

Wheal Hermon, St. Just 1560-1976

Justin Brooke

Possibly named after a mountain in the Holy Land, where the river Jordan rises, this mine has the distinction of being the oldest named mine in Cornwall to appear on a map, a map from about 1560 at Hatfield House. In 1584 Norden marked it on his map of Penwith Hundred, but without a name, as was his custom at the time. Situated at Porthnanven on the southern side of the Cot or Kelynack Valley and extending a short way down the coast, the mine has never had a change of name in the four and a quarter centuries of its existence, apart from variants in spelling, though at one time it was worked with its neighbours Letcha (late Cornish for a frying-pan) which adjoins it to the east, and Oak, adjoining Hermon on the cliffs to the south.

The first working of which there is any record can be assumed to have started some time before about 1560 and to have ended after 1584. A sale of black tin to the Angarrack smelting-house is recorded in 1716. After a period of idleness it was taken up in the autumn of 1753, and it is thanks to correspondence that has survived in private possession that an account can be given of this working, which lasted until about 1770 at least.

In November 1753 Henry Usticke of Botallack, who later became Vicar of Breage, wrote to his brother William, a solicitor, of Castle Yard, Holborn, London, who held a one-sixth share in the mine, to tell him that in less than two fathoms driving the (adit) level would hole to the shaft. A horse-whim was set working in December, when it was hoped that the miners would soon see the deep bottoms. About ten tons of tinstuff were broken during that quarter. In mid-January 1754 John Maddern of St. Just, William Usticke's mineral agent, wrote to say that the whim was at work and that two pitches had been set underground at 1-7th tribute. He expected that the bottom would be cleared the following week, and had been told that the manager, Captain Benjamin Davy, intended to set it on tribute as it would not be profitable for the adventurers to work it themselves. The adit end was "quite out of Tyn at present", and the last call, of £27.9s. per 1-6th share, was high because of the cost of the whim. In February two pitches were set, one taken by cousin Martin Usticke for his brother in law John Jellard, at 12s.11d. in the £ "under the level of a deep adit to the westward from the end," and Richard Grose took the other, above the level, to the westward, at 11s.3d. in the £. While Mr. Allen drew the ore and waste with the whim at 4s.6d. per 100 sacks (or 10 tons), the adit end was set to drive at £1.6s.6d. per fathom. Henry Usticke thought there were four tribute pitches being worked in the mine, and one man, James Phillips, working at unspecified tasks on the owners' (i.e. the shareholders') account.

In the March quarter of 1754 it was hoped to raise six tons of tin stuff which was valued at 40 per hundred or 40 cwts. of black tin to a hundred sacks or ten tons. The modern equivalent to this in pre-decimalisation days would be 448 lbs. of black tin to the ton of ore. The adit was still being driven, in hard ground, without tin. Despite the favourable outlook most of the tribute workings were paying cost, and some pitches were renewed at a high tribute. However, by the end of the month two of the best pitches were abandoned, Lawry's pitch having holed into old workings and John Jelbard's pitch having proved but very indifferent. The lode in the end of the adit turned out better, and the quarter's output was 1,000 sacks or 100 tons, giving a profit of about £10 per share.

Because of the abandonment of the pitches in the bottoms the adventurers put their own men in, on owners' account, and in June the mine began to present a better appearance, with the lode 18 in. wide and "richer stuff I never saw", wrote Henry to William; some 14 tons were raised from it in about two months. Sinking was in progress, after which they intended to drive under the adit. The improvement lasted for a while, but in January 1755 Henry reported to William that the mine had of late proved but so so. The lode in the dip (dippa; the Cornish for a pit) was large but not rich, though the adit end was pretty hopeful and the lode in it was small but well-tinned. In February a drive was started under the deep bottoms, and in May the lode in the adit came in rich, though the mine was poor everywhere else. The deep adit turned poor and was stopped in June, but the lode in the (shallow) adit end continued very well, though in very hard ground. In July the mine was "very poor", and in January 1756 Henry reported that at the last division of ore there was only 28 sacks to a share, or 168 sacks, representing a total of only 16¾ tons. The division of ore was between shareholders, who had to arrange to take it away and have it dressed at their own cost at one of the stamps in the valley, as Wheal Hermon did not dress its own ore. In July Henry wrote from Breage that he had heard at third hand that the mine "about makes wages", or was just meeting cost, though the tribute pitch "in pursuance of our late agreement, has as yet met with Northing."

Here the correspondence ends, though the working evidently continued, since in August 1768 the mine owed £12.12s.11d. to the bankrupt estate of William John, a Penzance merchant, which his trustees hoped would be paid by a Mr. Davy, who may have been the purser.

Part of the mine was worked as Lower Hermon Bounds in March 1787, when a lease was granted to Charles Ellis. The deed stated that the bounds lay in the nearby tenement of Letcha, "on the Load (lode) that the said Charles Ellis is now working from the present Little Winds (winze) shaft, eight fathoms westward and fourteen fathoms eastward of the shaft. Dues were 1-15th to the mineral lords and 1-10th of the balance to the bound owners. Another pair of bounds was leased at the same time to John Wallis, to work on the lode that Charles Ellis and his partners were working, from the boundary of their sett westwards so far as the bounds extended. The dues were the same for both lessees. In February 1816 the bounds may have been renamed, for an auction was held of a share in them, under the name of Great and Little Hermon Bounds, from the estate of John Millett, Gent., deceased.

Idle for a while once more, the mine was set working again in 1822. In January 1823 about 40,000 (20 tons) of its black tin was auctioned at Bosavern Stamps. In October 1825 the whole mine was put up for sale by private contract by Captain Nicholas Grenfell of St. Just Churchtown, who had a plan and the books. In its present working, he noted,

it had produced large quantities of tin of excellent quality and had given a profit. There was a 32ft. x 3ft. water-wheel, the first machinery to be recorded for the mine. It was taken up, together with Wheal Letcha and Wheal Oak, and worked steadily until, by 1835, it reached a depth of 50 fathoms, still drained by a water-wheel. In May 1836 it was offered for sale as a going concern, owing to the death of the managing adventurer, at auction in Penzance. Its equipment included the water-wheel, 40 fathoms of pumps, horse whims, ropes and other items. It had, in fact, been suspended before mid-March. Collins states that the mine worked from 1837 to 1841, but the writer has found nothing to confirm this.

The mine was working again in 1874-75 with John Chenhalls as purser and manager and Captain T. Chenhalls as agent. In 1876 it changed hands again, with Richard ("Banker") Boyns, who had formed the company, as purser, and Captain James Bennetts as manager. In setting up the company Boyns was assisted by Captain Henry Eddy of North Levant Mine (now part of Geevor), where Boyns was also purser. There was now good promise of a reward, "as they have now so rich a lode that a solid mass of good tinstuff 5 ft. long, 4 ft. wide and 2½ ft. thick, was the other day blown out in one piece", according to the West Briton, quoted by the Mining Journal. The mine was held from Douglas Round of London and the Rev. Baron Hichens of Chester at an annual rent of £20, presumably merging into dues. Richard Hichens was the owner in fee of the land.

The company may have held land on the north side of the Cot Valley, which had been heavily mined in the 18th and early 19th centuries, for at the West Penwith Sessions, held in November 1878, the lessors of the mine were taken to Court by Dr. C. Le Neve Foster, the Inspector of Mines, for allowing ten shafts to remain unfenced. Alfred Chenhalls, the local agent for the lessors, had had five shafts fenced in 1875. The Bench was of the opinion that the lessors were not liable, as the lease was still in existence. The case was accordingly dismissed and costs were refused, though the prosecution claimed the right of appeal. The lessees were then summoned for having 54 unfenced shafts within fifty yards of the highway, ten of which shafts were included in the original summons. The lessees replied that the mine had been closed between November 1876 and February 1878, that 12 of the 54 shafts had been fenced, and that the work of fencing the others was in progress. The case was then adjourned for a month. In January 1879 the case came into the Court of Common Pleas for a ruling as to what constituted the abandonment of a mine. The defence in the lower Court had been that operations had only been suspended and that the machinery had not been removed. As no discontinuance was proved, the appeal was lost.

Work was resumed at the mine, and in 1880 it employed eleven people, but operations appear to have stopped the following year. In October 1891 it was reported that Captain James Andrewartha was trying to form a company to work the mine, and later he reported that engines had been bought and that sufficient shares had been taken up to cover the preliminary expenses. The mine had formerly been worked by a private individual, and had made good returns and respectable profits, but difficulties over buying an engine, which was absolutely necessary, had led to its closure. In April 1892 Captain Josiah Thomas of Dolcoath Mine, who had been commissioned to inspect Wheal Hermon, refused to go down the shaft from surface as there was only a windlass and a piece of borrowed rope. However, he hoped to go into the mine by the adit; the first level was 35 fms. down, and below it the mine was full of water. He later reported that in his view the mine's reputation was based largely on hearsay from old miners. He did not consider the prospects to be brilliant by any means, by any mode of working that might be adopted, though a

high price of tin would, he thought, justify spending £5,000 to £6,000 on it as a speculation.

The mine subsequently came into the possession of H.F. Olds, of St. Just, and in February 1914 the Mining Magazine remarked that it was fortunate that with the closing of Botallack Mine another source of employment was open to the discharged miners. Olds was on the committee of management of Levant Mine, and had opened Wheal Hermon above water level and equipped it with 15 heads of Cornish stamps run by water power, together with the necessary dressing plant. The ore was expected to average 15 lbs. of black tin per ton, and there was sufficient ground above adit to last for many years on the then scale of working. As luck would have it Mr Olds, who was the mine's manager at the time, met with a fatal accident in November 1914, when he fell down the shaft. Plans were then put in hand to form a Syndicate to work the mine, and production of black tin continued until the end of 1915.

In the middle of 1924 the mine was acquired by Corderoy Mines Ltd., together with the adjoining mines of Letcha and Progo. The Hermon and Trojan lodes were regarded as the mine's most important ones, and the adit was opened for 2,000ft. The very high values of tin said to have been found resulted in the granting of an option over the mine to the Uroz Co. Ltd., successor to a company formed in 1912 to work oil-wells on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Favourable reports were made on the property by Josiah Paull, M.I.M.M., the Manager of South Crofty Mine in Pool, and by Major R.C.N. Robinson, of Corderoy Mines Ltd. The first-named recommended spending up to £10,000 on further exploratory work so that 1,500 ft. of the adit could be cleared and examined. The lode appeared to have been worked at adit level, but there were no records of the result. Major Robinson thought that if the requisite capital could be provided there would be every prospect of the mine becoming an important and profitable producer. During the testing of the mine ore from it was assayed by Christoe & Sons of Truro, who recorded that the tin concentrate was 68.3% metal. Operations came to an end in 1929, without any recorded production. The Uroz Co. was taken over by the Consolidated Mines and Minerals Development Corporation Ltd., which retained the option on the mine until 1932. That company, in turn, was liquidated about 1933, when all its directors resigned, and it was struck off the Register in 1935.

Wheal Hermon was looked at during the 1939-45 War, but no operations resulted. In 1964, following the formation of Penwith Mineral Explorations Ltd., Wheal Hermon was leased by that company from a Mr Olds, presumably a descendant of the former manager. In 1970 the company unwatered the mine to the 100ft. level to assess its potential for working under the sea. Samples taken proved encouraging, and it was found that the flooding of the level was from a surface shaft-head and not from the seepage of sea water. Other prospecting activities occupied the company's attention until March 1976, when it went into liquidation.

As the guest of the Uroz Company, the late Dr A.K. Hamilton Jenkin inspected the mine in December 1927. He noted that the backs were 270ft. above the adit, and had been stoped out to surface. At one point the adit widened, and here old men had cut marks, "W.R. 1759", "J.N., J.P. 1759", and "W.T., P.H., J.B. 36 V3, W.H." It is possible that J.P. was James Phillips, who had worked in the mine on owners' account in February 1754, and J.B. could well have been John Bennett, nicknamed The Preacher, who was also mentioned in the Ustick letters. This gives a clue to 36 V3, for of all the books of the Bible with 36 chapters, Ezekiel is the most apposite:

“Therefore prophesy and say, Thus saith the Lord God; because they have made you desolate, and swallowed you up on every side, that ye might be a possession unto the residue of the heathen, and ye are taken up in the lips of talkers, and are an infamy of the people.” This can be read to mean that the richest parts of the mine had been picked out and it was about to close or to fall into the hands of outsiders who, in their ignorance of mining, might be persuaded to buy out the existing shareholders’ interests.

References:

Brooke Index, County Record Office, Truro

References (those marked * are in private possession):

*Sketch Map of West Cornwall, c1560, Hatfield House, *Usticke letters; *Counterpart leases 1787; *F.C. Owen, Circular 1928 (7.1); *Penwith Mineral Explorations Ltd. file; Oats Collection, County Record Office, Truro; A.K. Hamilton Jenkin in Journ. Royal Institution of Cornwall 1931, 443; ditto Notebook, County Records Office, Truro; Clive Carter deposit, County Records Office; Truro; Royal Cornwall Gazette 1816 (3.2), 1823 (22.1), 1825 (22.10); West Briton-1836 (11.3, 22.4, 29.4), Mining Journal 1836 (30.4), 1876 (30.12), 1878 (16.11), 1879 (8.1, 22.3), 1891 (10.10, 14.11), 1892 (30.4), 1915 (11.12), 1925 (18.7), 1928 (9.6, 24.11), 1929 (26.1), 1930 (25.1, 23.8); Hunt’s Mineral Statistics 1874-75; Cornish Telegraph 1876 (1.8); J.H. Collins, **Observations on the West of England Mining Region**, 1912, 508; Mining Magazine 1914 (Feb.), 114; Mining World 1914 (21.11, 28.11), 1927 (3.9), 1928 (3.10), 1930 (23.8); Stock Exchange Official Year-Book 1929-35: **Stock Exchange Register of Defunct and other Companies** 1956; H.G. Dines, **The Metalliferous Mining Region of South-West England** 1956, 62.