

2. Buttons and Shoes : Mining about Lochlibo

Brian S. Skillen

The earliest known workings in the area were about Uplawmoor, beginning in 1764 on the 'Ell' coal at around a depth of 12 metres. Known as the Oupley Colliery the mine was active for at least a decade close to the old Uplawmoor Smithy and miners cottages were among the earliest dwellings in the village (1).

Mining down at Lochlibo began in the eighteenth century in coal and limestone from the Lower Limestone Group. Bores from the area show coarse grained fossilised sandstone typical to this group.

Leases for bleaching ground about the area of Uplawmoor and Caldwell identifies local coals and makes reference to William McCracken. Exploitation of the area seems to have been successful enough to encourage miners to explore about Lochlibo, possibly as older areas became worked out. The Old Statistical Account suggests that mining progressed down through the woods towards the loch in the 1780s with Mure of Caldwell and others (Figure 1). The rent was £60 per annum and the mines profitable enough to support a small steam pumping engine. It may be that this lay towards the Neilston end of the mining area. Only the need to find more coal could have brought about the foolhardy decision to work in below Lochlibo along the dip of the workings. Part at least of the area could have been no more than about 6 metres from the surface in fissile sandy shales. Double seam working developed in the area leaving very loosely bulked ground to up to 32 metres depth. Some bore evidence coupled to historical accounts would suggest that several layers of workings from about 3 metres downward existed, this would have been caused by throws and general dislocations in the ground and seam structure (2).

By 1792 the shaft serving the Lochlibo workings was at 32 metres and on 29th March of that year water burst in on the mine and drowned 8 people. The fact that reporting proved very confused as to the source of the water is of some interest. The *Glasgow Mercury* suggested that it was from waste workings, if so they lay at a higher level and breached through the roof. It was then the most common cause of drowning out workings; breaching wastes took a heavy toll of Scottish miners. However it seems likely that the columnist did not know the district too well and preferred a flooded waste as to the other possible water source the loch itself. The *Glasgow Courier* fingered the loch waters as the culprit, but quite possibly the real cause was a mixture of both loch water and drowned waste, given the level of exploring in the area hinted at in bores and anecdotal evidence (3).

Loch legend had a really interesting cause and again favoured the loch but this time it was due to a rash miner tearing out on the colossal roots of the Mace Reed, which was apparently interfering with his howking out the coal, hence allowing the water to run in on the workings. Mace Reeds would not have run down to 32 metres even though popular legend had it that they ran to the bowels of the earth (4).

Actual evidence for some movement of the loch water into the workings is suggested by a depression in the loch bed. The loch itself was generally very shallow but at one point halfway along the loch and close to the east shore there was a hollow about 2.4 metres deep. The depression could equally well have been a crown hole across underground subsidence, rather than a break-in. Whatever the reality of the event the lochside disaster chased the miners back to concentrating about the woods. Time too being taken to make a collection for the families of the drowned workers which came to a little over £16 (5).

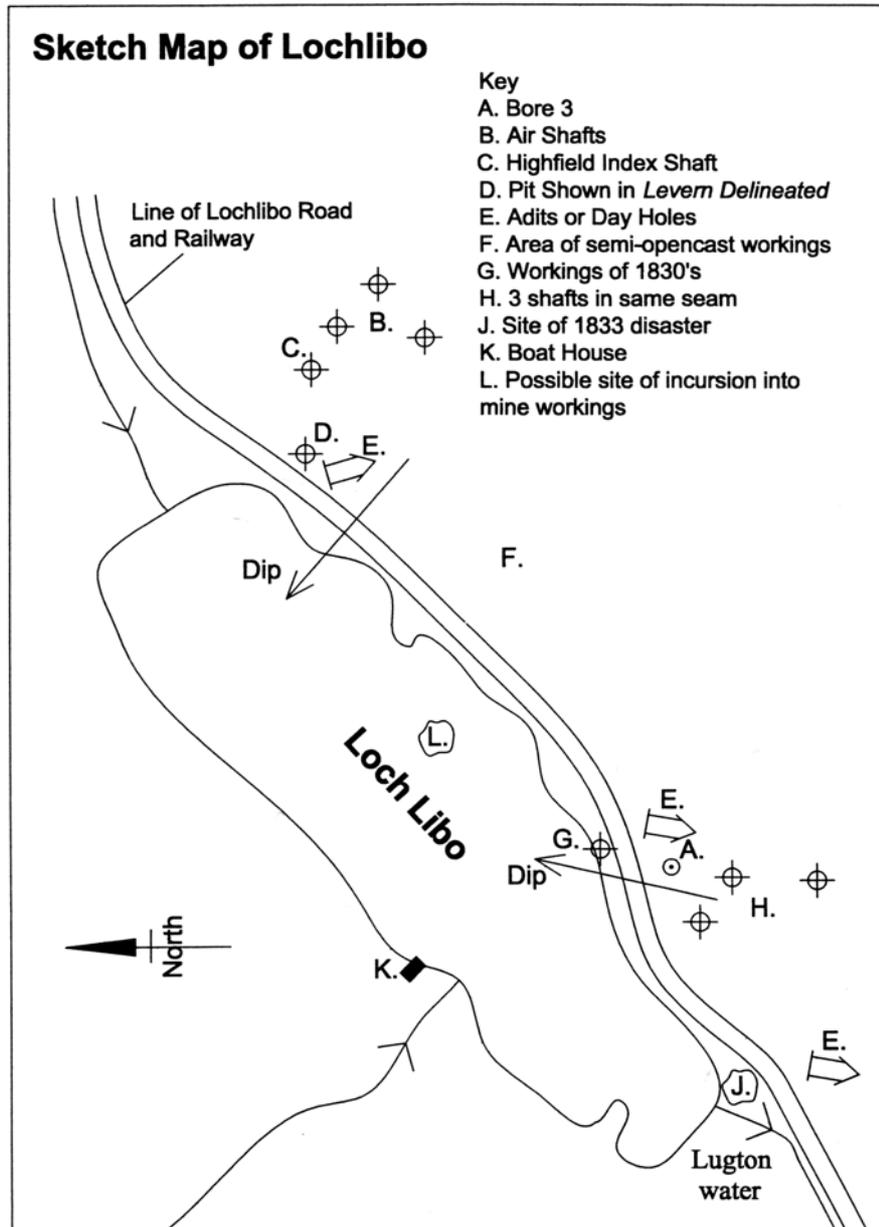


Figure 1

The pumping engine towards the loch side was retained for a time after the accident but was eventually sold by public roup. At this auction about 62 metres of piping for pumping was also sold in various measures and diameters, hinting that the miners had long experienced trouble from water influx (6).

The workings back in the woods and probably some further trials along the lochside were managed at the turn of the 19th Century by William Bryce, Mure of Caldwell's grieve. Legal services for the workings were provided by Mure's Glasgow solicitors James Hill & Thomas Kippen (7).

The 1820s saw a lot of activity about the woods with trials and opening up on a seam around

16 metres from the surface. A Blackband Ironstone found at around 12-13 metres proved uneconomic to work with lack of easy transport to iron works, certainly its value was never realised and exploring continued along coal seams mainly towards the outflow of the Lugton Water. Charles Taylor in his *Levern Delineated* hints at continued mining activity but also many abandoned workings, which proved death traps to local cattle (8).

Possibly most successful at this time was the Highfield Index Limestone Quarry, significant enough to become the index and providing around a metre of lime on a bed of limey blaes.

The Lochlibo Coal Company then surfaced to further activity across the area. The so-called "Craw Coal" was wrought along with Ell and Main Coals. The "Craw Coal" had a core of stone averaging 0.9m thick and was hard to take. Most of the coal seems to have been used locally, either for domestic purposes or calcining limestone. But workings were intense enough to see the use of the first winding engine, of around 33 hp. to replace a horse gin. The decision was of some interest regarding use of steam at a country colliery where the cheap price of fodder would reasonably have been expected to encourage continued use of horse powered winding gins. Steam winding engine use may have reflected deeper trials with surface coals having been worked out.

Certainly there were local problems following coals and workings to the dip begun again about 1830 was foiled by another disaster in 1833. Mining was then active towards the Lugton end of the loch, from a shaft close to the water edge. The very deep lochside hole of about 4 metres, marked the point where the then working shaft fell in on the 3 July 1833. The shaft was probably compromised by the roof structure of the mine giving way along the dip under the loch and running backward toward the shaft itself. Miners active below ground barely got clear in time and the closure led to the loss of 80 local jobs (9).

The difficulties of working along the dip under the loch drove the miners back to the woods and towards Caldwell. Then there seems to have been a reasonably successful period in workings about 21 metres from the surface. The mines worked day and night, possibly supplying fuel to the north Ayrshire industries. The death of the night engineer late in 1840 hints at 24 hours continual operation (10).

Mining continued more generally about the area and attempts were made to get in on the dip workings once more. It was apparent that the coal to the rise was nearly exhausted, hence the interest in Lochlibo once more. The 1792 workings were targeted for this mine and the first stages were to consolidate breaches. Quite likely the loch bottom was puddled with clay and sand in bags dropped in on the shallow loch from small boats. Work on the loch bottom may be the reason for the limited area of the aforementioned depression in the loch floor. Some form of primitive consolidation was certainly achieved and heavy pumps were then placed on the old 1792 shaft to drain the inner workings. The dip workings of the 18th Century cannot therefore have been great for heavy pumping would have toppled the inner support structures of any substantial mine waste and triggered another run and inundation from the surface. Quite likely the 1792 working was a proving one, paying its way with coal the miners howked as they worked in along the dip. Breaking ground in the loose structure below the loch quite likely triggered the original flooding disaster. The new mining team which got in on the old workings found evidence of the 1792 disaster very quickly, a skeleton washed back was found and recovered, even some buttons and a pair of shoes. The skeleton was then properly interred at Neilston cemetery (11).

Local mining struggled on for years. Shallow seams were still exploited to the last century, coals being dug out and used to boil the pot. There was historical precedent for this from the 19th Century when the railway was driven through the area, the agents of Mure of Caldwell

found to their shock that the navvies had opened a shallow seam and were taking coal for their bothies (12). They were certainly not alone in thieving or taking coal. Many miners lived in the area for years after the mines closed down and some form of exploitation continued even then. Local mining families such as the Gebbies were about the area over the cross over years of the 19th and 20th centuries, Matthew Gebbie for one was done for assault in 1892 on a local man (13). The miners about Lochlibo were a tough lot for though there had been opportunity and success, local ground conditions had made it a hard won fight. Probably really only successful in the rockhead seams and downright disastrous in the reedy, fissile sandstone dip seams, perhaps there really had been some argument for the culpability of the Mace Reed if that was really all that had held such boggy lochside lands together.

Brief Notes on mining terms

Crown hole: A depression in the ground caused by collapse of shallow workings or movement in an old shaft beneath.

Dip: The down-slope of the coal seam, as opposed to the 'Rise' on the up-slope. The dip was much more difficult to work as groundwater flowed down into the dip workings, whereas workings on the rise drained away from the working face. Working to the dip was even more dangerous if it lay a short distance under a loch!

Gin: an engine, usually wooden-framed, powered by horse(s), for pumping or winding.

Double seam working: two seams very close together which were worked as one.

Throws: faults or vertical ground movements.

Waste: old workings, often flooded.

Trials: speculative digging to identify further resources.

Sources and References

The paper was developed from newspaper references, mostly in The Mitchell Library, Glasgow. Bore tables and fieldwork maps with British Geological Survey were also used. Fieldwork in the 1980s was carried out to confirm evidence and where possible to come to some conclusion over accident reports.

1. Glasgow Journal, 5-12 July 1764 ; 31 March – 7 April 1774; Burgess, M. 'Barrhead and Neilston' (1992).
2. Glasgow Mercury (GM), 27 January – 3 February 1780. Also bore tables.
3. Glasgow Courier (GC), 3 April 1792; GM, 27 March – 3 April 1792.
4. Wood, J. "Rarer Flowers of East Renfrewshire", Annals of the Andersonian Naturalists Society (1893) p.46-54.
5. GC, 19 April 1792; Bathymetric and bore table evidence.
6. GC, 22 July 1797.
7. GC, 22 July 1797; 19 February 1799.
8. Taylor, C. 'The Lavern Delineated' (1831).
9. Glasgow Herald, 5 July 1833.
10. Scottish Reformers Gazette, 5 December 1840.
11. Glasgow Argus, 18 September 1843.
12. Derived from the late James F. MacEwan of Westerton, recorded 30.10.1989. MacEwan had been told this by a former railway man active from the late 19th. to the mid 20th. century. The railway man had also apparently been one of those first in attendance at the Tay Bridge Disaster.
13. Glasgow Weekly Herald, 22 October 1892.