

A MUSHET MYSTERY

by DAVID BICK

The name of Mushet is more or less exclusively associated with Scotland and the Forest of Dean, and it was therefore a surprise recently to discover evidence of David Mushet running an unusual mining operation in Breconshire, in 1817. With little doubt the workings coincided with a site near Talachddu in the heart of the countryside (Grid ref SO 085 342) and described by the geologist Roderick Murchison in 1839 as follows:(1)

"The Old Red Sandstone does not contain any mineral veins worthy of notice ... I have met with only two which have been deemed worthy of the slightest attention and these are both of copper ore. One occurs north of Ludlow, and the other in Breconshire ... at Felin Fach, four miles north-east of Brecon, on the right bank of a mountain stream ... The vein-stuff thrown out from the trial shafts (the works having been abandoned) contains much crystallised carbonate of lime with sulphurets of copper and iron partially diffused through a mass, the remainder of which is made up of scales of green earth, crystallised blende in very minute particles, and a little red oxide of iron".

Unaware at the time of any Mushet connections, Murchison's account led me to explore this forgotten site in 1960. Clear evidence of former activity was found, including a leat, the mound of a shaft, and a flooded adit which had been driven in as deeply as possible from the little River Dulas.

On a later visit the adit was drained with a syphon and proved to be 75 paces long, the first 60 being very narrow. The end came in a fall, probably at the shaft, about 40 feet below surface, the whole drivage being in flaggy beds of the Old Red.(2) There was no sign of a vein either below or above ground, where scrub had considerably obscured the workings. However, plenty of mineralised specimens were lying about, and conforming in great measure to Murchison's description. These samples gave rise to much discussion and debate, and it would not be wide of the truth to say that no two opinions coincided. Among the various constituents claimed to be present were calcite, rhodocrosite (a manganese mineral), chlorite (the 'green earth' of Murchison), feldspar, galena, blende and copper and iron pyrites. Altogether a very curious and remarkable deposit.

The origins of mining here are uncertain, but valuable light is cast on developments by the above-mentioned evidence, discovered in the National Library of Wales.(3) It takes the form of Counsel's Opinion on alleged violation of a lease dated 29 October 1817, of "mines and grooves of copper ore, lead, tin, manganese, lapis calaminaris, black jack" etc., on the lands of Vunglas and Llwyncunnog. The lessor was the Rev. J H C Lefroy of Ashe in Hampshire, Lord of the Manor of Talachddu, the site being on Llwyncunnog property. The lessee was David Mushet.

The document relates that "a few days after the execution of the lease, Mr Mushet set two labourers upon the work and in about a month after, he discharged them and employed men regularly brought up to the business (from the Forest of Dean?) who drove levels and sunk shafts to get at the ore which turned out to be all copper and they got some small quantity out but then from the work not being sufficiently encouraging or from want of pecuniary means on the part of Mr Mushet no man has done the least thing in the work since 8 August last and the ore taken out now remains in a rough state in a cottage contiguous to the work ..."

The upshot was transfer of the lease in November 1819 to John Palmer of Shrewsbury, James Freme of Liverpool and James Webster, a chemist of the Vitriol Works, Co Lancaster. Whether the new parties accomplished much is very doubtful. The workings were afterwards reported to have been 60 yards in depth.(4)

This brief account sums up all I have been able to glean about a very singular enterprise, leaving unanswered a host of queries. Not least, what was Mushet seeking in so remote and unpromising a district, and what enticed him there in the first place?

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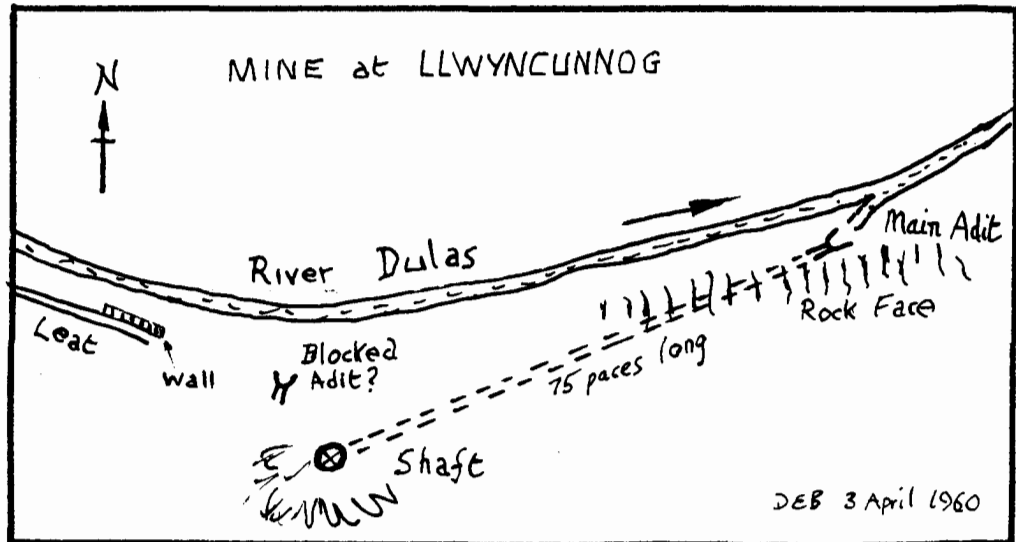
References

- 1 R I Murchison, The Siluran System, 1839, p 188.
- 2 See G W Hall, Metal Mines of Southern Wales, 1971, p 90. for further details of the site.
- 3 Maybery Papers 4028.
- 4 Samuel Lewis, Topographical Dictionary of Wales 1849.

Acknowledgement.

I should like to acknowledge the help rendered by the National Library of Wales with regard to early maps of the area.

FIG.1



The site, from a rough survey made in 1960.

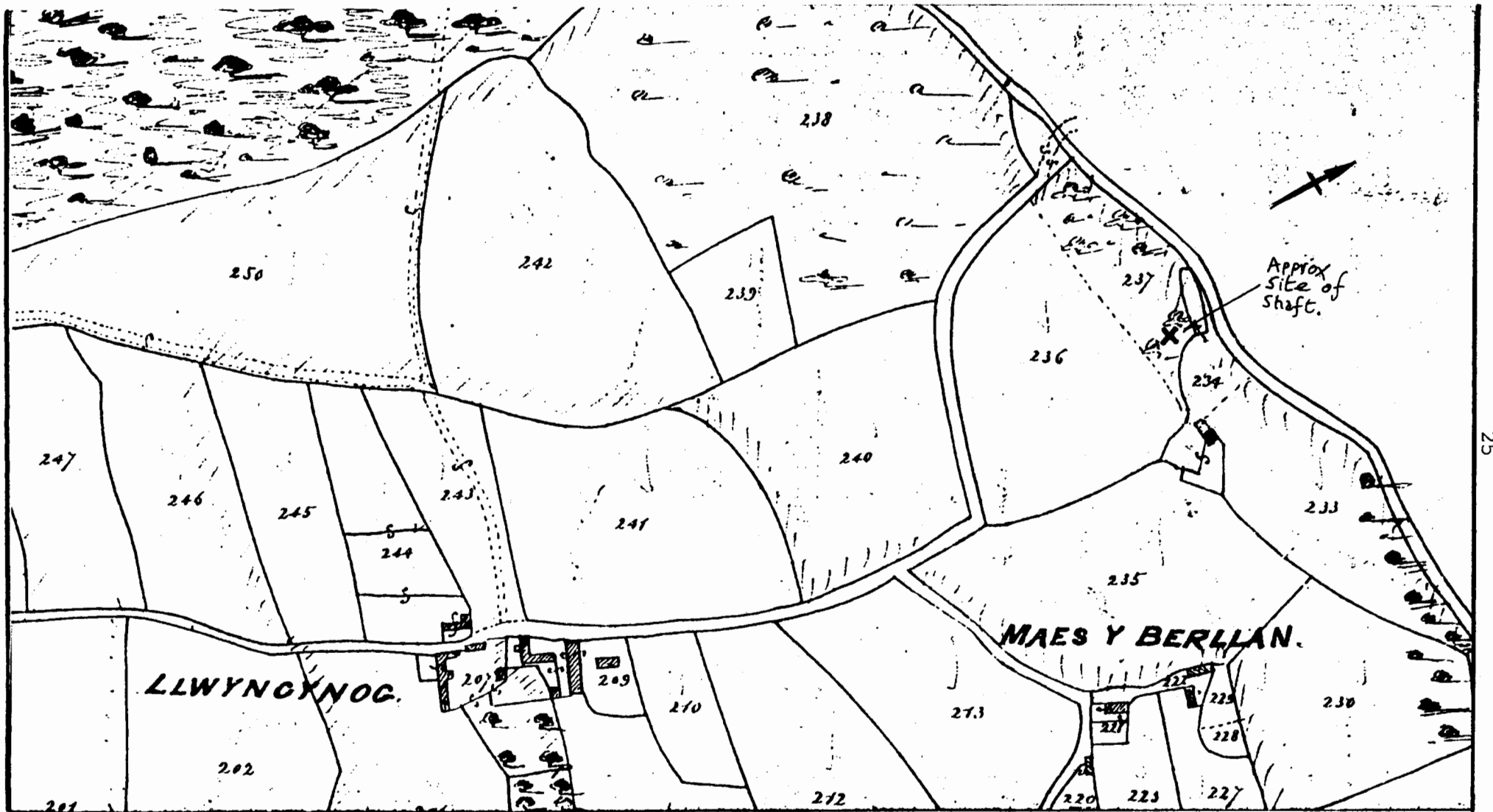


Fig 2. A detail from the Talachddu Tith Map of 1847. The cottage near the workings has since disappeared, along with two other buildings close by, shown on the 1st edition of the One inch Ordnance Map.