

LEAD MINES SEIZED BY MINERS

Ownership Forfeited by Non-use

It cannot often have happened in an industrial dispute that the men on strike should turn round, enter on their recalcitrant employers' property, and proceed to work it for their own employment and profit. Yet this is what the Derbyshire leadminers are likely to do.

It could hardly happen in any other industry, but ever since the early Middle Ages the Derbyshire leadmines have been governed by a very peculiar set of customary laws which have opened to any man the opportunity to seek his fortune by his own adventure in prospecting and working and have not been tender to other people's supposed rights of property.

The leadmining industry in Derbyshire has an extraordinarily continuous history. It was carried on fairly extensively by the Romans, and all through the Middle Ages and right down to the late 18th century it supported quite a large population. There was a steady decline in prosperity during the 19th century, but the traces of former greatness can be found in hundreds of disused shafts dotted all over the hills. Now there is only one mine of any size at work—the Mill Close Mine at Darley Dale, owned by Messrs. Wass and Son and employing some 200 men. The workers at this mine—members of the Derbyshire Miners' Association—have been on strike for 21 weeks. The firm is an old one which 60 years ago worked a good number of other mines near Winster, Wensley, and Darley (villages on the hills to the west of the Midland line between Rowsley and Matlock), but have lately concentrated on the extremely productive Mill Close Mine.

By the Derbyshire mining law, if any person can prove to the barmaster (the official who represents the Crown's interests in minerals) that a mine is "not duly and reasonably worked," it can be transferred from its present owners to the new applicant. Taking advantage of this, the miners on strike have laid formal claim for half-a-dozen mines which Wass and Son formerly worked but which have been disused for many years.

The barmaster has served formidable notice on the owner to show cause within three weeks why (for instance) the Plackett Mine, "situate in the Liberty of Winster in the District of the King's Field in the Hundred of the High Peak in the County of Derby," should not be forfeited. The owner did not make any attempt to work the mine during the period, and the barmaster with two jurymen of the Grand Jury of the Great Barmote Court—the old mining court of the King—then viewed the mine and sanctioned its working by the new applicants.

Three mines have already been forfeited in this way—the Plackett Mine and the Davis and Windmill Mines, which, though quite near, are in another division, the "Soke and Wapentake of Wirksworth." The work of prospecting begins on Monday, and should the mines after expert examination be found worth it machinery will be obtained and lead-mining begun in earnest. The men are assured of the necessary capital, and the high prices of lead now ruling should make their undertaking profitable.

The Crown gets substantial advantage from the lead workings on the "King's Field"—a wide district which covers 70 square miles. In 1288 the King received the 13th "dish"—the 15-pint vessel in which the ore is measured. He still by law is entitled to a Royalty of one-thirteenth, but in practice is content with a 25th. Any person is allowed to dig for ore in the "King's field," except in churchyards, gardens, orchards, highways, and under churches and houses. He is, however, liable for action for damage unless he finds lead. Before he can have a mine marked out for him he must produce to the barmaster a "dish" of lead. The barmaster

then stakes out two "meers," or claims (of 29 yards each in Wirksworth Wapentake and of 32 yards in the High Peak Hundred), and a third alongside which is reserved for the Crown and styled the "Lord's meer." This is now, in practice, sold to the mine-worker. The industry has its special courts to administer the mining laws—the Great Barmote Court, already mentioned, and the Small Barmote Court. The latter deals with disputes between miners, but has only met once since 1904—and then to hear a complaint of trespass.—"*Manchester Guardian*," 20th December.

Access to natural opportunities is secured by the operation of this healthy "customary law." It prevents one man denying another the right to live. Its operation would make any strike succeed. Unfortunately it has but a limited application. But its lesson is clear. What is the custom with lead-bearing land should be the custom with all land. It proclaims there is no such thing as private property in natural resources. If every landholder was under the obligation to use his land or forfeit it, there could be no problem of unemployment. The raw materials of the earth would be free for the enjoyment of all, and wages would rise to their just level—the full produce of labour. The Derbyshire Mining Law is a natural "Minimum Wage Act."

HOUSING THE PEOPLE IN CROYDON

108 People to the Acre

Croydon Corporation (*DAILY NEWS*, December 17th) are up in arms against the action of the London County Council in trying to "dump down" on the latter's estate at Norbury some 260 houses which, it is stated, not only do not comply with the borough by-laws, but will contain more people to the acre than the most crowded part of Croydon prior to the war.

The Medical Officer of Health has also reported that the houses are objectionable on the following grounds:—

- (1) The houses number 27 to the acre.
- (2) Over 90 per cent. have two bedrooms only, rendering them unsuitable for the average working-class family.
- (3) The floor area of many of the bedrooms is less than the desirable standard or the standard laid down by the Ministry for occupation by two persons.
- (4) That the floor area of many of the living rooms is below the standard laid down by the Ministry.
- (5) That the angle houses exhibit defects similar to those found in back-to-back houses, *e.g.*, inadequate ventilation.

The Croydon Public Health Committee recommended that strong representations be made to the Ministry of Health that the plans for the houses in their present form should not be approved, and further that a communication should be sent to the London County Council on the subject.

Councillor Stevenson, in moving the adoption of the recommendation, pointed out that there were 27 houses to the acre and with an average of four persons to each house that would mean 108 people to the acre.

In reply to questions whether the Croydon Town Council could not stop the erection of the houses because the plans did not conform to the by-laws, the Town Clerk advised that this could not be done, as the houses had been approved by the Ministry of Health.

Twenty-seven little brick boxes to acre with a "housing" capacity of 108 is surely the latest if not the last word of the Government's idea of a land fit for heroes to dwell in!