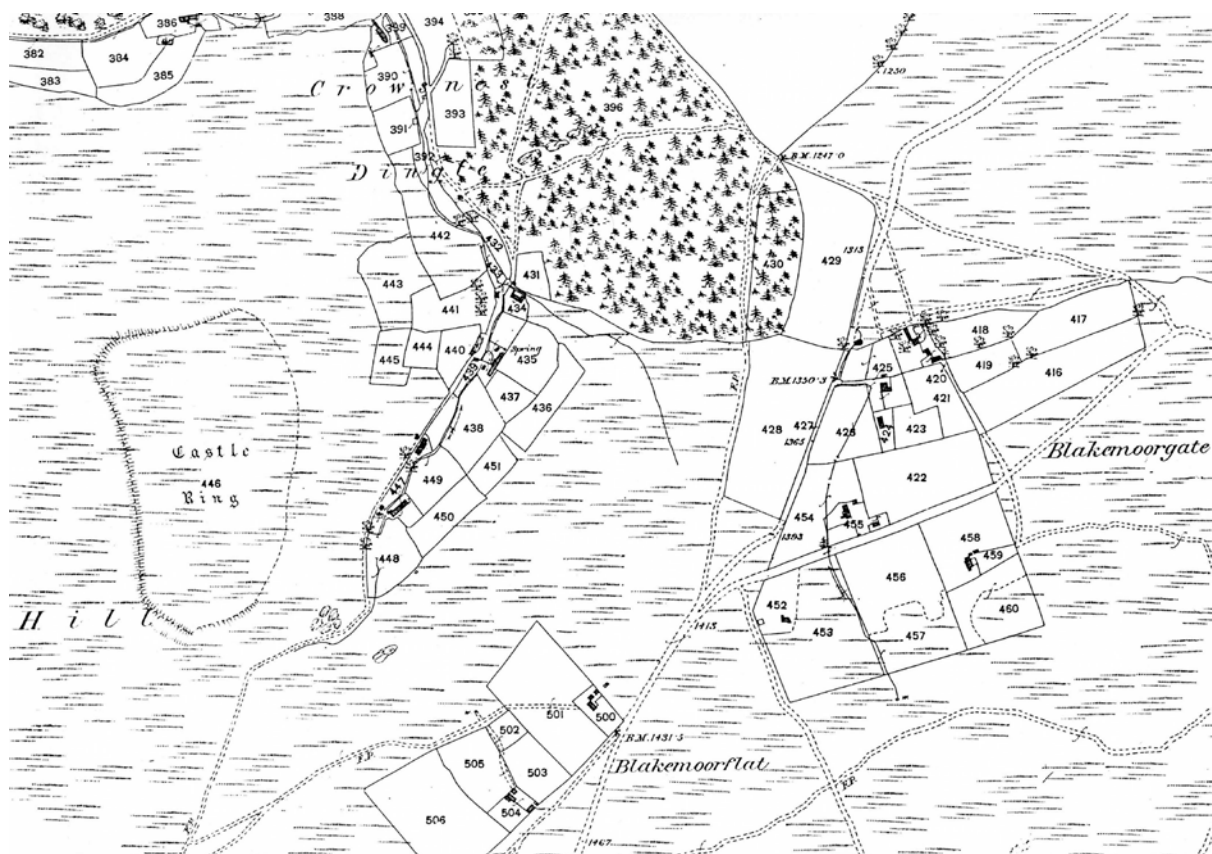


# Blakemoorgate

The remains of several miners' cottages at Blakemoorgate at the northern end of the Stiperstones are being renovated by English Nature. 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 the surviving buildings provide 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 1880 there were more than a dozen 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.



# Reaching Blakemoorgate

There is 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 two 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

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## 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 some of the houses already have the additional protection of a belt of trees, and 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 easily split underlying rocks are the Mytton Flags, which make 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

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The remains of at least five houses can be seen, with some associated buildings.

The walls are strongly built from the local stone, which lends itself to the production of very even flagstones. 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 arches were constructed 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.



# Inside the unroofed House

The unroofed house 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 flagstone covering. There are chimneys at both ends of the house.



# Outhouse

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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 reveals 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 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.

# Roofed House

The house which has retained its roof shows 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.



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 another house and cattle sheds. The buildings for animals and for storing hay would not have been so strongly built as the houses, and little remains of these.



## Similar Buildings today

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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