

ABERGWESSIN or NANTYBRAIN.

For a small mine, remotely situated in a moorland valley, with no great production record, or important nearby properties (if we except Nantymwyn, 4Vi miles to the S.S.W.), this place has received a good deal of attention, and has been known by a variety of names. Reopened as Nantybrain and Trawsnant in 1844, a date before mining began to attract the attention of the general public, its most active period followed from 1846 to 1850 under the name of Abergwessin Mine. Attempts were made to raise further capital in 1852 as the Trawsnant Silver-Lead Mine, and in the following year as the Irfon River Lead Mining Company, but without success.

In the early 1860s it was again at work, then being called Newton, and from 1871 to 1876 as East Nantymwyn, although at this period the original sett appears to have been divided, one part being carried on under the old name of Nantybrain. The last trials were made by the Brecon Mines Syndicate in 1882-83.

The track to the mine leaves the metalled road at Nantybrain farmhouse, and in a quarter of a mile passes over the mouth of a level, probably the Jones's adit of the Abergwessin Company's workings. This is 173 paces long, and goes under some surface workings that can be seen above the track. It has clearly been driven at two different periods. No other traces of mining are to be seen for a mile, at which point the valley turns abruptly south-east, a minor tributary continuing the south-westerly direction of the lower section. Here there is an adit by the track, with only a small dump, but from which a good stream of water flows after rain, and below are the walls of a water-wheel pit, erected by the East Nantymwyn Company in 1872-73. The valley now narrows considerably for a short distance, and again opens out, where the remains of another, smaller, wheel pit still contain an axle and parts of the rim.

A few yards higher the stream divides, and above the confluence are the dressing floors, and on the slightly higher ground between the two tributaries a horse-whim round. Two shafts can be seen on the west bank of the western tributary, one about 100 yards above the other, in the lower of which a pump-rod is standing. There are also surface workings on the outcrop of an east-west lode, and an adit to the upper shaft.

The Abergwessin Company, constituted in 1,000 shares of £10, £5,000 being paid to the vendor of the property, started a cross-cut adit at a site now obscured, but probably between the dressing-floors and the lower shaft, and sank the shaft. The mine at first looked very promising, and at Christmas 1846 the manager, P.P. Couch, regaled 30 or 40 workmen to a dinner of a roasted bullock and six barrels of good ale – a custom apparently continued throughout the company's existence. Few details of the underground workings have been preserved, but three or four lodes, 9 to 30 feet wide, said to be identical with those of, and traced from, Nantymwyn, were explored at the adit, 10, 20, and 30 fathom levels. Although as much as 12 in. of solid galena was occasionally reported, overall results were evidently uneconomic, and production trifling. This company erected two 'water-engines', and was installing crushing and dressing machinery when the mine closed – an event accompanied by criticisms of mismanagement.

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It was reopened early in 1863 by Josiah Harris, and carried on by him for at least two years as a private concern under the name of Newton. No reports were published, but in 1865 a Mining Journal correspondent visited the property, and saw a wheel pumping from the shaft by means of flat-rods, a fine lode, called the Red Lode, opened at the 20, where there were ribs of galena 4 to 6 in. wide, and good piles of ore on the dressing-floors. But this activity escaped notice in both the Lists of Mines and the Mineral Statistics.

Some work was going on in 1871 as East Nantymwyn, and in the following year a new limited company of the same name, supported largely by Bristol people, took it over, although apparently the large area held under former leases had been sub-divided. This party purchased a 30 ft. by 2 ft. 6 in. water-wheel from the Tuckingmill Foundry, with the intention of deepening the existing shaft, until it was discovered that this had been sunk partly in weak ground, and that if continued it would come into old stopes. In view of the problems anticipated in these conditions, and since the company's main object was to prove a lode lying some distance south, believed to be the Comet Lode of Nantymwyn, a new shaft, and an adit to it, were begun 60 fms. south of the old shaft. Fortunately this could be sited in a straight line with the water-wheel and the old shaft, so the extension of the flat-rods to it presented no difficulty. It seems that a shallow adit was driven west at this time, and various other trials made, but the agent's reports are obscure.

Nothing of value having been found in the new workings they were given up in 1874, and attention again directed to the old shaft. By now the company's funds were low, and several shareholders had lost interest, but in November this reached the 35 fm. level – the previous bottom level being now called the 25. Very little more was done until October 1875, when operations were resumed under Captain Robert Northey, who got six tons of galena from the 35. But this proved to be only a small pocket, and in spite of his urging further development, and offering to work for six months without pay, the mine was abandoned in the summer of 1876.

This failure may not be entirely attributable to the poverty of the ore deposit, the conduct of the management hardly contributed to success. A committee of enquiry found that the directors had agreed to purchase the mine for £6,000 without troubling to visit it, for which neglect the vendor gave each of them 200 free shares, and the secretary 500. No right of access had been secured, so that it was necessary to pay way-leave to another party. Supplies could, in any case, only be carried to the site with difficulty, and skilled labour was very scarce. Neither directors or shareholders seem to have made any enquiry as to the location of the mine, or in what sort of countryside it lay. The accounts were always credited, but not in so many words, with money due on unpaid calls, which could never be recovered, thereby falsifying the asset figures, and rendering insolvency, when it came, irretrievable.

During this period a Mr. Powell worked the 'adjoining property' as a private venture, and although nothing is known of his operations, these must have been in close proximity to East Nantymwyn, for at one time an outflow of water from the former flooded the latter. Probably the boundary was the western brook, but despite the fact that the two shafts of

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East Nantymwyn are still to be seen, no trace remains of workings on the other bank. Pieces of the upper water-wheel bear the imprint of 'T. Bright, Carmarthen, 1854', and it seems reasonable to suppose that this was the wheel supplied to Rhydtalog on Mr. Gibson's order in that year, and used there at intervals until 1873, when it was carried to its present site.

Of the activities of the Brecon Mines Syndicate's activities nothing is known, except that 5 or 6 men were employed underground for a time.

G.W.Hall, September 2011.