

NOTES ON A SPANISH MINING MUSEUM AT LA UNION

Trevor D. Ford

Some 15-20 km northeast of the old Spanish city and port of Cartagena lies a moribund lead-zinc-iron-silver mining field centred on the town of La Union. This unusual name comes from the fusion of three former mining villages. About 10 km further north is the golfing and sailing resort of La Manga.

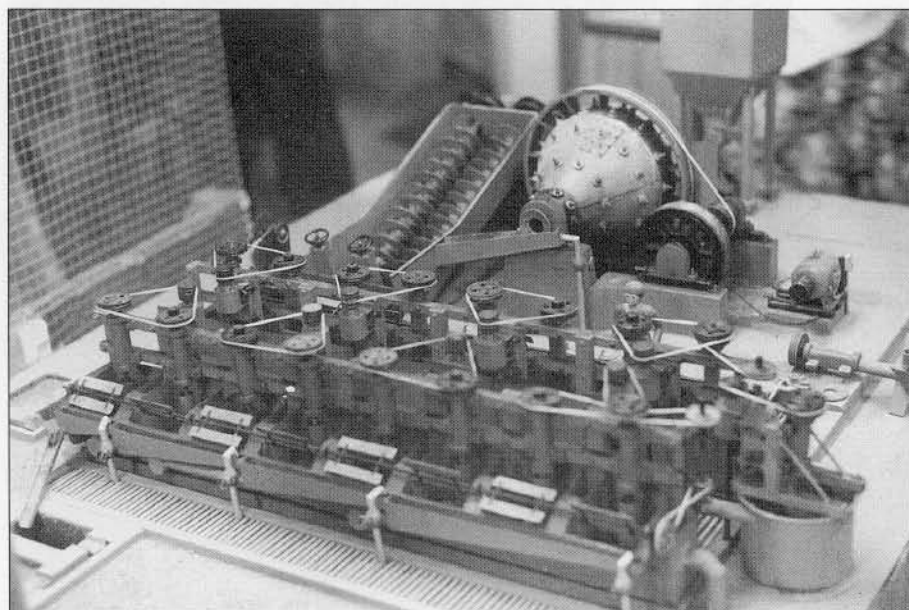
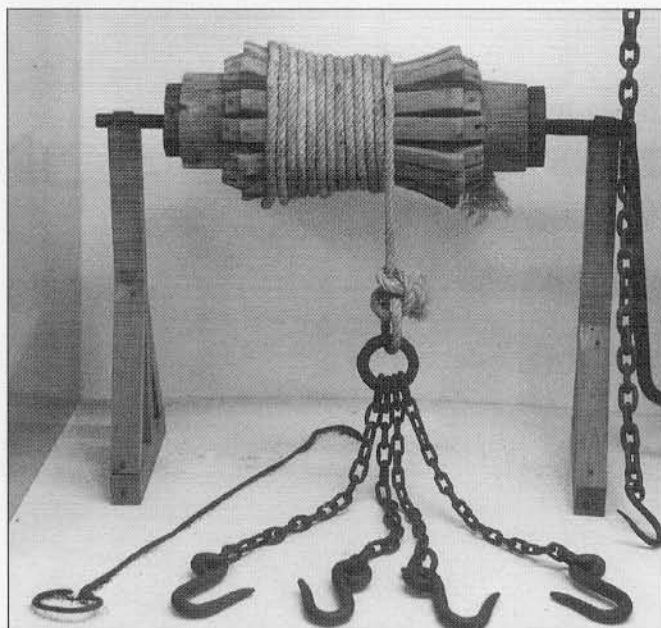
The principal ores produced were galena and sphalerite, with smaller quantities of iron ores (magnetite and pyrite) being raised from some mines. At times production amounted to a third of all lead and zinc ores in Spain. The galena yielded up to 10 grams per ton of silver. In 1976 no less than 30 separate companies were operating but this number soon declined to two, and no mining is active at present. Veins were mined by classical underground

methods but in more recent times three open pits were developed. The host rocks are metamorphosed early Palaeozoic schists and gneisses, covered by a less altered later Palaeozoic transition series of varied character. Nearby are the relics of a former Triassic cover. The geological history ends with a Miocene cover followed by an unconformable, late Tertiary, sheet of lavas and tuffs with numerous dykes and a volcanic neck. Ores occur in all these host rocks and mineralization is seen as a complex history of syn-sedimentary deposition followed by a sequence of enrichment, remobilization and redeposition.

The area is rather arid with scrubby vegetation and with abundant mining relics, shafts, haulage ways, three open pits and various ruined buildings, one with a tall chimney leaning at an alarming angle. My visit was only for a few hours and it was obvious that exploration of the whole area could occupy the serious mining historian for a week or two.

Mining has been going on around La Union for at least 2000 years and the archaeologists have uncovered relics of occupation from pre-Roman times onwards. Mining ceased about 10 years ago when the last open pit mine closed, though there are the usual rumours of big companies interested in possible future developments . . .

A mining museum was opened in the centre of La Union town, in Centro Cultural Asenslo Saez, in 1986. Similar to, but smaller than our Peak District Mining Museum, it is well worth a visit. It has a headframe and a crusher outside but persistent rain precluded a full examination. Inside there are three principal collections - mineralogical, archaeological and ethnological. The mineralogical collection has many fine specimens, both local and brought from far distant places. Amongst the local material I spotted blue fluorspar in good cubic crystals rather like the Weardale fluorspar but not banded like Blue John. Unfortunately labelling was not too good, with some specimens having no label at all, and many of the remainder with no locality.



(top) A hand-operated windlass with rope and hooks.

(left) Working model of a ball-mill (background), a log classifier and a complex bank of flotation cells.

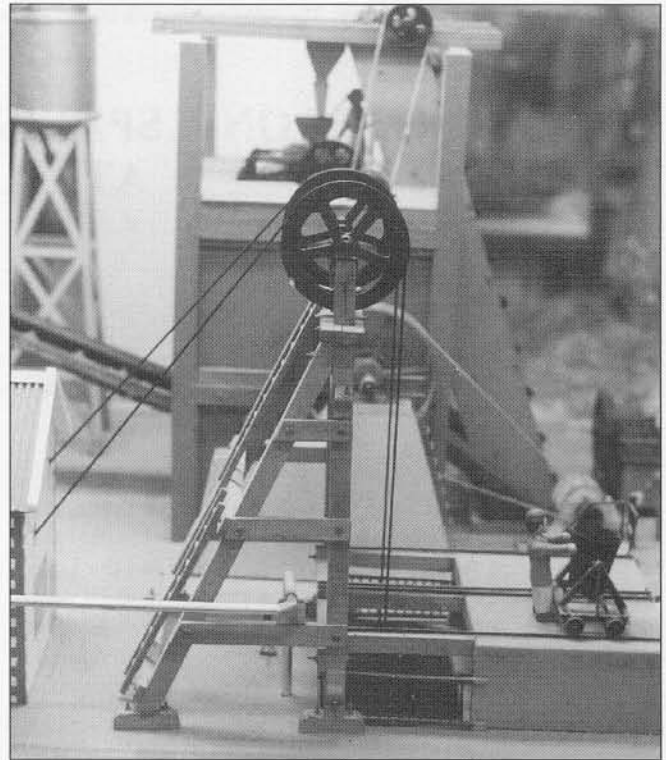
The archaeological collections ranged through the centuries from stone tools, pottery, jewellery, coins to amphora (wine jars).

It was the ethnological displays which I found most interesting. Ethnology is here interpreted as meaning anything to do with human activities, so there is a grey area where archaeology ends and ethnology starts. The human activities covered here were principally those associated with mining.

The curator and guide was a minute Spaniard no more than five feet tall who had worked in the mines all his life and who attributed his small stature to the effects of lead fumes stunting his growth when he was a boy. He spoke no English but was voluble in explaining and extolling the exhibits, most of which were models he had made himself of both old and modern mining equipment. Some were working models, others static. There were a few plans, maps and display panels on the walls.

The accompanying photographs are of a selection of his models, which were rather clustered together in the limited space available. A bus-load of tourists and a school party made viewing difficult too!

Surprisingly there was no bookstall of any kind and no attempt was made to sell guidebooks or postcards etc. A few souvenirs were available - model miner's carbide lamps as key ring pendants.



(above) Headframe with winding house and shaft collar.

(below left) Model of a blacksmith's forge.

(below) Working model of a bank of jiggging boxes.

Trevor D. Ford.
21 Elizabeth Drive,
Oadby, Leicester. LE2 4RD.

