A mine was the centre of a whole community and everyone was affected by its progress. In the good times, everyone enjoyed a share of the wealth but the closure of a mine was a catastrophe that could mean the destruction of the community. Those miners with smallholdings might be able to hang on until the mine was opened up again but many found that they had to move to other parts of the country or even abroad. Adjacent to many of the mines you will find ruins of houses, which were abandoned when the mines closed forever. If you visit the head of Perkinsbeach Dingle or Blakemoorgate, you can see the remains of whole abandoned villages. Some of the miners' buildings, such as cottages, schools, chapels and churches, still exist today and you may be able to recognise them amongst the more modern buildings of villages in the district. Of all the villages in the district, Shelve seems to have been the most important from a mining point of view and it was even described in the Doomsday Book as a "mining township".

It was unusual for local mining companies to provide houses for their workers but one notable exception to this was in 1873, when the adventurers of Bog Mine built workers' cottages at a cost of £50-£60 each. Although some miners lived in villages, many more preferred to live in smallholdings scattered over the surrounding hillsides. Landowners encouraged their miners to "squat" on their land and to make small enclosures. In this way, they could collect rent from the miner as well as obtaining his labour. From his cottage, the miner used to walk many miles to the mine, both day and night in all kinds of weather. There was no social security in those days and the miner had a stark choice, if he didn't work he didn't get paid. To offset this, many miners formed friendly societies whereby they could receive a weekly payment if they were off work due to sickness or accident. Each cottage had a number of acres of land and this allowed the families to supplement their income by growing most of their own food. This led an irate mine owner of the 19th century to remark that, because of the need to cultivate their own land, the miners were not entirely dependent upon their earnings at the mine for subsistence. This was apparently an undesirable trait as it made the miners too independent!

Their houses were small by our standards, with no more than 2 bedrooms upstairs and a living room and pantry downstairs, occasionally with lean-to buildings at the side. The miners built their own houses out of local stone with a thatched roof, with neighbours often lending a hand. It was a tradition that if they could build a stone chimney between sunrise and sunset and have a fire with smoke coming out of it before nightfall then they could stay and finish off the house at that spot. Outbuildings were also thatched but the walls were made with a frame of wood filled with a mixture of gorse, turves and mud. The smallholding was usually sufficient to provide enough grazing for the milking cow in summer and hay to last the winter, while some miners also kept pigs for bacon or as porkers. These pigs were not fed as scientifically as modern animals and often had to make do with acorns which had been soaked in a barrel of water. Poultry were common, as were sheep which were allowed to roam the hillsides. Since the miner's family tended to be large, he was therefore of necessity a keen gardener, using his vegetable garden as an important additional food supply. The children were expected to help out by collecting whinberries and blackberries from as far away as the Long Mynd to supplement the family diet. This was so important that schoolmasters often had to close the local school at those times of the year when wayside fruits were ripe. A miner's main meal
might consist of bacon and vegetable stew with homemade bread. To eat meat supplied by the butcher was unusual and this would depend on how much he was earning at the time.

The monthly reckoning was a general holiday and there was no school that day. The reckoning at Roman Gravels Mine was accompanied by a fair held at the crossroads, where hard earned money could be exchanged for necessities. Some families made the journey to Minsterley, Pontesbury or even Shrewsbury, either walking or riding on the horsedrawn wagon of the local carrier. In later days the railway became available, although some people regarded it as a waste of good money and still preferred to walk.

Local political feeling ran strongly at times and elections were occasionally accompanied by violence between bands of rival villagers. The Hope Valley was a Tory stronghold whilst Snailbeach was staunchly for the Liberals. The supporters of each party were in the habit of attempting to prove their superiority by punching the heads of their supposed inferiors!

Compared to some areas, the district was very well served by schools. Although most were small, they were very numerous and each small village had its own. The free school at Snailbeach, founded in 1843, was a typical example of one of the larger ones. It was erected at the joint expense of the Marquis of Bath and several gentlemen of the Snailbeach Company, with accommodation for 100 pupils and average attendance being about 80. The company provided an endowment of £40 per annum towards the running costs and each miner was expected to pay 6d per quarter to the schoolmaster. As the mine at this time employed 500 men collecting an average total of £2,000 per month, it would seem that education was quite cheap. The schoolmaster's wage would have been £100 per annum (twice the average miner's wage) unless he chose to pay an assistant.

The mining communities were very religious and there was a strong chapel following in the district. It is significant that, of the 7 men killed in the Snailbeach disaster, 3 were lay preachers and the other 4 were steady attendees. Five were Methodists and the remaining two belonged to the Church of England. The Rev. John Cope of Minsterley preached in the district in 1896 and published a small booklet about the accident. This booklet gives a revealing account of the important part religion played in the social life of the community. One of the dead was a leading member of the Band of Hope and spoke strongly against the evils of alcohol "thereby saving the local children from 10,000 sins". Another "preached of Hell as a reality" and a third was a leader of the local Sunday School. The Wellington Journal of the times records that Mr Henry Wiggin of London, known as the "Weeping Preacher", visited Snailbeach and had large audiences for night after night.

Sunday Schools thrived and the big occasion of the year was the 'Treats'. In hard times, these might only consist of marching behind a local brass band, followed by a picnic on top of Corndon Hill. Later trips were made with the children riding in horse drawn wagons and eventually in charabancs to places as far away as Rhyl. The chapels organised Eisteddfodau at holiday times with singing competitions and another popular local activity was football. Thrift was encouraged by means of the Chapel clothing clubs and charity took such forms as paying a child's school pence when the father died.
This is only a short description of the life of the Shropshire miner. Although conditions were much harder in those times, the communities were close knit and they helped each other in adversity. Those of us who live in towns have our car, television and other comforts but we can never experience the community spirit of the old mining villages of South Shropshire.