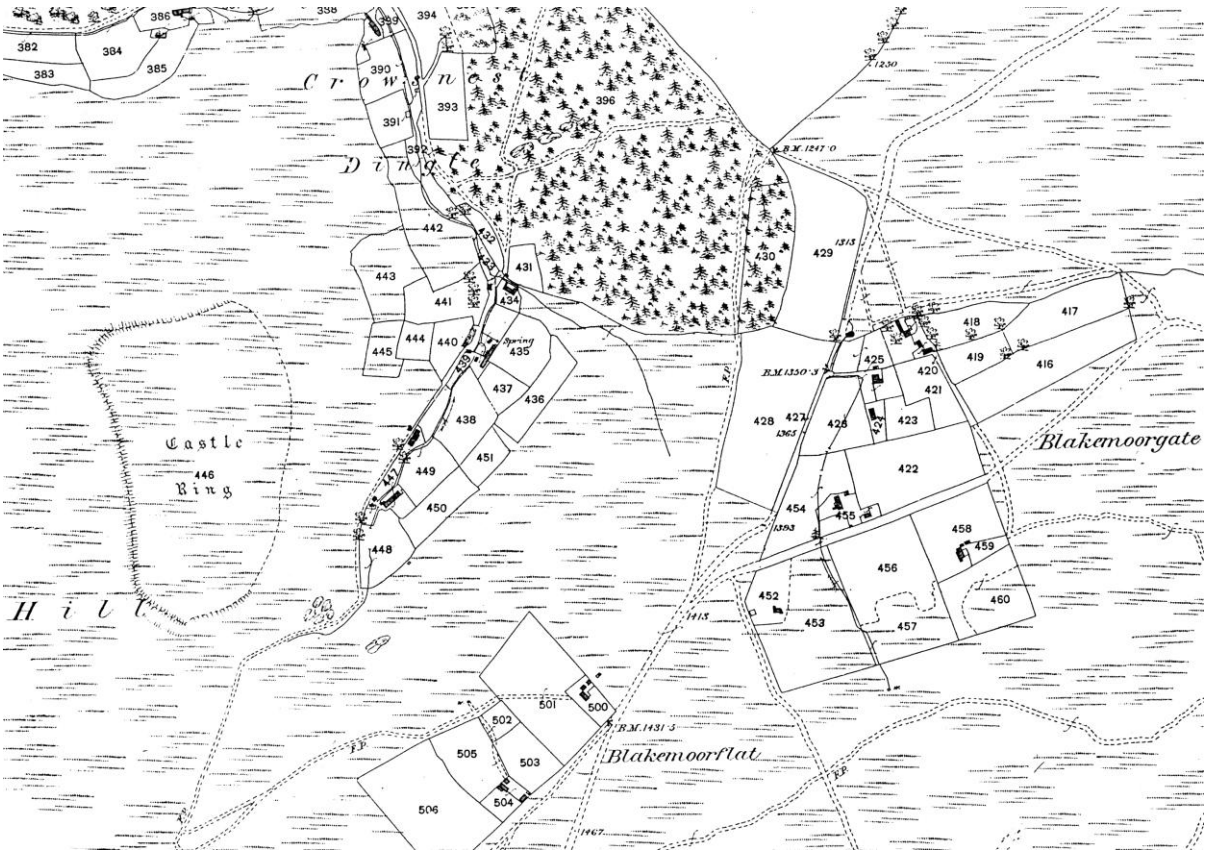
Blakemoorgate

The remains of two miners' cottages at Blakemoorgate at the northern end of the Stiperstones are being renovated by Natural England. Even before restoration is complete they already provide a clear indication of the way of life of Snailbeach Miners.

Although the Snailbeach Mine would have employed over 500 people in its heyday, there is no evidence for a large settlement in the immediate vicinity of the mine. The miners were largely self sufficient, and Blakemoorgate provides important evidence of their way of life.

The earliest large scale Ordnance Survey Map of the area shows a number of settlements in Crow's Nest Dingle, at Blakemoorflat and Blakemoorgate. By 1882 there were several houses, with associated outbuildings. Fields are marked, from which gorse, heather and stones have been cleared, making the land suitable for pasture or growing vegetables. Some of the fields at the south of Blakemoorgate appear to be only partly cleared of native vegetation.

1882 may have marked the peak in the population on the high moorland. Look at the table showing lead production and the number of people employed at Snailbeach which appears at the end of this document.



Snailbeach and Blakemoorgate

A pdf copy of the Ordnance Survey's "Get-a-Map" service is with the collection of maps.

Reaching Blakemoorgate

There are, as yet, no convenient parking places for cars closer than the car park by the village hall in Snailbeach.

From there, follow the narrow road which is signposted to Lordshill. As the road emerges from woodland into fields the circular stone built caps on old mine shafts can be seen.

The road straight ahead leads to a farm, but a steep descent to the left is the way to follow, past the old Lordshill Chapel. Beyond this the track enters ‘The Hollies’; an area where ancient Holly Trees were pruned each year to provide winter feed for farm animals. The track divides here, and the one to follow bears to the right up the hillside, before turning southwards along the ridge. The track passes through a belt of trees, and then the cottages can be seen on the slope to the left of the path, nestling just below the brow of the ridge.

The Location

Water Supply

One important reason for the choice of location is the stream which rises nearby. The old map also marks a well and a stream. A supply of clean healthy water would be essential.

Protection from the prevailing wind

The houses are sheltered by the top of the Stiperstones Ridge, with the lower part of the walls set into the hillside for extra protection from the prevailing wind. The old map shows that some of the houses had the additional protection of a belt of trees. Many more have been planted later. At the height of around 400 metres above sea level, severe weather would be a frequent occurrence.

Grazing for animals

It is clear that the settlers here have had to use a great deal of ingenuity to survive on the Stiperstones. Gorse and heather have been cleared to establish fields with good grazing for livestock. Stones have been cleared from the land and the field boundaries are marked by the stone ridges.

Building Materials

The underlying rocks are called the Mytton Flags. They are easily split, making them an ideal building material. Rectangular blocks which would easily form stable walls can be obtained. Here the bedrock is covered by a thin covering of later deposits, which were dug away to make good foundations for the houses. This would also have the benefit of allowing homes to be built into the hillside for greater protection from the wind.

The Buildings

The remains of two houses can be seen, with some associated buildings. They are being restored.

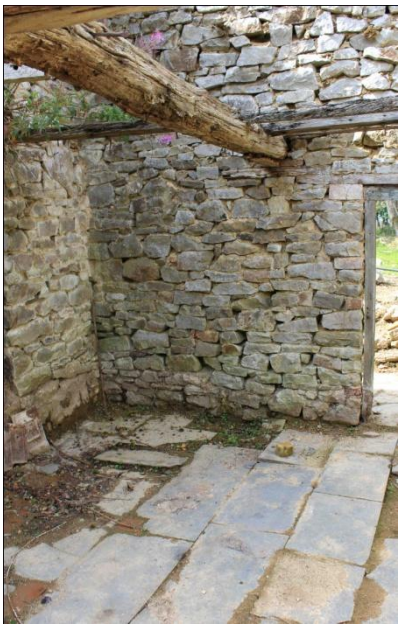
The walls are strongly built from the local stone, which lends itself to the production of very even building blocks. The walls of houses are about half a metre thick. There was very little mortar or cement in evidence when restoration began, though some has been used in the rebuilding of houses. They were originally built with just clay or soil between the stones to provide protection against the wind and cold. Great care must have been taken in their construction for them to have survived as long as they have done.

Miners would have plenty of experience in using the local stone, as they made arches to support the mouths of adits and shafts. They would have been familiar with making timber supports underground, so constructing the wooden floor for the upper storeys of a house would have posed no problems. Unusually, this house appears to have been designed with two front doors. It was planned as two semi detached cottages, and then completed as one.

Inside Davies's Cottage

The unroofed house is known as Davies's Cottage as the last resident was Edwin 'Neddy' Davies. It has the remains of a substantial kitchen range, with an oven on the left side of the fireplace, and a container for hot water on the right. The floor still has the remains of its beautiful stone covering. There are chimneys at both ends of the house.

Many of the timbers used, like the joist which supported the upper floor of the house, were built into the house 'in the round' rather than being sawn to give square edges. This might indicate that those who built the cottages probably cut down the trees they needed rather than buying ready prepared timber. The steep slopes on the edge of the Stiperstones remain well wooded today. Most of the land has fairly young trees, so the older ones were used for building and for fuel.



Outhouse

The inside of the outhouse reveals the complex construction of the chimney behind the kitchen range in the house. In the left side of the picture the brick arch marks the remains of a bread oven. To the right there would have been a copper over a fire for boiling water on wash day. Clearly the owners of these houses went to great lengths to make them comfortable. It is a good illustration of the resourcefulness of the people who lived here.

The rest of the Outhouse was used as a Dairy, which had limewashed walls and a brick floor.

The yard in front of the house and outhouse is paved with bricks and flagstones so that mud isn't carried into the house on the boots of people living here.

Cook's Cottage

The best preserved house which had retained its roof is known as Cook's Cottage after the last residents Fanny and Robert Cook. It is a substantial two storey construction. Some plaster remains on the walls, with signs of blue paint. Plastering the walls would have helped the draught proofing of the houses as well as adding to the appearance of the homes. The upstairs was divided by a partition into two rooms; one for the parents and the other for the children.

There is a narrow, well constructed staircase in the corner of the house. It would probably have had doors at the top and bottom in order to reduce draughts.

Other Buildings

Vegetable Store

Outside the roofed house is a vegetable store, a low building with an arched roof well insulated with soil and turf. This would have been ideal for giving dark, frost free protection for potatoes and other vegetables during the winter. Frost would make the potatoes turn black, whilst light would make them turn green and start sprouting.

Cattle Sheds

Round the back are the remains of a Byre for cows and also, closer to the house, Pig Sties. The buildings for animals and for storing hay would not have been so strongly built as the houses, and little remains of these.

The Byre is being rebuilt as a shelter for school groups.

What happened to Blakemoorgate?

There is a third cottage at Blakemoorgate. This is not being restored, but left to show what happens to the cottages in time. This is known as Rita Evan's cottage although the last recorded inhabitants were the Hotchkiss's.

There was also a fourth cottage. This was at Blakemoorflat and was last lived in by Mary Evans and Anne Salter.

The table on the following sheet gives figures about lead ore production and the number of people employed at Snailbeach Mine. Accurate figures are not available for earlier years but we can assume a workforce of around 500 and ore production of over 2,500 tons a year from 1800 to the date when the accurate statistics appear. 1863 was probably the peak year for lead production with 3,250 tons of ore mined, by an underground workforce of 203 men.

In 1884 a steep fall in the price of lead forced the closure of most of the lead mines in Shropshire. After 1895 lead production elsewhere had almost ceased, and Snailbeach was the only mine left by 1901.

The writer suggests that depopulation of the cottages would have started around 1880, the main causes being

1. Fewer miners and surface workers were employed at Snailbeach
2. Other mines were closing
3. The small scale mining which continued into the 20th century and the ore dressing from material on old tips employed few people.
4. There was no other obvious source of work nearby.
5. The harsh climate 400 metres above sea level and the remoteness of the cottages would deter people from moving in when houses were abandoned.
6. Although mining was a protected occupation, young men might have joined the forces during the First World War, and, had they survived, they would have been unlikely to have wanted to settle back here.
7. The lack of facilities
    - Piped water
    - Surfaced roads
    - Shops, School, Public House (nearest at Stiperstones 2 km. away)
    - Gas, electricity, telephone, mains drainage, bus service

Snailbeach Mine Statistics

YEAR	Tons of Lead Ore Produced	Value	Underground Workers	Surface Workers	Total Workforce
1877	2463	30792	176	180	356
1878	2498	2022	182	169	351
1879	2284	23982	169	165	334
1880	2097	18731	150	164	314
1881	1946	18500	136	164	300
1882	1575	11997	137	141	278
1883	1293	10850	115	115	230
1884	844	6750	72	76	148
1885	254	1900	42	44	86
1886	826	6600	89	61	150
1887	860	6750	83	61	144
1888	961	8560	81	65	146
1889	1126	11420	88	71	159
1890	1200	11390	82	75	157
1891	1102	9370	84	65	149
1892	1072	6548			
1893	1149	7152			
1894	1854	11075	106	52	158
1895	1509	9443	76	60	136
1896	1179	8049	74	60	134
1897	1179	9401	87	59	146
1898	1161	9968	94	63	157
1899	1224	12486	105	64	169
1900	1188	14039	106	44	150
1901	1158	9778	93	43	136
1902	803	6958	69	41	110
1903	829	6687	84	41	125
1904	607	5071	91	43	134
1905	679	6351	87	42	129
1906	673	8132	77	42	119
1907	593	8132	77	42	119
1908	914	7671	95	43	138
1909	936	7876	94	41	135
1910	841	7437	48	40	88
1911	127	1184	9	9	18
1912	35	415	23	14	37
1913	21	229	24	14	38

Similar Buildings today

The local stone has provided an abundant supply of cheap, easily worked building material. The oldest part of the primary school in Minsterley has survived in good order since 1845. As in the houses at Blakemoorgate, brick is only used around windows and doorways. The school provides ample evidence of the quality of construction possible, especially where, as in this case, lime mortar was available.

The local stone is much in evidence in older cottages around Snailbeach. Some buildings have been painted, plastered or pebble dashed over the stone but many will have origins which go back 150 or 200 years. The workforce at Snailbeach Mine was at its highest before 1850. It would have been much reduced by 1890, and other mines in the area would have closed, so the abandonment of more outlying or less substantial houses would have begun by then.

Where houses were abandoned then valuable roofing materials would be stripped for use elsewhere, and this would mean that the walls, held together only with mud and the force of gravity, would rapidly deteriorate. As can be seen at Blakemoorgate, birds have planted Rowan trees liberally and these have even rooted in the soil of old buildings. This has inevitably hastened the break up of walls.