

# 3M The Tale of the End - 1911

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## Introduction

Mining finished in 1911. The story is told through two of the descendants of Thomas Lovett, the man who had established the Snailbeach Company in 1783.

## Colonel Heaton Lovett and John Henkin Lovett

You will guess from our names that we are descendants of Thomas Lovett who founded The Snailbeach Company in 1783. He was the major shareholder and our family has benefitted from his sound business sense ever since then. Indeed, the mine was profitable for exactly one hundred years. But I think we'd lost sight of Thomas Lovett's business sense and we didn't keep a careful eye on things. Maybe we just assumed that the mine would always make money, because it always had.

A new company had been formed and it needed a mine manager. James Ray Eddy had resigned in 1870. We appointed Henry Dennis. He was a Cornishman and a qualified engineer, but he'd made his name in Wales. Everything he touched seemed to make money, so we thought we'd got the right man. But he didn't move to Snailbeach. He ran the mine from his office in Ruabon, because he had lots of businesses there.

He was full of great plans for mechanising and modernising, and we had spent £10,000 on improvements. The reservoir was useful, because it meant the ore dressing never had to stop for lack of water. Installing the engine for a lift in George's Shaft meant the miners worked longer and better than when they had to climb ladders all the way. He was right to do all this. It kept Snailbeach profitable for far longer than any other lead mine in Shropshire, and the improvements saw another forty years of mining.

But then Dennis made his mistake. He set his heart on having a railway. Dennis persuaded us to form a new company to run the railway and invited shareholders. I have to say we were both taken in. We put up money, and were rewarded by being put on the Board of the company. It didn't do us any good, just provided a load of trouble. I suppose we thought it would be valuable to be connected to the main line. But actually, it wasn't a full size railway, only a half size one to serve the mine, with nothing for passengers at all. So the directors of the company weren't going to get first class travel in a director's coach all the way from Shrewsbury. Dennis could tell we were disappointed, so when two engines were bought, one was called Belmont, and the other Fernhill, both named after our houses.

The shareholders put up £16,000 and borrowed the other £4,000 needed to complete the railway. We eventually repaid the debt, but it cost us all the dividends we ever earned. The railway only paid 3% a year on our investment. It was the worst deal we ever made. It would take over thirty years just to get our money back, but then the railway made a loss. There was no more money to support it because the mine had made a loss as well. The income from the railway was so small it would have been cheaper to go back to using horse and cart.

Lead mining was in deep trouble. The price of lead had made people explore the whole world for supplies, and they were now producing in quantity from Spain, from Brazil and from South Africa. The price of lead fell and nearly all the mines in Shropshire closed. For a year Snailbeach almost closed down. There was no traffic for the railway so our engines were lent to a railway Dennis had just built in Wales. By the time they

came back they were in a poor state. There was no cash to develop the mine, and none to maintain the railway. We restructured the company and started again on a smaller scale. In the great days of the mine we had produced 3,000 tons. Now we were lucky to get 1,000.

Dennis had really lost interest in us. In Ruabon he'd just discovered there was red clay for making the tiles that were so fashionable at the time. He set up Dennis' brickworks and it went from strength to strength. He was making his fortune, but we got nothing.

Finally the Marquis of Bath was persuaded to come to the rescue of the mine. In 1895 he agreed to give up his royalties for three years so that the money could be spent on development. We had to spend the money on making the shafts deeper and extending the levels to look for more lead. This helped us struggle on for a while.

Henry Dennis died in 1906 and his son Henry Dyke Dennis had replaced him. He said he'd got a scheme to save the railway. One of his companies was going to start a quarry, and the ideal place was close to the Snailbeach Railway line. This could increase our business. It certainly did, and traffic increased immensely. But you don't get much for carrying road stone just a mile or two, so we still only just covered our costs. The trouble was, there had been so little money for maintenance that the engines and track were worn out. We had to scrap the engines named after our homes. Then we had to raise £4,000 to put the railway in order. Dennis spent a thousand pounds of this on a brand new locomotive which he named after himself. It was far more powerful and expensive than it needed to be, because the loaded wagons went downhill under gravity. The engine only had to pull the empties back up again.

The people who put up the £4,000 to get the railway in order never got a penny back, so in fact the railway was just subsidising the stone quarry. Add to that the fact that Snailbeach Mine was subsidising the railway and it's no wonder we had money problems.

Foreign lead imports were undercutting all the British mines, and I suppose Snailbeach was just about worked out. In 1911 we stopped pumping, and the last bit of profitable working was flooded for everforever. The machinery which was still working was sold, mainly to Dennis' other mining companies and the rest scrapped. It was a sad end to a glorious mine. We're sadder, wiser, and poorer men.