NOTES ON THE LEAD SMELT HOUSES OF THE SOUTH SHROPSHIRE MINING AREA

(The following notes were prepared for a meeting of the Historical Metallurgy Society held in South Shropshire on Saturday May 10th 1980).

The earliest details of lead smelting in the area occur in Hoosen's "Kinners Dictionary" of 1741. It would appear that at this time a natural draught was a more important consideration than fuel and that, for this reason, smelting was taking place on the Stiperstones Hills.

"There are places where we may suppose that the lead ore has been carried several miles for the convenience of air .... Upon the hills called Stiperstones in Shropshire there (holes) may be found very common, and are very little places. They seem to have done their business by laying a round row of stones on the ground and placing the fire in the middle. They picked the ore on or near the surface of the ground on those hills and perhaps melted not one hundredweight in one place."

During the 18th century it became more important to take the ore to the fuel and a source of power for the bellows. Smelters were constructed in both the Shrewsbury coalfield, around Pontesbury, and the Coalbrookdale coalfield. Very little has been written on smelting in either area.

The following sites are recorded in the Shrewsbury Coalfield (see fig 1).

1. WALLINGFORD, erected in the late 18th century and the owners obtained the lease of the local coal mines in 1778. In this year they also purchased a Boulton and Watt engine. In 1790 the smelter was let to John Lawrence, agent for the Shrewsbury Coalfield Company, but it had closed by 1831.

2. MARTSFORD, built by Lawrence before 1831, near the present Horseshoe Inn.

3. PONTESFORD, to the east of the road to Pontesford Hill, erected by the Shrewsbury Coalfield Company before 1804 but had been disposed of by them by 1814. A report of 1813 stated that there were 3 smelting furnaces, a 4hp engine with blowing apparatus, slag hearth, etc.

4. PONTESFORD, to the west of the road to Pontesford Hill, built by the Coalbrookdale Company shortly after 1784 and remained in use until about 1872. Two chimneys, 150 ft and 180 ft high, were constructed in 1832. Water from a small stream was used to turn a wheel to provide draught.

In 1851, the two smelting houses at Pontesford employed 90 men and 35 boys. The smelters closed following serious complaints about smoke and fumes and after the closure of the local mines when coal became available at a new railway wharf on the Linsterley Railway. At this time compensation was being sought for damage to crops and death of farm animals. Workers were having to drink copious amounts of cod liver oil.
5. **SNAILBEACH**, 800 yards north west of Snailbeach line, opened on 11 July 1662, to replace the Pontesford smelters. This was a modern reverberatory furnace where the draught was provided by a long flue and high chimney. The smoke passed through the long underground flue to the chimney on Lordshill. The smelthouse closed in 1895 but one of the five furnaces was reopened temporarily in June 1897.

At the opening ceremony there was "a procession of 400 men preceded by the band of the 1st Shropshire Rifles". The party then feasted at "three rows of tables 145 ft long placed inside the new smelting house".


The writer wishes to acknowledge the assistance received from Mr K Lock. The map was reproduced by kind permission of K Allbutt and K Brook.

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**Map**

The South Shropshire Lead Mines

- railways
- lead mine
- coal mine
- small mill
- drainage levels

1 inch = 1 mile