

The History of Honister Slate Mine

It is difficult to tell when the first slate was extracted from the Honister Slate Mine but it was probably during the time of the Roman occupation. Fragments of Honister slate have been found at the site of the Roman Bath House at Ravenglass and Hardknott Fort. It is possible that the Romans created the route across the fells that is known as Moses Trod to allow slate to be carried to coastal ports. Much later, the monks of Furness Abbey who owned land in Borrowdale are also thought to be early pioneers, but neither of these claims are proven.



In early times this part of Lakeland was a poor and remote land with few roads and even less habitation. The nearest town, Keswick, was half a days walk away from Honister. The hamlets of Seatoller, Seathwaite, Rosthwaite and Grange consisted of only a few farms.

The early quarry men had no means of riding to Honister in comfort. Most walked from Keswick early on a Monday morning and lived rough on the mountains until the end of the week or even longer, working the slate by hand in all kinds of weather. Miners even walked from as far away as Egremont and Whitehaven in West Cumberland to spend the week working at the Honister Slate Mine.

The first real surviving evidence of 'slate getting' at Honister is from around 1643. At this time the men used crude methods to prise the slate away from the surface of the Crag where the vein was exposed. The main areas where this took place is at the top of the Crag at Bull Gill and also Ash Gill, at an altitude of about 2000 feet. You can still see remains of some of the series of terraces from where the slate was taken.

Stone huts called 'bothies' were built by the miners to protect themselves from the elements. The bothies were built from the slate extracted from Fleetwith Pike and were only about three metres wide by four metres long. They had very thick walls to keep the wind and the rain out. They contained a fireplace so the miners at least had some warmth. The men would live in these bothies for up to two weeks, or for as long as their supply of food lasted.



When the supplies ran out, the men would return home. Ponies came to collect the riven slates that they had made and transport them by way of Warnscale Bottom to Whitehaven or along Moses Trod via *Green Gable* and on to the port of Ravenglass. These early slates were thick and crude and were used on local buildings. They did not look much like modern roofing slate, being from half an inch to an inch thick and 2-3 feet in size.



So this is how the slate industry began. It was to be a way of life at Honister for many generations. Little was to change here for nearly three hundred years.