

## Gwydir Miners' Audio Trail

Welcome to the Gwydir Miners' Audio Trail, which starts at Hafna car park near Betws-y-Coed.

### 1. Introduction and Hafna Mine

At least four generations of my family have worked in the Gwydir lead mines. My great grandfather and grandfather were both miners, my dad was a miner at Willoughby mine, and I worked just down the road at Parc Mine.

A hundred years ago, almost everyone around here was involved with mining. Many combined mining and farming, working a smallholding or helping on local farms to supplement the unreliable mining pay. In addition to the big mines such as Hafna, the ground is riddled with pits, shafts and trenches where groups of two or three men prospected, hoping to strike it rich! A few were lucky - Cobbler's Lode, near Parc Mine, was named after local cobblers who discovered a rich vein of lead and made a fortune. Discoveries like this raised hopes and encouraged further prospecting, but they were few and far between, as the veins of ore around Gwydir were often thin and difficult to get to!

The mine owners were desperate to attract investors and would go to great lengths to publicise the potential of their mine. Some were just carried away by the mining fervour and lacked the experience to run a mine properly. Others were downright dishonest, making unrealistic claims about the probable rewards and conning money out of investors! Hafna, above you here, is a typical example of these Victorian mines – very showy buildings but little real return!

My dad didn't encourage me to go down the mines because the earnings were so unsteady. Mines changed owners frequently and many went bankrupt, so miners were often laid off. However, the tough miners were always admired, and the young lads around here were always keen to join their ranks.

## 2. Parc Mine – surface panel

Parc Mine was the last working mine in Gwydir, finally closing in the 1960s. Jobs at the mine were highly sought after, and there was a great atmosphere there. I was only there for a year at the end but it was the best job I ever had. Most workers were local so two Leyland Comet lorries used to pick us up from Llanwrst Bridge and drive us up to the mine, while the bosses travelled by Land Rover with their own driver! The town really felt it when the mine closed.

When he was fifteen in 1956 my friend Albert started work on the 'Black Gang', loading the processed lead and zinc ores onto lorries. He earned £7 per week plus a monthly bonus. The gang were always black – hence their name – as the wet ore splashed all over them. You didn't have masks or protective clothing in those days! When he started the rest of the lads played a trick on him, as they always did to any new boy. As he started shovelling, they told him to make sure he fully-filled his shovel, and of course, he could hardly move that laden shovel of lead!

When Albert turned seventeen, he went underground clearing the rubble from the rails after blasting, under the guidance of an experienced miner. Another youngster's job was collecting and refilling the miners' tea flasks – they used to eat where they worked as there wasn't a proper mess-room underground. Youngsters hoped to work their way up the ranks to become a timberman or a driller. Everyone's ambition was to go underground, as the pay was better and you felt you had become 'a real man'!

### 3. Parc Mine - underground panel

I was a welder so worked throughout the mine, wherever I was needed. I was amazed how far the tunnels extended. The longest stretched nearly two miles, almost reaching the Ugly House! It wasn't cold underground and it stayed at a steady temperature throughout the year. It was wet though and you could hear the constant drip of water.

Experienced miners could really read the rock. I'll never forget one manager, John Froggatt. He was a man of few words but had an unrivalled understanding of the rock. Once I was called to repair a steel air pipe that had broken when a poorly set blast had shattered the rock. We'd just finished the repairs when along came John Froggatt and immediately made us move our equipment away. "*Pass me that bar*", he said, and lightly touched one rock with the bar, making at least a ton of rock fall! We'd been working there without realising the rock was loose, but he could tell immediately!

The drillers were the best paid miners and also got a bonus – up to £100 per month on top of their wages – that was big money in 1963! It was pretty dangerous work. They often worked high up in a stope (a cavern made by mining) balanced only on thin planks of wood, supported on metal pegs drilled into the rock. Top driller Karl Huzarski once fell 300 feet without breaking any bones, only losing two teeth! Lead miners were tough!

We were a musical bunch and loved to sing as we walked out along the tunnel. The acoustics underground were superb. I remember one mine captain from South Wales saying, "*I love to hear them singing at the end of shifts – it's bloody beautiful!*"

#### **4. Vale of Conwy Mine**

At this small mine, young lads were employed on the surface operating the buddles that separated the ore from the waste rock. A buddle is a sort of sloping conical table down which the crushed rock and ore mix was slowly washed. You can still see the circular buddle pit where they worked.

They walked up from Llanrwst or Betws y coed each morning, and then worked outside all day, whatever the weather. Their job was to keep up the supply of material to the buddle. When the buddle table was full, they had to shovel off the headings (that's the separated ore) from the top of the table, and the tailings (that's the waste rock) from the bottom. They were shovelling all day long!

To make matters worse, the vein of lead that the miners were working was very thin so most of the material coming through the buddles was waste rock. The lads had to barrow all this waste away and tip it on the spoil heaps. The ore was shovelled into barrels, and a horse and cart called once or twice a week to take it to the quay at Trefriw to go off to the smelters. A lot of work for very little ore!

It must have been a back-breaking job and the pay was terrible. In the 1860s the young buddlers only earned 4 shillings a week, less than a third of the pay given to an experienced miner. Once they gained experience, they could begin working underground, which was every youngster's dream – it was not only better paid, but a lot warmer in winter!