Miners' Housing in the Shropshire Hills
Ivor Brown, SCMC Journal No.3

There have been several drawings reproduced recently of imposing double storied "miners cottages" in the Stiperstones area - but were the miners' homes really as grand as these? For a start, until the 1870s there seems to have been few whole-time miners dependant on that craft in the area. The average lead miner's working day appears to have been short, reportedly sometimes as little as six hours, in order that they could continue their principal life-supporting occupation of subsistence farming, albeit on a very small scale.

All of this is made clear in the Kinnaird Commission Report of 1863. It contained evidence that very few of the miners lived in the villages but were "scattered over the hills". Captain Henwood of Snailbeach said that "during the week the miners use cabins and barracks near the shaft and the smelters have bedrooms in the melting house yard". At busy times on the farms and smallholdings, work at the mine took second place and it was a common complaint of the mine owners that their workers were firstly farmers and only secondly miners. In the owners' view, this was also often the cause of closure of many a mine.

While dossing down in cabins and barracks for a few nights each week solved the itinerant miner's own problem, he still had to provide a home for his family and, from this, the practice of "squatting" grew up. This involved the construction of a simple dwelling or hovel on any odd piece of land. It was often actively encouraged by the landowners and mine owners who felt that they would be better served by persons who lived close at hand and who were dependant on them for the space of their habitation. The process of squatting was first described to me by the last of the Bennett family, who lived in Perkins Beach just before he moved out of his cottage in the mid 1960s. The remains of this cottage/holding can still be seen, the walls now only being about 1 metre high. A good description appears in an essay written by an anonymous writer in 1898 and preserved in the Shropshire Records & Research Centre under the heading "A Short History of Perkins Beach Mine". The period described is just prior to 1860 and the description is worth quoting in full.

"In those days it was customary with the mining population for want of better accommodation to select a site on the mountain, then obtain assistance of a few of their fellow workmen. Some of (these) would then repair to the adjoining plantations and for a nominal price purchase a quantity of larch or other small poles that had been cut down to give room for the growth of those left standing. Meantime the other portion of men could be employed building walls with sods. The first consignment of timber arriving, one or two, who were considered to be the most expert with axe and saw, would commence forming a roof to the habitation. This would be 'slated' with the class of material the walls were built of. When convenient a scanty coat of straw, generally mixed with heather, may be
laid on the top to ensure it was waterproof. The ground floor (would) consist of the natural subsoil."

"Usually the whole family would quarter in this (structure). The following morning the next on the scene would be the farmer terribly chagrined at the damage done to the mountain sheep run. Following hard after him would come the Lord of the Manor or his Agent to demand a nominal rent. In most cases (they would) grant an allotment adjoining for a garden plot. Many of these structures as time went on, and with an agreement between the Landlord and the squatter, have been made into convenient dwellings and a cow, sometimes two, have been kept thereby greatly enhancing the value of what aforetime was nominally a barren mountain."

"Out of these huts have come many a stalwart, intelligent miner to find his way to different parts of the mining world and his family to respectable positions in society. The discovery (of Perkins Beach Mine) was made onemoonlit night by a miner ditching round one of these aforementioned gardens. He struck a very fertile lode in which he found a fine lump of rich lead ore close to the surface."

Genuine "ruined miners' dwellings" would today most often be found as broken down walls on flattened platforms scattered around the hillsides. The walls of the living area would form small enclosures while alongside there would be one or two larger enclosures made to keep stock in or to keep sheep out of the garden plots. The buildings would have been covered with sod or thatch roofs, long disappeared although some thatched cottages remained at Pennerley until recently. Others will of course have been re-roofed by later generations with slates or tiles or more often the ubiquitous corrugated sheeting.

Several surveys have been carried out by various authorities over the years of the conditions in which the workers of the Shropshire Hills lived. Even as late as 1869 a Government Survey (quoted by Trinder in his History of Shropshire 1983) found that labourers' cottages in the county were worse than in any other English county apart from Dourest. The situation in Pontesbury Parish is described in the Victoria County History. "...Most of the cottages erected between 1785 and 1848 were originally hastily contrived turf huts". Two such cottages had been recorded as early as 1793 and in 1836 a "vestry resolution" refers to "huts wherein several men, women and children are living together in one room, whereby the morals of many children are corrupted and vice and immorality encouraged to a great extent". The VCH continues by stating that nearly all of these huts had been replaced by stone cottages before 1857. In the later 19th century, the common house type was a single storey stone cottage having two or three bays but by 1968 very few remained, at least 30 having been demolished in this century.

All of the evidence therefore must lead to the view that the Shropshire Hills' miner lived in much smaller dwellings than those considered to be "old miners' dwellings" today. The buildings that survive as ruins may well do so only because
they were non-miners’ dwellings. Several other styles of miners’ housing are of course to be found, including detached houses built for key personnel at particular mines such as the engineman, manager or agent. Purpose-built groups of dwellings, most commonly in the form of rows, were built to accommodate essential workers at times of expansion. Another form of dwelling is that of a conversion from enginehouse or workshop to houses and outbuildings. This was a fortunate practice for the industrial and social historian because it has preserved so many of the features that are cherished in Shropshire today.