

June 22nd, 1988
Coniston Copper Mines

Excavations at Simons Nick
Wednesday Evening

On the edge of Simons Nick, just above Levers Water, is a circular depression about two and a half feet across and close by, some fragments of ancient timber, two iron studs and an iron stip protrude from the grass. Directly below, on the floor of the Nick, lies a fragment of masonry wall which might be a shaft head. A dig here on Boxing Day 1986 revealed a jack roll windlass. That dig has not been completed, for later that day, an examination of the other side of the Nick led to the discovery of the ladderway leading to Dead Dog Passage and subsequently to the Top Level Extension and its many connections and ramifications.

Last Wednesday evening (June 22nd) a small group of CAT members met to examine the remains buried in the grass. They were Peter Fleming and Mark Scott, who had been the first to notice them, Sheila Barker, Angela Wilson, Ian Matheson, and later Alan Westall. It was a bright, but cool and windy evening. The turf was removed from the depression to reveal an iron ring set in stones and further excavation showed that the hole beneath was lined with timber. Was this part of a barrel? It did indeed seem to be so, for about eighteen inches down the end came in view, a single very well preserved piece of wood some thirty inches in diameter, with an iron boss which had been bolted in the centre. It looked like plywood, but this seemed unlikely in view of its probable age. The interior of the 'barrel' was full of small stones and fragments of wood, but at the bottom quite a few pieces of Peacock Ore (Erubescite) were found. The remains are clearly that of the bottom end of a barrel with an iron rod mounted in its centre. One can only speculate as to its use. A water tank? More likely a hand operated jig for washing or separating ore.

Removal of the turf from the nearby remains exposed a layer of moderate sized rocks. They formed a layer one rock deep, and seem to have been placed there. Beneath was a timber and iron platform like structure about six feet wide and of a similar length which reached to the lip of the open stope. It had been built of rough timbers, but had heavy sawn cross and side members. Each side member carried a large square headed bolt, which protruded above the grass. About seven flat strips of iron of varying width and thickness ran towards the edge, their disposition symmetrical, but their purpose obscure. The whole structure seemed to form a platform to mount some equipment with which to carry out work in the open stope. It may have carried the Jack Roll Windlass which we found below, but it seems more complex than that. There was not time for a complete excavation, so there may be more to reveal at a future date.

Both excavations were photographed and then filled in again in order to preserve the remains. How old are they? Well, lying as they do on the surface of Simons Nick they may have been in use before Top Level was driven to provide an easier means of removing materials from the stopes in the mid nineteenth Century. The surface workings

around Simons Nick are Elizabethan; in 1616 they were about four fathoms deep and according to Sir Daniel Fleming the miners were experiencing difficulty with the make of water. Could these remains date from then? It's possible, but I personally do not think so, for they were built on top of the spoil which overlays the ground at the side of the Nick. The 1986 Boxing Day discoveries included no less than four Jack Roll Windlasses, which seemed to have been used by latter day miners in a final attempt to make a living during the last months or years of the failing mine. Perhaps they date from then, but again I don't think so, for their location doesn't tie in. My guess is that they date from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, in the period between the activities of the Company of Mines Royal and those of John Taylor and John Barrat, when the mines were less productive and were only worked at intervals.

Ian Matheson.