**Snailbeach Mine – Social History**

Thousands of people were employed in mines in the 19th century. Up to 500 men worked at Snailbeach mine. Mining was a hard and dangerous life, and lead mining was more dangerous than most. Generally miners did not live as long as people in other occupations, and as lead is very poisonous, lead miners often did not live as long as other miners. Statistics from the 1860’s show that lead miners were twice as likely to die before they reached 65 years old than non-miners.

Miners worked in another world, a world without light or warmth from the sun, where water constantly dripped from the roof, and where there was no difference between night or day.

At Snailbeach mine most of the miners lived away from the mine. Many had to walk several miles to and from the mine every day, through heavy rain, hail or snow, which turned the tracks to mud that clung to boots, making walking more difficult, cold and wet before they started work. Some of the miners rented cottages for £4-5 per year. When the men reached the mine they changed into their underground clothes in the changing house or “Dry”.

There were three 8 hour shifts per day, changing at around 6 a.m., 2 p.m., and 10 p.m. Most mines in the area only worked 6 hour shifts, but longer shifts were introduced at Snailbeach due to the depth of the mine and the time taken by the miners to reach their place of work. The 8 hours included the time taken for the miners to go down the ladders and come up again. According to Samuel Jones, a Snailbeach miner, this “occupies us an hour and a half”. That was about 30 minutes going down and 60 climbing up. Captain Henwood also admitted that “we call it an 8 hour shift, but the men, on average, do not spend 6½ hours in actual work.” The 8 hours also included 20 - 30 minutes for eating.

A miner’s wages depended upon how much rock or ore they removed from the mine. They worked in groups, usually of six men, and were paid as a group, dividing the money between themselves.

There were many deductions from a miner’s wages before he received his money. Miners had to pay 8d per pound for candles, and the same for gunpowder. They were allowed 2 pounds of candles per week. The men also paid 1 shilling per month for the services of a doctor, which
covered their families too, and 9d per month towards a “sick club”. This paid 7 shillings a week to sick or injured miners while they were off work. Miners were fined 2s 6d for any breach of the company’s regulations. The money went to the sick club.

The Snailbeach miners were paid every two months. At the end of the first month miners were given “subsist”, a sub on their wages, which was then deducted from the amount due at the end of the second month.

In the 1860’s the tutwork miners earned 20 - 22 shillings per week, and the tribute miners slightly less.

Snailbeach was considered to be healthy, for a mine. Samuel Jones, when asked if the miners considered their employment unhealthy: “No I do not think that they do” but he also added “It is certainly more unhealthy than being on top of the land working”.

The two main factors in favour of Snailbeach being a healthy mine are that it was considered to be a dry mine, and well ventilated. Much of the water that entered the mine did so on the upper levels, the lower levels were only damp. This was an advantage because it kept down the dust. Many of the levels (tunnels) were large - 7 feet high by 6 feet wide, which enabled a good flow of air through the workings. In some mines the miners worked up to their knees in water, and in many coal mines the workings were only 2 feet high so the men had to work lying down!

Old Shaft was used as the climbing shaft and was described in the 1863 report as a “most capital ladder road, there being plenty of room, plenty of air and easy ladders. I do not think it possible to find a more easy or safer footway”. The introduction of the cage to take the miners to and from the 252 yard level made life much less strenuous.

The only lighting that the miners had underground was from candles, stuck to their hats with clay. When they were working the candle was often fixed to the rock face, and in the records there are numerous instances of the positions of these candles being used as reference points in the mine.

At the end of the 19th century the manager at Snailbeach insisted that the wicks be of a certain type. The wick had to be made of three threads of cotton and three threads of linen, folded to give six threads of each. Candles were classed into sizes by the number that weighed one pound. Miners usually used candles at a weight of 16 to a pound.

There were, fortunately, relatively few accidents at Snailbeach, although mining was generally a dangerous occupation. Explosions are the most well known accidents in mines, but these usually occurred in coal mines where there is explosive gas with the coal and a single spark could cause an explosion. Explosions in the metal mines were usually due to gunpowder being ignited unexpectedly. Sometimes this happened at Snailbeach. Mr Hewitt lost his sight in 1883 due to an explosion.
Accidents in the lead mines were caused by rocks falling from the roof of the tunnel or stope onto the miners below, and from miners falling down shafts.

The worst accident at Snailbeach occurred at 6-15 a.m. on Wednesday March 6th 1895 in Old Shaft. Two 7 man cages were in operation, one winding men to the surface at the end of their shift and the other lowering men down to start the next shift. As the cages passed for the third time that morning, midway down the shaft, the wire rope for the descending cage broke and the cage plummeted to the bottom of the shaft. The men were killed instantly.