

HOPPING MINE, UPPERWOOD, MATLOCK BATH

by Peter J. Naylor

Abstract. A c1920 photograph supported by verbal reminiscences has provided primary material on early 20th century fluorspar mining at Matlock.

In an article in the Bulletin of the Peak District Mines Historical Society, "The Mines Near Upperwood, Matlock Bath, Part 1", by Flindall and Hayes, Volume 5, Part 4, pp. 182-199, October 1973, reference is made to fluorspar mining (pp. 188-189).

A little further information has come to light in the form of a photograph, photographer unknown, previously unidentified and reproduced below. The owner of the first photograph to come to light asked the writer if he could identify the mine and its location. The only information offered at the time was reference to a spar mine at Matlock Bath, circa 1914, believed to be Speedwell Mine. By coincidence, an identical photograph also came to light, and was shown to the writer by a lady, now resident in Wirksworth, whose father appears in the picture. Contact was also made with an elderly gentleman who had worked at the mine in that time, 1920-24. All these people, in different ways, contributed to an explanation of the picture, the people on it, its location and date. Further advice was given by Roger Flindall.

The picture features the surface of Hopping Mine, to the west side of the unclassified road which extends from Holme Road, Matlock Bath to the hamlet of Upperwood. The cabin of random dry stone construction with a corrugated iron roof was used as a site office and store (SK 2911 5807), now gone, but whose foundations are discernible in the undergrowth. The retaining wall to the left of the road is extant, and the road to the right of this wall is now tarmacadamed. The camera lens was facing due north, the main adit is off the picture to the left, and is now sealed. The tramway issued from this adit and appears to have had a gauge of about 24 inches (610mm).

It has not been possible to identify all the people present but the ponies were better remembered. The following have been identified;

Far left, holding a Tilley Lamp, is Henry Botham, 1892-1973. He lived at Stafford Row, Chapel Lane, Scarthin, Cromford. His daughter, Mrs. Dorothy Shimwell, still possesses a copy of the photograph. She can recall as a child carrying her father's lunch every day, from Scarthin, over Harp Edge, through Upperwood and to the mine entrance. One would hesitate before sending a little girl on such an errand today.

The man in the doorway is Arthur Crowther (witnesses confuse him with a George Crowder), who operated the mine as the Peak Mining and Minerals Company. The mine was known to some locals as Crowther's or the Fluorspar Mine. He has a cigarette in his right hand and his left arm is concealed from the camera. This may have been deliberate as it was withered and he may have been self-conscious about it. He leased the mine from a Colonel Albert C. Cantrell Hubbersty at £20 per annum and 9d (4p) per ton of fluorspar extracted (Flindall and Hayes, 1973). The spar from this mine had a reputation for being of high quality. A mineral lease dated 20th November 1920 was signed by Messrs. A. Crowther, H. Crowther and H. Croft. On 28th November 1919 the executors of Colonel Hubbersty sold 'Hopping Pipe or Upperwood Mine' for £50 to the Peak Mining and Minerals Company Limited of Smedley Street, Matlock and 39-41 Grattan Road, Bradford, Youlgrave. The sale was registered on 4th December 1919 (Barmaster's Collection, Chatsworth).

Behind the pony to the left stands Albert Botham, brother of Henry. He was blinded in one eye by a piece of flying spar. This picture must have been taken shortly after this accident, for close examination of the picture reveals bad bruising around the left eye.

The little boy in front of the right hand pony is Samuel Webster, who lived in Hope Cottages off Holme Road, Matlock Bath.

The left hand pony, "Flower", is seen wearing a head muff. As shifts were being worked at the time by the men, but not the ponies, the other handler is not shown. He was John 'Sam' Robb. After an unhappy childhood in Manchester, he obtained a job at the mine after a spell as a boots at Hodgkinsons Hotel, Matlock Bath. This he got through his friend and fellow pony handler, Sam Webster, with whose family Sam Robb lodged. The latter worked at the mine from 1922 to 1924, when it closed temporarily. His job was to tub fluorspar lump out of the mine and to tip it at the roadside in the middle foreground of the picture. He also tubbed waste rock out of the mine and tipped it down the bank across the road, off the picture to the right. This tip, added to subsequently, is still in evidence. He was paid £1.25 per week out of which he paid Mrs. Webster £1.00 per week for lodging.

Shortly after the photograph was taken, the ponies were replaced with Siberian ponies, renowned for their strength and stamina. These were called "Pip" and "Baldwin" and they would only respond to pseudo-Russian commands. All four ponies were used underground, Sam Robb had charge of "Pip".

The fluorspar was conveyed to Matlock Bath Station by horse and cart, down Holme Road, five journeys a day, carrying 30cwt (approx. 1.5 tonnes) per load. The carter was a contractor and not an employee. The hazards of such a journey, especially in icy weather, were well known. On several occasions the waggons' brakes failed and ponies were killed as a consequence. There was talk, some believe fulfilled, of driving a shaft down from Hopping Mine to Temple Mine with the express purpose of shooting fluorspar down to Temple Walk for easier carting.

The pony which undertook this dangerous mission at the time of the photograph, was an ex-World War 1 gun-carriage animal. It had a reputation for taking off at a rapid pace. Its name was "Taffy", which suggests that it might have originated in the Welsh Valleys.

All the ponies were stabled behind a butcher's shop at the bottom of Holme Road, near its junction with the Parade.

This phase of mining came to an end when the cartgate collapsed near the entrance. Crowther instructed Sam Robb to drive an iron spike into the ground and to throw an attached chain down the escape shaft. This was shaft number 7 on the Flindall and Hayes Survey (Bull. PDMHS Vol. 5, No.4, p 198, 1973). All the miners escaped by this route bar one. The remaining man refused to climb the shaft and had to be dug out through the fall.

As a consequence, work ceased for a while and most of the men obtained work elsewhere. Sam Robb went as a barman at the Midland Hotel, Matlock Bath, later to D.P. Batteries at Bakewell then to Cawdor Quarry at Matlock. Sam Webster went to Mill Close Mine where he stayed until its first flooding in 1938.

Other names remembered, but not identified in the photograph include:

Jack Worthy of Bonsall, foreman of the mine; Arthur Holloway; Jim ? , the haulage contractor, and Conquest or Concannon.

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Sources

Flindall, R. and Hayes, A., 1973. The mines near Upperwood, Matlock Bath I
The Tear Breeches-Hopping-Flurospar-Speedwell Complex. Bulletin Peak District Mines
Historical Society Vol. 5, Part 4, pp. 182-199
County Records Office, Matlock
Barmaster's Collection, Chatsworth

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