

3L The Tale of the Yapp Family

Hello there my name is Nathaniel Yapp

I am 38 and have been a miner here at Snailbeach for 30 years. They do say as how mining goes back a long way in Shropshire and I've heard tell that they mined copper near Oswestry 4,000 years ago to make bronze. My ancestors would have lived in a draughty hill fort then and supported a ruck of Druids. The Romans came to this valley 2,000 years ago and, because they beat us in battle, they made my ancestors slaves to mine lead for them. Ever since then we have been digging underground all over Shropshire.

Where we mine out the ore it leaves huge spaces underground called 'stopes' but we have to leave a few pillars of rock behind to stop the walls collapsing and us becoming the cheese in a rock sandwich! My stope is a typical one and we have four of us working here. We work for ourselves and get paid on what we produce. I'm in charge as I am the experienced miner with my brother Joshua as an assistant to drill the holes. I usually set the gunpowder charges myself but I'm letting my brother learn how to do it as he is thinking about setting up his own team. My son Arthur is the labourer and my other son William pushes the wagons. Outside on the dressing floor there is my wife Emily and my two young daughters Hannah and Jessie. Their job is to break up the ore with hammers and separate out the lead ore. They keep this safe until the month end when the mine agent weighs it to work out how much we will be paid.

My ancestors originally had to use firesetting to get the lead out. They lit a fire against the rock face last thing at night and the heat would cause rock to expand. In the morning, they threw water against the rock and it contracted quickly, causing the rock to break up into many cracks. They used a plug & feathers to break off flakes of rock - two thin iron wedges (feathers) were placed in the crack and a thicker wedge (plug) was hammered between them. The broken ore was taken out in baskets or sledges. They do say that the Old Man (that is what we call previous miners) could only mine about 2 inches per day using this. It's a good job we can do better than that or we'd starve!

This isn't always our stope as all the teams have to bid against each other at the end of each month - what we call the Bargain. The mine agent will ask how much a team will charge for a ton of lead ore produced from the stope and the team charging the least will get the right to work it for the next month. That happens for each stope in the mine and here at Snailbeach there are over 100 of them! Then it starts all over again next month! That suits the mine owner because if a stope is rich in lead ore everyone will bid against each other and force the price down. But it works the other way if a stope is poor in lead ore as the mine agent has to push the price up until a team will agree to work it. 'Dead work' such as sinking shafts or driving levels is paid at so much per fathom (that is 6ft).

Not all mines are worked like this however and the size of the mines round here varies tremendously. The small mines are worked by family partnerships with either an adit driven into the hillside or a shallow shaft with a hand windlass. These workings usually start life as a trial level, driven in the hope of striking a rich vein, but that is very rare! In reality, most of these mines only supply a subsistence living for the miners or get abandoned.

Some of the larger mines don't work with self-employed gangs like us but by shifts of men every 8 hours for 5 days per week. On Saturdays only a third of the miners are at work, between the hours of 6am and 12 noon. The remaining two thirds of the men are thus idle from Friday night to Monday morning. These long weekends are unpopular with the mine owners who still have to keep the mines pumped dry. In 1870, the owners of Roman Gravels Mine tried to introduce a full day's work on Saturday. The workers from other

mines, however, induced the men to stop Saturday working by means of threats and intimidation, saying that they were breaking the rules of the country.

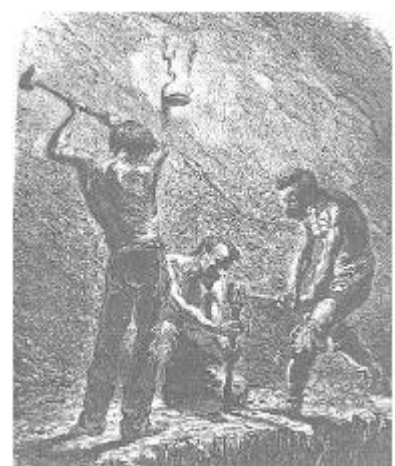
Even at mines with self-employed gangs of miners, there are still full-time employees of the mine owner. These include the mine captain (manager), engineer, engine drivers and perhaps a few other specialists such as the men who maintained the shaft. It is even known for particularly skilled captains and engineers to be employed by more than one mine, dividing their time between them. Pumping and winding costs are borne by the company but miners are obliged to buy gunpowder and candles from the company.

Some jobs do not involve extracting ore and these are treated differently. If a shaft is to be sunk or an access level driven, this is offered to teams at a set rate per fathom of ground extracted. The price for this can vary depending on the softness of the ground being passed through. Another type of payment is day work, where workers are paid a daily wage for a particular job such as unloading kibbles at surface, clearing out collapsed levels or ore dressing at surface. The workers have to wait until the next reckoning before collecting their wages and this is a busy time for the mine captain, who has to add up all the ore brought to surface or fathoms of ground extracted. Where teams do not have enough money to survive until the next reckoning, they can obtain an advance from the company and this is deducted from their wages, together with the cost of any gunpowder, candles, etc bought from the company store.

My name is Joshua Yapp

I am 32 and my brother Nathaniel is letting me learn how to set off the gunpowder charges. Gunpowder was introduced to Snailbeach in the 17th century and were the miners pleased to see it! At first we used to have two men using a hand drill and hammer to drill a 2ft shothole, turning the drill all the time to stop it jamming in the hole. I preferred to use the hammer myself - I got too many bruised knuckles holding the drill, especially if Nathaniel had been out celebrating the night before!

In 1880 they gave us compressed air drills for drilling the shotholes and they really speeded things up. The problem is all the dust that comes out of the drill holes as we can't help breathing it in. Lots of miners who do this work die with lung problems later in life - silicosis they call it. We call the machines 'widowmakers'. I hear that modern drills are hollow and water is pumped into the hole during drilling to damp down the dust but we don't have them here!



After we have drilled the hole, we clean it out with a scraper and fill it with gunpowder. A lump of clay is used to block up the end of the shothole and a pricker is used to make a hole through the clay for a fuse. Prickers are made of copper or bronze to prevent sparks causing the gunpowder to explode a bit too early. Our fuses are made of hollow straws and in September we go into the fields after the corn is harvested to

collect our supply for the following year. We make our fuses in the evening by twisting one end of the straw, filling it with fine gunpowder and twisting the other end. We always experiment on surface to see how long they burn - so it is our fault if we get it wrong! After lighting the fuse I leg it down the passage and wait for the explosion.

After the blast, we have to wait about 15 minutes for the fumes and dust to settle so it is a good chance to have a cup of cold tea and a chat. We then send my nephew Arthur in to clear it up.

My name is Arthur Yapp

I am the team labourer and I am 17. Lumps of galena and barytes are very heavy and I shift loads of it about - you have to be strong for this work. If the rock blasted off is too big to be lifted, my dad will drill a little hole and set off some gunpowder in it so it breaks up - what he calls "popping" it.

One of my jobs is to put up timber supports if the roof gets a bit unsafe. If we don't the mine agent will get angry and fine us. My main job is to shovel all the ore into a wagon so it can be taken out by my younger brother William. We don't take the waste rock out so I have to stack it wherever I can, either in an old stope or even in the roof supported on wooden bars. I like to watch my dad and uncle work as one day I hope to be a proper miner like them.

My name is William Yapp

I am 10 and I push the wagons of ore out of the mine to where my mother is. It is hard work and dad doesn't give me a candle because he says I can't get lost following the rails! I hate it as it is very scary being in the dark and they always kid me that the knockers will get me.

We all believe in the knockers in this mine. They make knocking sounds in the distance as we work and we leave bits of our lunch behind for them. All the miners reckon they will lead us to good lead ore or barytes if we follow the sound of the knocking. Whistling really annoys the knockers and they will either make the lead ore disappear or make the roof fall on us. I remember when I first started in the mine I was a bit scared and was whistling as I walked along. I suddenly got sent flying by a crack round the ear from my dad. I never did it again!

No miner round here will work on New Year's Eve as this is when the ghosts and knockers take over the mine. At 5pm we light candles in all the stopes and leave the mine. My mum says it's just an excuse for the men to go drinking but what do women know!

My name is Emily Yapp

I am 37 and although I have to keep the house and cook for all our family, I also have to come and work at the mine for 4 hours a day. This is because our menfolk work underground all day and someone has to prepare the lead ore (what we call dressing it) to sell to the mine owner at the end of the month. It is the same for all of the mining families and we all have an area where the trucks drop off the ore than our own men have mined. I use a flat headed hammer called a Bucker to break up the lumps of ore into smaller pieces. We work all year and it is really hard in winter. The only shelter we have is an open sided frame with a thatched roof. It keeps off the rain but the wind blows through it something cruel. Sometimes I wish I was a man as at least it is warmer underground!

When we are working at the mine we usually wear warm flannel dresses and great coats like those of men, with handkerchiefs round our necks. Also hats or bonnets on our heads to protect ourselves from the

weather. Although the work is hard we are always smiling, laughing, and singing - it is a good opportunity to gossip to our neighbours a well.

Our names are Hannah and Jessie Yapp

We are 14 and 8 years old and help our mother dress the ore. We take the small pieces she has broken and pick out the whole pieces of galena. The mine owner will only buy pieces that are all lead and he will reject any that still have rock attached. If there are any pieces with rock still on then we crush it further with bucking hammers. We put this in a sieve, which we shake in a tub of water to get rid of the mud and dust. After picking out any bits of galena we throw the rest away on the tips.

Some of the older girls around here usually go to London in the month of May to work for about three months for the market gardeners. They do weeding and then carry vegetables, strawberries and other fruit to market. They make a great deal of money, which they bring back home for their families. When we are older, and if we don't get married early, we will probably get a job in service as a maid at the home of a richer family. We are lucky to live here though as girls are not allowed to work underground in lead mines. Some of our relatives work at a coal mine and girls there have to pull the tubs of coal underground. Our cousin Patience Kershaw wrote this poem :-

It's good of you to ask me, Sir, to tell you how I spend my days
Down in a coal black tunnel, Sir, I hurry corves to earn my pay.
The corves are full of coal, kind Sir, I push them with my hands and head.
It isn't lady-like, but Sir, you've got to earn your daily bread.
I push them with my hands and head, and so my hair gets worn away.
You see this baldy patch I've got, it shames me like I just can't say.
A lady's hands are lily white, but mine are full of cuts and segs.
And since I'm pushing all the time, I've got great big muscles on my legs.
I try to be respectable, but sir, the shame, God save my soul.
I work with naked, sweating men who curse and swear and hew the coal.
The sights, the sounds, the smells, kind Sir, not even God could know my pain.
I say my prayers, but what's the use? Tomorrow will be just the same.
Now, sometimes, Sir, I don't feel well, my stomach's sick, my head it aches.
I've got to hurry best I can. My knees are weak, my back near breaks.
And if I'm slow, then I'm very scared these men will batter me.
But they're not to blame, for if I'm slow, their families will starve, you see.
Now all the lads, they laugh at me, and Sir, the mirror tells me why.
Pale and dirty can't look nice. It doesn't matter how hard I try.
Great big muscles on my legs, a baldy patch upon my head.
A lady, Sir? Oh, no, not me! I should've been a boy instead.
I praise your good intentions, Sir, I love your kind and gentle heart
But now it's 1842, and you and I, we're miles apart.
A hundred years and more will pass before we're standing side by side
But please accept my grateful thanks. God bless you Sir, at least you tried.