

ANCIENT MINING CUSTOMS USED IN ENGLAND TODAY

F.E. Gregory

(Written in 1932)

The mining methods and customs of many districts in England are to this day strangely bound about by the records and traditions of the past. In some mining fields this is more apparent than in others yet it is everywhere in evidence, for Cornwall with her mines under the sea, Wales with her famous quartzites, and Derbyshire with her remarkable cavern deposits, are all tinctured with quaint customs that have come out of the almost forgotten past. Here modernism has never replaced tradition and many of the laws are woven of the woof and warp of ancient custom. Indeed these things exist because they have come to be part and parcel of the civil laws. And these laws are observed with meticulous care and accorded all the reverence due their venerable age. All activities pertaining to the mining of metals is bound about, and hedged around by curious and oftimes clumsy laws. Each minute and trivial detail being covered by the civil code, and each petty law enforced by an oftimes pompous official.

These laws are the outgrowth of a long and complex history. To trace their complete line of evolution would be to go back to the times of the aborigines; for they most certainly were the first miners. Following this would be the histories of the various invaders and the changes their influence has wrought. And too, many of the early rulers of the island were interested in the metal mining, some because of possible benefit to the revenues, some for the building of a reserve in the event of war.

Superstition too has played its part in shaping the mining traditions and practices of the country, superstition that is a remnant perhaps of early religious and pagan beliefs, but has come to be woven into the daily life and doings of the people.

These, to us strange conditions while found in a greater or lesser degree in all the mining fields of the Island are most in evidence in the mining districts of Eastern England. Here the lead mines of Derbyshire and the lead-copper-silver mines of Devonshire have been worked since ancient times, but how

long no one knows, that is for the archaeologist to discover if he can. But here today mining methods are governed almost entirely by customs that have come up out of the past. As L.B. Williams has said, "Deep down in every man born of this country there is an indefinable attribute that makes him part of the past. He looks into the future but little, but will fight with blind instinct and without reason for some immemorial nothing that brings him neither goods nor benefits except the simple satisfaction of having observed some nebulous right" (*Derbyshire Mining 1932 Mining Magazine*, Vol. XXXI No. 2, p.90)

So it comes that there are three major forces that have exerted their power to bring about the conditions and customs as found today: first, laws as derived from traditions of the past, second, personal right, however nebulous that may have been, and third deep superstition -- a strange trinity indeed but nevertheless an effective one.

It was this writer's good fortune to visit, and study after a fashion, the major mining districts of England some years ago. Having worked with many Cornish, Devon and Derbyshire miners in the United States and Canada he was somewhat prepared for the curious customs to be found in the English Isles. But he nevertheless found that any mere verbal description beggared (sic) the issue. Who, for instance, would be prepared to find villages, with streets, stores, schools and electric lights nearly a thousand feet under ground, where life is carried on much as it is elsewhere? Here and there in the miniature village are groups of children pursuing the usual games of childhood, washings hang on drying lines and women gossip from the doorways. Except for size it is quite like any other mining town, though it is nearly a thousand feet up to the grass roots. Yet this may be found in Cornwall, this and many other curious things. For instance here and there thru the numerous drifts and adits are gates guarded by ancient gatemens, who finger the seal on your pass and as he passes you on solemnly adjures you not to whistle. For to whistle in many of the mines is to frighten the ore away forever. Up at the breast, though the miner was using a modern type air drill he carefully wet the drill bit with spittle before starting the hole. This it seems was to guard against Fitures (a drill hole out of round). Many of the miners still believe in the "Knocker" or "Noggie", a tiny elfin being that is supposed to lead those whom he likes to the lenses of ore. So, into the bottom of each drill hole before it was loaded went a scrap of printed paper, this was a warning to the "Noggie" or Knocker to flee from the blast, a patent apology for the employing of modern mining methods.

Back in abandoned ground are the "Scratchers", men who by the payment of a small fee have the right to rework the already worked ground. Their tools are moils, gads and feathers. The ore is too poor to pay for powder or power drills, and the miner labors by the light of a tallow candle. The ore and waste after being broken is heaped in piles to ripen before sorting, for ore is supposed to grow like a plant or a vegetable. These men all become exceedingly skillful sorting by hand. One sorter was observed to toss each piece

The manuscript of this account was supplied by Victor Verity, of the *American Society of Mining Law Antiquarians*, via John Lacy, to Trevor D. Ford, and records a visit to the mines of Cornwall and Derbyshire some time prior to 1932 by F.E. Gregory, who was presumably an American miner. His name may suggest a Derbyshire connection. It is possible, that in the manner of Mark Twain, he was just indulging in a pardonable exaggeration of the state of things in the old country for his compatriots. However, it seems more likely, at least this side of the water, that he was the victim of a lengthy leg-pull, probably on one of the Sunday sessions, which left the miners incapable of using the hand-jig next day for fear of increased susceptibility to the "damps".

Although he includes some tantalising points, based presumably on observation, it is perhaps not best to use him as a factual source. L.B. Williams, whose article he quotes, was manager of Millclose Mine, and one wonders if he was the perpetrator of part of the leg-pull.

The original spelling has mostly been maintained, though a few full-stops have been entered to maintain the intended sense.

of ore into the air and catch it again before tossing it on to the bin. On being asked the purpose in this he replied "Dammie Son. Hi am the best ore sorter in Cornwall and hi allus sortes this-a-way". That was logic enough it would seem.

Up in Derbyshire the richest of the deposits were depleted long ago. In character the deposits were not greatly unlike those of South Western Missouri, however, the district was characterized by the number and richness of the cavern deposits. There were limestone caves the walls of which were incrustated with Galena; and many of these were located and worked before historical times. They and the disseminated deposits are still being worked in a small way. The miner who secured a tenure to mine the ore often moves his family down to some of the upper and drier of the natural chambers. Here they live and work like true troglodytes, delving in the dripping earth for the "beleden stone" as galena is locally called.

One day a week is set aside for counting day. On this day the ore is carried to the surface, there to be examined and measured by a pompous official. The ore is not weighed and sampled for analysis, but is measured in a coffin shaped wooden vessel that holds about 75 pounds of wet ore. This vessel has been care-fully made and tested for volume by comparison against a brass dish which King Henry VIII is supposed to have had made. In the testing the brass dish is filled with turnip seed then the seeds poured into the vessel to be tested.

Each thirteenth dish is set aside as a royalty or fee due to the owner of the soil, or the farmer of the revenues. In addition there are tithes to be paid to the church, and various fees to petty officials, all payments being regulated by laws.

Down in the mines the miners have evolved many crude but ingenious methods of concentrating the low grade ores. One observed was a cow skin from which the hair had been removed and the skin tightly stretched over a willow rucker frame, set at an angle of about ten degree. The skin was dressed with a thin coating of tallow rubbed well into the pores. In operation the fine ore as a slurry was poured along the upper edge of the skin, a gentle rocking motion being imparted to the device at the same time. This resulted in the fine galena being held on the surface of the oiled skin while the waste was washed away. Various other types of hand-made rockers are in use, and in many of these can be seen the predecessors of some of the modern ore dressing devices. Jigs made entirely of wood are a common sight, the screens devised by weaving together slender oaken sprouts.

Water and methane gas ("damps or blacks") are the curse of the Derbyshire miner. The limestones of the district are cut by numerous underground water courses. In the Low Peak district the water which fills these courses is derived from peat swamps. As a consequence the water is heavily impregnated with organic matter. This on decomposing gives rise to enormous quantities of methane gas, which rises to displace the air in the caves and mine workings. To be damped is the common fate of the miner.

There is an old law which prohibits hand jiggling on Monday forenoons. It was supposed that the strenuous exertion following a Sundays dissipation predisposed the miner to an attack of the "damps".

The remedies in vogue for treating a man overcome are many and curious. Amongst these might be mentioned, rubbing the victims bare back with a cold hammer, laying him face downward in freshly broken earth or drenching him thoroughly with sheep-sorrel tea. Wearing a necklace made from the hair of a white oxen is supposed to be a

preventative.

At the entrance to the larger of the mines the men may be heard quipping each other as their chances that day of walking out or being carried out; or a man working in a particularly dangerous place may be seen placing small bets as to his chances of being "damped". "Hi old Sport, too bad ye don walk out" is a commonly heard salutation.

The deeper of the Derbyshire mines are rather terrifying even to one familiar with underground workings. Few square sets are to be seen in the older workings, instead stulls and sprags are used as a back support while the walls are held by a wicker of oaken sprouts. Everything underground is slimy with the mold of ages and grey with algae and moss. Here and there are rushing torrents of brownish colored water following a natural opening to the near-by rivers. The roar of the evil smelling flood reverberates thru the high vaulted caverns and crooked tunnels to become magnified and distorted, and awe inspiring to the novice.

The different levels are reached by means of rickety ladders, too often suspended over a water-worn chasm the bottom of which can not be reached by the rays of an electric torch.

Each miner as he descends to his work carries the days supplies of explosive tucked safely in the top of his boot. Perhaps there it keeps company with a gad or moil and a few detonating caps wrapped in oil cloth to guard against moisture. A common method of keeping fuse dry is to crimp a detonating cap over each free end, the coil is then blithely shoved down a hardy boot leg. Many old miners claim that a water-tight union between cap and fuse can be made with no other crimper than the miners teeth.

Much of the drilling is still done by hand. Here one will find the best hand steel men left in the world. Right hand, left hand, back hole, flat hole or down hole, each is but an incident in the days work to them.

The handicaps under which they labor are many; and some of the attempts they make to provide a few physical comforts are touching. Over in some protected niche a tiny charcoal brazier will be burning to supply hot tea, as a help to frighten off the clammy cold. This steaming drink with cheese and orange marmalade seems to be a standard lunch. Off to one side a primitive air blast driven by a small stream of water will be used to circulate the fetid air.

Everywhere is the drip of seeping water, the only dry objects to be seen are the rats that scurry from stull to stull searching with beady eyes for a chance scrap of bread or an open lunch bucket.

The ore is hand sorted on cow hides where it is broken, then trammed in diminutive cars to storage. Here the bucking board and cobbing hammer have held their own against modern crushing equipment. And beyond a doubt they will continue to hold their own for this is the land of little change, where peculiar combination of forces have united to stultify all progress.

The deposits were largely depleted in the past centuries, and the ore left is low in grade, while the water problem would daunt the modern engineer. Added to all this are the fees, lots and tithes that sap the scanty earnings of the unfortunate miner.

Strong hearts have lived and mined in that region in the centuries past and strong hearts still live and mine there, undaunted by conditions considered intolerable elsewhere, and not afraid to work side by side with the specter of death.