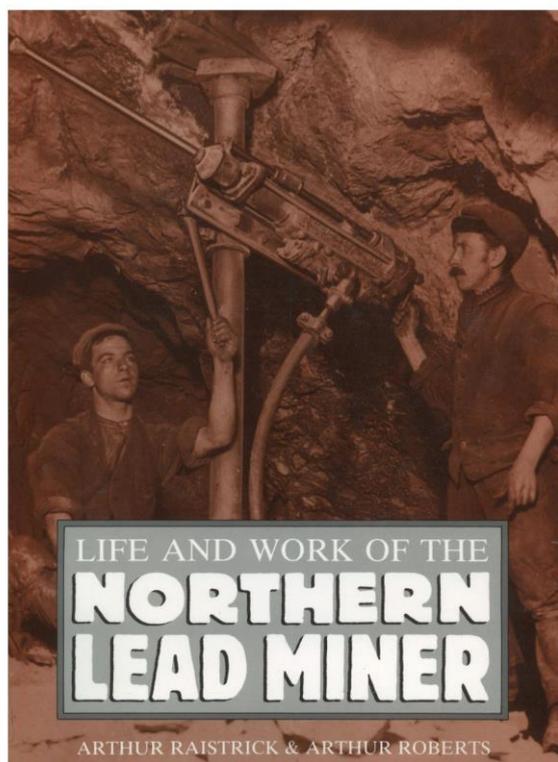


# Life and Work of the Northern Lead Miner

Arthur Raistrick and Arthur Roberts

(1984)



This evocative book is chiefly made up of photographs, 200 in total, taken from a collection held at Beamish Museum. They cover the period of the later phase of Lead Mining in the North Pennines, including the Tees, Tyne and Wear Valleys, and some way into Cumbria and Yorkshire. Most of them were taken between 1860 and 1910. The first thing to say is, '*Don't skip the Introduction!*' The book opens with eleven pages giving the history of the industry and provides essential background for the photographic record. Even if you don't intend to open a mine of your own – though there is enough detail, almost, to make that feasible – the text gives you the information you need to be able to interpret the visual evidence: not just what the photos are saying, but even, you begin to suspect, what the mute faces would be saying if they could.

Dim memories of O Level Geography lessons may be stirred by the description of the processes of mining for lead. The material covered includes the access to and extraction of the ore, the dressing and smelting of it and all the logistical paraphernalia associated with transporting it between the various stages. Obviously, entire books could be written about what is covered in single sentences here – the use of horses and ponies – and little boys; the chemical and mechanical ingenuity of a procedure that evolved through generations – from Roman times to the present day. Particular geographical points of interest may emerge for some readers, encountering familiar names and

discovering what industrial history lies behind their now more tranquil environs, eg Greenside Mine at Helvellyn, the workings at Alston, Middleton-in-Teesdale, Eggleston and even Richmond – there is a picture of the Weighing of Lead at Richmond Station in around 1870.

It is the human story that will stay with you and, as ever, that is in the detail. We are told that a man would usually arrive at work – and it could be a long hike along the Level, or tunnel - ‘wet-shod’, unless he had uncommonly stout boots, because he would have been sloshing through the streams that were an inescapable feature of draining slopes, not to mention the water wheels used for hoisting in the deeper shafts. One job for the smaller lads was to be a ‘windy billie’, operating a hand blower to keep the air stirring. If you worked above ground in the smelting process, your face would be red-hot but the back of your neck forever in a draught, the ventilation necessary to stop you being poisoned by the fumes. The ‘dressing’ wasn’t much better, entirely exposed to the elements and constantly wet because everything to do with breaking down the first product, or Bouse, was conducted with the aid of water.

If nothing else, the vocabulary is fascinating: Scrabble players take note and ‘Call my Bluffers’ prepare to hazard a guess... as to the meaning of... Hushing, and Hotching, the Buddle and Tremmel, the Adit, Stope and Winze.

And at last to the pictures, which immediately make more sense in the light of the explanation that precedes them. The first ones cover very early stage mining, the opencast gashes and round ‘bell pit’ workings that date back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are small mine buildings as well as the more complex, extensive accumulations of machine housings that start to look like villages in their own right. Equipment and men, groups and individuals, countryside and interiors, all are accompanied with a little text to fix the scene and date. What most linger in the memory are inevitably the photographs of the work itself, the tunnelling, the primitive mechanical inventions, the obvious danger and difficulty, the dark and the dust. The last few photographs illustrate a little of the cultural life of the mining communities, its parades and bands. The final one, ‘The Farewell’, shows a Weardale mining family about to emigrate: 1880 onwards saw such a drop in the price of lead that many mines closed permanently.

This is a sobering book in many ways but a highly necessary one if we are to read our industrial landscape correctly.