

The Mendip Miners

By Mark Wareham, July 2011

John Dirrick a mendip man
was buried January the 28th.

his constant employment was under ground
his long distemper was shortness of breath
his main endeavour was safe and sound
he set his aspirations above the earth
and after sixty and two years spent
in labour and sorrow in grief and pain
finding on earth no true content
Surrendered his soul to god again
1704

In 1704 the poem on the left was written of my great x 9 grandfather John Dirrick who was a lead miner on the Mendips in Somerset. John was born at the start of the civil war in 1642.

The poem was written by his brother, the parish clerk of Ubley and is arguably one of the earliest recorded incidences of industrial disease. It reads -

*His constant employment was under
ground
His long distemper was shortness of breath
His main endeavour was safe and sound
He set his aspirations above this earth
And after sixty and two years spent
In labour and sorrow in grief and pain
Finding on earth no true content
Surrendered his soul to God again*

In 1614 John's grandfather Edmund Dirrick was taken in front of the Star Chamber, a court under the authority of the King and much loathed by commoners, for various misdemeanours including trying to unlawful gain a share in a lead mine.

The Dirricks had family connections to Mendip lead and coal miners of the earlier 17th century as would other ancestral lines on my mother's paternal and maternal lines such as the Says, Carvers and Horlers (assuming the Horler line and not that of Horner (see page 47)). The Mendip miners played their part in the civil war, on both sides when paid or impressed, but were predominantly supporters of Parliament. On page 48 we have seen how north Somerset rose almost en-masse in support of the puritan cause and for Parliament. Undoubtedly the miners were part of the crowd of thousands gathered at Chewton Mendip which caused the Royalist recruiters, Hertford and Hopton, to abandon their cause in the county and look to Cornwall and Wales for better opportunities to raise forces.

By 1643 the Mendips was under the control of the King's forces and in early 1644 miners were being recruited, or probably impressed in the majority of cases, to serve their cause. Miners were most useful in sieges where they could dig to undermine walls. They were used by the Royalists at the first siege of Wardour castle -

"All efforts and offers, however, were in vain, and Lord Hopton having reinforced the besiegers with a strong detachment of Mendip miners, commanded by Sir Francis Dodington and an engineer, Ludlow was obliged to surrender on February 18, 1644." *From The Civil War in Hampshire (1642-45) and the Story of Basing House by Rev GN Godwin.*

In July 1645 however at the second siege of Sherborne Castle, miners from the Mendips were being used by Sir Thomas Fairfax and his roundheads and put to work in the besieging forces to sap and undermine the walls. In the end however it was the powerful artillery that mainly led to a breach and the storming of the garrison.



The ruined west gatehouse of Sherborne Castle. Slighted by Parliament after the war to ensure that it could not be a haven for Royalist discontent. Mendip miners were employed by the roundheads besieging the castle to sap and undermine the walls.

The strong Protestant leanings and rebellious nature of the miners from Mendip was to be seen again in 1683 when many rallied to the cause of the Duke of Monmouth against Charles I's grandson King James II. However the disastrous pitchfork rebellion was doomed to failure. At the Battle of Sedgemoor in Somerset the miners stood bravely and sold their lives dearly in the fight but many were butchered by the King's regular forces and many others were put on trial and executed by that cruel man Judge Jefferies.

The line from the Dirricks of Ubley by the Mendips to my grandfather is shown on the next page.

