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CENTRAL SNAILBEACH LEAD MINE. SHROPSHIRE

By Nigel A. Chapman

Introduction

The fame of the rich veins and the profits being made from the Snailbeach lead mine, Shropshire, inspired others to study the area for similar profitable mines. One of the obvious places to 'fossick' was the continuation of the Snailbeach veins out of the mining sett being worked. It seems surprising that it took until 1860 for operations to locate these veins to be commenced. Probably previous prospecting has left little trace while the evidence for the Central Snailbeach activities are still clearly visible.

Over the Summer of 1860 a number of local miners formed a private company and 'Costeanned' on a sett to the west of the Snailbeach Mine on the supposed continuation of the Snailbeach Main Vein with the intention of locating and working the vein. During the course of these operations several veins were found and explored for lead ore. At the time it was noted that none of the adjoining or nearby mines on the west side of the Stiperstone Hills had failed to produce lead ore.

During May 1861 John Job wrote a letter to the Mining Journal concerning activities on the sett. Having admitted to being interested in the adventure, he continued by mentioning that probably the Snailbeach Main Lode traversed the whole sett from one end to the other. Several veins had been located underground with their horizontal and vertical planes converging towards each other. Work on the area had consisted of locating the best sites for several levels to be driven from the west towards Snailbeach. One level, known as the Crows Nest, was driven about 400 yards from the Water Wheel drainage adit of the Snailbeach mine.

John Job, while believing in the ultimate productiveness of the veins, suggested the need to prove them at depth. It appeared that the existing enterprise of J. Powell & Co. were of limited means and unable to find the necessary capital so they hoped to set up a limited liability company to raise the finance for the venture. By now it becomes apparent that John Job's letter was a form of publicity to interest local industrialists in the proposed company.

Central Snailbeach Lead Mining Company

Events moved forwards with the publication on July 20th 1861 of a prospectus for the Central Snailbeach Mining Company to consist of a capital of £10,000 divided into shares of £1 each. The adventurers held a tack-note of 295 acres and had obtained the services of Messrs. Phillips and Darlington, Mining Engineers, to report on the mines. With this favourable report and lithographic plans of the sett showing the veins (real and supposed) the proposers looked for funds.

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Mr. Edward Davies, Manager of the Bretchell Colliery near Shrewsbury, wrote following an underground visit about a 'strong vein' with a northern underlie and heading west cut in Crows Nest level 'proving beyond all doubt that it was the Snailbeach Main Lode.' This brought a letter from Capt. James Richards of the West Tankerville Mine to refute the claim. Then in September John Evans and David Davies, two of the Managers at Snailbeach wrote to contradict Capt. Richards statements. They went on to point out "that the 'Strong Vein' in the Crows Nest Level of Central Snailbeach is none other than the main lode of this mine." Which was a superb statement for the proposed company plus the publicity engendered by the argument.



Figure 1. Location map of Central Snailbeach Mine.

The Central Snailbeach Mining Company was incorporated on February 1st 1862 with;

Job Taylor of Dudley as Chairman,
Edward Henry Lowe of Shrewsbury,
George Joseph England of Dudley,
John Job of Snailbeach as Directors.

The company held a lease of a valuable mineral estate under the Haggestow Hall Farm for 21 years from March 25th 1862. One of their first actions was to present 1330 shares (fully paid up) to the previous company and to pay all the development costs to date of at least £300. An article of the company was that the management should be from the mine with Phillips and Darlington as consultants.

With over 3100 shares subscribed for, the company set to work with the sinking of Taylor's Shaft during April. This was to intercept the Snailbeach Main Lode at its intersection with Davies Vein. It was expected to cut the

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Main Lode at a depth of 45 fathoms and was 9 feet in diameter. The shaft was being sunk by 12 Sinkers with a further 7 miners driving the Crow's Nest level to intercept the shaft, to provide ventilation and eventually a water adit for the pumps.

With operations progressing favourably the reports cease until a quarterly meeting held in the George Hotel Shrewsbury on July 29th 1864. Walter Eddy and a Mr. Hammer had supplied reports on the progress of the mine which were most encouraging. They believed that the 214 yard level was on a continuation of the Snailbeach Main Lode and was producing 1½ tons of lead ore per fathom. (I should point out the different measurements: On the South Staffs. Coalfield all measurements were in yards, not fathoms. As some of the directors came from that area they seem to have preferred yards.)

Following the quarterly meeting an Extra Ordinary meeting was held to consider raising the capital of the company to £40,000 to permit the shaft to be deepened and to obtain a larger area of land to work. The shareholders present were unanimous in their approval.

A prospectus for the increased capital was issued during August 1864 and with it were sent several photographs of the area and the mine. These show the present beam engine house and the tall square chimney with a wooden head frame over the shaft. This would suggest the construction of the building during 1863-4. Also the buildings suggest more colliery practice such as would have been current on the South Staffs. Coalfield. The winder could have been supplied from the Dudley area, while the use of the square chimney is typical of the Black Country.

The company now consisted of the following directors:

Job Taylor of Dudley, (Chairman.)
Edward Lowe of Shrewsbury.
George Joseph England of Dudley.
Rev. Thompson Stoneham of Ketley.
William Pearson of Stourbridge.
Thomas Proctor of Moat Hall, Shrewsbury.

Of these people, Job Taylor was a partner in Bennett and Taylor, Coal Masters of Oldbury, Worcestershire and lived at Portway Hall Oldbury. He was to be involved in the Mid Wales Lead Mining Co. and at this time was Mayor of Dudley. William Pearson was a partner in J. & W. Pearson & Co., colliery owners and brick makers of Stourbridge Staffordshire, making his fortune in these trades. He may also have been involved in an ironworks at Dudley.

A further meeting was held on December 24th 1864 when the confidence of the shareholders in the mine meant that over 50 of the shares were subscribed for.

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1865

Operations continued on the shaft sinking with the aid of the steam winder, while the pump attached to the engine kept the water from flooding the shaft. Information regarding the mine during this year is unfortunately sketchy, but work continued to find the Main Lode and produce the elusive profits so much demanded by the shareholders. One major news item for the year was the appointment of John Kitto, late of the Great Laxey Mines on the Isle of Man, to the management of the mine. At a shareholders meeting in the following year it was noted that the mine had a number of shareholders on the Isle of Man. It would appear as a result of Kitto's influence encouraging investment in the mine. He reported to the shareholders that to date £11,000 had been expended on the machinery and excavations and believed that the remaining £5,000 would be well and profitably spent on the mine. The workings of the Snailbeach Mine were only 150 fathoms from the Central Snailbeach shaft and were said to be producing rich ore from the area. Again, the basic belief in both mines working the same vein system is indicated. More than any other factor, this basic belief kept the company working over the years.

1866

Captain Kitto was at the mine early in January 1866 to report on the No. 1 lode, which he found to have much improved. He went on to encourage the shareholders by mentioning the number of staunch supporters of the mine in the Isle of Man.

The 12th Ordinary Meeting was held in the George Hotel Shrewsbury early in February with Job Taylor in the chair. He noted in his report that 16,000 shares had been allotted but it had been decided not to allot any more. To improve the standing of the company it was proposed to open an office at 12 Old Jewry Chambers London with Thomas Thompson as their Agent.

John Kitto reported that the 124 yard level in the No. 1 lode had been driven about 16 fathoms East and West, and produced lead ore of poor value. While work on the No. 2 lode was still in the shale and required much farther driving before lead could be expected. Operations had ceased while the shaft was sunk a further 15 fathoms. The Shaftsmen had recently extended the pumps to the 124 yard level and were putting in a ladderway to the same depth. He hoped to be able to sink the shaft down to 154 yards depth in five months.

The company was stated to have assets of £4200 4s. 7d. over its liabilities and the shareholders seem to have been satisfied with progress. Sinking of the shaft continued over the next few months with periodic progress reports from John Kitto. He was always optimistic that riches were just around the corner, shafts should be sunk deeper or levels driven farther with profits just out of sight. By the beginning of December the shaft was down to the 82 fathom level and driving of two cross cuts commenced. The Shaftmen were

busy putting in a kibbleway and lengthening the pumping lift to clear the water. Once this was complete the shaft sinking was resumed while a team of miners drove a cross cut to find the South lode.

1867

Captain Frank Evans of Holywell, Flintshire was asked to visit the mine and present a report for the General meeting towards the end of January. At the time the shaft sinking had reached a depth of 164 yards and a level had been driven 5 fathoms to the south towards the No. 1 Lode and the Main Lode. One and a half tons of lead ore per fathom was being raised from the level in a promising gangue with better results expected. Capt. Evans suggested continuing the level would intercept the Main Lode proving its ore content and supply profits. It was also decided to continue sinking the shaft to a depth of 200 yards and to drive off a level to test the lode at depth. For reasons of economy this project was shelved.

By the General Meeting held at the George Hotel, Shrewsbury on July 13th, the bank balance had fallen to £547 10s 9d. The company still held £24,000 worth of its shares and proposed selling them to the shareholders and the public to boost funds. During June negotiations had taken place with landowners to the south east of the Hogston Farm estate and a take-note for the Hill Sett had been obtained. For the company to commence working the Hill Sett required the approval of the shareholders at an Extraordinary General Meeting. This was called directly after the General Meeting on July 13 and heard reports from John Kitto and Curwen Salmon regarding the Hill Sett.

Four veins of lead were believed to cross the Sett but more important was that the shale beds found under the Hogston estate terminated against the range of hills. The miners had realised that lead ore was not going to be found in the shales and hoped the Hill Sett would reverse the cash flow of the company. In the meantime an outlay of about £4,000 was required to develop the new area. Both reports suggested driving the south heading from the Engine Shaft at Central Snailbeach to cut the veins at a depth of around 100 yards. Operations were to commence on the surface to prove the outcrop of the veins and to find any hidden veins.

1868

At the General Meeting John Kitto reported that in the 164 yard level to the West of the shaft, the lode was increasing in size, while the underlie had changed from North to the South. This underlie change brought the lode to an angle similar to the Snailbeach Main lode and improved their chances of being in the correct lode. The shale had almost disappeared from the level, while the lode was now 4 feet wide with spots of good lead ore. John Kitto was quick to point out the similarities to Snailbeach and the profits paid over the last eighty years from a lode found in similar circumstances.

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The level being driven from the Central Snailbeach Engine Shaft was stated to be only forty yards from the South boundary of the old sett and advancing at the rate of about 6 yards per month. All this expense was draining the bank account so at the Half Yearly Meeting on January 31, appeals were made for shares to be brought. Of the original 8,000, only 2422 had been taken and Edward Davies was asking shareholders to take up the rest. As an incentive, it was mentioned that the lode was now 5 feet wide, worth about 1½ tons per fathom and the value was improving.

The share issue was slowly taken up by the existing shareholders and the shortage of money brought operations almost to a stop, only the New Hill level was continued. John Kitto protested loudly until operations were recommenced on the shaft sinking below the 164 yard level and the level itself was pushed forwards. By the middle of April the shaft had been sunk 12 yards below the 164 yard level, while the level was in a lode of 4 feet width but of poor lead values.

These two activities continued for the next few months up to the Half Yearly Meeting held in Shrewsbury on August 8. Job Taylor revealed that the bank balance stood at £934 14s 6d. In John Kitto's progress report the falling off of lead ore values below the 164 yard level was mentioned. Mr. Kough, the Secretary and Solicitor, retired from the post. At a later Director's Meeting, Mr. Towie resigned and Henry Bloom Noble of Douglas, Isle of Man was elected. Little appears in the reports but a Boardroom battle seems to have taken place. Probably two camps existed as to the direction operations should have gone. At this stage the Directors were trying to keep the mine working and attempting to raise the necessary finance.

1869

Mining operations using the available £934 14s 6d. seem to have continued until the next Half Yearly Meeting held in Shrewsbury on March 9th. Job Taylor from the chair proposed the winding up of the company, but this failed on taking a vote. Mr. Kough countered by proposing the creation of 10 Mortgage Debentures to raise £2,500. A proposal from Mr. Derwent was to make the 8,000 shares created in July 1867 into Preference shares. Various amendments watered down both these proposals until little was left. Finally it was proposed to consider the unissued 4244 shares as Preference entitled to twice the dividend of the 19,755 shares issued. As an added incentive these shares were to be entitled to be paid out of any wind up scheme ahead of other shares. The Director's were empowered to have the shares legally created and offered to the shareholders. John Kitto produced an optimistic report for the occasion, noting the masterly state of the lode with spots of lead ore and expecting riches once the hanging wall of the vein was located.

Over the next couple of months the Directors had the new shares registered and called an Extraordinary Meeting to confirm the launch to the shareholders. This meeting took place on June 12th in the George Hotel in Shrewsbury.

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Job Taylor as Chairman confirmed to the gathered shareholders the proposal to issue the Preference shares and to alter some of the Articles of the company. These measures failed to attract the necessary interest, so the share issue was doomed to failure, leaving the company without sufficient funds to continue.

During 1869 Job Taylor was Mayor of Dudley, Chairman of Central Snailbeach and a Director of the East Mid Wales Lead Mining Co. working at Capel Banhaglog. Directing operations in mid Wales were none other than John and Sampson Kitto. One obviously led to the other, probably they met at Central Snailbeach and a working arrangement for mid Wales developed from that.

Operations at the Hill Sett had drained the bank to the point of no return, meaning that liquidation was the only course left to the company. This was not to be the end, a large number of the shareholders were keen to continue operations and the outcome was that the Directors were empowered to liquidate in favour of a new company. Called the New Central Snailbeach Mining Company, it was registered on November 30th 1869. The Directors proceeded to offer 8,000 shares to shareholders in the old company but it took appeals and a discovery of lead ore before the shares were taken up.

1870

Early in the New Year John Kitto produced his usual optimistic report with details of the location of the Snailbeach Main Vein at Central Snailbeach. While under the Hill Sett it was claimed ran the Ovenpipe lode of the Tankerville Mines. It was also mentioned that instructions had been given to construct dressing floors, to be followed by regular returns of the lead ore produced. A vein of 3 feet wide was said to be producing 3 tons of lead ore per fathom.

At this period, operations seem to have centred on the continued sinking at Central Snailbeach and the new shaft sinking at Mytton Dingle. At Central Snailbeach the plant was extensively modernised, probably with a new beam winder to wind from the greater depths envisaged. The existing Lancashire boiler probably dates from this period, having been invented in 1866. As the original plant seems to date from 1863-4, probably externally fired egg ended boilers were used at first. Bad weather with severe frosts held up the work during the Winter for several months. Sinking at the mine continued to a depth of 200 yards to try the veins at a greater depth in the hope of finding ore.

At Mytton Dingle the shaft was sunk using a horse gin until heavy feeders of water stopped work. A level was driven to cut the shaft at a depth of 14 yards and a portable traction engine was bought to wind and pump the shaft.

1871

When the General Meeting was held on March 31st at the London Tavern,

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Job Taylor as Chairman mentioned a credit of £2639 12s. belonging to the company. He noted that the Directors consisted of H.M. Wainwright, R. Hilhouse, Henry Rotten and Job Taylor. The office of the company was now at 3 Birmingham Road, Dudley with J.S. Wainwright as secretary.

At Central Snailbeach the sinking of a sump to 230 yards depth had been the major work with some nice lumps of lead ore found. A level was being driven south towards the main lode with high expectations and a second sump was being sunk. The alterations to the surface plant was nearly complete with the masons and engineers expected to finish by the end of April. Mr. H.M. Wainwright pointed out that the new plant would be one of the cheapest, while at the same time, for its size, one of the most efficient in the county of Shropshire.

At Mytton Dingle the shaft had been sunk to a depth of 44 yards and a level driven on the lode for 8 fathoms. Two large stones of lead ore were produced at the meeting to show the quality of the ore at the mine. A large part of the company's capital had been spent proving the lodes here, with great hopes of developing a profitable mine.

1872

Mining continued along similar lines into this year, work at Central Snailbeach was now concentrated on driving the 164 yard level because the extensive workings of the previous company would enable a quicker intersection of the South Lode.

Problems were being experienced with the sale of shares in the company. To finance mining a further 3,000 shares entitled to a return of 10% dividend from the profits before any other shares were launched. Such a scheme was a sign of a company in trouble and few were prepared to risk their money. By the General Meeting on September 14 over 1,000 shares still remained to be sold. Also for the first time Job Taylor was missing and R. Hilhouse took the chair. At this point, with the Directors imploring the shareholders to sink more money into the concern, the reports end. It appears that somewhere towards the end of 1872 the company finally foundered with little to show for years of work and several fortunes expended. In particular Job Taylor had made a fortune out of coal mines at Oldbury, Staffs, only he appears to lose a large part of it in lead mining.

Today

At the Central Snailbeach mine (NGR SO 368015) are located the most prominent remains, in the form of a three storey Mytton shale and brick built beam engine house. The engine beam was mounted on the south wall with a large flywheel slot (now a window) at ground level. At this point would once have been the winding spool with 'Rattle chain' on it. Pumping was also done by this engine with a crank operating a flat rod to a quadrant on the shaft edge.

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Internally the ground floor still retains two wooden beams the full length of the room that once supported the cylinder. To the east is placed the Lancashire boiler minus many of its fittings but still in good condition. Probably once out in the open, it is now roofed over. Further south is the truncated square brick chimney still connected to the boiler. In the west face of the chimney is an arched opening pointing towards the site of the single shaft. Also in the bank nearby a short stone arched tunnel can be found. This is believed to have drawn air from the shaft into the chimney forming a primitive ventilation system for the mine.

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Nigel A. Chapman.
14 Dorset Road.
Edgbaston.
BIRMINGHAM.
B17 8EN.