

The Sallet Hole

Fell-walkers who are geologists, landscape sketchers and the like, with an eye for natural form, must often wonder at the queer facts they meet with. Our hills are full of details that can't have been shaped by erosion or any straightforward act of Nature, though we begin by fancying that everything is wild and primeval, untouched by man and his sophistications. When we were very young we rejoiced in the notion that God made the country by himself, whoever built the nasty town we had come from. But when we grow up, we find everything mixed, at any rate in the Lake District. We can't escape from the works of man; and, after a while, we learn that much of the romance of the fells means that men have been there before; that this is no undiscovered country, and that we are not the first who ever burst into the silence.

So wrote W G Collingwood, the prewar mining historian¹.

The great yellow Komatsu trucks burst the silence as they guzzled and grunted along the broad ribbon of yellow mud which followed the undulations of Longstone Edge. Bored drivers slumped listlessly over their steering wheels as their enormous machines crept with labored languor tail-to-tail like true Caterpillars.

Driving rain blasted over the Edge and soaked the leeward sides of my trouser pipes as crystal drops of upland rain dripped mesmerically from my cloth cap peak. The gusting wind heavily rustled the full-leaved beeches which started to lend a sheltering comb to the exposed escarpment as I made my way along the pretty chasm of High Rake trying to avoid the maculating spatter of the passing truck wheels. This great man-made canyon was formed by centuries of lead-miners as they followed the vein for a mile or more across the girdle of England. Maybe their hewing ceased fifty or a hundred years ago. My Burt² states that the Mining Record Office logged work at High Rake from 1868 to 1901 and noted a mere forty-five tons of ore for 1872 only. Clearly such a great work would have yielded much more over the centuries.

At last I reached the isthmus of uncarved ground by which I could cross North to Coomb Dale. I paused to view the lonely chasm with its verdant grasses and saplings clinging to the walls of tilted strata, lush and virid in the wan sunlight of a rainy summer's noon. The rake silently exhibited all that eerie and gentle melancholy of The White Peak and I thought that here was a real piece of industrial archeology which could serve as an amenity walk.

In the unseasonable wetness I crossed to the long-uncropped gore where years ago I had found cowslips and orchids growing in sanctuary between the footpaths pastures and excavations and from there I walked down into the glaucous solace of the tiny limestone defile which dips dryly to the sequestered incision of Coomb Dale. The lambs and ewes protested as I ambled downhill, and little rabbits skittered away mercurially as little brown balls with fleeting white scuts signalling their departure.

I sat in the silence on an already dry high flank as the sun burst from the day's only glode enlivening the grays and greens of the hawthorn-dotted slopes and their guarding outcrops of intercalated limestones and shales hunkered like the half-buried ruins of an ancient city.

Amidst the peace I thanked God for bringing me again to this lovely place and for the timid creatures who graced it and begged Him to defend them from Fear and from Want until He should call them to the Elysium in which strife and hunger are redundant. I did not curse the rain, as in sorrier times I should, for I now appreciated that to it and to Him sheep, rabbit and man

owe the Life to see the Sun. Across the gorge two very black sheep stood unmoving in the undergrowth basking in its scanning rays.

After Lunch I scrambled down the thalweg over the broken clitter and through the glades of ash and hawthorn into the crossing dale. There a blocked abandoned road was flanked by a mud-stained stream whose copious flow descended the valley with unnatural celerity.

I turned upstream and walked to where years ago I had chanced upon The Sallet Hole. The great adit sat gated and gushing below the steep little ravine whose tree-infested gash harbored the lush and lime-fed salad which had lent the ancient mine its name. The compressor house cum canteen was now bricked-up with breeze blocks and it was clear that no longer would the dark damp levels ring to the roar of jackhammers and neither would spectral shifts of candle-capped miners be seen resolutely to troop through its ramparts of solid rock.

The Record Office logged eight tons of lead in 1876 and one hundred and eight tons of barytes from "Sallad Hole" but its main product this century was fluorspar, extracted in my time by Laporte Industries Limited.

As I reached the portal a man drew up with a tractor and trailer and, descending, told me it was "funny old weather". He approached amid the gurgling stream and sprouting saplings. I told him that the last time I was here the buildings were operational and lorries drove up and down. He remarked that work had finished at this hole in 1993 but that there were five miles of galleries underground and Laporte's continued work at Hucklow having replaced compressed air with diesel, expelling the fumes through abandoned upcasts. I told him I had just come from Ladywash where the great shaft of the long-lorn lead-mine was billowing steam and smoke which had surprised and perplexed me. The man paced around nervously beneath the peak of his blue baseball hat and I regarded him with some suspicion. I confided that I taught in a technical college, with which he commiserated. I enquired whether he farmed locally or whether he was attached to The Company. He replied that he was the self-employed contractor who had planted the plastic-piped saplings beside the track but confessed his work unnecessary as broad-leaved trees seeded naturally and flourished throughout the ravine as was indeed obvious. Continuing our industrial conversation I asked him if there was much of a steel industry left in which to market fluorspar and he sensibly remarked that fluor had a great diversity of uses and that Laporte was primarily a supplier to the chemical trade.

The man said that the cost of living locally was very high and that there was little employment for younger people, and that unstable. He said he paid £1200 Council Tax for a two-up two-down in Longstone and that a bus trip to Bakewell (six miles) cost £8.40 one way. I expressed astonishment at both figures and wondered at what the Derbyshire County Council would expend their revenue. He invited me to visit their headquarters at Matlock and examine the splendor of their offices. He was understandably skeptical of the desirability of heavy industry in the National Park and sympathised with the still arduous lives of miners toiling in diesel smoke and with their short average lives.

I remarked that at least the industry provided pay packets for lorry drivers and others who toiled around the landscape and beneath it. But I thought also of the dismal lack of imagination shown by authorities who would fill the beauty of the rakes with interminable trains of sludge and other foul refuse in the name of "landscaping". Of mistaken ideas of safety and amenity which fill holes, grass spoil tips and plant little trees where little trees love to be and grow amply in the bounty of God's sanction.

Far to the South in Cornwall, South Crofty closed this year terminating three thousand years of British tin production. They say that The Savior himself came there to buy tin, with the wealthy dealer who would gift Him his own grave. Our land is a palimpsest scrievned with

the striving of ages. Man, beast and herb have refashioned its structure and its surface to the modes of the time, and time bears away the marks of place. It bore away Zaphrentis and Lithostrotion and buried their mortal vestiges here. It will dissolve even these.

Energy is the restless midwife of flux and change, laying down herself for her eons. But beyond the Mother of the Planets lies the Eternal, standing apart from the Created, discerned and yet unknowable by that trapped in the cycles of time.

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