



NEWSLETTER NO 10
February 2022

WEST SOMERSET MINERAL RAILWAY ASSOCIATION

Chairman: P. Gannon
Secretary: C. Sampson
Treasurer: R. Cloke
Membership Sec: G. Mound

Correspondence: Rose Villa, Roadwater, Watchet TA23 0QY

Email: info@wsmla.org.uk

Website: www.westsomersetmineralrailway.org.uk

Walks and Talks, Events *Phil Gannon, Chairman*

With yet another year of Covid and its mutations our programme of walks and events was again severely affected. This has had a negative knock-on effect: we have been unable to hold our committee meetings or AGM. No bus trips or exhibitions!

On a more positive note, the reduced number of walks resumed on April 9th with a maximum of six persons and were welcomed by many people to whom we send our posters and programme; in fact this year the average number of walkers has been four or less. In July the local BBC radio requested a short talk on "The Mineral Line". This was recorded on July 14th and transmitted on Friday July 18th at 8pm; this was a positive for the Association as feedback came on the following Monday from an interested listener. The remaining walks until November were better supported by walkers, both locals and holiday visitors, who expressed good interest and generous donations.

We are planning a new programme for 2022 which will be available soon. Everything we do is based on the work of Mike Jones.

Mike Jones, The Mines & The Mineral Railway *Chris Sampson*



Members of the original WSMLA committee at the launch of Mike Jones' book A New Account. Mike is standing far right.

As a teenager Mike Jones became interested in industrial archaeology and trained as an architect. For his final year project at Leeds School of Architecture, Mike designed a School of Mines for a site at Grassington in Yorkshire, a former lead mining area. In 1957 his parents retired to the Brendon Hills where they farmed 18 acres. On visits home Mike 'discovered' the mines and mineral railway. After working for 18 months at an old-fashioned firm of architects in London, he joined Somerset County Council's Architect's Department. He quickly got in touch with Roger Sellick and John Hamilton, who had been engaged in research into the Brendon Hills industry for almost fifteen years. They kindly allowed Mike to join them and contribute to their seminal book on the Brendon Hill mines and West Somerset Mineral Railway (WSMR), which was published in 1962, with a second edition in 1970.

Sellick, R. et al (1962) *The West Somerset Mineral Railway*. Dawlish: David & Charles.

Sellick, R. et al (1970) *The West Somerset Mineral Railway 2nd Edition*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles.

Much new information came to light in 1975, with the acquisition by Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society (SIAS) of a very large quantity of documents from the office of the solicitor Charles Edward Rowcliffe at Stogumber. The cache had been found after it had already been bagged up for collection by a wastepaper merchant. As the solicitor in Somerset for the Ebbw Vale partners who initiated commercial mining on the Brendon Hills, Charles Rowcliffe was responsible for negotiating the mining leases and for applying for and obtaining the 1855 Act of Parliament which authorised construction of the WSMR, of which his son, also Charles Edward, was appointed Secretary.

Although the papers had been stored on the earth floor of a shed for more than half a century, copies of some outgoing letters could be transcribed before they disintegrated, and together with original documents that had survived in reasonable condition, they afforded new insight into the working of the mines and construction and operation of the railway.

Sellick, Hamilton and Mike Jones agreed that a new edition of the book should be written jointly after they all retired in the 1990s. Sadly, Sellick died in 1988, and in the same year, Mike Jones was offered early retirement. Hamilton had spent his working life teaching mining, engineering and geology in Ireland, where he continued to live in retirement. Mike continued his research, including visits to Gwent Record Office, where a few documents have survived the wholesale destruction of Ebbw Vale Company records in 1912 and again in 1930. Mike was also interested in the people who were engaged in managing and working in the mines and on the railway, as well as partners in South Wales and those people in West Somerset who played their part in the enterprise.

In June 1995, Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) commissioned Mike to prepare a report on 'Proposed low key visitor access to industrial sites on the Brendon Hills' which, among other things recommended that professional surveys of the remains of mines and railway should be carried out. Suggestions for the consolidation of structures, with approximate costings for each were included in the report, as well as proposals for visitor access, which among other things recommended 13 circular walks on public footpaths by means of which visitors could see almost all the remains of the mines and railway.

Following receipt of the report ENPA commissioned Mike to survey all remaining structures of the mines and railway, work which was completed in 2005. Ultimately this led to the formation of the West Somerset Mineral Railway Heritage Project, and later The West Somerset Mineral Railway Association. In October 2005 an application was made by the ENPA for a Heritage Lottery Fund award. A substantial grant was awarded in 2006 for conservation, access and interpretation works. Included in the award was a sum for the publication of a new history of the enterprise. Mike began work on the book in 2005. John Hamilton wrote that part of the book which dealt with geology and the history of the mining. John died in November 2009, a few months before publication of the new account which won the 2011 Peter Neaverson Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Industrial Archaeology.

Jones, M.H. & Hamilton, J.R. (2010) *Neither here nor there? Vols I & II*. Dulverton: ENPA.

This publication was quickly followed by a single volume work, one which was aimed at the interested casual reader.

Jones, M.H. (2011) *The Brendon Hills Iron Mines and the West Somerset Mineral Railway. A New Account*. Lydney: Lightmoor Press

Mike died on 13 October 2021. He will be greatly missed.

This article is based on a more extensive piece which can be found at [www.westsomersetmineral railway.org.uk](http://www.westsomersetmineralrailway.org.uk)

Mining Adventures *Phil Gannon*

Steve and Vicky Friedrich and Zeus the collie from Kent are regular supporters of the Mineral Line and visit West Somerset twice a year. Last year we looked at the past Exmoor Mining Ventures, particularly those recorded by the former Exmoor Mines Group. This year in April we made a return visit to the Florence Iron Mine below Tabor Hill, with consent of the owner, examining the remains of the tramway, engine house and various adits, one in particular. Extreme caution was exercised, as the roof and props or what remains of them are in a poor state! Most adits are partially blocked or flooded.



a



b

The next trip took us to Simonsbath and the Barle river valley; a very pleasant walk down river to a small mine working, Wheal Eliza. This was operated under licence from the Knights of Exmoor between 1846 and 1854, looking first for copper and then iron. Two adits and a shaft are visible; the shaft was recorded as 300 ft deep but is now partially blocked or flooded. Pumping of this shaft was effected by a water wheel positioned on the opposite river bank, served by a leat. Flat rods were used to convey power across the river. Scant remains of the structures can be seen.



c

Samples of rocks were examined on the waste heap that is much oxidized and partly covered with vegetation. Once split some samples revealed large crystals of siderite (Iron carbonate), specks of Chalcopyrite (Copper/Iron sulphide) and Pyrite (Iron sulphide). Historically the mine was not a success but is more known for its connection with the murder of poor seven-year-old Anna Burgess in 1858, whose weighted body was deposited down the flooded shaft. Full details of this tragic event can be found in the microstudy book "Murders and Mysteries on Exmoor."



d

From Simonsbath we ventured to Blue Gate and walked down Burcombe to



g



h

Cornham Ford. Very early iron mining is indicated by a huge open cast trench known as Roman lode (mined during the Roman occupation, probably by locals, under orders). The trench is a significant feature in length, depth and width but does not appear on current OS maps! At Cornham Ford we found three adits which Steve ventured to explore; one was quite long, but ended in a collapse, blocking further examination.



e



f



i



k

We returned to Blue Gate for a brief look across the moor to the Deerpark mine. There are several shallow pits and trenches, evidence of 19th century trials for iron deposits.

The final visit of the day was to Molland to locate the Bremley/Gourt mines, previously worked for copper and iron ore from the 1750' s. The ruins of the Gourt engine house, the shaft and the collapsed adit are all very overgrown.

The later working of this engine house was between 1850 and 1867.



j

In late September our adventure was to visit the Honeymead mine, set in the Exe valley near Simonsbath, accessed by public footpaths. We found a spoil heap and water issuing from the mouth of an adit, partly obscured by late summer vegetation. We gained access, and Steve, suitably equipped with waders, hard hat and torch, examined this 19th century trial for iron ore. The adit portal exhibits an excellent example of dry stone walling.

In the afternoon we travelled the short distance to the Blackland iron mine near Withypool. A conversation with the owner of Halsgrove Farm permitted us access down a small incline to Pennycombe Water. The valley bottom is overgrown with woodland; however, a small waste dump and evidence of tram rails led us to a first adit and then a second adit.



l



m



n

On entering the second, one is faced with thick glutinous red oxide staining mud: further in the adit is clear and in remarkably sound condition. For mining enthusiasts the site is of great interest as tram rails and sleepers are in situ, including the remains of an end tipping ore wagon. Whilst the main period of working was 19th century, the mine was cleared out and examined in the second World War for viability. Unfortunately, examination of the ore samples showed the presence of copper sulphides which rendered the iron unsuitable for steel manufacture, and a geological fault in the ore body made the mine unviable.

The narrow ore bodies and discontinuous nature are typical of the Brendon Hills/ Exmoor mineral deposits, rendering them uneconomic then and certainly today. Photographs show typical minerals in situ, as observed.

References: BGS Metalliferous Mining Regions of South West England Vol 11 H.G.Dines 1956 revised 1994.

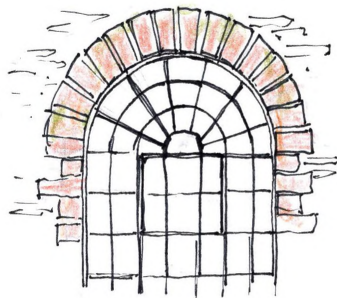
Exmoor's Industrial Archaeology. Edited by Michael Atkinson.

Old News for you:

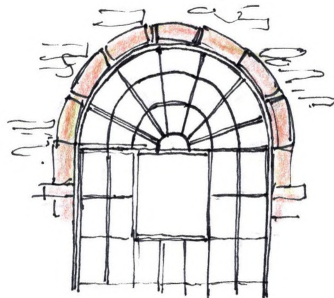
December 2 1871 West Somerset Free Press

An inquest was held on the body of a Huish Champflower boy named Baker, aged 12, who died from scalds received when a boiler burst at the iron mines at Gupworthy, Brendon Hill.

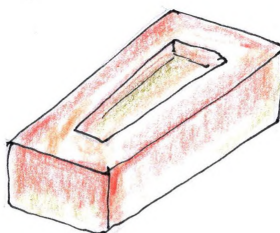
WINDING HOUSE



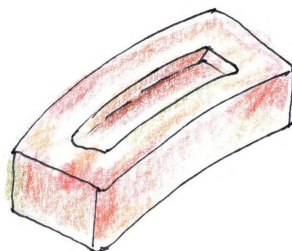
L.H. UPPER WINDOW



R.H. UPPER WINDOW



TAPER HEADER BRICK



CURVED COURSE BRICK

NOTE: BRICKS ARE MADE WITH 'FROG' ON ONE PLANE
PLAIN FACE IS PRESENTED IN RE-USE

Bricks and The Windinghouse

Phil Gannon

Any visitor today entering the winding house may think they are looking at an original 19th century structure, whereas closer examination and the enormous research documented by the late Mike Jones and others tell a different story.

The distinctive red/orange bricks utilised in the window jambs and in the Roman arch heads to the windows are a particular feature. Closer examination of the eastern wall shows the lower arch heads constructed in normal practice of double bonded headers and vertical plain bricks. But the upper arches are not consistent or good construction practice! It can be seen that bricks exhibit either taper or curved shape on the bedding plane but have been laid on edge!

There is a simple explanation: they were running out of bricks to achieve a curve! These bricks are purpose formed for the construction of circular chimneys. Up to 1978 two mine engine houses, Kennisham and Burrow Farm, remained, both showing the distinctive circular taper chimneys, characteristic of so many Cornish design beam engine houses. Today only Burrow Farm mine engine house can be studied but it clearly shows the use of the purposed shape bricks in its construction. So, what about the winding house bricks? Where did they come from? One can only speculate. The Raleigh's Cross mine, only a short distance away, previously had a circular brick chimney to the 1860 winding engine boiler house, as seen in the archive photo records. In 1907 the Mineral Syndicate blew up the remaining structures at Raleigh's Cross to use the masonry debris for a temporary counterbalance working the Incline.

The use of lime mortar enabled one to salvage bricks and stone for reuse, unlike the hard cement used today. When Mr Norman, the owner, decided to reconstruct the winding house in the 1930's, following its part destruction in 1917, much of the rubble stone was still available. The use of salvaged industrial cast iron windows (their source is not known today) necessitated the construction of Roman arch heads in brickwork or masonry. The availability of curved and tapered bricks locally and perhaps at the demolished Raleigh's Cross site, must have been tempting. It seems that insufficient were available and this explains why the upper left hand window(viewed internally) has taper bricks on edge and the upper right hand window has curved bricks lengthwise! A similar tapered brick was recovered from the former Kennisham Hill mine waste site in 2020 for reference.

Where did the bricks come from? Bridgwater in the 19th century was a vast producer of bricks and tiles and cargoes were shipped out along the coast. Cornwall had very few sources of brick clay or brick producers and importing coal for fuel was very expensive. Nearly all of the historic Cornish Mine chimneys have Somerset bricks.

There are exceptions to the use of Bridgwater red bricks; for example the relieving arch under the lower section of the Incline revetment shows the use of bricks made in Wellington, Somerset. A loose sample is embossed with the name of the manufacturer, Thomas. We see evidence of hard yellow bricks used as contrasting banding in the contemporary photos of the boiler house chimney at Raleigh's Cross. Today many good examples of yellow bricks and decorative mouldings can be seen in Watchet, some stamped EBBW VALE as they are produced from the carboniferous fire clays associated with the strata of coal/iron mines in South Wales.

Winding House



Kennisham Engine House 1978



**Tapered (centre) and standard bricks from
Raleghs Cross Mine Site**



Pillar at the bottom of Goviers Lane, Watchet

Website *Robert Edwards*

Our website, which can be found at www.westsomersetmineralrailway.org.uk, will give you the opportunity to explore a wealth of fascinating information about the history of the West Somerset Mineral Railway. The website holds a large collection of historic photos, gathered by Mineral Line enthusiasts through the decades and they make intriguing viewing.

The website also holds descriptions on many topics related to the Railway. There are diverse pages ranging from details of the accidents that occurred on the railway to a history of mining on the Brendon Hills and even a glossary of mining terminology.

You can also read about our excellent guided walks, with dates and descriptions. This year these were greatly reduced by the ravages of Covid, but we have plans for similar walks in 2022, as well as some new ones. Details will be posted on the Website. We hope this will motivate you join a walk, led an expert guide, to discover how the Mineral Railway functioned and the stories behind it. Contact us with queries; we can arrange special walks or talks for groups.

Picture Locations

- a Florence mine, Heasly Mill
- b Florence: inside the adit
- c Wheal Eliza
- d Wheal Eliza
- e Cornham Ford
- f Honeymead adit
- g Wheal Eliza pumping shaft

Minerals from Wheal Eliza dump: iron, copper, iron pyrites (golden flecks).



Crystalline structure reflects the sunlight. Green shows copper, malachite. Enough to excite the speculators!



- h Wheal Eliza adit no 2
- i Roman Lode
- j Honeymead adit portal
- k Gourt Engine House ruin
- l Blackland Mine
- m Blackland adit, with ore tram body
- n Blackland mine iron lode.

Minerals in Blackland Mine

