

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Gold in Dean Forest

by C. E. Hart
1944, Vol. 65, 98-104

© The Society and the Author(s)

GOLD IN DEAN FOREST

by C. E. HART

IN the Forest of Dean, near the top of the Old Red Sandstone, are conglomerates, sedimentary in origin, largely made up of quartz-pebbles embedded in a red sandy matrix composed of quartz grains of various sizes. The conglomerate bed is exposed at many places on the edge of the coal-basin. The Buckstone is part of the continuation of the same bed which completely encircles the basin and is continuous beneath it. The formation presents a resemblance to the 'Banket' or gold-bearing conglomerates of the Transvaal, Rhodesia and West Africa, but in the case of Dean the proportion of gold is much smaller. Throughout the centuries attempts have been made to test the suitability of the Dean deposits for working on profitable lines.

There are no direct references to the Forest of Dean in connexion with gold until 1680. There is, however, every reason to believe that when grants were made in previous centuries in connexion with Gloucestershire the Forest of Dean was one of the districts particularly involved.

On 22 October 1370 (1) 'an indenture was made between the king (Edward III) of the one part, and Robert Rous of Bristowe and William de Notyngham of Bissheie of the other part, being a lease for seven years from this date of all the king's mines of gold, silver, lead and tin found in Gloucestershire in hills, fields, waste places, etc (2). The king to have for his seignorage the ninth pound of all plate of gold and silver from the mines arising, and where

¹ Cal. Close rolls, 44 Edw. III, m.7.d. (pp. 194-5). (In French).

² For some interesting additional details of a similar grant in Devon and Somerset, see Cal. Close rolls, 43 Edw. III, m.9.d.

lead ore shall be found the lord of the soil shall have the thirteenth part of the ore, and where tin shall be found the tenth part of the tin ore, and the lessees the residue of the profit'.

The following year, on 12 July (3), the same two lessees were 'appointed to take twelve miners, stampers (*boliaros*) and smelters (*meltarios*) in the county of Somerset and put them to work in the king's mines of gold, silver, tin and lead in the county of Gloucester, which the king has demised to them at farm, to stay there as long as shall be necessary, at their wages'.

In the previous year, according to Calvert (4), Edward III had granted William de Notyngham all his mines of gold, silver, lead and tin in Gloucestershire for seven years. Notyngham afterwards obtained like grants for other counties. A similar grant was made to Henry Burton in 1378 (2 Rich. II); other grants were made in 1382 (5 Rich. II) and 1388 (11 Rich. II) (5).

In 1427 (5 Hen. VI) the gold rights within Gloucestershire passed in the general grant to John, Duke of Bedford.

On 30 July 1462 (6) the king granted a five-year licence 'to Galias de Lune, Wm. Marynere and Simon Spert to mine within the counties of Somerset and Gloucestershire for lead, tin or copper ore in which silver or gold may be had, yielding to the king every eighth bolle (7) of ore, and to make mills and take workmen as they require'.

According to Calvert there was another grant in 1465 (4 Edw. IV). In 1485 (1 Hen. VII) the Gloucestershire gold rights were included with other counties in the

³ Pat. rolls, 45 Edw. III, m.31. (Cal. part III, p. 124).

⁴ John Calvert: *The Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland* (1853, p. 98). Information based on Cottonian ms. Otho. Ex. (a mutilated and burnt Latin ms.).

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Pat. rolls, 2 Edw. IV m.7. (Cal. pt. 1, pp. 194-5). Calvert (*op. cit.* p. 99) appears to be in error in stating the year to be 12 Edw. IV.

⁷ Perhaps 'barrow', or 'billy' (a load carried on the back).

general mining commission granted to Jasper, Duke of Bedford and others (8). In 1564 Gloucestershire was included in a patent or monopoly granted by Queen Elizabeth to William Humphreys, Cornelius Devos, Daniel Hochstetter (or Houghsetter) and Thomas Thurland, to seek for gold, silver and quicksilver in certain counties (including Gloucestershire) in England, Wales and Ireland within the Pale (9). The Company formed to work this grant was incorporated by charter in 1568 as 'The Society for the Mines Royal'. Another grant in 1565 to William Humphreys and Christopher Schutz was worked by 'The Society of the Mineral and Battery Works'. The Societies were later amalgamated and held their monopolies until after the middle of the 19th century (10). It does not appear that their operations at any time met with any degree of success. The above patents were confirmed and amplified by James I and became the charter of the Mines Royal Company.

In the 17th century, about 1680, a gold mine was discovered at 'Little Taunton' [Taynton] in Gloucestershire. 'The Society of Mines Royal seized them [this and another] and granted two leases of them to some refiners, who extracted some gold; but they did not go on with the work, as the gold sometimes would not repay or requite the charge of separation though often it did (11)'.

On 9 July 1685, Henry Guy (presumably on behalf of the Treasury) wrote to Sir Robert Howard (Auditor of the Receipt) and Mr Harbord (Surveyor-General) enclosing a petition (12) from Abraham Shapton regarding the Taynton mines. They were instructed 'to deliver to him

⁸ Calvert, *op. cit.* p. 99.

⁹ *Opera Mineralia Explicata*, p. 26; Sir John Pettus, *Fodinæ Regales*, p. 46; Calvert, *op. cit.* pp. 120-1.

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Stannaries*, pp. 41-2.

¹¹ Abbot's *Essay on Metallic Works* (1833), p. 203; Watson's *Compendium of British Mining* (1843), p. 60.

¹² Now missing.

[Shapton] the lease about the mines royal in Great Taunton, co. Gloucester (13) '.

On 4 October of the same year Howard and Harbord were instructed ' to report on the Petition of Abraham Shapton showing that he has received back the lease and assignment of the mines royal holding (as he believes) gold and quicksilver, assigned to Sir Robert Howard and the Surveyor-General which they are ready to assign back to petitioner : but being unable to pay the five years now due by his covenants to the Company on the £10 per annum rent or to set the mine on work, petitioner prays to be paid said £50 or for the Lord Treasurer to purchase the estate (14) '. The three ' old quarries ' marked on the six-inch Ordnance Map in the neighbourhood of ' Black House ' may have been Shapton's workings.

There are no further records to assist us except that Calvert (15) mentions ' On the discovery of gold in Gloucestershire and Bedfordshire in the last century [i.e. the 18th] the crown grantees seized the mines and worked them ', while Fosbrooke (16) referring in 1807 to Taynton wrote : ' It has been asserted that about 1700 gold was extracted from an ore found here, but not in sufficient quantity to repay expense '.

Again, the sale particulars of an estate at Taynton, 1844, refers to the matter and adds : ' Mining and refining is now a much more simple and less expensive operation than it was a century ago. A spirited individual may find this " a Mine of Wealth " '.

In 1906 gold was reported to have been discovered in the auriferous conglomerates near Micheldean and operations of an exploratory kind were carried out. In this

¹³ Out Letters (General) IX, p. 101 : Cal. Treas. Bks. vol. VIII, p. 258. [P.R.O. Ref. T.27/9].

¹⁴ Out Letters (General) IX, p. 152 : Cal. Treas. Bks., vol. VIII, p. 354 [P.R.O. Ref. T.27/9].

¹⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *History of the County of Gloucester* (1807).

connexion an adit (17) was driven into the hill side about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles south-west by south of Micheldean Road station (18). Samples from the eastern outcrop were collected by Mr C. G. Cullis and Mr L. Richardson. These were assayed by Mr E. A. Wright in the Metallurgical Laboratories of the Royal School of Mines, who reported that the samples contained a small amount of both gold and silver. According to Mr J. M. Maclaren (19) the siliceous pebbly conglomerates were found to carry about 6 grains of gold per ton (20). It was found that gold did not occur in sufficient quantity to be workable with profit.

In the Lea Bailey enclosure on the western slopes of Wigpool there are many shallow trenches in the wood around the outcrop of the conglomerate which are understood to have been used for sluicing, although it is difficult to see where the water came from. It has been suggested to me that they were merely trenches of an exploratory nature, possibly dug in an endeavour to make the work of the syndicate dealing with the operation look alive (21). Trial digs were also carried out at Staple Edge, near Soudley, but with no success. Some of the holes may be seen close to the quarry at present being worked by Messrs Forest Concrete Products Ltd.

The syndicate formed to seek for gold was the Chastan Syndicate Ltd., of which the following particulars are given in the 1908 volume of the Stock Exchange Official Intelligence :—

¹⁷ Later known as the Bailey Level which was worked for iron-ore.

¹⁸ 'Some remarks on the Old Red Sandstone Conglomerate of the Forest of Dean and the Auriferous Deposits of Africa', by C. G. Cullis, D.Sc., F.G.S., and L. Richardson, F.G.S. (Procs. Cots. Nat. Field Club, xvi, 1907, pp. 81-5).

¹⁹ *Gold : its geological occurrence and geographical distribution* (1908), pp. 122-3.

²⁰ There are 480 grains to the troy ounce.

²¹ One local resident even went so far as to suggest that some gold had actually been brought down to the area and put in the conglomerate!

Chastan Syndicate Ltd. Registered 20th November 1906. 13/14 Abchurch Lane, E.C. Directors: Sir H. F. Nicholson, K.C.B. (Chairman), Dr J. H. Crowley, F. G. Jones, C. F. Kennedy. Secretary, H. H. Thompson. Mining rights have been acquired in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, over about 1,814 acres of gold-bearing property, and an adjoining property of about 109 acres has been purchased. Development is in progress. Authorised and Issued Capital—£49,000 in £1 shares fully paid. No accounts have been issued and no dividend has been paid. Transfer form—Common; fee 2/6d. Telegraphic address: 'Perpetuity' London. Telephone No. 5132 Bank.

In 1907 a Take Note was granted to the syndicate by the Commissioners of Woods to work the gold, gold ore, silver and silver ore in about 3,677 acres of land in or adjacent to the Forest of Dean. The land in question ran in a belt northeast from Cockshoot inclosure. The Take Note terminated by effluxion of time in 1908 and was not renewed (22).

From a report (23) of an Ordinary General Meeting of the syndicate held on 25 July 1908 we learn that there were 700 shareholders. The venture had been a failure, and, although there were 'assets worth about £7,000', there were no funds in hand. The syndicate was wound up in September 1908, the Liquidator being G. C. Harrower, Esq., College Hill Chambers, Cannon Street, London, E.C.4.

The only reference to the syndicate found since that time is the following note written in 1913 by Mr A. O. Cooke in his book, *The Forest of Dean*, p. 104:

'Has any reader cause to rue the once much talked of Chastan Syndicate, formed to discover English gold? We are within hail of one at least of the imagined seams [Staple Edge, near Soudley]; digging was for some time carried on within our woodman's 'beat' on Staple Edge—much to his wonder and amusement, his local knowledge not disposing him to sink

²² *Ex informacione* Assistant Commissioner, H.M. Forestry Commission, 16 March 1945.

²³ *The Times*, 27 July 1908, p. 17, col. 6.

his savings in the enterprise. But he understands that "many ladies in London put a heap of money into it"—a statement doubtless true'.

At one time there were hopes that gold would be workable in other parts of the Forest and the 86th Report of the Commissioners of Woods (24) contains the following record:—

' 28 Oct. 1907: Sale of Mines Royal in parts of the Clearwell Court Estate '.

When the estate was offered for sale in 1908, the sale particulars included the following note:—

' It is believed that the conglomerate rock, in which gold has lately been discovered in the Forest of Dean, lies under a great portion of the Estate. By a Deed of Conveyance dated 28 October 1907 the gold and gold ore, and silver ore, and all other Mines Royal under Ord. Nos. . . . were granted by the Crown to the predecessors in title of the present Vendors' Testator and are comprised in the sale '.

I have thought it of interest to record the attempts at gold mining in the district, although there does not appear any prospect (even with modern processes) of the conglomerate being worked as an economic proposition for gold.

²⁴ 29 June 1908, p. 64, App. 7.