

WOMEN AND THE LEAD TRADE IN 17TH CENTURY WIRKSWORTH, DERBYSHIRE

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Abstract: During all periods of the lead industry most mine owners and shareholders were men and most offices and institutions of the industry were restricted to men, but barmasters' and other records reveal that, at least in the seventeenth century, a significant number of women had a personal stake in the trade. They were owners and shareholders, ore buyers and workers, in this last regard usually restricted to the least skilled, most repetitive and worst paid tasks, except in the smelting mills, where they seem to have had parity with men.

Barmasters

The chief barmaster and leaseholder of the royal duties of lot and cope, payable by mine holders and ore buyers respectively, was almost always a man. However, women were not expressly barred from holding the lease, and in 1650, when her husband, Sir John Coke the younger, died intestate, his widow Dame Elizabeth Coke inherited his possession of the lease of the mineral rights and chief barmastership in the Wapentake of Wirksworth (BM Add MSS 6686 ff136-142). She lost no time in subletting the rights for a seven-year period to a male partnership and, in practice, the persons who actually ran the industry, the chief barmasters, were men, and they appointed other men as their deputies. In the one case where a woman, Jennet Carrier, carried out the barmaster's functions, she did so because she was the daughter of Thomas Parker, chief barmaster of the Wirksworth Wapentake and she and her husband Richard Carrier, vicar of Wirksworth, acted as proxies for her father. The Carriers collected lot (one thirteenth of each mine's production), from the miners, and cope (6d per load), from the ore buyers. They also demanded a third, dubious, tax called "guifter ore" and, in his capacity as vicar, Richard Carrier claimed the highly unpopular tithe (tenth) of the miners' ore. They backed their tax collecting with violence and menaces and were brought to trial in the Star Chamber in 1632 for their actions (DRO D258/30/16-24). Jennet seems to have been more feared than her husband. Among the means of persuasion allegedly used by the Carriers was a "mastive dogg" which "did then mount and leape amonge them" in a struggle with one miner who was disinclined to pay a fine incurred for using an illegal measure, and a "long knife", drawn by Jennet to prompt one miner to pay his dues (RGO33). She maintained that this was merely the knife she used to notch the tally stick when measuring ore to calculate lot and cope. Jennet denied the charges against her but was fined and jailed nevertheless, and that her sex was one factor in the animosity shown toward her is suggested by the remark of the earl of Dorset that "if Mrs Carrier had been at home armed with her distaffe and spindle, and not with a knife and a tallye in the fiede, this might have been spared" (Wood, 1999). Jennet was not the only woman actively involved in the struggles with recalcitrant miners. Among the alleged misdeeds committed by the Carriers was the seizure of 21 dishes of ore by a group which included Alice Wright (DRO D258/42/29e). Alice was probably the wife of George Wright, one of Carrier's deputy barmasters. In any event she was clearly no more of a homebody than the vicar's wife.

Mine owners

Female ownership of mines and mine shares was common. As with the men, the women's involvement in the work of the mines varied with social class and the character of the mines. Shareholders in small, independent mines, men or women, often worked in them. For men and women in the ranks and occupations other than that of working miner – yeoman farmer, trader, craftsman, gentry – mine shares were

investments, and it is unlikely, for instance, that the original shareholders in Gentlewomen's Grove, near Matlock, were personally involved in ore getting. Among the titled gentry involvement would have consisted of signing share certificates or, at most, taking an interest in the mine accounts. Catherine Gell, wife of Sir John Gell II, of Hopton, was a shareholder. Surviving among the family papers from a period before her husband inherited his baronetcy are "Mrs Gell acct for Raventor", September to December 1655 (DRO D258/10/90) and "Mrs Gells acct for Gray Mare Arse 1657" (DRO D258/35/50/70), which include calculations of one eighth of the profits, indicating that she owned an eighth share in each of these mines. A list of the Gell mine holdings drawn up in 1689, after the death of Sir John, includes Gell's daughters, Elizabeth and Temperance, and his mother-in-law "Madam Packer" (DRO D258/24/50/23). Other share-holders are Lady Archer, Mrs Oldfield, Frances Heathcote, Mrs Allsop and "Mrs Samons heires". When Elizabeth Gell's grandson Philip opened the Golconda mine in 1769 his sisters Maria Catherina and Isabella were shareholders (DRO D258/38/7).

Jennet Carrier was lower in the social scale than the Gells, but a "gentlewoman" nevertheless who, as she testified in court, "never did worke in anye grove as a myner but ... hath hiered workemen for triall to get leade oare as is usuallie accostomed for married gentlewomen of the beste qualitie and others in that parte of the Duchy [of Lancaster] to doe". Jennet was owner of the Cockinkilne and other mines in Wirksworth liberty and, while she took no part in mining operations she was a vigorous participant in an often violent struggle over ownership of mines, including a prolonged dispute in which Jennet's claim to an eighth part of one mine was pursued in both physical and courtroom battles.

In spite of male dominance of the industry, married women could hold mine shares in their own right and a legal document of 1661 includes Elizabeth Needham, Anne Abell and Elizabeth Bradshaw, with their husbands, in a list of mine owners (DRO D258/44/23). Among the mine owners dispossessed in 1630 as part of the driving of the Dovegang Sough were Dorothy Fearn and Anne Hopkinson (NA DL30/54/669A). However, since the earl of Dorset was not alone in thinking that a woman's place was in the home this right did not go unchallenged, and Jennet Carrier, in her pugnacious way, quarrelled in Wirksworth marketplace over her mine holdings (Wood, 1999). A second Wirksworth woman, Elizabeth Fearn, had also quarrelled "in Wirksworth towne streete", defending her rights to other mines. Elizabeth also gave evidence in court that "it is usuall for Gentlewomen & other women as well married as unmarried to take & hould ptes of ground & maintayne the same with workmanship & sayeth that she herself had an hundred poundes worth of groves and sould an hundred poundes worth". Elizabeth and Dorothy Fearn and Anne Hopkinson were gentlewomen - Mrs Hopkinson was the mother of William, a mine owner whose

profits from the industry enabled him to build the large house still standing on Greenhill, Wirksworth, and now known as Hopkinson's House. A second son, George, was a lawyer and steward of the Wirksworth barmote court (DRO X9 109/1). However, as Elizabeth Fearn and Jennet Carrier implied, female mine owners were not all from the gentry.

A common way for women to acquire mine shares was in their dowries (L. Willies, private communication) and through inheritance from their husbands or fathers, particularly for those who were not "gentlewomen". The miner Richard Walker, of Brassington, left "all his rights and title of in and to his Mynes veynes or meeres of ground possession or ptes of possession" to his wife Margaret in 1675 and his neighbour George Steeple left his wife Dorothy and daughter Mary "all my groves & meeres of ground that I have within the Wapentake of Wirksworth equally between them" ten years later (LJRO. Probate). In a Derbyshire petition of 1641, signed by 1,912 heads of mining households, seeking the removal of a tax on exported lead, eighty-seven were widows (NA E101/280/18, quoted by Wood). There were a number of Wirksworth women, contemporary with Jennet Carrier but lower in the social scale as well as more conventional in their behaviour, who were listed as mine owners in the lot and cope accounts. In 1639, Ann Taylor held the most productive mine in Wirksworth (DRO D258/34/11). She had seventeen consignments of ore measured by the barmaster, a total of 150 loads 2 dishes (over 37 tons), in a total for the liberty of 1107 loads (277 tons). There were Emmot Vickers, Mrs Mary Fearn and Alice Enser. Mrs Fearn, who was described in the Carrier case as having successfully brought a charge of assault and battery against one of Carrier's men, is given her title in the barmaster's lists because she was the wife of John Fearn, gentleman – one of their daughters married John Stuffin, gentleman, of Shirebrook. By the same token Ann Taylor and Emmot Vickers were from the lower orders, though not, presumably, of the "poorer sort". Emmot Vickers, whose gender is revealed in an ore account for Brassington, mined 27 loads 2 dishes (7 tons) at Wirksworth and in 1645 is listed as measuring small amounts of ore on five occasions at a mine variously described as "in ye Breetch", "at Mr Stuffins grove in the Breech" and "at ye Crosse Rake in the breetch" - she was presumably in partnership with Stuffin. Fourteen years later "Widdoe Phillips" and Mary Bunting were being listed by the barmaster at Wirksworth and Mary Goodwin at Middleton (DRO D258/7/20/3). In the private Gell liberty of Griffie Grange the barmasters' lists during the second half of the seventeenth century include the names of Ellen Bowman, Elizabeth and Ann Bateman, Joan Higgitt, Mary Howson, Elen Ogton, Ann Sooton, Elizabeth Wright, Elizabeth Bagshaw and Elizabeth Young (DRO D258/20/6y). On Carsington Pasture in 1682 Margaret Alsop opened a new mine at Picking Pitts and Widow Wright held one near the Haywards Stone (DRO D258/18/25). It seems probable that some, perhaps most, of these women, like many of the men in the barmasters' lists, actually worked at their mines. The Hannage Sough agreement of 1693 has twelve women, including the ore buyer Margaret Bagshaw (see below), in a long list of "proprietors owners sharers and partners at of & in several Groves or Lead Mines" (BM Add MSS 6684 ff52-57).

Ore buyers

In addition to owning mines Emmot Vickers also operated as an ore buyer in the Wirksworth, Brassington and Middleton liberties. Incomplete records from 1639 reveal the scale of her activities. In July to September she bought a total of 63 loads (16 tons) in the Wirksworth mines, plus 11 loads in Brassington and 5 in Middleton in August. The ore buyers in 1639 included another female mine owner, Anne Hopkinson, and Mrs Elizabeth Wigley. Between July and September Mrs Wigley bought almost 60 loads (125 tons) in Cromford and 86 loads (21 tons) in Wirksworth, plus almost 24 loads (6 tons) from the Middleton mines in August; the corresponding figures for Mrs Hopkinson are almost 30 loads (7 tons) in Wirksworth

liberty and 8 loads (2 tons) in Middleton.

In Griffie Grange Mary Curtes bought 13 loads 7 dishes (3 tons) of ore in the second quarter of 1658 (DRO D258/20/7/1-40). This was her only appearance and she may have been deputising for her husband on that occasion as for most of the period one of the buyers was a George Curtes. There was another sole appearance by a woman buyer in the Griffie when Margaret Bagshaw bought 5 loads in the third quarter of 1702 (DRO D258/20/9/3). She had earlier been listed as an ore buyer in Wirksworth in each year between 1692 and 1698, and in the two years for which detailed figures survive she bought 96 loads 7 dishes (24 tons) in 1692 and 249 loads 6 dishes (62 tons) in 1697 (DRO D258/18/25).

Mine workers

It has been generally accepted that women's work was restricted to winding and washing, usually on the surface, though there are references suggesting that women were sometimes employed to carry out this work underground. One unambiguous statement, made during a tithe case in 1687 at Wensley, was that the daughter of a tithe collector had "washed ore in the grove and at the Topp" twenty-five years earlier (NA E134 3 James II Easter 15). Katherine Guy, accused in the Carrier case of taking part in the violent occupation of a mine, was stated to have been hired by Mrs Carrier "to worke and drawe up leade oare or rubbidge that was gotten in the grove". Katherine Guy, a thirty years old spinster, was a winder, employed to operate the "stows" or windlass, winding ore and waste up the shaft to the surface. The women, and children, employed either winding or washing and dressing the ore in preparation for its sale, were members of the mining teams but were not named in the usual records and Katherine Guy's identification is unusual.

One woman mine worker whose description has survived without identification is the one whom Daniel Defoe met on Brassington Moor as he was on his way from Wirksworth to Buxton. He came upon this woman living with her children in a cave usually thought to be the cave at Harborough Rocks, which has evidence of prolonged occupation. She was a miner's wife and told Defoe that her husband earned about 5d a day. She herself, when she could leave the children, could earn another 3d by washing ore. Defoe's comments on this woman and her cave home belie the low opinion of the "subterranean wretches" generally held by people of his class. Inside the cave "everything was neat and clean" and the family "seemed to live very pleasantly, the children looked plump and fat, ruddy and wholesome; the woman was tall, well shaped, clean, and (for the place) a very well looking, comely woman". Wives and children were commonly employed in the small mines worked by families or partnerships of neighbours and in the teams of "copers", working agreed contracts in the larger mines. Defoe's interviewee may have earned her 3d a day helping her husband.

One witness in the Carrier case had stated that Mrs Carrier "did never worke as a myner", implying that other women, not "of the best qualitie", were miners. There are two sets of accounts – for Gray Mare Arse and Raventor mines – which confirm that this was the case, and which hint at the possibility that women may sometimes have carried out the primary task in mining, ore getting. In the Gray Mare Arse accounts Mary Horneby and her son (or servant – the handwriting is difficult) were paid 1/- on 5 July 1657, implying a higher rate per shift for Mary than all the men in the team apart from the leader. At Raventor two years earlier Mary Ashe was paid 4/8d for twelve shifts, a rate of 8d a shift, and the same as two men who worked seven shifts each. A second woman, Margaret Spencer, worked twelve shifts at half the rate and a third, Milly Booth, eleven, also at 4d a shift. It seems unlikely that Mary Ashe, working full time and paid the same rate as the men, would have been carrying out a different task from theirs. Mary Horneby and Mary Ashe may have been carrying out "men's

work" in their respective teams.

There was another type of mine work, akin to washing and dressing, which was disproportionately carried out by women. This was "caving", the reworking of old spoil heaps, an activity generally despised by miners as inferior to their own skilled and dangerous work underground. In the 1641 petition the names of miners are followed by an anonymous statistic for "more poor hirlings and cavers with their families ... which live upon the mines". There are few accounts of cavers, though Dr Wood quotes an Anne Wilson testifying to the Duchy Court in 1677 that she had been one. The barmasters' accounts do not name them but, since ore buyers paid a tax, "cope", on their purchases of caved as well as mined ore, the lot and cope accounts record the amounts. They show that caved ore was a significant proportion of the mines' output; the surviving, incomplete, figures for the Brassington, Cromford, Middleton and Wirksworth liberties for the period 1653 to 1661 total 19,270 loads (4,817 tons) of "grove" (mined) ore and 6,108 loads (1,527 tons) of caved ore (Slack, 1992). At the end of the century 673 loads of caved ore (115 tons) were sold in the Wirksworth mines in 1697 (DRO D258/18/45).

Smelting workers

The procedure in a seventeenth century smelting mill was described in 1630 by Roger Kenyon, a Duchy of Lancaster official (NA DL 41/17/19, quoted in Kiernan, 1989). The mills employed four workmen or women at each hearth. Two were skilled smelters whose job was to manipulate the ore as it was smelted. One tended the furnace and kept the hearth loaded with ore and a fourth attended to labouring jobs, including breaking the ore and ladling the molten metal into the moulds for the "pigs" (ingots) in which form the lead was sold. In some of the bills presented to the manager by blacksmiths for manufacture and repair of tools, the smith named each worker to whom he had supplied a tool or repaired one. The most skilled work in the mill was done using a shovel and a "crow" (bar), and entries in the blacksmith's bills show that some of it was done by women. In a smith's bill for work done for the workers at Nether Mill in Wirksworth during the quarter April to June 1663 Elizabeth Roper and Mary Smythe were both charged for shovels and crowbars and one entry has Elizabeth working in the slag hearth, where the residue from the ore hearth was re-smelted - "to Elizabeth Roper to ye slaghearth a "sturrop" [stirrup] & a sword [both attachments to the bellows] - 3d" (DRO D258/35/14/25-26). In other bills (DRO D258/35/49/1-) Mary is shown to be versatile, as she was also equipped with a cowrake, for cleaning out the ore-hearths, a "pene" (a hammer with a sharpened end), a "lenes" or "lencs" [?], a "ston ax" (for breaking ore?) and a "limp" (a scraper used to remove waste during washing) (Willies, 1975). Ann Smith is charged for a shovel, crow and cowrake, Ellen Teller had a shovel and a "pen", Ann Spencer was wielding a shovel and Jane Holehouse a shovel and a crowbar. These women were clearly full members of the smelter teams. The work was well paid. The teams were paid 5/2d per fother (8 pigs or 22½ cwt) which at busy times would result in a good wage. In the second quarter of 1663 for instance Elizabeth Roper, Mary Smythe and six male workmates at Nether Mill produced 80 fothers, making an average weekly wage of 3/7d. It was, however, highly dangerous; the poisonous effects of smelting were not confined to the landscape outside the mills and lead poisoning often caused ill health and early death among the workers.

Litigation

Despite their exclusion from the institutions and government of lead mining, the wives and daughters of working miners were essential to the success of mining ventures and were certainly knowledgeable about mining, its rules and its politics, as they showed in a number of the legal disputes which were a constant feature of the industry. The Carriers were accused of recruiting Mary Bradshaw, among others, to give false evidence on their behalf in 1625 (DRO D258/54/19p). In 1634,

after the imprisonment of a number of miners for defying Charles I over payment of tithes, or tenths of their ore, their wives petitioned the queen, Henrietta Maria, for the men's release (BM Add MSS 64908, f134, quoted by Wood, 1999). A Barmote Court record of 1659 notes that the court's decision to warn John Mather that he would forfeit his share in a mine in Barley Flatts unless he turned up for work there had been conveyed to Mather's wife "to tell her husband" (DRO D258/10/9/36). Among the witnesses in another tithe case, brought to the Duchy of Lancaster court by the Rector of Matlock in 1676, were several women (BM Add MSS 6678 ff 162-183). Evidence was given that a miner called Roger Jackson, who had spoken at an earlier case against the Rector's claim and who had recently died, had admitted shortly before his death that he had been offered £5 to refute the witness statement of Martha Harrison, and that Martha had been speaking the truth. Elizabeth Ball said that she had spoken to Jackson several times and accused him of lying. The day before his death she had heard him say that he had £5 waiting for him at Nestowes Mine and after his death she had told his widow what she had heard. The widow had then gone to Nestowes to demand the money and another of the women, Alice Spencer, had told Mrs Jackson "Alas your husband forswore himself for it". The women were clearly both knowledgeable and willing to speak their minds. Margaret Pidcocke told the court that in 1650 her husband had told the Rector's tithe gatherer that "hee was a knave and alwayes thrusting himselfe into office, that hee had given Mr Smith something and would after give his Mr something". In 1699 a mining partnership led by Nathaniel Soresby brought an action in the Wirksworth Barmote Court against another led by John Wilcockson, claiming ownership of a new vein in Ratchwood mine (BM Add MSS 6681 ff 428-435). Ellen French was one of the defendants and was listed as a witness "to prove the bad actions of Nathaniel Soresby in other matters to the disturbance of the peace of the Myne"

Summary

While the mining records obscure much of their contribution and while they were generally excluded from ore getting and from the government of mining, the women of the lead mining communities were involved and were indispensable.

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