

Early Period of Mining in Swaledale (Pre 16th Century)

Before the arrival of the Romans, Swaledale formed part of the kingdom of Brigantia. The Brigantes were Iron Age tribes who occupied much of the North Pennines and were skilled metal workers. Excavations of their dwellings have revealed small articles made from lead, smelted lead and pieces of ore; this suggests that they collected ore from exposed surface outcrops or stream beds and had practised the process of smelting before the Romans arrived.

After the Roman's defeat of the Brigantes in AD74 some of the prisoners were taken to be used as slave labour in mines at Hurst & Greenhow, this was common Roman practice at the time. The Romans are likely to have further developed mines already discovered by the native people of the area. The lead produced at Hurst was sent to Catterick and York (Roman stations).

A pig of lead found in Swaledale at Hurst bore the inscription and head of Hadrian, Roman Emperor 117 – 138 AD. Another Roman pig of lead was found by the late Francis Garth of Crackpot whilst he was levelling a field. Not realising the historical value of the find, Mr Garth smelted the lead down to repair the hinges on his field gates.

After the Romans there is little record of mining for many centuries, although lead was in demand by the Anglican settlers for coffins, pipes, tanks and buildings. After the Norman Conquest the Honour of Richmond (which included Swaledale) became the property of Count Alan of Brittany, who built Richmond Castle, so creating a huge local demand for lead. Old mines were expanded and new ones discovered and by the end of the 12th century there was sufficient lead production levels to allow for export. Lead from Crown lands in Swaledale was sent for roofing at Waltham Abbey, Windsor Castle and Clairvaux Abbey in France.

Documents relating to the fourteenth century indicate that the mines were regularly worked. In 1307 money was being raised to build the town wall of Richmond and the king granted tolls on goods sold at Richmond market; a toll of 2d was put on every cartload of lead sold. Towards the end of the thirteenth century the term 'lead merchant' began to be used, although at this time it was more likely that these merchants were the actual miners bringing their lead to market.

The Manor of Grinton had been granted to Bridlington Priory in 1312 and after the dissolution in 1538 it reverted to the Crown. After twenty years the mines within the Manor were leased to Lord Henry Scrope and Arthur Phillippe for an annual rent of twenty shillings.

The leasing of the mines has caused great confusion through the centuries and many quarrels and legal disputes. Added to this was the often unclear definition of boundaries, grants from the Crown were often made in terms of 'Lordships, Manors, wastes and commons' at a time when few of these had actually being marked out on the ground or decided by law.

(Source: Rastrick, A (1975): Lead Industry of Wensleydale & Swaledale Vol 1, Moorland Publishing. Fawcett, E (circa 1939): Lead Mines in Swaledale MS. North Yorkshire County Records Office)