

3G Tale of the Doctor

The Doctor's view of mining

My name is Dr. Ewart, and I am retained by the London Lead Company to treat the miners in my area. Now in the 1820s the government have started to become concerned about safety in mines. Most of the problem comes from explosions in coal mines. This is what makes the news. But metal mines are different. First, I have to tell you, that lead mines are safer than coal mines in some ways. You see, methane gas comes out of coal. It's poisonous, and it can cause explosions. Dozens of coal miners have been killed in mine explosions and it really is the greatest danger that any miner faces.

The only explosions you will get in a lead mine come from the miner's own carelessness. He takes gunpowder down the mine. He's also got a lighted candle, and if the candle lights the gunpowder, he'll be making a one way trip to the pearly gates in very small pieces.

Considering how dangerous the work is, there are very few fatal accidents in lead mines. The national rate is about 2 fatal accidents per thousand miners per year. In Cornwall it's much worse, with about 6 deaths per thousand, but Shropshire is much safer than that. There is a good record for safe working here.

But accidents don't tell the whole story. We have noticed that working in lead mines damages a man's health. A healthy young man enters upon work in a lead mine, and in a few years he begins to experience some difficulty in breathing. He continues to be an efficient miner. But climbing up to the surface starts to take longer. You know how much time it takes – sometimes an hour to get to the surface again from the bottom of Old Shaft. Well, he takes longer. He stops for breath. And when he stops he spits because he's bringing up stuff from his chest. When he emerges at the surface he's a pitiful sight. His heart is beating fit to burst, his whole frame is covered with sweat and his strength passes in seconds from extreme feverish excitement to the very opposite, a perilous and complete exhaustion. He loses his appetite for food, and often he brings up his breakfast on the way to work. He coughs a lot, and his lips are blue because the oxygen isn't getting to the blood. By the time he's 45 he's done for. He has to stay at home, a worn out miner. When this has happened his health never recovers. He soon dies exhausted.

Now I've noticed that Snailbeach isn't a bad mine as they go. At White Grit, where conditions are loose and dirty, lots of miners die early. But at Snailbeach the conditions are solid, damp and with low dust. It's the damp that keeps the dust down. And at Snailbeach there are miners who go on beyond 45 and 50. The burial records prove it. We don't know what does the damage.

We know that lead is dangerous to grazing animals. If sheep and cattle graze near to the outlet of the lead smelter, they fall sick and die. If a bird flies through the smoke coming out of a smelter chimney, it drops down dead. But I don't believe the lead in the mine is dangerous. You see the lead ore, Galena, Lead Sulphide, does not dissolve in water or in anything else which you find in a mine. It only reacts at very high temperatures in a smelter. So touching the lead ore is not likely to be dangerous, as far as we know. So what could the problem be?

The other danger to men's health comes when they get out of the mine. Down there at the bottom of a deep mine it's hot. The miner labours with his shirt off, and he's wringing wet in the damp

conditions. But when he gets to the surface it's cold. And he might have to walk home several miles in clothes that are wringing wet and cold. He gets a chill, pneumonia, rheumatism, arthritis and every complaint you can imagine. This 'Miners' Dry' was only built long after my time. It took an act of parliament before the mine provided a decent place for the workers to get changed into dry clothes and dry their wet working clothes.

I tell you, it's high time there was a proper investigation of the problems miners suffer, but no-one wants to go down the mine and see what the problem is. No-one knows what kills them off early. It's all a mystery. Look at a farm worker and he's got a good red complexion, he's strong, he looks healthy, he eats well he lives to a good age. But these pale miners are worn out by the time they're 50. And the men who work in the lead smelters are even worse. They must be poisoned by the fumes, just as the cattle and the birds are killed round about. There's real danger everywhere, but no-one is concerned. Parliament should do something about it, but everyone's making too much money to care. Even the miners don't talk about it, but they think they are well paid for their work. All I can tell you is that at Snailbeach they seem to go on longer than in most places, so it's not a bad mine as things go.