New markets, new life for iron ore mine

By ROBERT RAE

AN IRON ore mine which the British Steel Corporation closed last year, has been reopened by some of its former workers and is now supplying high grade haematite to steel and engineering firms, a number of which are in the Sheffield area.

Once, the Florence Mine, at Egremont was one of a number of Cumbrian mines owned by the corporation, and supplying ore to feed its giant blast furnaces.

Now, operating under the name of the Egremont Mining Company, it is Britain's sole producer of haematite.

A year ago, the mine employed nearly 200 people.

To day, salvaged from closure by former employees who pooled their money and formed the new company with the help of the Dowager Lady Egremont and Lord Egremont, it has a workforce of 11.

But the biggest change has probably been in the Florence Mine's market.

Under BSC, the market was corporation blast furnaces and was assured; not so assured, of course, that the ailing public sector could not decide to close everything down, on the grounds that too little ore was extracted to make the mines worthwhile.

Blast furnaces guzzle ore; comparatively speaking, but there are other uses for smaller quantities of high-grade haematite, and this is where the

Egremont Mining Company is setting out its stall.

"We were aware that there was a market outside BSC," says managing director, Mr Frank Johnston.

"There were firms who had requested supplies of this ore over the years, but BSC declined to supply it because they required all the ore for blast furnace purposes."

At least three Sheffield firms are now getting supplies of haematite "lump ore" from Egremont.

The ore is being used as an oxidising agent in steelmaking, and to extract carbon from castings, making them more malleable.

There are also plans to supply foundries with pieces of ore of a given size to pack castings in.

"We have had a very ready response from people using a steady rather than a tremendous tonnage," says Mr Johnston.

"Being small, we are very flexible and we can supply anyone with his requirements at virtually 24 hours notice."

The Egremont Mining Company plans, as a sideline, to produce samples for collectors, schools and other educational institutions, and also intends to open its gates to tourists.

Iron ore mines, Mr Johnston stresses, are quite a different kettle of fish to coal mines.

"Travelling is very easy, there is no inflammable gas — you can smoke your head off if you wish," he says.

Visitors from all over the world who happen to be holidaying in England and get to hear of the mine, keep turning up, so once again the Egremont Mining Company knows it has a ready market.

Mr Johnston and his colleagues reckon their prices are at the right level to compete with imports of similar quality ore and they are hoping to build up orders for 10,000 tonnes of their ore.

Working at that rate, they believe they have enough top quality ore to last them 25 years.

Anyone wanting to arrange trips to the mine once it opens officially to visitors, should contact the company at Florence Mines, Egremont, Cumbria, CA22 2NR.