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**A CONTEMPORARY DESCRIPTION OF THE FLATS AT
HUDGILLBURN MINE, ALSTON**

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“A Few Notes on a Subterraneous Excursion into a Lead and Silver Mine, in the Parish of Alston, in the County of Cumberland”.

“On the 19th of February 1818, a party of gentlemen trade an excursion in the mine of Hudgilburn, to view a cavern in the limestone rock there, discovered but a short time previous to that date.

At about 4pm. being dressed in the working habiliments of the miners, and seated in ore waggons, two in each, vis a vis, we were hurled into the interior region of the mountain of Middle Fell.

We entered the cavern – a light was sent forward, which showed the direction to be in a straight line for a great distance. The light appeared dim, and like a star peeping through a dingy cloud. The width varies from about three to six feet, as I thought, but we did not measure the width or the height. The roof has along its centre an indentation the whole length, and its chasm appeared somewhat wider at the top than it is at the bottom; which, with the groove or rent in the middle of the roof, impressed a conception on the mind, of the sides having been thrown to recline backwards by some convulsion of nature. The groove is shallow, and appears like a wound healed up, leaving the scar as a mark of the injury formerly received.

Advancing about half way, we came to a thin rock which divided our passage into two. We pursued the right hand passage, now become so narrow, ‘that a bulky man could scarcely brush through, but widened a little further on. As we passed along, several openings and small recesses on our right and left were seen, but not of a sort to excite much interest, until we reached the far end of this passage, where there is an open space equal to a room of ordinary size, with a beautiful cabin on one side, nearly square, lined with smooth jet black walls, richly spangled with stalactites, that sparkled equal to brilliants of the first water. The solemn grandeur of this place inclined the whole to pause, and contemplate the sublimity of the novel scene around us. We rested on the floor of solid limestone, and gazed on this charm of nature with awe and wonder. When I beheld a scene so superior to what can be produced by all the arts of man on earth, I could not conceal my regret that such treasures should be made so difficult of access, that they should be where –

“At each step

“Solemn and slow the shadows darker fall,
“And all is awful, list’ning gloom around.”

The substance of so jet a black with which this charming little cabin is lined, is called by miners “black jack”. It contains a portion of the ore of zinc, and is smelted for its valuable produce in great demand throughout this realm for potteries, medical purposes, brass, &c. In this beautiful little room, there are two openings, in form, nearly square, from the floor upwards, about 1½ foot each side, lined with the same substance, and embellished with glittering spar, of exquisite brilliancy. These transparent particles are very regularly distributed over the walls, neither too thick nor too thin, to give the effect of genuine taste and finish: but the process of nature is going on, and that brilliant spar will most probably become a thick crust, if not impeded by the hand of the workman, and will in time attain to a solid mass of quartz, of which numerous large pieces are found in the mines.

While we rested here, men were sent further in advance, to explore the extent and nature of the several low and narrow passages and openings in the rock, which communicated with this open space; and having taken hold of the end of the clew of pack-thread to direct their retrograde steps by the same way, they tried to advance:- they proceeded on hands and knees, or feet, as necessity dictated, a considerable way forward in the largest openings they could find, until they were called back by the voice and a tug of the line. They found no end to these numerous intersecting openings in the rock, the passages of which are extremely intricate and dangerous, without proper precautions taken; for, to retrace exploring steps in such a labyrinth, if lights should fail, without a clew, or their companions stationed as we were in the main track, would be to hazard their lives.

Our curiosity on that occasion being gratified, we commenced on our return, by the same passage before described, but discovered some other passages that communicated with it, and in which some of our fellow travellers ventured to wander, and were able to join us again, ‘Without being obliged to return to the part where they entered the by-way.

The length of the main chasm is 320 yards. Evident signs would seem to prove that this cavern and all its communicating fissures have been filled at no very distant period, with water, and the probability is, it has been drained off by the adits in the mine, in which there runs, as I said before, a constant stream from some contiguous part of the works. The rocks of the cavern are covered by a sooty mucus in nearly a dry state, which it may be presumed, was generated by the stagnant water and impure air, previous to its draining. There is a little mud left on

the bottom of the cavern in a moist state, and the smell tends to confirm the conjecture of these concavities having been a reservoir for thousands of years, and drained off by the level of the mine. It appeared to me that some little ventilation passes through the whole, which might have been so ever since the water was let off; for the air from the level would follow the vent of the stream, and since the opening to the cavern was effected, a slight circulation of air would probably be created.

There were, I think, nine of us altogether; we were in the cavern upwards of half an hour, and we felt no material difficulty in breathing, while our candles, one to each, burnt sufficiently clear; which, with the animal breathing, must together have consumed a very considerable quantity of pure air, such as to have made a scarcity perceptible, if no fresh air had been supplied.” -

Newcastle Magazine.

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