

# THE YORK HARBOUR COPPER MINE

1897 - 1913



Mural of York Harbour Copper Mine shaft head by Rick Berry, based on an actual contemporary picture.  
This mural is displayed at the mine entrance in the Copper Mine Cape Trail parking area.

AROUND 1892 A PROSPECTOR NAMED DANIEL J HENDERSON located a copper deposit about a mile east of the town of York Harbour and some 1,000 feet up the precipitous north side of Blow-Me-Down Mountain in a gully known today as Copper Mine Brook. Unable to finance a mine himself, Henderson offered his find to others who might, and a St John's merchant, A J Harvey, bought part ownership of the property. Hedley Smythe was appointed mine manager, and Charles Rendell was mine captain.

Under Rendell's instructions, mining began in a disorganised manner in 1897. Four shafts were sunk and a precarious chute and pulley contraption to transport pork barrels of ore down the cliff to the coast was constructed. By 1899 some 500 tons of ore had been extracted but it remained unsold on the shore below the mine. In 1900 A J Harvey fired Rendell and leased the mine to the York Harbour Copper Company of Manchester, England. James Hooper was appointed mine captain. On 23 October 1900 an optimistic report appeared in the *Western Star* of Corner Brook, but with no attribution:- "*If the York Harbor Copper Mine proves a success, and we have every assurance that it will, some six or seven hundred men will be employed, which means an impetus to the trade of the Bay.*"

Hooper effected some improvements, deepening the shafts and installing a motor to raise the ore from the shafts. But according to Hedley Smythe, the workings were going away from the ore body rather than staying with it and mistakenly "*the conclusion was arrived at that the bottom of the ore was reached and that it had cut out completely*". Smythe's practical experience at this mine led him to disagree with this assessment. It would seem that there was a conflict here between one man's judgement based on general theory and another's based on actual knowledge and experience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A letter from Hedley V Smythe, explaining the problem as he saw it, appeared in *The Western Star*, Corner Brook, of 22 November 1901:-  
*... the ore near the surface and for some distance below it, is what is known as being "not in place" but thrown out of its regular course by the various upheavals and convulsions of the country in past ages. We have this disturbance here to a greater extent than in a low country; one main shaft being at an altitude of 1000 feet from level of sea. Now it is obvious that one has to be guided in this search for ore not by any given rule but by knowledge only acquired by familiarity with like deposits in this country. Experience gained in copper deposits in other countries is not to be depended on, as in most cases they are in a totally different formation and require different working. In this case our local methods of mining were not adhered to, the natural result being that although a large body of ore was opened up the workings were in depth gradually going from instead of to the regular or main lode. Consequently the conclusion arrived at was that the bottom of ore was reached and that it had cut out completely. Having been connected with this property since its first working and knowing the peculiarities of the formation here, I had every confidence that such was not so. On recommencing work on the first of November all energy was concentrated on proving "likely" looking ground 190 feet below surface and west of main shaft. Ore was struck in the first shift and at present we have opened up a deposit of solid ore which is now 8 (eight) feet in width and which I feel confident is a portion of the main lode sought. The quality of this ore is undoubted; it is the richest mined here and as far as I am aware second to none in the country. From the large body of ore gone through from the surface, about 5000 tons in sight, and with the recent addition of our present new band, I think that the future of the York Harbour mine would make the most confirmed pessimist dry up.*

The management's failure to heed the voice of local knowledge was not the only affliction suffered by the mine. Carelessness or incompetence may also have been involved, and the terms of the French Shore Treaty created difficulties :-

*Sparks from the cookhouse started a fire at the mine in June [1900] and forced everyone to flee with their possessions down to the beach. A brief visit from the French navy squelched plans to build a new pier and tramway; and a summer dysentery epidemic struck the settlement, rendering many of the miners helpless for days.* <sup>2</sup>

Fishermen had been encountering setbacks for a hundred years on the Treaty Shore; the railway builders also faced obstacles when they sought permission from the authorities to build along the Treaty Shore, and now it was the mine operators. A licence from the Governor of the Colony was needed, and along with that approval if received was a warning about the legal insecurity of leases or grants in the Treaty Zone. An 1890 Memorandum to Cabinet maintained :-

*that no permanent buildings of any kind may be erected, no mines opened, no magistrates appointed, in short that the whole coast for several hundred miles is to be closed to the colonists, and consequently the resources of the country behind left undeveloped, in order that no French fisherman shall be prevented from hauling his net or drying his fish in any spot which takes his fancy.* <sup>3</sup>

In 1902, Harvey refused to renew the lease of the York Harbour Copper Company, leasing it instead to the Humber Consolidated Mining and Manufacturing Company and Daniel Henderson, the original discoverer. Several improvements were made, and between 1902 and 1905 some 15,000 tons of ore were shipped to the USA. This was the greatest achievement of the mine yet, but more troubles, this time financial, resulted in court cases and bankruptcy. Chronic shortage and heavy turnover of workers also were problems, in spite of efforts to provide better conditions. One such improvement in conditions was the establishment of a boarding house for the miners, operated by William Murrin and his wife Priscilla. William and his brothers Moses and Herbert had earlier worked their way across the Island on railway construction, and had arrived eventually at York Harbour to work at the mine. Another incentive of interest to those with families was provided by James Druggett, a self-educated man and also a miner, in the form of Sunday school classes for the children of miners who had their homes nearby. However it appears that none of these measures solved the labour problems, although in the long run they contributed to the growth and development of Lark Harbour and York Harbour. Unfortunately the mine again seemed doomed to failure. <sup>4</sup>

At this time a group of London mining engineers and merchants formed a new company called York Harbour Mine (Newfoundland) Limited. Approaches were made to the Newfoundland Government to install a copper smelter



Coppermine Brook waterfall



Remains of ore carts near the mine

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, Wendy: *Once upon a Mine: Story of Pre-Confederation Mines on the Island of Newfoundland*, Special volume 26, The Canadian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Montreal, 1983, p33.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Chadwick, *Newfoundland: Island into Province*, Cambridge, 1967, p49, from a memo to Cabinet, March 1890.

<sup>4</sup> William Murrin (1857-1936) & Priscilla (1866-1951), Moses Murrin (1870-1941) & Grace (1871-1966), and Herbert Murrin were all from Spaniard's Bay. They raised their families in Lark Harbour and, except for Herbert, are buried in the cemetery. The preceding items are mentioned in Martin's account (see Footnote 2 above) and are confirmed by Mr Kenneth Druggett of Lark Harbour. Mr Druggett is the maternal grandson of William and Priscilla Murrin and son of James Druggett Sr, who, along with another miner, recovered the body of the deceased John Sheppard.

at York Harbour. This was approved by the Government, and two Copper Smelting Acts were passed in 1910 and 1911 to subsidise the cost of construction of smelters up to \$50,000 for each mine owner, but no smelter was ever built at the York Harbour mine. A few years later, after an accident in which one miner, John Sheppard, was killed when a working collapsed, the mine was closed in September 1913 and the company was wound up.

At its peak the York Harbour Copper Mine employed three hundred men, but only for a brief time. It appears never to have been a success for very long, and no more than a few cargoes of ore were shipped out during its entire lifetime of about sixteen years. It is unclear exactly why the mine closed when it did, as the legal difficulties had mostly been resolved once the French Shore issue was settled in 1904 and Newfoundland had gained sovereignty over her own territory.

Nothing further occurred until 1955 when the mine was reactivated briefly to maintain the mineral rights, and to this day whatever ore may exist there still remains untouched. Ruins of the mine workings and some of the machinery are still visible at the parking area of the Copper Mine Cape Hiking Trail near Coppermine Brook about a kilometre east of York Harbour.

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Lark Harbour.  
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