

THE THROSTLE NEST DATESTONE

R. Slack

Abstract: Possible origins are suggested for a rare and, perhaps unique, inscription at Rainster Rocks (SK219549) at Brassington, close to a mine.

Among the limestone outcrops and the thousands of fallen rocks and boulders which make up Rainster Rocks, about a mile to the west of Brassington, is one low outcrop which has an eighteenth century inscription carved on it. The inscription could well have been augmented in later years by a line from Robert Burns - "The best laid plans o' Mice an' Men, Gang aft a-gley" - but in fact consists of its original two sets of initials and the date -



(Above) *The inscription.*

(Below) *Rainster Rocks, Brassington, from the south.*



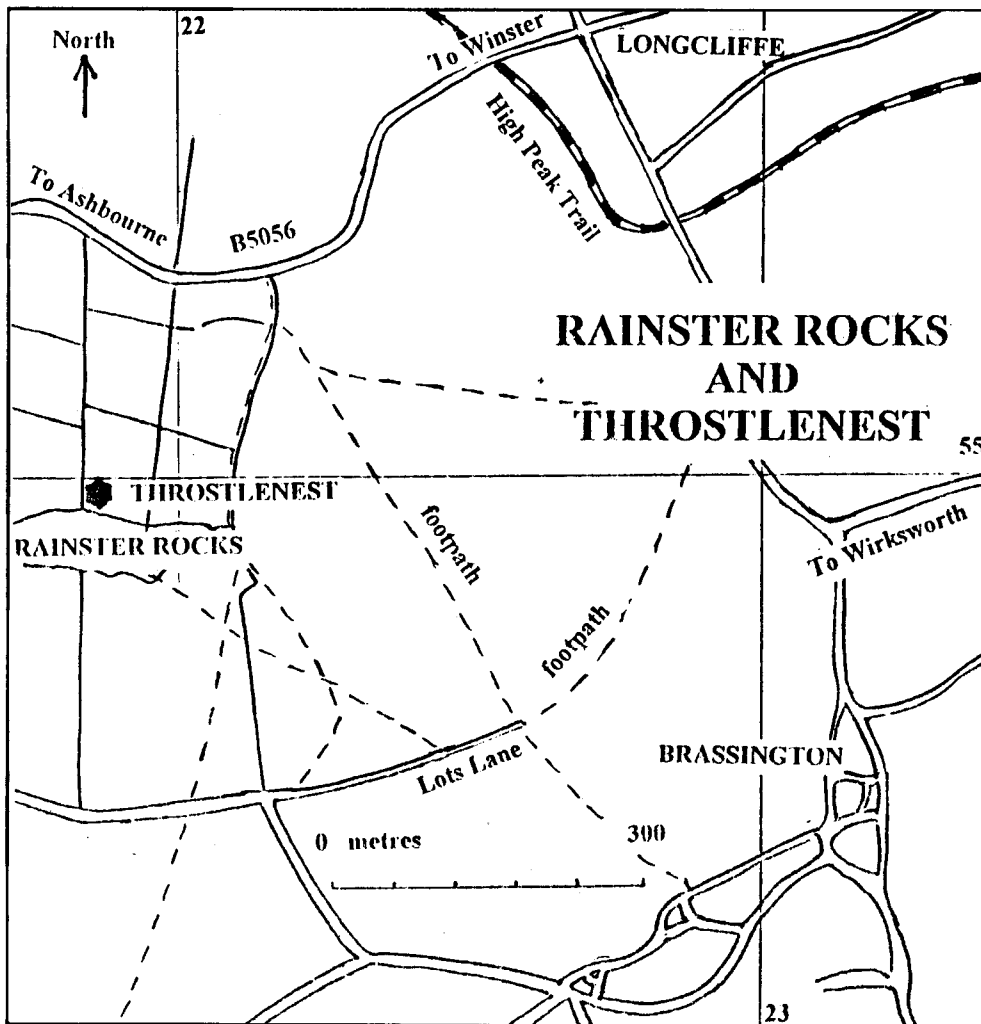
"TW+GW 1760"

The outcropping rock with the inscription juts out of the turf at the top of the steep, wooded slope of the Rocks, a few yards from the edge, in the rough ground of Brassington Pasture. Close by is the shaft of a disused lead mine, known in its working days as Throstle Nest. The mining records which would have identified TW and GW were mislaid in the nineteenth century and have not been seen since then. TW does not appear in any other contemporary record. It is likely, however, that he and GW were members of the Walton family of Brassington, many of whom were lead miners and one of whom at the time was George Walton. They may have been brothers, father and son or, like other couples whose initials are jointly carved in stone or wood, they may have been husband and wife. Whoever they were, Throstle Nest was TW's place of work.

The tradition in Brassington is that the stone is a memorial to two brothers who died in a rock fall in the mine and are buried there. TW is confidently named by one villager as "Tommy Watson". The link between the inscription and the nearby shaft is assumed in a Derbyshire Countryside article of 1957 which includes a photograph of the inscribed rock. In an unpublished letter of 1978 from Miss Nellie Kirkham, a copy of which is in the Derbyshire Record Office, she describes a visit to Rainster Rocks in 1949 in the company of fellow-members of the Birmingham Cave and Crag Club, who showed her the shaft and the inscribed rock. They regarded the rock as marking the founding of the mine but Miss Kirkham knew that "dates on mines are practically unknown", and thought it more likely that the stone commemorates an accident at Throstle Nest. The report of this has survived by being included in the 1762 edition of *The Miners Guide*

"Wirksworth Wapentake March 26th
1761

We, whose names are under written, being this day summoned by Mr. Edward Ashton, Bar-Master for the Liberty of Brassington, to a grove called by the name of Throstle Nest on Brassington Pasture; to enquire into the cause of death of T.W. now lying before us; accordingly we have been down the shaft to the Foot thereof, and down one sump or turn to the foot thereof, and on a gate Northwardly about sixteen yards to the Forefield, where the deceased had been at work; and by the information we have from William Briddon who was working near him; it appears that a large stone fell upon him out of the roof, and it is our opinions the said stone was the



Dates and initials were often fixed on houses and other buildings and on the openings, or "tails" of the soughs which drained many of the mines in Derbyshire. This was a custom, however, which was not usually followed in the mines themselves. The miners knew that lead was elusive and that they and their ancestors had always had to sink many shafts in its pursuit. No mine, or any miner's ownership of it, was likely to be permanent and there was rarely any permanent building associated with it. The TW+GW inscription is rare, perhaps unique. The link with Throstle Nest seems irresistible and, since most Brassington mines were worked by their owners, it is plausible to suggest that TW and GW owned this one. However the extent of the workings described in the 1761 jury verdict imply an older mine than one first sunk in 1760. While there must be a strong presumption that the TW of the inscription was the man killed in 1761, he may not have been marking the mine at all. The unlucky TW may have carved his inscription for romantic rather than proprietary reasons, and

cause of his death.

GW may have been his wife. For whatever reason he carved deeply and his work is as clear as it was in 1760.

Writers of our hands

Thomas Slack	Joseph Ball
Joseph Joanson	Philip Hodgkinson
Samuel Kinder	Henry Spencer
William Wilson	Robert Lee
Henry Flint	Thomas Fearn
John Flint (Jnr.)	Mark Slack"

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The discrepancy between the dates of the inscription and the accident was noted by Miss Kirkham. It is impossible that anyone carving soon after the accident would have carved the wrong year. If the inscription is a memorial it must have been carved a sufficiently long time after the accident for the date to have become half-forgotten. It cannot commemorate two men whose bodies remain in the mine, since the jury's report mentions only TW "now lying before us" either above ground or, if still in the mine, in a sufficiently accessible position for the twelve jurymen to have reached him and, therefore, for his body to have been recovered. The report makes it clear that TW was killed by a single rock, leaving his workmate uninjured. It seems that the inscription could only be a memorial in the most unlikely event of its being carved at the site of TW's death after the death of GW, someone associated with him, possibly his wife. Such a memorial would have been more expertly carved. Contemporary stones in Brassington churchyard are professionally done, and a mason would surely have been employed here.

REFERENCES

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