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RECOLLECTIONS OF A MILL CLOSE MINER

by

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Whilst engaged on business recently at the firm Firth-Derihon at Darley Dale I made a few enquiries as to whether there were any people at the factory who were employed at Mill Close Mine prior to its closure. Whilst a number of men had connections with the mine at some time or other, the majority were surface workers and usually of short service.

However I was introduced to an Old Mill Close miner who had considerable experience of hard rock mining and had been employed at M.C. for 10 years underground.

Mr Frank Green, who lives at Oaker Lane, Darley Dale entertained me for many hours during this and subsequent visits to the premises and much interesting information was imparted.

Whilst the studying of old plans and records coupled with actual underground exploration undoubtedly forms the back bone of the mining historian's work, a talk with an actual miner (if one can be located) helps to bring alive the human aspect of this interesting study.

The following information from Mr Green, whilst not word for word, has been set down as accurately as possible from notes made during my talks with him.

"I worked at Mill Close from 1928 to 1939 and worked as a machine man. The workings are very extensive and you could walk for miles. Perhaps I had better give you a description of these, from what I can remember. Lea Shaft went down to the 70 fathom level. Before I describe that I must mention one of the workings off the 70 which we called Munition Gate. This was very rich and you reached it, as I say off the 70 and down a short shaft about 100ft deep. Munition Level was a pipe vein like an inverted horse shoe. It was about five feet high and on the inside of the horse shoe was ore about 9 inches thick. The middle had gone and was a mass of clay and soft stuff. Water literally shot out of the middle and was so strong it pushed away loaded wagons. It took two of us to push empty wagons up to the face. That lead is still there and was not by any means taken out before the mine was abandoned. The vein zig-zagged and was difficult to work because of this.

Near the end of the 70 was Boil Up Shaft. It got its name, as you can imagine, from a boil up of water at shaft bottom. The whole of Mill Close was terribly wet. Working often had to be done at the face under canvas covering to protect the machine men (drilling ream). Twenty three fathoms down Boil Up shaft, the 93 level went off.

This was the main working area when I was there. Off this level went a network of working places rather like the branches of a tree. Ore shutes went down from her to the 103.

At the bottom of Boil Up was 103 level. This was connected by a

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winze to the 129 and the 144. On the 129 zinc blende was mined. When I say mined I should say quarried. It was in a huge deposit. When I tell you that you could fit this factory into it you'll see what I mean.

This winze was somewhere near Pickory corner. At the bottom of it the 144 ran for about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile (SIC) and at the time of the accident was under Haddon Hall. Between the winze and the end of this level was a small raise to a worked pocket and further on another winze down to the 170 level. This was the lowest part of the mine and was a development level.

Workings also went to the west from Warren Carr. Recently there have been odd earth tremors at Winster and they say that it is some of these workings of Mill Close collapsing.

The upper workings of Mill Close, were not very productive other than Munition Gate and they said that this was due to the ore being taken out by T'owd Man. Sometimes the miners who worked in these higher parts of the mine suffered from sore and smarting eyes caused by the influx of water containing some sort of irritant.

The accident I mentioned finished the mine really. Our shift consisted of mucking out from the shots fired by the last shift and drilling and firing another round. This was mucked out by the next shift to come on. We were working on the 144 and had mucked out and started drilling. Drilling consisted of a set of four holes 6 feet long in the middle of the face. These were inclined to meet at the end. If they met then it was good work. If they didn't it was still fired but we didn't consider it so well done. A good machine man usually was able to make his holes meet everytime. The idea of this was to heave the centre out and make most use of the charges. These holes we called the "out". Round these we drilled the relievers. Probably about 8 holes in the form of a square. After this the trimmers were drilled which "finished" the walls of the level. They were fired in the sequence cut, relievers and trimmers, with a short delay between.

We had drilled and charged the holes and with the fuses lit retired back and up the raise to wait. If you didn't get well clear you might be in danger of being hit with flying debris which could shoot out for well over 100 yards.

You could usually tell as to whether it was a good round. If there was a sharp bang then the shot was a poor one but if it was a dull rumbling roar then you knew the charges were doing their "heaving" work.

The shots went off with a peculiar noise, not a good round at all. Then there was a rush of air and the rest of the rounds went off. Something was very wrong. When we climbed down to the level we were nearly swept off our feet by water. Those who had candles quickly found them blown out. I had an acetylene lamp which I dropped. Everyone was making their way to the shaft whilst I was groping for my lamp. One of my mates called me to leave it and get out and I didn't need telling twice. Fortunately the cage was waiting for us when we reached the shaft. It was also a blessing that no one was working on the 170 at the time. Water rose to the 103.

I was off work eleven months due to the flooding. It was summertime and I got a job painting the New Bath Hotel in Matlock. I got good money for that with overtime in the long summer evenings.

When they pumped the mine down to the 144 they found the level full

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to the top with sand and silt. Electric locos and waggons were smashed up at the bottom of the shaft and had been swept along like toys.

At first they had thought that we had holed through to a fault taking water from the Derwent but as the water was able to be moved the management had second thoughts. When, after a long period of hard work, the level was cleared to the forehead, it was found that we had breached a cavern full of water and silt. It was a far sized place but there was no lead to be seen.

Pumping was by electric pumps up the intermediate shafts onto the 70 level. This sloped back to the pumping shaft where it was pumped by the three engines".

Here Mr Green described the engines but as these have been described elsewhere in the past Bulletins the description is omitted. As is usual with Cornish pumping engines they were well looked after and spotlessly clean.

"You could eat your dinner off them" was Mr Green's observation. He then went on to describe other features relating to the mine.

"We were issued with five candles when you came on (the shift) and each would burn for about 2 hours. We saved as many as possible to take home for our own use, lighting fires and such. We always left candles burning underground at Christmas and Boxing Day for T'owd Man. I think this tradition was observed in all old mining areas. One day I was coming off shift and walking towards the shaft on the 70. Not thinking I started whistling. I was rewarded by a hefty kick up my backside from a real old miner following me. I thought he had injured my spine. I had forgotten for a minute that whistling underground was tabboo. I never did it again! Water running on the 70 to the pumping shaft was usually under wooden flooring but in wet times it rose till it was sometimes thigh deep. We all wore thigh waders in wet parts. (It was all wet, but some places were wetter than others). You got a little more pay for working in really wet places.

They were very fair. You could be asked to be moved from such places if you wanted, the same goes for the upper levels where it affected your eyes, and the management would always let you move.

You fired your own shots. "Cheese sticks" were provided by the management for lighting up but we had our own (illegal) method. "Cheese Sticks" were like fireworks with wooden handles at the bottom.

The alternative, an old miners trick, was to cut a length of ordinary fuse about 18" long. Ever ½" a slanting cut would be made. When lighting shots this length was lit and at each cut would split so that the fuse to be shot could be lit.

As the length burned down you could tell how much time you had left with the shots already alight as it all burned at the same rate.

A father of one of my mates used to snare rabbits just behind the mine buildings. Rabbit was a tasty dish but when you dressed them you always had to remove the liver and kidneys because they were full of lead. They looked a sort of blue colour so you could always tell that the rabbit was bellanded.

A Mill Close miner was quite famous. He could get a mining job anywhere he wanted. His credit was also not questioned. A new suite

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could be bought at Matlock "on the tick" if you mentioned you were a Mill Close man. Drills used in the mine were Ingersoll. We were very taken with them.

When I left Mill Close in 1939 to go into the army there was a job to do in Gibraltar, making tunnels. I was put on with a detachment of men for the job. The C.O. had some family connections with Holmans and during the interview for the Gibraltar job he asked me where I was a miner and what machines we used. I told him Mill Close, Derbyshire and we used Ingersoll as they were the best. He went very quiet and I think that if I had said Holmans I would have been made a sergeant straight away!"

Frank Green is still hale and hearty after suffering only slightly with his chest, a legacy of his days as a hard rock miner. After his demob he used his Mill Close experience to obtain an overseas job in the South African gold mines "with about 300 natives under him!" But that is another story he says.

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