

WINSTER LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER

No. 7 May 1997

Notes of the meeting held on 21 April 1997

The lead industry in Winster: Medieval to Modern, by Dr David Kiernan

Once again the Market House was full, with people keen to hear about the impact of lead mining on Winster and the surrounding villages.

David explained that mining in the medieval times was not well documented because the mines were worked over. Most records cover the period 1500 to 1750.

In the beginning of the 16th century mining was on a very small and local scale. The mines were independent of one another and there were very few full-time miners. Most were farmers, during part of the year farming small holdings. Each mine shaft was probably mined by no more than two men; their wives and children assisted by working on the surface. The mines did not go very deep because they could not go below the water table, consequently when they hit this they moved onto a new shaft. They were free to mine anywhere except gardens, church yards and orchards.

Lead ore drawn from the mines was smelted in huge bonfires, called boles, placed on the crest of south west facing hills. This was quite a chancy business as for the ore to melt, a south westerly wind was needed for 2 days and 2 nights. If the wind changed everything was lost! The boles were thought to be over 20 feet in length. Smelting was carried out twice a year and if successful produced 16 to 20 tons of lead. Most of the smelting in Derbyshire took place on the east side where there was more wood available.

By the 1560s the local lead mining industry was in a poor state, with individual miners unable to sustain a living from it. The 1561 census showed only 112 families living in the parish of Youlgreave. It was only with the introduction of new methods of smelting later that century that the industry began to recover. Ore hearths were created in valleys using water power and half the amount of wood used in boles. These could operate all year round, smelted all grades of ore and were much more

reliable. As more of these were created, more miners and lead merchants moved into the area. The merchants took over the mines and employed 'hiredlings' to go underground, by the end of the 17th century all the small independent mines had disappeared.

The lead was carried by wagons to Bawtry, an inland port, and taken by river on rafts to London. Much of it was then exported to Europe and the Americas where it was used in silver mines and for making bullets for warfare.

By the 19th century lead mining was in decline again, other countries were mining more cheaply and consequently stopped importing lead from Britain, and slowly mines closed down. The last mine in this area to close was Millclose in 1934.