The Shropshire Miners

When you admire the mine buildings of the district and the sheer scale of some of the workings, don't forget the men who made all this possible. Although miners were brought in from places such as Cornwall or Derbyshire, most of the men who worked here were locals. It was their skill and perseverance that made all this possible, from the miner drilling at a rock face hundreds of feet underground to the engine driver tending his machinery with loving care. Similarly, don't forget the men, women and children who worked on the surface crushing and preparing the ore for smelting (a process known as dressing the ore). They had to work in all kinds of weather with minimum shelter, a miserable life that would never be condoned today. There were also the local artisans, the masons who built the engine houses, carpenters who made the headgears, smelters who converted the ore into saleable metal and many others.

A mine was the centre of a whole community and everyone was affected by its progress. In the good times, everyone enjoyed a share of the wealth but the closure of a mine was a catastrophe that could mean the destruction of the community. Those miners with smallholdings might be able to hang on until the mine was opened up again but many found that they had to move to other parts of the country or even abroad. Adjacent to many of the mines you will find ruins of houses which were abandoned when the mines closed forever. If you visit the head of Perkinsbeach Dingle or Blakemoorgate, you can see the remains of whole abandoned villages. Some of the miners' buildings, such as cottages, schools, chapels and churches, still exist today and you may be able to recognise them amongst the more modern buildings of villages in the district. Of all the villages in the district, Shelve seems to have been the most important from a mining point of view and it was even described in the Doomsday Book as a "mining township".

It was unusual for local mining companies to provide houses for their workers but one notable exception to this was in 1873, when the adventurers of Bog Mine built workers' cottages at a cost of £50-£60 each. Although some miners lived in villages, many more preferred to live in smallholdings scattered over the surrounding hillsides. Landowners encouraged their miners to "squat" on their land and to make small enclosures. In this way, they could collect rent from the miner as well as obtaining his labour. From his cottage, the miner used to walk many miles to the mine, both day and night in all kinds of weather. There was no social security in those days and the miner had a stark choice, if he didn't work he didn't get paid. To offset this, many miners formed friendly societies whereby they could receive a weekly payment if they were off work due to sickness or accident. Each cottage had a number of acres of land and this allowed the families to supplement their income by growing most of their own food. This led an irate mine owner of the 19th century to remark that, because of the need to cultivate their own land, the miners were not entirely dependent upon their earnings at the mine for subsistence. This was apparently an undesirable trait as it made the miners too independent!

Their houses were small by our standards, with no more than 2 bedrooms upstairs and a living room and pantry downstairs, occasionally with lean-to buildings at the side. The miners built their own houses out of local stone with a thatched roof, with neighbours often lending a hand. It was a tradition that if they could build a stone chimney between sunrise and sunset and have a fire with smoke coming out of it before nightfall then they could stay and finish off the house at
that spot. Outbuildings were also thatched but the walls were made with a frame of wood filled with a mixture of gorse, turves and mud. The smallholding was usually sufficient to provide enough grazing for the milking cow in summer and hay to last the winter, while some miners also kept pigs for bacon or as porkers. These pigs were not fed as scientifically as modern animals and often had to make do with acorns which had been soaked in a barrel of water. Poultry were common, as were sheep which were allowed to roam the hillsides. Since the miner's family tended to be large, he was therefore of necessity a keen gardener, using his vegetable garden as an important additional food supply. The children were expected to help out by collecting whinberries and blackberries from as far away as the Long Mynd to supplement the family diet. This was so important that schoolmasters often had to close the local school at those times of the year when wayside fruits were ripe. A miner's main meal might consist of bacon and vegetable stew with homemade bread. To eat meat supplied by the butcher was unusual and this would depend on how much he was earning at the time.

Being adjacent to the mines, these smallholdings were sometimes threatened by subsidence when workings approached too closely to the surface. An example of this is demonstrated in correspondence from the Snailbeach Mine letter book for 1897. The main protagonists were Mr Jones (the smallholder), Mr Oldfield (the mine captain) and Messrs How & Sons (solicitors for the Snailbeach Mine).

Jones opened the correspondence by complaining that workings were appearing very close to his house and he requested assurances that no damage would result, as well as a survey to verify these assurances. Messrs How & Sons asked Mr Oldfield to carry out the survey for a fee of 2 guineas. After considerable correspondence, a fee of 3 guineas was agreed and the survey completed. This showed that the workings had approached to within 20 yards of the house and that they were 12ft wide at a depth of 14ft. Oldfield concluded that:
- the workings were unsafe
- they would not stand without timber
- the timbers in the mine were already unsafe and decaying
- there was only a thin cover at places between the workings and surface.

He stated that the only safe course was for Jones to sell his house and for the company to work the vein as an open cutting. Jones swiftly reached a decision about leaving his home and sold it to the company.

The size of the mines varied tremendously. The smaller mines were often worked by family partnerships but, lacking capital for pumping engines, these were only adits driven into the hillside or shallow shafts with a hand windlass. These workings usually started life as a trial level, driven in the hope of striking a rich vein, but this was a very rare occurrence. In reality, most of these mines only supplied a subsistence living for the miners or were abandoned completely. Regardless of the size of the mine, the miners' tools were fairly standard.

The system of working the larger mines was by shifts of men every 8 hours for 5 days per week. On Saturdays only a third of the miners were at work, between the hours of 6am and 12 noon.
The remaining two thirds of the men were thus idle from Friday night to Monday morning. These long weekends were not usual at the time and were unpopular with the mine owners who still had to keep the mines pumped dry. All attempts to introduce a full day's work on Saturday were as unsuccessful as that at Roman Gravels Mine in 1870. The workers from other mines induced the men to stop Saturday working by means of threats and intimidation, saying that they were breaking the rules of the country. In 1871, the miners were also taking a day's holiday immediately following the monthly payday. The lunch hour, taken during the shift, was a full hour or more. Both these facts appeared to cause the mine management a great deal of frustration.

Unlike modern mines, very few miners were actually full-time employees of the mining company. The exceptions were the mine captains, engineer, engine drivers and perhaps a few other specialists such as the men who maintained the shaft. It was even known for particularly skilled captains and engineers to be employed by more than one mine, dividing their time between them. All other workers were employed on a monthly contract and they had to compete to sell their skills in a type of auction known as the monthly reckoning. In this, the captain would offer different types of work for the forthcoming month and it would be given to the miners who quoted the cheapest rate. The men formed themselves into small teams and would offer to work a particular part of the mine for which the mining company would pay them an agreed rate for a set weight of ore brought to surface. Pumping and winding costs were borne by the company but the men were obliged to buy gunpowder and candles from the company. Depending on the custom, some mines accepted ore as it was brought from the mines, others required the mining teams to deliver it already dressed for smelting. In the latter case, the teams would have to employ their own people to dress the ore on surface. To prevent ore becoming mixed up, each kibble or wagon of ore was marked to show where it came from and was dumped at surface in separate compartments known as ore bins.

Underground, the teams had a great deal of discretion in how they mined the ore. This was subject to some restrictions, however, and the mine captain was responsible for ensuring the safety of the mine, having the right to insist that timber supports were installed if necessary. This wasn't particularly for the benefit of the men - he was more concerned that the workings did not collapse and interfere with the profits! A typical mining team might consist of two experienced miners, a labourer for the heavy shovelling and perhaps a young boy to carry the ore to the shaft bottom. The mine workings would be divided into many different working areas, each with their own mining team. It was always a gamble because, depending on the richness of the vein, a team could either make a big profit during the month or a loss. Surprisingly enough, this system was very popular with the miners who valued their independence and appreciated the chance it gave them to make good profits. It also suited the mining companies because it encouraged the teams to deliver as much ore as possible to surface.

The rate for a particular area of the mine could vary from month to month. If a team found a rich vein which was easily worked, they would obviously make a large profit. This would encourage the mining company to offer a lower rate for that area at the next reckoning and this ploy worked because there were always other teams willing to take on rich areas. Conversely, if
an area proved poor during the month then teams would be unwilling to bid for it and the company would have to increase the rate before it was taken on.

Some jobs did not involve extracting ore and these were treated differently. If a shaft was to be sunk or an access level driven, this was offered to teams at a set rate per fathom of ground extracted. Again, the price for this could vary depending on the softness of the ground being passed through. Another type of payment was day work, where workers were paid a daily wage for a particular job such as unloading kibbles at surface, clearing out collapsed levels or ore dressing at surface. The workers had to wait until the next reckoning before collecting their wages and this was a busy time for the mine captain, who had to add up all the ore brought to surface or fathoms of ground extracted. Where teams did not have enough money to survive until the next reckoning, they could obtain an advance from the company and this was deducted from their wages, together with the cost of any gunpowder, candles, etc bought from the company store.

When the mines were booming in the 1870s, the mining teams on contract work could earn £40-£50 per month while 'stinting'. When 'plundering' in bad times, however, a miner would be lucky to get subsistence earnings. One Ladywell miner is recorded as averaging 8 golden sovereigns per month in 1875 but this must have been short lived. Within 10 years, the price of lead had fallen to half its value and wages dropped drastically in proportion. By 1921, when lead mining had ceased, the contract tunnellers driving the Leigh Level were earning 21/- per day which was good money for the time. Regardless of the richness of the mine, surface workers were always very poorly paid and a boy working on the buddles for 9 hours would only be paid 10d per day.

The monthly reckoning was a general holiday and there was no school that day. The reckoning at Roman Gravels Mine was accompanied by a fair held at the crossroads, where hard earned money could be exchanged for necessities. Some families made the journey to Minsterley, Pontesbury or even Shrewsbury, either walking or riding on the horsedrawn waggon of the local carrier. In later days the railway became available, although some people regarded it as a waste of good money and still preferred to walk.

Local political feeling ran strongly at times and elections were occasionally accompanied by violence between bands of rival villagers. The Hope Valley was a Tory stronghold whilst Snailbeach was staunchly for the Liberals. The supporters of each party were in the habit of attempting to prove their superiority by punching the heads of their supposed inferiors!

Compared to some areas, the district was very well served by schools. Although most were small, they were very numerous and each small village had its own. The free school at Snailbeach, founded in 1843, was a typical example of one of the larger ones. It was erected at the joint expense of the Marquis of Bath and several gentlemen of the Snailbeach Company, with accommodation for 100 pupils and average attendance being about 80. The company provided an endowment of £40 per annum towards the running costs and each miner was expected to pay 6d per quarter to the schoolmaster. As the mine at this time employed 500 men collecting an average total of £2,000 per month, it would seem that education was quite cheap.
The schoolmaster's wage would have been £100 per annum (twice the average miner's wage) unless he chose to pay an assistant.

The mining communities were very religious and there was a strong chapel following in the district. It is significant that, of the 7 men killed in the Snailbeach disaster, 3 were lay preachers and the other 4 were steady attenders. Five were Methodists and the remaining two belonged to the Church of England. The Rev. John Cope of Minsterley preached in the district in 1896 and published a small booklet about the accident. This booklet gives a revealing account of the important part religion played in the social life of the community. One of the dead was a leading member of the Band of Hope and spoke strongly against the evils of alcohol "thereby saving the local children from 10,000 sins". Another "preached of Hell as a reality" and a third was a leader of the local Sunday School. The Wellington Journal of the times records that Mr Henry Wiggin of London, known as the "Weeping Preacher", visited Snailbeach and had large audiences for night after night.

Sunday Schools thrived and the big occasion of the year was the 'Treats'. In hard times, these might only consist of marching behind a local brass band, followed by a picnic on top of Corndon Hill. Later trips were made with the children riding in horse drawn wagons and eventually in charabancs to places as far away as Rhyl. The chapels organised Eisteddfodau at holiday times with singing competitions and another popular local activity was football. Thrift was encouraged by means of the Chapel clothing clubs and charity took such forms as paying a child's school pence when the father died.

This is only a short description of the life of the Shropshire miner. Although conditions were much harder in those times, the communities were close knit and they helped each other in adversity. Those of us who live in towns have our car, television and other comforts but we can never experience the community spirit of the old mining villages of South Shropshire.