Bull. Peak District Mines Historical Society, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 93-95, October 1978

A VISIT TO 'BLOBBER' MINE, WIRKSWORTH, IN THE 1920's

by Robert Gould

By the turn of the 20th century there can be no doubt that the lead mining industry in Wirksworth was dead (Ottery, 1965). Capital to finance mine working was no longer forthcoming, the cost of unwatering the mines was too great, and the price of lead made smelting on anything but the largest scale impracticable. Some miners from Wirksworth and Middleton were still employed in the industry, with 27 still employed at the Mill Close Mine at Darley Dale. Between 1900 and 1920 what little mining activity there was, concentrated on the gaining of barytes, mainly at the old Golconda mine, near Brassington.

The end of the First World War, though, saw a return of interest in the possibility of re-opening some of the older mines in the area. The price of lead had risen, and local opinion felt that some mines could be worked profitably (e.g. Hodson MSS). Consequently the Sheffield Daily Telegraph of January 21st 1924 carried the following advertisement:-

> 'Derbyshire Mining and Exploration Company Ltd. Share Capital £50,000 divided into 200,000 five shilling shares. We offer 80,000 shares of 5 shillings each for subscription at par. Payable as follows, 1 shilling per share on application, 1 shilling and sixpence on allotment and 2 shillings and sixpence after allotment.
>
> The company has obtained from Saxton and Skinner for a nominal consideration an option for a period of 6 months from November 20th 1923 over some 20 veins. Properties include Cromford Moor Mine, Blobber Mine and Foxhole Mine ... Since 1919 drainage work, shaft widening, erection of an engine house, etc. has been done at Blobber, at a cost of about £7000. In Blobber in the dry summer of 1920 ore was mined for a few days and a solid rib of galena found, but this was soon flooded. A small pumping plant is being installed. It is estimated that on completion of this work the mines will yield 50 tons ore ore a day, with a weekly profit of £300'.

The pronouncement started a burst of activity in other local mines, as the same paper reported:-

> 'Many mines have recently been re-opened, e.g. Moletrap or Bullestree, Bolepit mine in Middleton Wood claimed by Samuel Barber and William Jones of Middleton; Bage, owned by James and S.R. Smith of Steeple House, etc. ...'

However, all these other re-openings were very minor affairs that were found impossible to operate for more than a few months on an economic scale. Meanwhile, though, work at Blobber was progressing quite rapidly. The Derby Daily Telegraph of 27th October 1925 reported that:-

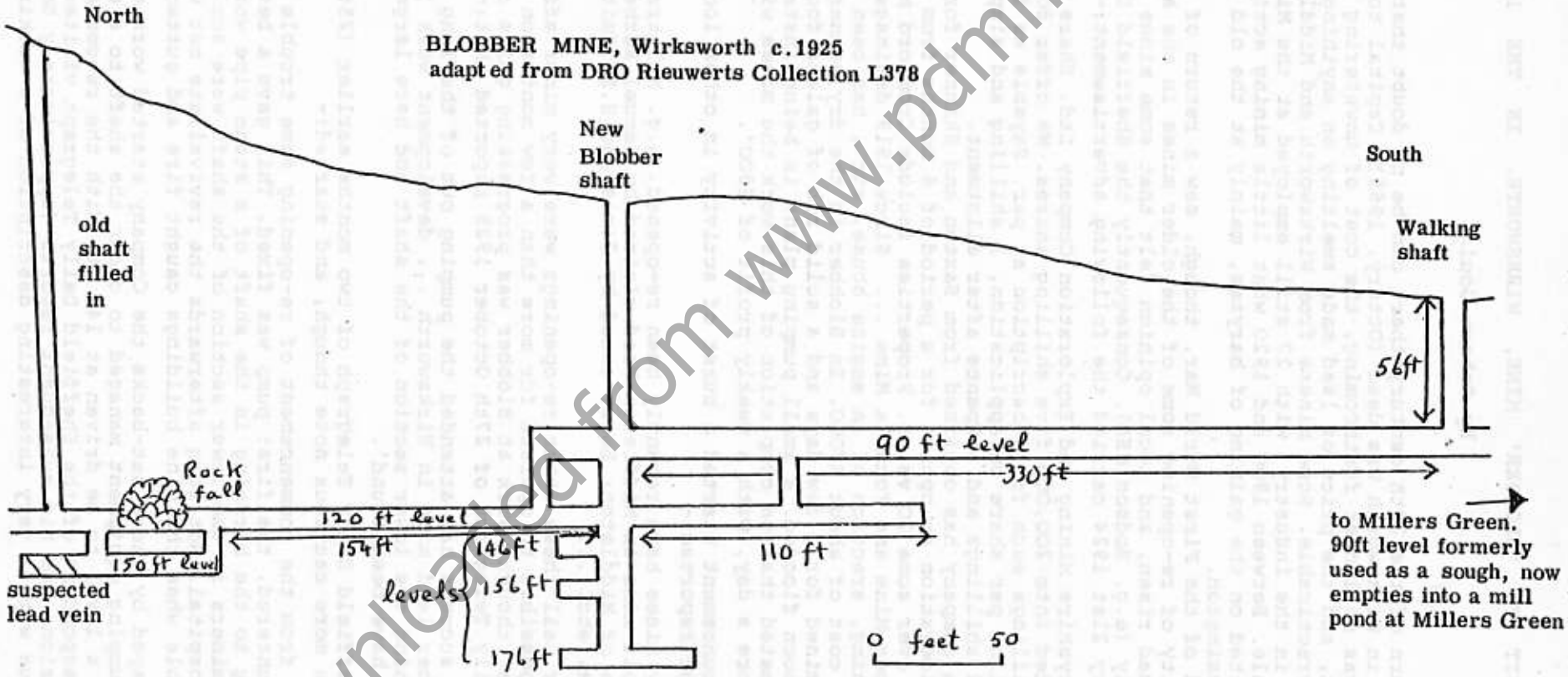
> '... success has attended the pumping out of the long forgotten Blobber lead mine in Wirksworth ... development work is being done in widening the lower section of the shaft and here large quantities of lead have been found'.

The Sheffield Daily Telegraph of two months earlier (25th August 1925) sounded a more cautious note though, and started:-

> '... from the commencement of re-opening some trouble has been encountered, the first pump was fixed. This gave a better result, but owing to the bursting in the shaft of a steam pipe working the pump the miners in the lower section of the shaft were scalded and removed to hospital. Not long afterwards the revivalists met with further trouble when the mine buildings caught fire and gutted'.

Undismayed by these set-backs the Company started work once more and larger pumping equipment managed to clear the shaft to a depth of 160 ft enabling a level to be driven at 140 ft. With the re-commencement of work the correspondent of the Sheffield Daily Telegraph visited the scene on two occasions and his subsequent reports (approximately November 1925) provide us with a very interesting description of a working mine in the 1920s:

Downloaded from www.pdmhs.com



Downloaded from www.pdmhs.com

'On the occasion of the first visit we descended this mine when the pumps had lowered the water to the 160 ft level, and we found that the mine had had more than one life, even then we thought that the mine had some great secret in its care. At 90 ft down we found a tunnel driven from the shaft which exploration proved led to the surface near the Derby - Wirksworth main road. (Actually, as the survey plan shows, the surface is reached by means of a climbing shaft at a level of 56 ft. The 90 ft shaft eventually terminated in a mill pond at Millers Green).

'Rotten timber pipes with raw-hide joints and the hurried way the workings had been driven into the shaft sides told their own story of water troubles. We failed to discover the trace of any pumping apparatus in the shaft which is about 9 ft wide at the top, where 40 ft are lines with dressed gritstone, to about 2 ft wide at the lower part, and still the narrow shaft descended into black cold water of unknown depth owing to rubbish that had fallen down it in the years that it had been flooded.

'(On the second visit) Mr. Edward Timmins, manager, and Mr. W. Hodson, jnr, assistant manager, met me at the mine and confirmed the report of the recent discovery of lead. They had no objection to showing me the full workings now that they had mastered the water. There is no cage fixed yet and the only method of descent is in the steel barrel which is used to raise the mineral and clay from the shaft. If you ever need a nerve test try descending a mine shaft in a barrel. The steel rope holding it seems none too strong and when you stand inside the barrel with three parts of the body out, you are hanging over the blackness of the shaft and have your feelings further disturbed by a spinning motion as you are lowered.

'Reaching the workings recently driven at the 140 ft level we found these to have cut through 150 yards of virgin rock and struck the main lead vein at a point where it is entirely pure lead varying in thickness from 20 inches to 6 inches. This proves the statement made by Glover (in his Directory of 1825) that the lead in veins in the Blobber is detached, making the mining all the more easy, as the only mineral to remove is wet clay.

'Explorations of the workings now pumped out gave a most interesting find of old mining tools including an iron shovel with a turned handle which provided the only means of dragging the lead along the narrow workings to the shaft by a miner crawling on all fours.

'Development work is being done in widening the lower section of the shaft and here large quantities of lead were found explaining why the old owners took such pains to try to drain the mine in the days before pumping. Now that the modern pumping plant even stronger than the sinking pumps is being fixed there is every prospect that the Blobber mine will again revive'.

This account, albeit interesting, was highly optimistic, and with the onset of bad winter weather the flooding, which had troubled all the mine's owners, proved too great a problem, and the erstwhile 'revival' of the industry in Wirksworth proved to be a failure.

REFERENCES

Hodson MSS, in Rieuwerts collection, DRO L375-378.

Ottery, F.S. 1965 *Development of Wirksworth 1800-1965*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Nottingham University.

Robert Gould
264 Bakewell Road
Matlock
Derbyshire
DE4 3BN

Downloaded from www.ndmhs.com