

## 2. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 Background

At the request of Dr John Dent, Principal Officer (Archaeology & Countryside), Scottish Borders Council, a watching brief was mounted by Susan Oakes of West Linton on a development at Siller Holes (Canmore ID 344737), on the slopes of Lead Law (Canmore ID 50258), to the north-west of West Linton, Peeblesshire (Illus 1). This was in response to a desire by the farmer and owner of Cottage Farm, Professor J King, to plant trees and create a wildlife pond in the area between the road and the slope of Lead Law in an effort to improve an area of naturally poor drainage (Illus 2).

### 2.2 The site

The solid geology of Lead Law is rhyolitic tuff of Biggar Volcanic Formation (Old Red Sandstone). The drift, depending on location, could be till, fluvial sands and gravels or recent alluvium, but

around NGR NT 145 533 it appears to be till (Nigel Ruckley, pers comm). There would be outcrop, probably the tuff, but there could be a little sandstone outcropping. The sandstone is from the Auchtitech Sandstone formation (Early Devonian).

The north-facing slope of the hill is covered with the remains of mine-working; there are pits, large and small, shallow and deep, and dumps of spoil (Illus 3), at the foot of which is an area of marshy ground. This had been in existence since at least as far back as 1849, being shown as a moss on a map of that date (Smith 1849). Running along the west edge of the site is a former Roman road (Canmore ID 108869) which later became the principal route between Moffat and Edinburgh (Illus 4). The first edition of the Ordnance Survey six-inch map (Illus 1) shows a pond close to the road and a number of the larger pits. It is not known whether the shallower pits had been backfilled with spoil from other pits or had not been further excavated.

A survey by the RCAHMS during October 1994 (RCAHMS 1995: 15) resulted in a detailed plan



**Illus 2** The site. Trees cover the top of Lead Law, and pits and spoil heaps lie on its slope. The pond is visible behind the fence and the former Roman road is in the foreground (photograph: Valerie E Dean)





**Illus 3** Siller Holes, looking north. In the centre, the extent of the mining remains is evident. The line of the Roman road runs diagonally across the area, to the west of the temporary camp (Google maps <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@55.7663242,-3.3621871,594m/data=!3m1!1e3> (accessed 24 April 2017). Imagery © 2016 Getmapping plc, Map data © 2016 Google)



**Illus 4** In the centre is the pond, source of the finds. The area excavated by the University of Edinburgh lies to the far right (photograph: Valerie E Dean)

of the mining remains (Illus 5) which included many small, shallow pits, larger pits and spoil heaps (Illus 6) and a possible drift mine or adit. The pits run in two main east/west alignments across the slope of Lead Law, which suggests that they may

be following a vein. Two parallel low banks mark a boundary between a former tree plantation and a neighbouring field to the south-west. These banks, in turn, overlie two sides of Stonypath Roman camp (Canmore ID 50251).



**Illus 5** Field survey plan showing the rounded corner of a Roman camp amidst the mining remains. The finds were recovered from the disturbed areas around the pond (© Historic Environment Scotland)





**Illus 6** Pits and spoil heaps litter the landscape (photograph: Valerie E Dean)

### 2.3 Archaeological background

During the period from the autumn of 1993 until the spring of 1998 the pond was dredged by machine and the silt dumped around the perimeter. Bone, cloth, leather, pottery, ore, slag and teeth were recovered by Susan Oakes from the resulting spoil dumps shown as disturbed areas on Illus 5 (Oakes 1994: 7). The distribution of the various finds was marked on sketch maps which have been deposited along with the finds currently held at the National Museums of Scotland Collection Centre. The bulk of more than 1,100 finds came from the most northerly dumps, where all categories were

represented. Slag and ore were scarce in the more southerly recovery areas.

In June 1995 the Department of Archaeology of the University of Edinburgh (Coles 1995: 37–9) conducted its first annual field school in environmental archaeology at a site to the north-east of the pond, directed by Dr Geraint Coles and assisted by Dr Chris Burgess. The objective was to establish the origin of the medieval remains recovered from the site and to establish the relationship of these remains to the mines themselves.

Unfortunately, neither the 1995 excavation records nor the finds are available for examination; in particular the pottery was not studied. The

department's interim report (Coles 1995: 38–9) suggested three phases of activity, the first being associated by the finds to medieval mining, the second being the construction of water control structures and the possible cutting of new mine shafts during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the third phase linked to later agricultural improvements. There did not appear to be any stratigraphic or finds link of the site to the bell pits and spoil heaps, although some small pits cut into mine tailings.

As no study has been made of the pits and spoil heaps, these cannot be dated at present. The depths of the pits are unknown, as also are their functions – whether for extraction purposes or to provide ventilation for the lower workings. It may be that the spoil heaps' sizes give an indication of the depth of the pits. No structural remains have been found.

## 2.4 The finds

The finds, conserved and currently held by National Museums of Scotland, are therefore unstratified. They comprise a large collection of 12th- to 14th-century pottery, the largest collection of medieval textiles outside Perth, an abundance of worked leather (including several complete medieval shoes), butchered bone, wood, rope, slag and ore (see Table 10). As these had been recovered from a waterlogged environment, the degree of preservation was remarkable. The dating of this assemblage has led to the assumption that the mineworking was predominantly of the medieval period.

As the finds were recovered by fieldwalking, they are considered to be Treasure Trove and will be assessed and allocated to a suitable institution.

## 2.5 Historical background

The main lead vein appears to run south towards Lead Law from an area just below the village of Carlops, known as Lead Flats (Illus 1), where there are old workings. Jenny Barrie's Cave (Canmore ID 50178) is a rock-hewn tunnel and the Seven Cauldrons (Canmore ID 50177) are cone-shaped pits in a north/south alignment, possibly trial pits or ventilation shafts. According to local tradition, all these were worked from at least the mid-16th century.

An unpublished survey by Susan Oakes (nd) describes 46 mine and quarry sites in the West Lothian area where coal, lead, silver, ironstone, lime, sand, oil shale and clay were extracted and worked.

Lead is one of the first metals discovered and it has been mined and smelted for at least 8,000 years. Lead beads found in Anatolia have been dated to around 6500 BC and the Egyptians are reported to have used lead along with gold, silver and copper as early as 5000 BC (Britannica Online Encyclopedia 2017).

Beads made of lead were discovered in 1992 during the excavation of a Bronze Age burial site at West Water reservoir, just 3km south-west of Siller Holes. This, at almost 4,000 years ago, is the earliest evidence for the smelting of lead in Britain (Hunter et al 2000: 115–82). There are claims that stone and bronze implements were once found in old works at Leadhills and Wanlockhead (Hunter 1885: 376).

Galena, or lead ore, was probably mined in the Wanlockhead area as early as Roman times, although the fort nearest to it is at Crawford (Canmore ID 47396). However, as the Siller Holes site lies alongside a former Roman road, is adjacent to Stonypath temporary marching camp and is near to both North Slipperfield temporary camp (Canmore ID 144753) and Tocherknowe fortlet (Canmore ID 72048) at Lynedale House, extraction of lead and silver by the Romans cannot be discounted.

The Romans considered that ores no richer than two or three ounces (troy) of silver per ton of ore were worth cupelling for their silver (Bick 1990: 75). A lead pig was found at Strageath Roman fort (Frere et al 1989: 174–5) and its lead signature suggests that it was formed from ore mined in the Southern Uplands (Rohl & Needham 1998: 33–4, plot 16; Hunter 2006: 85). With the departure of the Romans, the need for both lead and mining skills went into decline. Metalwork found in Scotland after the second century AD was made from imported silver. Unfortunately, no Roman finds have been made at Siller Holes to date.

Norsemen are reputed to have mined lead on Islay (Pennant 1776: 207) and recent work on the island has established that lead mining was taking place there at least as early as the 1360s (Caldwell 2008: 231). There were also Norse settlements on Loch Sunart, adjacent to the Strontian lead vein; at both these locations the lead deposits were found close to the surface (Smout 1967: 108).

Silver was needed for coinage and David I (1124–53) is said to have obtained his silver from a mine in Cumberland (Macpherson 1805), which implies that none was readily available in Scotland at that time. It may have been the 16th century before Scottish silver was available for this purpose.

The first known name associated with Linton was the Norman name of Comyn, when a lesser family member, Richard Comyn, who had made a 'good' marriage to Hextilda, daughter of Uhtred of Tynedale and Bethoc, only daughter of Donald Ban, was granted lands by David I's son, Lord Henry; this may have been on the occasion of their marriage at around 1145 (Buchan & Paton 1927: 112). Sometime between 1152 and 1160 he granted to Kelso Abbey the church of West Linton, known then as Lyntun Ruderic or Rotheric, and half a ploughgate (26 hectares) of land in the 'villa' (Kelso Abbey 1846: 226, no. 274).

The powerful Comyn family became one of considerable importance, holding vast tracts of land across Scotland. However, as they had supported John Balliol's claim to the Scottish throne and had allied with Edwards I and II, they were dispossessed of their estates by Bruce sometime after 1308 (Young 1997: 205). Some lesser Comyns were more fortunate and were given lands; although Peeblesshire and Linton were not specifically mentioned, it is possible they may fall into this category.

There are several references to lead mining in Scotland in medieval documents, the earliest being to a mine on Crawford Muir granted to the monks of Newbattle in 1239 (Newbattle Abbey 1849: 110, no. 146). Nearly all refer either to coastal areas of the western Highlands or to the Lanarkshire–Dumfriesshire border, where the industry was later to have its greatest success (Cochran-Patrick 1878: passim). The monks of Newbattle Abbey may also have been responsible for the medieval exploitation of ore from Lead Law (Hall 2006: 204), although no direct connection has been established, or perhaps one of the Border abbeys may have had an interest there. These large buildings needed lead for roofing, window frames, water pipes and drainpipes and it was also used to make food vessels, utensils and trinkets. During the Wars of Independence the lead was stripped from the roof of Jedburgh Abbey in 1305 which would, in turn, have created a further

demand for supplies for the repair works (Lewis & Ewart 1995: 140–43).

It was in 1313 that the Morton branch of the Douglas family appeared in Linton (Buchan & Paton 1927: 114), when William Douglas held the lands of Whitfield. The Douglasses gradually increased their holdings until they held almost the whole of Linton, either as landowners or superiors, as well as lands in Newlands parish.

By 1424 the Scots may have mastered the difficult art of refining silver from lead (Smout 1967: 104) when the Scottish Parliament granted to the Crown 'all mines of gold, and all of lead where three halfpennies of silver could be fined out of a pound of lead' (Cochran-Patrick 1878: lix).

There is a local tradition that in the 16th century Siller Holes lead ore was exported to Holland, where the silver was extracted (Nicol 1843: 180). The *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1796: 624) notes that silver said to have been obtained from lead mined from the Linton vein was used by Mary of Guise to pay troops during her regency (1554–60).

The earliest documented reference to Siller Holes is in June 1592, when the reduction of the tack or lease of Mr Eustachius Roche refers to:

the semes of mettelis discoverit and wrocht of auld: To wit the gold in Crawford mwre, Hinderland and Tuedis mwre the copper seme in Crawford mwre at the place callit Vamlökheid [blank] The seme of leid at Lyntoun callit Siluerhoilis: And to haue enterit ane sufficient number of warkmen: To wit thriescoir men of all sortis of warkmen necessar for ilk seme at the leist and to haue biggit houses mylnes fornaces cassin sinkis and mynes and done dyuers and sindrie vtheris thingis necessar for the practise of the mater of mettelis acording to the vse of myneris in Germanie and vther partis quhair mettelis is exerceit ... (Cochran-Patrick 1878: 55)

The fact that the name Siller Holes means silver holes or mines suggests that silver had previously been extracted there prior to that date – and presumably in sufficient quantity to justify the name.

In 1631 the Douglas connection was severed when William, the sixth Earl of Morton, sold all his Peeblesshire lands to Sir John Stewart, later



the first Earl of Traquair (Buchan & Paton 1927: 117). Thereafter Linton was owned by a number of other proprietors and Silver Holes became part of the former Medwyn estate, which was broken up in the late 1920s.

Other early references to mining at Linton can be found in Macfarlane's *Geographical Collections*, the 1908 edition of 17th- and early 18th-century manuscripts collected by Sibbald, for example, 'Near Lintoun in Tweddale is found Lead and Silver' and 'the Silver Mines of Lead Law, half a mile above Linton commonly called the Silver Holes' (Macfarlane 1908: 16, 143).

The mining of galena had become the main occupation of speculators by the late 17th century as a result of the increasing use of lead in the making of pottery and glass (Wanlockhead Museum Trust 1975: 3). It had been found quite widely across Scotland, in particular at Leadhills and Wanlockhead, but also in Islay, Tyndrum and Galloway. In 1606 a vein of

silver was found at Hilderston, near Linlithgow, but proved to be less fruitful than first thought and was abandoned soon after 1614 (Canmore ID 47939). By the late 18th century probably more than 5,600 tons of lead ore per year were being produced in Scotland (Smout 1967: 105).

Regular working of the Linton mines stopped around 1753 when Ronald Crawford & Co., tacksmen of Leadhills, ceased operations. The Earl of Wemyss and March had considered resuming operations in 1828, but the expense was too great and the project was abandoned by 1835 (Buchan & Paton 1927: 98).

In the early 19th century, cheap Spanish lead drastically reduced prices, although a revival in the latter half of the century kept the industry alive in Scotland until 1928. In the second half of the 19th century, the Leadhills and Wanlockhead mines were producing 97% of the ore in Scotland (Smout 1967: 106–7).