

"RICHARD NINESS, MINERAL AGENT, OF WARSLOW
IN STAFFORDSHIRE"

by

LINDSEY PORTER

Introduction

It is probable that the decade of 1850-60 is the most important period in the 19th century Mining activity of the North Staffordshire ore field. During this period, practically every mine of any consequence was at work and the connections between them are unusually strong. The connections can be pinpointed to two distinct features - (a) their relationship with Richard Niness (described by Kelly's Directory as a mineral agent of Warslow) and (b) the mine's relationship with certain directors, whose association with the mines can reasonably be assumed to be due to Niness.

A sparsety of documentary evidence exists but several sources, and in particular the Mining Journal, have been drawn together to give a general picture of his activities without duplicating the histories of the North Staffordshire mines he served, which are being treated separately.

The Activities of Richard Niness in North Staffordshire

The beginning of the decade commenced with few of the mines being worked - perhaps only Ecton and Bincliffe being the only ones of any consequence. Nothing is known of how Niness gained his mining experience nor of his connections with North Staffordshire. His first appointment appears to have been at Ecton sometime between 1850 and 1854 when he was an agent at the Old Ecton Mine, working scrins to the main Ecton pipe-working, below river level. The exact nature of his employment and even who were his employers is not yet fully understood through a lack of documentary evidence, although in a letter to the Mining Journal in 1860, Niness stated that he had been an agent at the mine for 2-3 years. The mine was being worked by either the Duke of Devonshire or the Ecton Mountain Mining Co., at this time.

In 1852, the Mixon Mine attracted the attention of a Mr Thomas Lewis, a sharebroker of Birmingham. By 1855, it was clear the Mixon was likely to fail and it had built up a considerable deficit, while the quantity of ore was providing little income even though £710 worth of ore was sold in that year. About this time, work at Old Ecton Mine finished and no doubt prompted by Niness, a new company was formed in 1855 to work

the Dale Mine opposite Ecton and Mr Lewis was almost certainly one of the directors. Other directors included James Pemberton of Birmingham and a Mr Johnson and this confirms a remark in the Mining Journal of 1858 that the mine was worked "by three gentlemen up to June 1st 1857". In June of that year, probably because fresh capital was required, the Dale Company sold its assets to a new company, the Dale Mining Co., and Lewis, Pemberton and Johnson were elected onto the board of directors.

Niness was appointed the agent of the Old Dale Company in 1855, and he continued in this capacity for the Dale Mining Company. His association with the above-named directors is of significance, particularly in the case of Pemberton, for they both had interests in several other mines including Ribden and Mixon. Pemberton had joined the board of the Mixon Great Consols Copper Mining Co., possibly in 1855, when he joined the new Dale Mine venture with Lewis, who was the purser at Mixon.

In January 1857, the Mixon Company was wound up a new Company, the Mixon Copper Mining Co. Ltd., was registered to carry on the work at the mine without the shackles of the large debt which its predecessor had built up. Niness was appointed the agent, probably because of his links with the Mixon/Dale directors. The company was short lived however and the mine closed before Niness was able to put it on to a financially viable footing, for his last report was in October 1857. In August 1858, Pemberton presented a petition to the Lord Chancellor for the winding up of the company (M.J. p. 519) and the machinery was sold to the Ribden Mine where Niness was also the agent and Pemberton a director (see below). During that year, Pemberton severed his connections with the Dale Mine and concentrated his capital in Ribden, a move which he must have regretted when the company was wound up in 1862.

In addition to Niness's activities at Mixon, he had other interests at Upper Elkstones, for he was reported as being the agent of Roylegde mine in 1851. (Shite). Further circumstantial evidence indicates that he was also the agent at New York mine which neighbours Roylegde and is situated a mile or so north of Mixon.

New York appears to have been worked intermittently during the 1850's - it was working in 1850-1 and had a 40" steam engine on the mine in 1853. It is also apparent that the first mentioned Dale Company in 1855-7 took out (or took over) a lease of an area of ground at New York Mine and consequently Niness had an interest in this mine also.

The lease of New York Mine passed to the new Dale Company and the engine was sold, after considerable dissatisfaction among the shareholders, to the Dale Mining Company for £1000 in March 1859 although it was valued at £1500. At a general meeting of the latter on 30th June 1860, it was agreed that the New York lease should be surrendered and with this, the triangular link between Mixon, Dale and New York, created by Niness, Pemberton and Lewis was severed.

Despite Ninness's association with the smaller mines of New York and Royledge, with the closure of Mixon the majority of his time would be confined to working the Dale Mine, but the formation of a new company in April 1858 to work the Ribden Mine at Cauldon Lowe widened his activities once more. At this time, the Dale Mine was enjoying considerable lime-light on the London Share Market which enhanced Ninness's reputation. It is probable, however, that this was a deliberate attempt to boost the sale of shares for the claim of the existence of a large vein or ore with "several hundred tons or ore in sight" was later refuted by the Company.

Despite this, however, the publicity seemed to have a favourable "steam roller" effect for in addition to Ribden, Ninness was appointed the agent of the Oakamoor and Stanton Mining Company which took an assignment of part of the Ribden lease in 1858 to work iron ore, coal, lead and copper ores from small veins surrounding the more complex Ribden ore body. In the same year he took over an old small mine known as West Ecton or Limepits Mine for a private partnership of which few details are known.

Ninness, however, had a further ace up his sleeve in ensuring he gained the agency of Ribden and the Oakamoor and Stanton Companies, and the ace was in the person of J.S. Richmond, a wine merchant of Liverpool. Richmond became a director of the Dale Mining Company, probably from June 1857 when the new company was formed, and therefore was well acquainted with Ninness. In addition he was also the chairman of the Ribden Mining Company a position he held from the company's formation until his death in August 1860; Richmond Shaft at Ribden mine being named after him. Both Ninness and Richmond were the joint mesne landlords of the Ribden Mining Company and held 46% of the shares between them.

Further, Richmond was also a director of the Oakamoor and Stanton Company by virtue of his large shareholding and consequently, with the additional influence through Pemberton (mentioned above), Ninness was able to secure the agencies of both the companies.

Following the liquidation of the Oakamoor and Stanton Company in 1860 and the Ribden Company in 1862, Ninness's activities were chiefly confined to the Dale Mine although he appears to have been retained to produce reports on other mines on occasions (e.g. - West Snailbeach Lead Mining Company in 1859). With the completion of the New Dale Engine Shaft in 1863, the Dale Mine started producing lead ore and blende in quantities which may be regarded as substantial compared with Derbyshire lead mines, where only Eyam and Mill Dam were producing any ore in significant quantities.

In late 1870 Ninness commenced, on behalf of the Dale Company, reworking two old mines close by - Holybank Mine and Narrowdale Mine. The former is situated just north of Dale and the latter of couple of miles to the east. Activities at Narrowdale do not appear to have been significant although some lead and blende was raised and a horse-whim was erected. Holybank level was driven to unwater the old mine and not, as

is sometimes quoted locally, driven to unwater the flooded Hayesbrook mine nearby. Little success appears to have been made at the mine and shortly afterwards in 1873, the Dale Mine closed and Ninness's activities in North Staffordshire came to a close.

An appraisal of Ninness's Activities

Ninness was probably responsible for the formation of the Companies where he was employed, with the exception of Ecton and possibly Mixon. He initially obtained a lease from the mineral owner to rework old mines and then aroused interest amongst investors who formed a limited company to work the mine concerned. Ninness was paid for the assignment of the lease in mine shares and was retained as the agent or "resident engineer".

It is worth noting the significance that this type of operation had upon the share market and investors. It was legitimate, but unscrupulous practice of some people to obtain a mining lease and arrange for the flotation of a public company, underwritten by share brokers, chiefly in London. Amid a great deal of publicity, expensive machinery was purchased which helped to "sell" the mine's prospect to shareholders who put up the share capital. The lessor conveyed his lease of the mine to the company in consideration for a considerable quantity of mine shares which were sold on the market before it was discovered that the future prospects were not as good as was first thought.

Richard Ninness was responsible for this type of practice although it seems certain that he did not sell out his shares. (This may however, be due to a certain extent that Ninness was unable to sell his shares for at the Oakamoor and Stanton Company he could not sell them until 2 years after the date of registration of the company which did not last this long). His financial gains were, therefore commensurate with his position as a mine agent, for his share capital was of paper value only, until dividends were realised (which certainly did not happen at any of the mines with which he was connected except possibly the Dale Mine where documentary research has not yet been completed).

Consequently, it is reasonable to say that his operations were fair practice and it only remains to consider whether he deserved the reputation he gained in the late 1850's as an agent of not inconsiderable experience. This is not easy for the bulk of the evidence of his activities is from reports of his own hand. At Mixon, the mine was practically finished when he took over the reins and cannot be considered.

Operations at Oakamoor and Stanton finished because it was discovered that there were no deposits of iron or coal of commercial value worth working. The consulting engineer's Report (by J.T. Woodhouse, of Woodhouse and Jeffcock, Derby) spoke favourably of ironstone and was based, partially at least, upon Ninness's advice and experience. Ninness (jointly with Richmond) was not only the mesne landlord but the two held £2000 cash,

3000 paid up shares and 800 unpaid shares from the Company in consideration of the assignment of the lease and consequently the Report was tainted by Niness's financial interests. Under the circumstances, therefore, the failure of the Company must be due in part at least, to Niness.

At the Ribden mine, Niness came close to forfeiting his lease, in which he had covenanted to commence working the mine within 3 years. The Ribden Mining Co. took over the mine only a few months before the time limit expired and consequently one can only assume that Niness had experienced difficulty in floating a company. Shortly after the Company was floated "great quantities" of lead ore were found at the Dale, probably to boost the sale of shares at both of the mines for the Ribden reports were carefully prepared to ensure that Niness's connection with the Dale was not overlooked by prospective shareholders.

Furthermore, very soon after work commenced at Ribden, Niness was painting a very rosy picture of the mine's prospects. There can be no doubt that Niness tried very hard to "sell" the mine's prospects which would be chiefly to his own advantage for along with Richmond, he was the joint owner of 46% of the shares. Yet despite this, it is probably fair to say that the prospects and risks were an acceptable speculation.

However, the share capital was spent in purchasing machinery and development. A great deal of money must have been spent in cutting down Inglebys and Gilberts shafts and in the purchase of a steam whim for Ingleby's Shaft and the Sim's engine from Mixon, both of which could hardly have been used. Despite this expenditure, against which there was little ore raised to offset it, Niness considered the mine a good speculation for a further Company and he was probably right.

If the Ribden Mine was a good speculation, the Dale Mine was even better. Niness was, however, severely hindered by uneconomical working conditions, but he raised sufficient ore to meet working expenses until a new shaft sunk in 1863 reduced ore-extraction costs and put the mine on a profit making basis. Even so, the reports of his own hand in the Mining Journal sometimes create the impression, albeit over a century later, that although he was a successful agent at the Dale Mine, his reputation during the days of the Dale, Ribden, Oakamoor and Stanton Companies was overstated.

After the closure of the Dale Mine, Niness was later connected with the Peak Forest Mining Co., in Derbyshire and he died at Chapel-en-le-Frith on 8/10/1894 aged 71 years as recorded on the family grave at Warslow, though there is some doubt whether he was buried here.

In addition to the links created by Niness between the mines, there was one further link that deserves a mention. The Secretary of the Dale, Ribden and Oakamoor and Stanton Companies was J. Dickinson Brunton,

a share broker of London. Brunton's Company undertook the secretarial work and the raising of finance. In the case of the Dale Mine, he received 1000 £1 shares from the shareholders in return for raising £2000 working capital.

Brunton was also the secretary of West Snailbeach Lead Mining Co., a short lived speculative venture at Rorrington in Shropshire and West Tolvadden Mine.

In addition, two of the Oakamoor and Stanton directors - John Bourne of Hilderstone Hall, Stone, Staffs and Major Henry Fitzgerald of Maperton House, Somerset were also on the West Snailbeach board, Fitzgerald being the latter's chairman as well as being appointed the Ribden chairman in 1860.

In August 1860, Brunton resigned as secretary of Ribden and Oakamoor - Stanton and of the Dale Mine in the following year; and his business management appears to have been at fault. The incident caused several caustic comments in the Mining Journal and one letter stated that his initial appointment (to the Dale Mine) "affords another illustration of parties entering into mining without previous knowledge and little business tact". Statements such as this in previous letters regarding the Dale Mine accounts had caused several shareholders to sell out of the mine and the shares were very dull on the market at one stage - an ironic twist to Ninnes's efforts to create a favourable impression of the mines with which he was connected.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Mrs Burdett, the librarian of North Staffs Polytechnic (Stoke-on-Trent) for permitting the use of their copies of the Mining Journal, Miss Nellie Kirkham for kindly searching her records on my behalf, and Dr J.A. Robey for his assistance in the presentation of the script.

Received 27th March 1971

Lindsey Porter
30 Hillside Road
Cheddleton
Leek
Staffs.

References

The Mining Journal 1850-73 London

Kellys Directory 1876

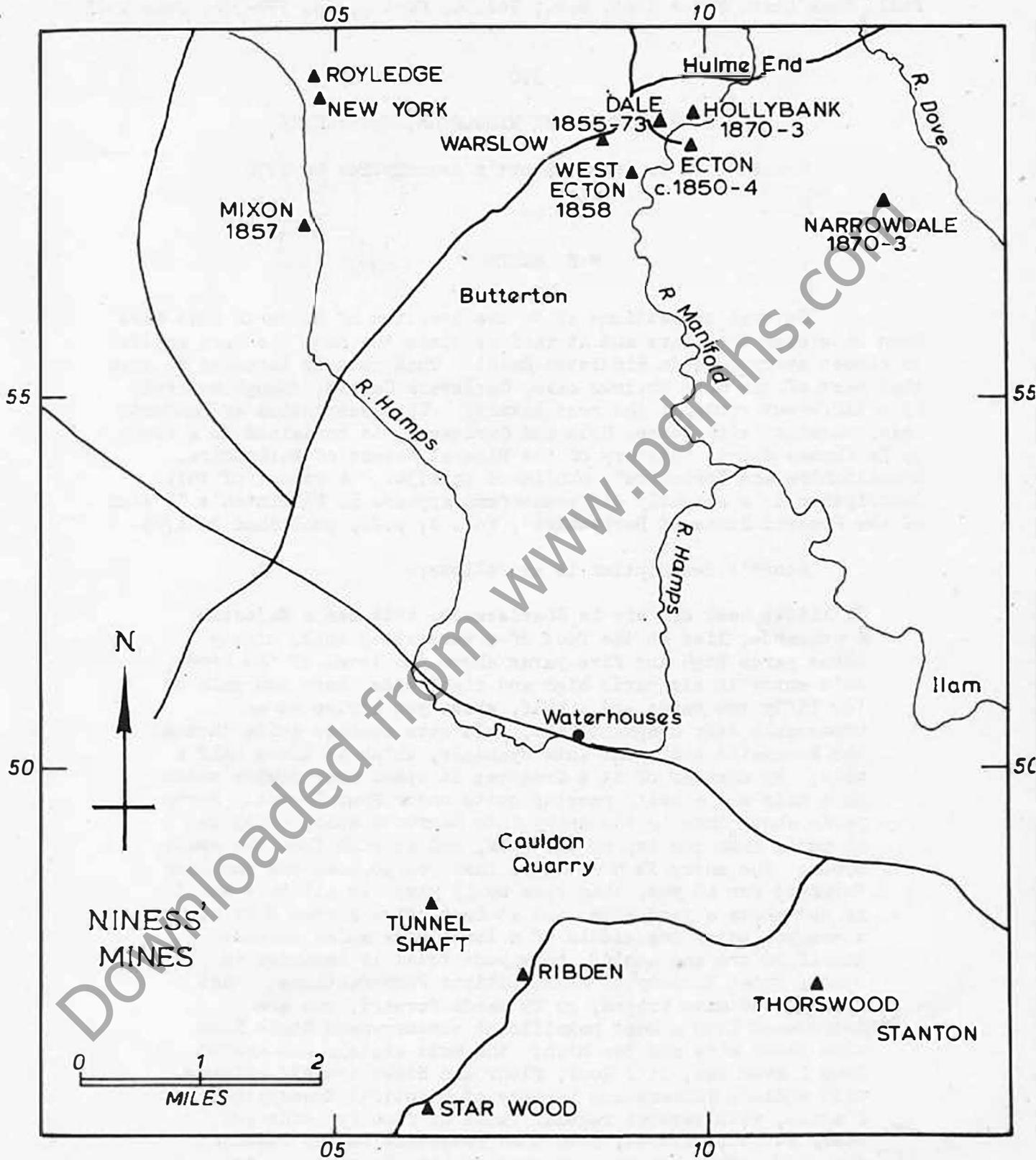
"The Copper and Lead Mines of the Mixon Area, Staffs." Robey and Porter, Bull. P.D.M.H.S. Vol. 4, No. 4, pp.256-280, 1970.

White, Directory of Staffs, 1851.

The Law Times, Vol. 35, O.S.:1, N.S. pp.399-400, Feb.11.1860. Re Mixon
Copper Mining Co., Edwards' Case.

Ribden Lease - Staffs Record Office D 240/M/E/V/2. 1858. The lease
describes Niness as "Richard Niness the younger of Warslow
Cottage, nr Ashbourne, Mineral Agent."

Downloaded from www.pdmhs.com



Downloaded from www.pdinhhs.com