LEAD MINES WORKED IN ROMAN TIMES

MAY SAVE US DOLLARS

FOUllowing in the footsteps of the Romans, who mined lead in the romantic hills of Shropshire's Welsh border country 1,800 years ago, a pioneering Salop company is encouraging mining rights in the area and hopes soon to save Britain dollars now spent on importing the mineral.

This is the country of the Silures, known sometimes as the "Shropshire Highlands," producing at its leafy valleys a scattered rural community, with its own slow but surewelled characteristics. Disaster overtook the district some 10 years ago when the mining of lead and kindred minerals died out. A mining population of about 1,000 drifted away.

Houses and houses down the track twisting dales, can be seen ruined houses and deserted mining premises, near small hamlets which have now turned fully to agriculture.

Is it the moor that wades the clouds over the Devil's Chair, the curious saddle-shaped central hill of the Silures? Legend has it that the devil died here after leaving Ireland.

It was in this district of fable and folklore that the film "Come to Earth," based on Mary Webb's book about the rugged country people, was made a few years ago.

Inhabitants being enlisted to last part.

TURRETDOWN RUINS

One a hilly area of four square miles, tumulus ruins of grey slate indicate the presence of old lead shafts which have been active intermittently since Roman days.

Some have crumbling, dangerous sides, and others, bored into hillsides, have had their entrances filled by falls of rubble.

Most of the ruins in all lie in the area. They are distinguished by their down-to-earth names as The Fug, The Griz, East Roman Wood Mine and the Bat, in mention a few of the main names.

In the first quarter of this century the mines declined. The district closed down in 1925, and the company then working most of the mines, Shropshire Mines Ltd., went into liquidation six years ago.

On behalf of the new owners of the mining rights, a firm of consulting engineers has been brought in to investigate the premises so far in the area, for the last six months.

LIGHTLY NAMED

Their operations are centred, conveniently enough, on the Age of Hope. Half the dozen or so miners who have entered their mines are old-timers who know of the previous seams.

No large-scale production is yet contemplated. Work is confined only to the investigation to see if lead mining can be made an economic proposition.

At Hope an old brick-lined chimney stack approximately 200 feet deep has been uncovered and full exploration when further support arrives.

A new shaft of 20 feet deep now is being driven at Penmerley near the Warning, while some fresh tunnel, so far 40 yards long, has been cut into a hillside at Wrekin.

We see Roman remains have been discovered. It is now recorded that between 1667 and 1681 some hundred pits of lead, all bearing the name of the Emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37), were found at the mines.

They are mentioned by Mr. W. T. H. Watkin in a paper on "Roman Shropshire," published in 1935.

Towards the end of last century, he records, too, the discovery of other antiquities, especially Roman coins, in rubbish, filling shafts and galleries they left.

OLD VILLAS

Two villas, which existed at Pontefract and at Diddlethorpe were believed to have been the homes of Roman officials.

If the new venture is successful, modern mining officials and workpeople may shortly be moving into the sleepy villages of Milton, Pontefract and Hope.

This prospecting is far from encouraging the aim. Though not at the £100 mark of a year or two ago, lead prices have hardened. They say, at over £30 per ton, which is still an attractive figure as against, for example, £19 in 1935.

A wide field of exploration lies before them. At present, only 1 per cent. of Britain's lead needs are met by the country's three or four mines. The Missouri region of the United States is one of the main suppliers of the world's lead.