Lord Tankerville's Stay In Stiperstones

Perilous Journey Through The Boat Level

by M. Corfield

Much has been written from time to time about the various "levels" driven in connection with the mines in this north-west area of Shropshire; I think probably the "Boat Level" has received most publicity and criticism. As I have lived practically all the seventy-three years of my life within the proverbial stone's throw of the mouth of this level and as a child played on its hillocks and in its waters I should like to write the facts concerning it as known to me.

For the uninitiated I will commence by stating: the "Boat Level" is an adit level; that is, one that is driven out to daylight from a vertical shaft. It is situated a little way above the Stiperstones hamlet and extends about two miles to the bottom of the main shaft at The Bog Mines, some one hundred and twenty yards deep. It has a number of air shafts sunk down to it at various places enroute. These are at Bergum, Tankerville, Pennerley (near the Methodist Chapel), The Black Pit (at the Pennerley end of the Bog Marsh) and one at the other end nearer the School.

All these pits were also mined, levels being driven out on the veins in various directions. I well remember a bit of belated mining being carried on at Bergum Pit some years ago and was much intrigued by the method used to bring the mineral to the surface.

PrIMITIVE HAULAGE

This was by means of a "gin", i.e., a wooden contraption with a rope and pulley attached to a "kibble". A horse was fastened to the shafts and walked round in a little circuit winding the loaded kibble to the top. A man would "land" it and then would let the kibble back down, which when filled, the horse would start off again bringing it to the surface time and time again.

This is often called "The Gin Pit." The primary reason for driving the Boat Level was to drain the water from the area through which it passed as well as the pit at The Bog, which judging by the quantity of water flowing out of it, achieved its purpose.

HOW THE BOAT LEVEL

GOT ITS NAME

The Boat Level seems to have been unique in that the flow of water was sufficient to carry a boat; hence its name. This boat was used to bring the mineral from The Bog to the mouth of the level. The boat was pulled back the two miles underground by means of a rope running along the side of the level, by a man working hand over hand. I do not know when this particular level was driven, but my mother, who was born in 1847, used to tell us that as a little girl she attended The Bog School and the then schoolmistress would relate how she had been for a trip in the boat on the Boat Level.

It would appear from records made and published in Histories of Shropshire that The Bog mines were working some two centuries ago, and it has been commented that there was mining there in Roman times. These mines were reputed to be very rich in lead ore and pitch-blende, also barite; this latter was mined at a later date. The Boat Level was discontinued as a means of transport after a time, when my grandfather built the house at Birchill about 1830 stables were also built to house the horses he kept for hauling the lead and other products from The Bog to Shrewsbury. A number of others were also engaged in this work. These waggons returned via Asterley, bringing back coal for the engines at the mines.

Lord Tankerville's Residence

and Industrial Plans

About 1907 The Rt. Honourable George Montagu, 7th Earl of Tankerville, seeking to confer benefits on the tenants of his Shropshire Estate, came to reside in this district for a time. He had with him Lady Tankerville, their two sons, Mrs. Van Morerne, Lady Tankerville's mother, and a small retinue of servants. They were accommodated at Prospect House (Snailbeach). As a treat, the Earl arranged for large quantities of venison (something no one around here had ever tasted) to be sent from Chillingham Castle, his Northumberland seat. This was joined up by a local butcher and distributed amongst the tenants—sad to say, not always to their satisfaction. Also distributed to each householder were framed photographs of the Earl and Lady Tankerville in their 1902 Coronation Robes.

One thing which delighted the local people was that the Earl being possessed of a fine, well-trained baritone voice sang solos in their Chapels and at various concerts in the district. On one occasion the Earl and Countess held a service at Stiperstones School. Crowds of people attended from far and near and the service was held in the open air. Both the organisers were skilled in this kind of proceedings; Lord Tankerville had associated himself in America with the famous evangelists Sankey and Moody and the Countess,

Top—The late Lord Tankerville, whose efforts to re-establish the Stiperstones mining industry are described in this article. Centre—The late Mr. O. Jones who took part in the attempt to push through the Boat Level. Below—The late Lady Tankerville. (Both Tankerville portraits are from originals presented to the local temperance.)
then Miss Leonora Van Marter had been attached to the Salvation Army.

The Earl's greatest ambition for the district was to provide some form of industry; in consequence he had the Round Hill mine opened up and employed a number of men. This did not carry on for long for they were defeated by the enemy of mining—water.

Miraculous Escape As Landslip Burst Open

During these operations the Earl expressed a wish to explore the Boat Level, and one day Mr. Edwin Jones, his Uncle John Jones, and His Lordship set off. They entered the level at the mouth, and wading through the stream, scrambling over accumulated rubbish the three men made their way for a considerable distance.

They gradually realised to their amazement and horror that the water was getting deeper and deeper. There had been a fall behind them, which was pounding the water up. To proceed would be going further from safety; to return was even more dangerous. In desperation they decided to stand still.

The water crept higher and higher up their bodies reaching their shoulders. Still it crept on and I can imagine a prayer was raised from each heart for deliverance.

As though by miracle, just as the water reached their necks and they knew that the end could not be far away, to their great relief, the water started to recede and after some time they were able to make their way back out. The weight of the water had burst through the fall of earth. When at a later date The Bog mines were re-opened the Boat Level was cleaned up and a patrol travelled it regularly to keep it in repair.

A Misleading Article

Now to comment on the reason which incited me to write the foregoing. In 1951 a most disconcerting article appeared in The People in which the brook flowing down the Boat Level is described as a “sinister stream from which no living creature will drink and which drives fish mad.”

This statement can easily be refuted, since it is the only water available for the animals on the smallholding of its name and for those throughout the valley where it flows, including our own meadows. I have never known it harm any one of them.

The only reason this water was disliked for domestic purposes is that it is very hard, due to the fact that it flows through a vein of ironstone and carries along with it an iron deposit which accounts for the fact that the stones in the bottom of the brook always appear red; hence the name—“The Red Brook” (Brook).

To quote again: “The water looked surprisingly clear. I took off my shoes and socks as I went in to take a sample. As my feet touched the bottom it was just as though I had had an electric shock.” I have never heard of any one else having a similar experience. When making hay in our meadows through which this stream runs we have many times paddled our feet about in the water to refresh ourselves. The children of the district have always played in the stream. Having in mind the fact that this water flows through lead and blende lodes and realising that the latter was the mineral from which Uranium was found, the water has been viewed with suspicion.

On enquiring I find that when The Bog mines were being worked in 1914-1918 a surveyor with a Geiger Counter made an exhaustive test of the area only to report that a very minute quantity of radio-activity was found, not sufficient to cause any alarm respecting radio-activity.

Exhaustive Tests Proved Water’s Suitability

“Tom Clun” of the Clan R.D.C. had published in the November, 1960, number of The Shropshire Magazine a letter to the effect that his local council had experimented with fish in the water in question and the fish did quite well. They also took some samples over a period of years and not once was any trace found of poisonous metals.

A few years ago the now owner-occupier of “The Boat Level” smallholding installed a pump in the allegedly “sinister” brook, and now his modern cowhouses as well as the home are supplied with a satisfactorily and permanent flow of water. With modern detergents the problem of the water being hard is more easily overcome to-day.

Warm Water from The Black Pit: Adventure with a Viper

When a young child I had a rather unpleasant experience associated with the Boat Level brook. I set off with my uncle one lovely May day to dam the brook in preparation for the annual sheep washing. I well remember trotting along by his side. He was carrying a small axe to cut branches from alongside the stream, to start the dam. This brook was particularly suitable for the job and was favourably set on account of its being less cold than other brooks, due to the fact that in “The Black Pit” area was a warm vein which raised the temperature of the water.

My uncle told me that when he and others had worked in this particular pit they always had to remove their home-made flannel shirts because of the high temperature.

We travelled on to the chosen spot and as we neared the bank of the stream my uncle gave a cry of alarm for there basking in the sunshine on the dry, mossy bank was a viper. The "V" shaped mark on the back of its neck stood out plainly. My uncle rushed forward to destroy it but as it glided away, I collapsed on the ground overcome with fear. My uncle turned back to my aid and so missed the chance to destroy one of the only species of poisonous snakes found in this country.

To this day I always view with suspicion any mossy bank and certainly anything that crawls.