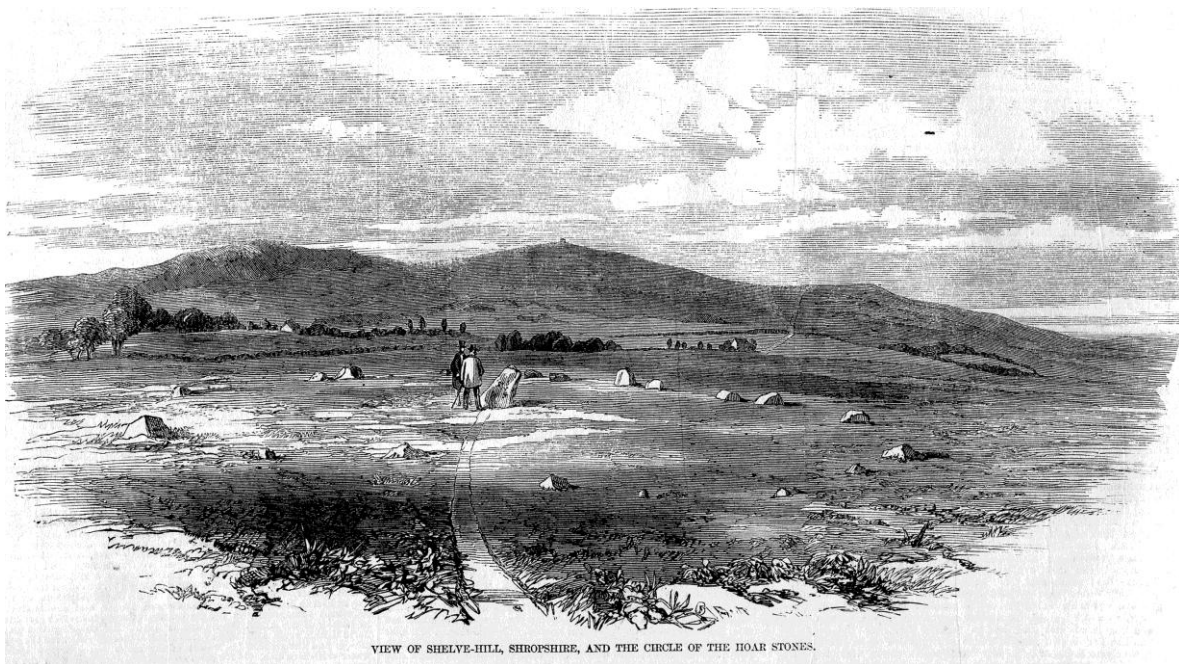


London Illustrated News 4th October 1856

An Excursion to the Roman Lead Mines in the parish of Shelve and the Roman villa at Linley Hall, Shropshire

It would not be easy to find a more beautiful country – rich in every variety of feature which constitutes beauty in landscape scenery – than that in the immediate borders of Wales, and of this perhaps the most picturesque and the least-known portion is that which lies along the boundary of the Welsh counties of Montgomery and Radnor, extending eastwards until it sinks down into the less-interesting plains, and westwardly until it loses itself in the wild mountains. Hills in abundance, rich valleys, picturesque dells and mountain gorges,, covered with wood, and well supplied with water, present a succession of scenery which changes at every step we take, and which is filled with ruins and remains of antiquity belonging to all periods – for these regions appear to have been almost better known in the earlier ages of our country than at present.

They were in fact the scene of the great mining operations of the Romans; they appear subsequently to have been the favourite resort of the Princes of Mercia, and they were evidently the seat of feudal power and civilisation in the Middle Ages of our country. In modern times this district has been comparatively little visited, because it was scarcely accessible; but railways have made a great change in this, as in many other things; and I can honestly recommend the line from Shrewsbury to Hereford, and thence to Ross, as one of the most picturesque in the island. With this facility of access, the part of the Welsh border of which I am speaking will, no doubt, become one day a favourite resort; and Ludlow, one of the prettiest towns in the kingdom, with its fine old castle and picturesque neighbourhood, offers an excellent central point, which the visitor may take as the base of his excursions.



VIEW OF SHELVE-HILL, SHROPSHIRE, AND THE CIRCLE OF THE HOAR STONES.

A recent visit that I made to that neighbourhood had partly for its object the earlier period of Border history. I was desirous of examining the traces of Roman lead

mining in the mountains of Shelve, and to take advantage of the invitation of their hospitable lord, the Rev T.F. More of Linley Hall. In the ordinary way, to reach the parish of More, in which Linley Hall is situated, it is necessary to go to Craven Arms station on the Shrewsbury & Hereford Railway, and thence take either a hired carriage or the stage-coach which goes every other day to the town of Bishop's Castle, about four miles to the south of Linley. I stopped short of Craven Arms, at the Marsh Brook Station, where Mr More had brought his carriage to meet me, and whence the drive to Linley is an extremely beautiful one. After proceeding a little distance through the rich, but broken and beautiful, scenery which is characteristic of this part of the country, we entered a narrow and deep valley, thickly wooded, which winds round the southern extremity of the singular mountain range, known by the name of the Long Mynd. Leaving this valley we entered more open country, though still presenting on each side, a great variety of prospect, in which on the right the Long Mynd mountain continued to hold a prominent place.

On our way we stopped at a small hamlet named Eaton, where a considerable barrow or tumulus, which rose above the corner of the road, had recently been partly cut away for the materials of which it was composed. Tumuli of different shapes and sizes are here scattered over the country in considerable numbers. In the present instance the workmen, who only cut off one end of the tumulus, found, on what appeared to be the original surface of the ground, about two-thirds of the height of the tumulus above the present road, a quantity of burnt matter, with human bones, and several rude, imperfectly burned urns, ornamented with zigzag patterns of the form which has usually been called British. The fragments of these urns, which were all placed with the mouth downwards (the usual position) were collected, and have been preserved by the Rev J. Rogers of the Home, at a short distance from the tumulus. Somewhat more than two miles brought us to the end of an avenue of old oak trees, running nearly north and south, and full a mile in length. It forms the approach to Linley park, which is separated from the northern end of it by the coach road from Shrewsbury to Newtown.

Linley Hall stands on an elevated spot, slightly rising from the end of the avenue, backed to the north by hills rising immediately behind the house, and to the south and west commanding a fine and extensive view over the vales of Bishop's Castle and Montgomery. The park, which is scattered over by magnificent old oaks, runs partly over the sloping ground in front of the house and partly into the valleys of the hills behind. The present hall is a spacious and handsome mansion of the Ionic order of architecture, erected about eighty years ago which was partly on the site of a much more ancient and more extensive building, constructed partly of timber and surrounded by several courts.

The family of More is one of the most ancient in this part of the Border; and before they inhabited Linley Hall, had been established in the castle of More - to which and to the parish they are understood to have given their name - as early as the time of the Conqueror. More Castle stood below the village, rather more than a mile from the present hall. No remains of its walls are visible, but it is probable that some of the foundations remain under the mounds of earth which still mark its site, and which show that it must have been a fortress of considerable strength. The period at which the Mores removed their residence from the Castle to Linley Hall is not very certain, but they appear always to have been leading men in this part of the Border. In the

sixteenth century they were staunch Parliamentarians, the great rivals of the Herberts, and they acted a conspicuous part in the warlike operations in this neighbourhood. At a more recent period the name of More of Linley, in the person of the grandfather of the present proprietor, became distinguished in science and art, and was borne by an accomplished traveller and botanist – the pupil, friend and correspondent of Linnaeus. It is certainly not too much to say that the present representative of the family inherits the tastes and talents of his grandfather; and it is almost an anomaly in the history of our landed proprietors that the same lands which the Mores held when first settled here soon after the Norman Conquest, extending some seven miles towards Shrewsbury, have been preserved entire in the same family down to the present day.

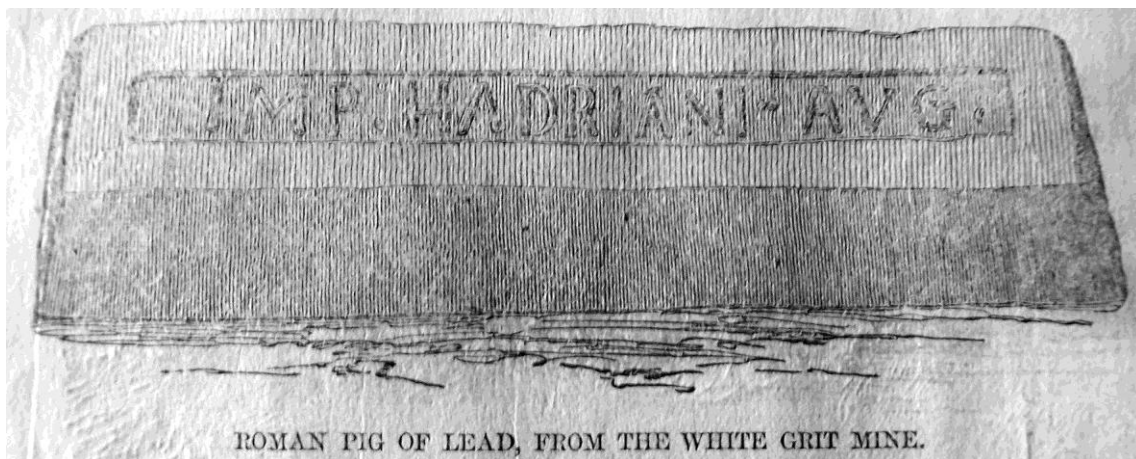
On the second morning after my arrival at Linley Hall, I accompanied Mr More in an excursion to the lead-mining district of the parish of Shelve. Our way lay at first up a beautiful valley, running in a northerly direction behind the house – the slopes of which are covered on each side with thick hanging woods, while a mountain stream which swells at some seasons into a torrent, trickles down the bottom. At the end of nearly a mile and a half the steep and bold slopes of Radley-hill present themselves before us – the southern extremity of the Stiperstones range, round which the valley we had been pursuing branches into two, eastward and westward. Down the eastern branch comes a small tributary stream, called the Black Brook. The hills to the east and south-east of this stream contain copper, which I believe has not yet been worked to any extent; the hills to the east are wonderfully rich in lead, and I believe in lead only. We took the valley to the west, which is still extremely picturesque, although the hills begin to be bare of wood, and we followed the carriage-road about three miles, when we came to the end of Shelve-hill, near the lead mine known as the White Grit Mine. We here quitted our carriage, and sent it on, for the objects which interest us lie high up the hill, and can be approached best on foot, for it is not till we get near the top that we begin first to meet with the remains of the Roman workings, which are found all along the western side.

From the summit, the view westward, with the lofty mass of Corndon to the south-west, is extremely fine. Descending into the valley, where the carriage awaited us, we visited the rather extensive works in which the ore is crushed and washed, and prepared for smelting. As we wander over these barren mountains – barren they seem not destined to remain long, for the beds of purple heather which have hitherto appropriated them are rapidly giving way to fields of corn and turnips. We meet with frequent traces of an ancient population in the shape of tumuli, which are scattered over the fields (there are one or two large ones on the summit of Corndon) of inhabitants of various kinds, of upright stones, and of these mysterious circles which have caused so much discussion among antiquarians. Of the latter objects there is a very interesting example in the middle of a wide expanse of heath, at the distance of about one quarter of a mile to the west of the high road which runs along the side of Shelve-hill, which is known by the name of the Hoar Stone, or perhaps the name belongs more probably to the stone in the middle for it consists of a tolerably large one, surrounded by a circle of twenty-nine smaller stones.

This curious circle occupies the foreground of our view to the western side of Shelve-hill. It is on the face of this hill that the labours of the Roman miners are traced so largely. To explain the peculiar character of these workings it must be stated that the

veins of metal cropped out of the hills towards the west in lines which are almost vertical. There are not less than seven veins which cropped out of the western face of Shelve-hill and the Romans, who found the metal on the surface, began at each spot where it appeared, and followed it into the hill as deep as they could trace it, or they could go with their means of breaking through the rubble. In our sketch, the part of the hill to the extreme right approaches the principal works of the White Grit Mine. The Roman excavations here are numerous, not so deep as they are further north, perhaps the ore was not so abundant at the surface or was not so easy to follow. Some of the mines eventually filled up with broken rock, while others look like attempts to sink shafts which have not been carried out.

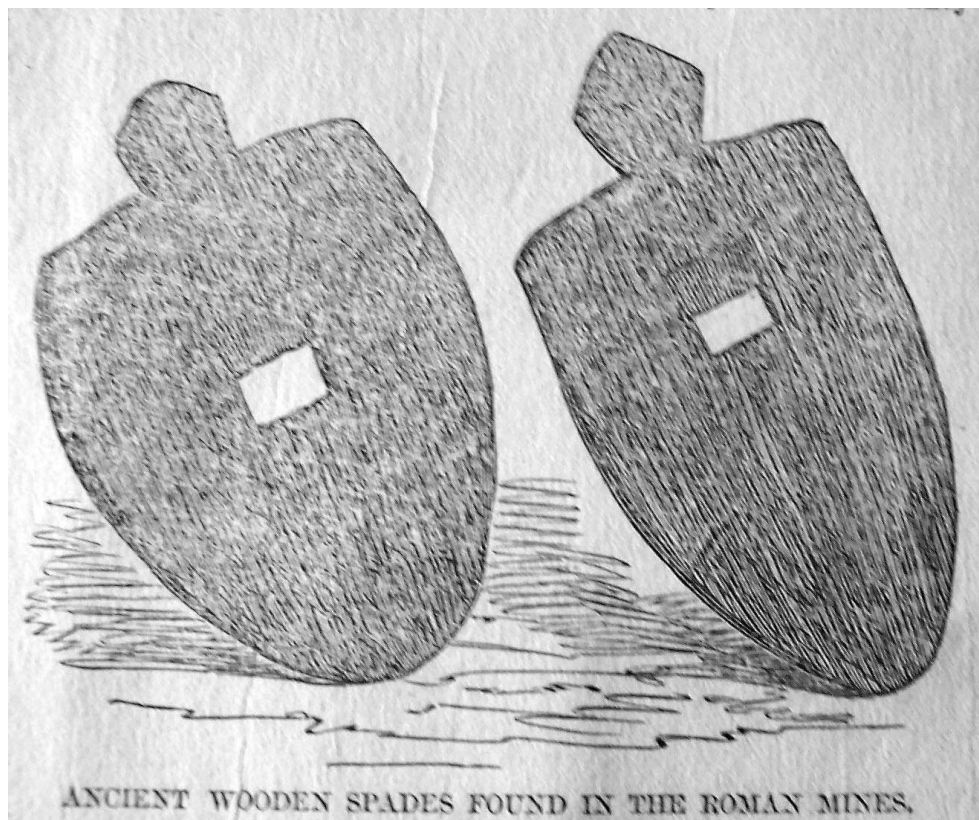
A little beyond the extremity of our view, to the left, close to the road-side, is a modern mine called the Gravel Mine, which, though quite as likely to be as productive as any of the others, is not at present worked – apparently because the company to which it as well as the Grit Mines belong, have leased more ground than they know how to manage. It is here, up the side of the hill behind the Gravel Mine, that the labour of the Romans is seen to most advantage. Two or three veins had cropped out almost parallel to each other, and the Roman miners actually cut the mountain from top to bottom into great ridges or grooves. We might suppose from the appearance that they began at the bottom, and that, after they had followed the metal in one spot as far as they could, they commenced immediately above, and filled up the previous excavation with the waste from the new one. As we approach the top of the hill, the remains of these excavations take the form of great caverns, which have evidently gone to great depth; but the entrance has been clogged up with fallen rock.



I believe that these excavations are still known popularly by the name of the Roman Mines; and no one who examines them well will doubt for a moment their extreme antiquity. It is known that articles of undoubted Roman character have been at times found among the rubbish with which some of them are filled; and I do not think it at all probable that they were worked in the Middle Ages. In the dining room at Linley Hall is preserved a pig of lead in perfect preservation, with the stamp of the Imperial works (under the Romans the mines were all worked in the Emperor's name), IMP.HADRIANI.AVG., which was found some sixty years ago, I believe, in the excavations above the Gravel Mine, just described.

There is a curious notice of the British lead mines, in Pliny, who informs us that the lead was obtained in this island, at the surface of the ground, and so abundantly, that it was found necessary to make a law limiting the quantity taken each year (I suppose to keep up prices). "In Britannia summo terrae corio adae large, ut lex ultro dicatur ne plus certo modo fiat". Plin. Hist. Nat. lib. Xxx, c.17. It can hardly be doubted that Pliny's information refers to the district described above. On this subject, see further in my "Celt, Roman and Saxon", pp. 237, 238, where other inscriptions on Roman pigs of lead are given.

An exactly similar pig of lead, with the same inscription, was found much more recently in the parish of Snead (adjoining that of More), below a large intrenched camp called the Roveries, not much more than a mile to the west of Linley Hall. Both of them weigh one hundred and ninety pounds. From the fact of the first of these pigs of lead being found on the site of the mines, we must conclude that the Romans smelted their ore on the spot. I believe that one other similar pig of lead, at least, has been found in this neighbourhood, or not far from it, with the mark of the Emperor Hadrian – which would seem to show that the mining operations here were, at least, in their greatest activity during his reign (AD 117-138). No doubt if the rubbish which fills these mines were disturbed, other objects of antiquity would be found. Mr More possesses among his relics at Linley Hall two objects which are singularly interesting. They are wooden spades, about the size of the ordinary spade now in use, but of peculiar form, as will be seen by our cut.



They are cut out of pieces of very sound oak, about half an inch thick, cloven roughly with some wedge-shaped tool, and not smoothed.. The handles are only just enough to be held in the hand; but a square hole is cut through the middle of the spade bevelled backward, evidently intended for introducing a staff to act as a lever

where force was required. They are both in extraordinary preservation, so much so as almost to raise a doubt as to their extreme antiquity; but I am assured that they were found several feet under the crushed stones of the Roman mines. They lay in a dry position and I am not aware what limit has been fixed to the duration of oak under favourable circumstances. The canoes cut out of oak timber, which have been found at great depth in various parts of our island must belong to a period much anterior to the Romans, and yet the wood is sometimes found in such good preservation that we may form an idea of the tools with which it was cut.

The richness of the veins of lead in these hills may be imagined from the fact that Mr More has calculated, from records in his own possession, and other sources, that in the parish of Shelve alone at least 60,000 tons have been raised, which at an average of £25 per ton (which I am told is a fair one), would amount to £1,500,000. And yet out of 45,830 yards of mineral vein, only 3,700 yards have hitherto been opened to an average depth of a hundred yards. I understand that experience has shown that the deeper the mines are carried, the richer and more plentiful the ore. The Snailbeach Mine, at the northern end of the Stiperstones range. Has been worked to a depth of 500 yards; and the Bog Mine, between Shelve-hill and Stiperstones, reaches the same depth. In fact the quantity of lead which may be procured hence is only limited by the labour employed. Whilst still occupied in exploring these interesting remains, we were overtaken by a rather heavy storm, which, threatening to last during what remained of the day, put an end to our design of ascending Corndon, and compelled us to make the best of our way home.

Mr More had informed me that, at one corner of the upper or northern end of the avenue leading to his park, some labourers, digging a ditch a few years ago, had met with remains of old masonry, and that similar remains had been found within the park on the other side of the road, and communicated to me his suspicions that they might indicate the site of a Roman villa. On the morning before we started for the mines, I examined the spot, and found immediately under the surface of the ground pieces of mortar and tile, which convinced me at once that Mr More was correct in judging the remains to be Roman; whereupon he put some men to work to dig during our absence, with directions how to proceed. We were agreeably surprised, on our return, to find that they had laid open a room – or perhaps, to judge from part of a cross wall, two small rooms, with the remains of the hypocausts which warmed them. In the division to the west, the floor had been supported by the usual pillars of large square tiles, of which the lower tiles of each pillar remained in their places, but the rest had been broken up. In the other division, which lay eastward, the floor had been supported by short pillars of roughly-squared stones instead of tiles and a large square piece of the floor of cement they supported remained in situ, and separated in such a manner from the walls that it did not appear as if it had originally joined up to them.

The space between it and the walls, however, was narrow, and may have been filled up with flue-tiles, etc. When first opened, quantities of flue-tiles, roof tiles and pieces of smooth stucco from the walls, lay thickly scattered about. The floor of the hypocausts lay from three to four feet under the present surface of the ground, which is uneven, but the floor of the rooms was, to judge by the pieces remaining, but a few inches under the surface. One of the large trees of the avenue stood in the way of our excavations towards the south; and a trench dug eastwards from a breach in the

wall of the room which appeared like a door, gave no traces of wall or floor in that direction. But when we dug as far as we could then venture towards the middle of the road between the avenue and the park, we found the continuation of the hypocaust and other walls running towards the park, and apparently better preserved than in the corner of the avenue.

The avenue is bounded westwardly by a hedge, separating it from a large pasture-field, which runs up to the Shrewsbury road (the road separating the avenue from the park); and this pasture-field is again separated to the west by a road running at right-angles from the Shrewsbury road to Bishop's Castle, from a second pasture-field. I found, on examination, that the whole of the upper part of the first pasture-field presented unevenness of the surface, which seemed to indicate extensive traces of masonry underneath, and the same indications occurred in the second field, on the other side of the Bishop's Castle road, till they ended in what appeared to be the corner of an extensive square, leaving little doubt on our minds at that time, that we were walking over the site of a Roman villa, and that one of no ordinary dimensions. Unfortunately for myself, I was called away from Linley Hall by other engagements before the excavations could be carried any further; but they were in good hands, and Mr More has since continued them with success, and made some rather puzzling discoveries.



The accompanying sketch, taken from the road, that is, looking southwardly, represents the excavations at the head of the avenue as they appeared on the day I bade farewell to my friendly host. After my departure, Mr More continued the excavation southward, by the side of the hedge, and traced for a distance of forty feet a strong stone wall, two feet six inches thick, running parallel to it, and along the eastern edge of this run a strong stone drain, in perfectly good condition, with a pipe

formed of flue-tiles of a curious construction, for the purpose of fitting together. Quantities of black earth lay here and there, apparently ashes from the fires of the hypocausts. The operations were now transferred to the park, where indications of buildings again presented themselves. Mr More traced a wall in the same line, or nearly so, with that which he had just found in the avenue, to the length of a hundred yards, without coming to its termination; and he has also met with a smooth floor of such extent that it was probably that of a large court,

Running at an acute angle from the wall in the park – that is from Linley Hall down the gentle slope of the ground to the site of the villa – was found a tolerably well-preserved aqueduct. A few yards to the east of the present mansion is a pool of water, of no great extent, but which appears to have been there from a remote period. The aqueduct pointed directly to this pool, which therefore we have good reason for supposing to have been originally a Roman reservoir, and which deserves to be closely examined. It is fed from springs on a hill immediately behind the house. Mr More's latest discovery, but by no means the least remarkable one, is that of the remains of a wall, twelve feet thick, running across the narrow valley, about a hundred and fifty yards above Linley Hall. Such a wall as this can only have been one of defence; and it would seem as if the inhabitants of the villa had found it necessary, at some period or other, to protect themselves against the sudden irruptions of the mountaineers from behind. The villa itself was beautifully, and in other respects securely, situated. It embraced within view a vast sweep of country, bounded a few miles to the south by a range of hills – one of the highest summits of which is crowned by the very remarkable circular intrenchments called Bury Ditches. To the west, the view extended far into the Welsh county of Montgomery, with more than one strongly intrenched position immediately in front.

Nor are there wanting around memorials of its ancient inhabitants, for several tumuli are scattered over the park of Linley. One, a large one, a little to the east of Linley Hall, was some years ago scooped out and turned into an ice-house, without leaving any memorial of what was found in it. Two others, on the brow of Linley-hill, are known popularly by the name of The Butts, a term not infrequently applied to tumuli on the Border. Everything seems to indicate that there was here a Roman settlement of some importance, and the result of Mr More's further explorations cannot be looked forward to without great interest. It is evident that the more important parts of the site are as yet untouched. I will only add that where, as in England, the Government itself does not interfere to preserve or explore our national monuments, and render them available for history, it is fortunate for the advancement of science when our landed proprietors, in whose domains such monuments happen to be met with, possess, like Mr More, the judgement and the will to have them properly examined.