

# The mystery of Buckden Bill

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On a snowy March day in 1964 a party of students from Birmingham University set off to explore the old lead mines high above the village of Buckden. What they were to find that day would keep people guessing for decades after. It's been one of the great mysteries of Upper Wharfedale, puzzling and intriguing local people and visitors alike but now some answers could be at hand.

While exploring the extensive passages of Buckden Gavel Mine, the students found the body of a man. They quickly returned to the entrance of the mine and called the police, who initially declared a murder investigation. Members of the Upper Wharfedale Fell Rescue Association were scrambled.

Roger Nichols, one of the fell rescue team sent to retrieve the body, remembers the day well. He found it around 400 yards into the mine in a little-explored passage reached using three shafts, each up to 60 feet (18 m) high.

He recalls: "All that remained was a dark-stained skeleton clothed in studded leather boots with hook-type fastening, trousers, shirt, waistcoat and a fine felt hat. The body seemed to be in a relaxed pose with hands folded across the chest and the legs in a natural position."

Clearly, the gentleman had been there a long, long time. This was no contemporary crime scene for the police to investigate but a fascinating relic from the past. The contents of the man's pockets added to the

interest – an old-fashioned clay pipe, a tobacco tin, a box of three-inch (7.5 cm) long Crown Vesta matches, a medicine bottle containing a colourless fluid, a silver sixpence dated 1872, two shilling pieces dated 1885 and a funeral card for a John Winskill, who is thought to have been buried at Settle in May 1890. A walking stick completed the scene.

These objects helped to place the man's death in the early 1890s but he was never identified. Presumably he entered the mines on his own – but why? The mines had effectively closed more than ten years previously. It seemed he died of natural causes, perhaps a heart attack, but nothing more could be said. In the absence of any real clues to the man's identity, he was dubbed Buckden Bill.

The mystery of Buckden Bill has endured. During the years that followed, the lead mines have retreated further into history but we have also come to understand more about the industry and how it took over the quiet fells of the Dales and swelled the population of the villages.

At Buckden, lead was mined at Buckden Gavel on the western flank of Buckden Pike at least as far back as the seventeenth century. Early mining took place via shafts sunk above Cray but in 1804 work began on a horizontal tunnel high up in Buckden Ghyll. The entrance can still be seen today. In the 1860s the mine, run by Charles Lodge and Co, was producing significant amounts of lead but, as with the other mines in the



*Above, looking out from inside Buckden Gavel Mine; right, Buckden Bill's felt hat (pictured here with Roger Nichols) was found with the skeleton.*

Dales, the end was not far away. In the 1870s world lead prices were driven down by competition from new sources and the Dales lead industry, with its by now overworked veins, could not survive. By 1877 production at Buckden Gavel Mine had probably more or less ceased.

At the time there must have been mixed feelings. Lead mining provided a living but it was hard, miserable and dangerous. After the mines closed, the men who had toiled in them drifted away to the cities, the mine buildings and smelt mills started to crumble and the fells reclaimed their solitude.





*Left, Buckden Pike, once a thriving mining area.*

Shortly after 'Bill' was discovered, the Upper Wharfedale Fell Rescue Association explored the workings more fully and found them to be just as the last shift of miners had left them, more than eighty years before. The mines were extensive and on three levels. Clog marks could be seen in the mud on the floor of the mine. Even impressions of the miners' corduroy trousers were

visible on the muddy side walls. Elsewhere, initials and dates were carved into stonework. There were also the stumps of tallow candles, stuck to the walls in clay cups, along with a broken clay pipe laid on a shelf. It was almost a complete museum but one that could not answer the biggest question of all – who was Buckden Bill?

Now, half a century later, the jigsaw is

coming together. Nothing is absolutely certain but the picture that is emerging could well be the right one.

Mike Gill, recorder for the Northern Mine Research Society, says: "It is now believed that 'Bill' may well have been a man called John Sunter Place. He was from a mining family in Upper Wharfedale but had been living in Burnley. He also appears

to have disappeared at the right time."

John Sunter Place was born in Low Row in Swaledale in 1844. In 1861 he was living with his father and mother, John and Jane Place, at Kearton near Feetham in the dale. Aged sixteen, he was the eldest of seven children and, like his father, was working as a lead miner.

The census of 1871 reveals that the family had by then moved to Kettlewell in Wharfedale. It is thought that John Sunter Place married Kettlewell girl Mary Ann Wiseman in 1868 and the couple now had two young children. John was still a lead miner. He and Mary Ann were living side by side with John's parents in the village – his father had secured the key position of agent in the local mines, probably the profitable Old Providence Mine in Dowber Gill, east of Kettlewell.

As the lead industry fell into difficulties in the 1870s, however, work in the mines became harder to find. By 1881 John and Mary Ann had left the Dales and moved to Burnley. At some stage his mother and father moved to Manningham in Bradford.

What happened in 1890 is key to solving the mystery. By the following year John Sunter Place appears to have gone missing, yet no record of his death has ever been found.

In April 1891 Mary Ann, his wife, was still living in Burnley. Although listed in the census as married, she was now described as head of household and had gone out to work herself. She was a cotton weaver, as were five of her six children, including Thomasine, aged only twelve. Staying with them was Hannah Place, probably John Sunter Place's sister, perhaps to help with

the aftermath of the disappearance.

So where did John Sunter Place go? Two things happened in the summer of 1890 that might hold clues. In May he presumably attended the funeral of John Winskill in Settle. There is a suggestion that they were both members of the Rechabite Society, a movement promoting temperance. Mike Gill remembers that when the funeral card was found, it was remarkably undamaged in John Sunter Place's pocket. He reasons that had it been in his pocket for any length of time while he was going about his normal daily life, it would have been at the least creased or dog-eared.

And just weeks after the death of John Winskill, John Sunter Place's own father died in Bradford.

Did either event prompt a time of reflection for our John? Did he decide to return to Wharfedale during the summer of 1890 to explore the mines that gave him work, that shaped his life but that ultimately let him down? And what was the connection with Buckden Gavel Mine?

Mike Gill says: "If he'd just gone in the mine casually it doesn't seem likely he would have got to where he did. He was found in an area of the later workings and it would have been a difficult journey to get there. It looks as though he was familiar with the mine and that he might have had some thought in mind when he went in, perhaps to visit part of it where he had worked."

When he was a miner, John had lived in Kettlewell, of course, and the mine at

Buckden would have been a four-mile (6.5 km) uphill walk away. Mike says: "That was nothing in those days. It would have taken him less time to get to work than many people today."

Intriguingly, a map of the mine reveals names like Sunter North Level and Wiseman's West Level. Levels were often named after the men who worked them. Although Sunter was probably a common family name, could Mary Ann's family have given their name to parts of the mine?

As to what took place in the mine on that day in 1890, it is impossible to be precise. The climb up to the entrance would have been strenuous enough but inside, the route to where John was found would have involved hard climbs. He was forty-six, actually quite old in lead mining years. The heart attack theory begins to appear possible.

As for Mary Ann, she seems to have died in 1919 and is said to be buried in Kettlewell churchyard, finally back in the village where she was born. Whether she ever had any inkling of what might have been her husband's fate we will probably never know but in making that final return journey up into the Dales, she moved not only back close to her roots but also, it seems, to her late husband. ■

*You can see some of Buckden Bill's belongings at the Yorkshire Dales Mining Museum in Earby, near Skipton. Buckden Gavel Mine itself is now in a very dangerous state and should not be entered.*

## NOT MUCH OF AN EARLY BIRD

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Overheard on a Bradford bus late one night, as two drinking friends parted: "Ah'll see thee Sunda' mornin' then, Fred."

"Sunda' mornin'?" exclaimed Fred, "Ah nivver knew they 'ad em!" *Leonard T Butterfield*