

FOLKLORE AND SUPERSTITION IN MINES

by

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The object of this article is to give the reader some idea of the amount and type of mining folklore that existed all over Britain until some forty or fifty years ago. I have not, however, attempted to compile a complete collection of beliefs; in several parts of the country, such as the South Wales Valleys, there has been such a vast quantity of folklore and superstition that whole volumes would hardly suffice.

Since the mid-eighteenth century most beliefs have died, probably mainly due to the advances in mining techniques and the consequent improved safety in the mines. Most superstition based upon events occurring underground was centred around the more dangerous aspects of mining. For instance, in Derbyshire the amount of choke-damp underground was often thought to be increased when the weather was cloudy or damp, and in many areas of Britain miners would not eat strong-smelling cheese, radishes or onions underground for fear of attracting fire-damp. In Ebbw Vale many would not descend the shaft in the first cage of the morning as it was believed to be ill-fated. However, someone had to go down first, and for those who did crossed-fingers were looked on as being lucky.

Women were rarely allowed underground; in most areas they were believed to lead to disasters. Recorded evidence of women working in the mines is not, however, difficult to find (for instance "Children in the Mines 1840-42" by R.M.Evans, National Museum of Wales Schools Service, Cardiff 1872, has several figures showing women underground).

In parts of Wales and in the Mendips lead mines "corpse candle" was a well known omen. This was generally in the form of a light seen hovering around the place where an accident would occur, and in some areas the belief remained until the early twentieth century.

White creatures have always been significant in all kinds of folklore. For instance white rats were considered magical and are said to have caused the abandoning of mines. Rats and mice seen leaving their regular haunts underground were thought to mean impending disaster.

In most parts of Britain whistling underground has some sort of significance, always unlucky. It was especially disliked by the lead miner and was said to call the devil and cause roof falls. In Monmouthshire it was often considered a sign of fear, and in Devon and Cornwall it was "unseemly and irreverent". In Derbyshire it was believed to drive the ore away. Both modern miners and cavers in some parts are still superstitious of whistling underground.

An interesting aspect is that of unlucky days and special occasions. Probably the most widely known of these was Good Friday, when some mines were known to have closed as late as the early twentieth century, for fear of disaster. In others, such as at Bradwell in Derbyshire, the miners would not go underground but were prepared to work on the surface at the mine. This superstition probably led to all

Fridays being considered unlucky in some areas, and hence the miners' expression, "black Friday"... though in parts of Monmouthshire "black Friday" referred only to Friday 13th. The day of restarting work at the mine after a holiday was considered unlucky, this probably being based upon fact rather than superstition, as lack of activity in the mine often led to unexpected earth movement and roof falls (perhaps hangovers led to inefficiency too!)

It was often not customary to work on local fair days, though once again, this was not so much a superstition but rather a wish to have a good time. The decision to stop work on such days was usually that of the miners rather than the management; at Brynamun, Carmarthenshire the decision is known to have once taken the form of "We'll throw a stone in the air; if it comes down again, we'll go out!"

Other unlucky days included New Years Day, Innocents Day, and strangely enough, April 2nd in parts of Wales. In Bradwell, Derbyshire, miners would leave half a candle burning for the Old Man on Christmas Eve, though the reason for it is not clear.

Events occurring whilst travelling to the mines were numerous. Meeting a woman on the way to work was a common belief of ill-luck in England and Scotland, a similar belief being held by fishermen. This superstition, however, died out during the First World War when women went to work in the factories and were bound to see miners early in the morning. An unusual unlucky event in the North East of England, and one that has been confirmed by an informant, was the meeting of a pig on the way to the mine!

There are various beliefs concerning black cats and dogs crossing one's path, seeing crows, magpies, robins or pigeons at the pithead etc. The dove was often a precursor of death; apparently one was seen before disasters at Llanbradach, Senghennydd and Morfa collieries. A flock of birds, known as the "seven whistlers" was a warning of disaster in the Midlands; similar superstitions, such as the cry of the golden plover, were found in Warwickshire and North Wales. An informant in Glamorganshire told me of an unusual practice at his father's mine; a canary would be set loose in the first cage of the morning... if it remained calm and acted naturally then it was safe to descend, but if it became restless and flew madly around the cage, it was a sure sign of there being gas in some part of the mine.

Another unusual superstition was one held by some miners in the Rhonda Valley; when having a bath, a miner would always leave a small part of his back unwashed for fear of weakening it if he washed it completely. A strange practice, but I have been assured that it was true by more than one Welshman.

Having given a general view of the beliefs and superstitions of the miners, the final section of this article will be concerned with a few of the numerous aspects of the "knockers". There are many accounts of the "knockers", which vary from area to area, nor are they entirely peculiar to Britain. They were generally believed to live in the metalliferous mines, there being very few mentions of knockers in coal-mines. As early as 1656 in "The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits", a letter by John Lewis of Glascrug, the knockers were known of in lead and silver mines. He described them as being about eighteen inches high; "rarely seen, but heard - seem to work in the mines".

In 1754 the eminent Welsh scholar Lewis Morris wrote: "Before the discovery of Esgair y Mwyn mine, these little people (as we call

them here) worked hard there day and night: and there are abundance of honest sober people who have heard them ... but after the discovery of the great ore, they were heard no more". He goes on to say that a "Llwyn Llwyd they worked so fresh there for a considerable time that they frightened some young workmen out of the work". However, the knockers were generally considered harmless, and Morris continues of knockers leading miners to rich ore: "Let who will laugh, we have the greatest reason to rejoice and thank the knockers, or rather God, who send us these notices."

In Cornwall, the knockers, or "knackers" were well known "fairy-like creatures". It has been suggested that the Cornish mining term "knockings", given to lead ore with spar as cut from veins, may have some connection with the knockers, though it seems somewhat unlikely. The sounds made by these mysterious little people were often attributed to dripping water, pumping engines and miners in other workings, for although a great number of miners believed in the existence of the knockers, there was an equally great number of miners and management who dismissed them as purely characters of superstition.

In coal mines the belief was rare, though knockers were known of in parts of North East England (Newcastle and Teeside), where they were known as the "swart" or "fairy of the mine". But there appear to be no definite opinions, in these parts, upon whether the knockers led miners to rich veins, brought bad luck or good luck, or brought disaster. The North Yorkshire iron-stone miners believed that a miner who whistled underground would be involved in some accident, the cause of which would be attributed to the knockers.

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#### References

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