortunately did not recognise the fact that the water they used for the process [16] had a temperature of 38° F – result a completely ruined film. In order to save time, the police photographer was then taken to the body and as he had never climbed an electron ladder before he was heartily congratulated when he completed his 30 foot climb in 10 minutes accompanied by many grunts and groans.

As soon as the photographer had completed his task, in moved the 'undertaker squad' their task being to dismember and pack the late gentleman in a box measuring some 3 ft x 1 ft x 1 ft – here, for some unknown reason, the author found himself the centre piece of the operation. The feet, complete with boots, were placed at one end of the box, the skull at the other and the remainder packed in between.

The description given by students as to the type of clothing and the state of decomposition of the body were totally inaccurate. All that remained was a dark stained skeleton clothed in studded leather boots with hook type fastenings, trousers, shirt, waistcoat and a very fine hat in excellent condition. In the pockets were a clay pipe, tobacco tin, a box of 3 inch long 'Crown Vestas' matches, note book, medicine bottle, containing a colourless liquid and a (quickly examined for gold sovereigns, but found to be empty.)

When all were carefully packed away the box and the hat were carried from the mine. The author carried the hat hoping he would be able to retain it for his own use – his intentions were, however, rudely shattered by a ‘gentleman in blue’, who held out a big hand and said “That will be wanted in evidence” or similar words. Not having slept for 20 hours the author was in no condition to resist.

Many guesses were made as to the time and cause of death. The body was, by the way, in a relaxed position with hands folded across the chest with the legs in a natural position. There was no sign or trace of a jacket or any form of lighting equipment. Assessments as to how long the body had been there varied from 50 to 100 years.

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**Footnote**

Reference was made in N.C. & M.R.S Newsletter Volume 1 Number 3 to the fact that at least one bat had been discovered in the mine. Since that particular sighting no more have been seen – however whilst the above operation was being carried out at least one bat was seen to fly out and return to the mine that night. It would appear, therefore, that efforts to locate bats in the mine should be made.

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