THE LAND OF LEAD AND SILVER PROJECT
20 October 2025
Andie Harris

Andie Harris, from the North Pennines National Landscape team, began by telling us about the origins of this project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England. In 2017, a working group was concerned about the state of an old building which had been previously used in the lead and silver industry in the North Pennines. The group surveyed all the remains and categorised them by indicating the level of danger each building posed. They even looked at the possibility of converting some buildings into homes.

Mining in the North Pennines has been an important industry, from Roman times, with many different sites being developed. Andie then showed many pictures: some of the mines when they were still operating and others showing the remains that are still standing, sometimes just hollows and piles of rubble. In the early days extraction was carried out only by man power but later pneumatic drills were used. Any lead which was found was broken up into small pieces and then washed, usually by women and children.

Some of the mines were owned by The London Lead Company which was run by Quakers. This organisation insisted that all children went to school, at least until they were 12. The children then had to pass an exam before they were allowed to leave. There is a story about one young man who continually failed the exam. He was made to leave at the age of 16. It is thought that he was one of the brightest pupils who ever attended that school.

After the lead was washed it then needed to be smelted. This was toxic work and therefore led to the construction of very long tunnels in Victorian times to take away the fumes, ending with a tall chimney. Some of these tunnels were large enough for horse-drawn carriages to travel through. Two tall chimneys still stand on Allendale Moor: silent witnesses to the lead industry that for over 200 years brought work and wealth to these remote valleys. The lead industry was very important; lead was used in paints, cosmetics, roofing and plumbing. Silver was a by-product of the smelting process.

The life of a miner was not easy, although The London Lead Company built houses for their workers, with running water, and also provided street lighting in the villages. The company also built schools and meeting houses, and provided allotments so the workers could grow their own vegetables. Around 1904 the lead industry was in decline and many of the mines were closed. Some of the miners emigrated to America and Canada.



In the 1970s, however, some mines began to reopen but this time they were searching for other minerals. The aims of Historic England are primarily to conserve and record, especially where areas are at most risk, whilst developing new audiences and looking for volunteers.

Andie then talked about Augill Smelting Mill (previous page). Its remains can still be seen, about one and a half miles east of Brough. Although the surviving building is now roofless, the remaining structure has been renovated and supported with steelwork that has been tied into the walls. There is an information panel standing in front of the building entitled “Augill Lead Smelting Mill” and “later iron foundry” with some history of the building and a detailed plan of the workings that were carried out in it.

Erected in 1843, the building is situated in a “secluded and romantic vale”. By the 1850s the mines were taken over by a partnership that included the Waltons of Greenends near Alston. In 1848 Jacob Walton was commissioned by the North Stainmore Mining Company to look into the prospects of their two mines and report back. “The Augill Mine is one of the most singular mines I have seen” was one of his comments.

Andie also mentioned similar projects in Northumberland and County Durham, including repairs which had been carried out on the remains of the old wash floor at Middlehope Shield in Weardale. The walls in the buildings were originally dry stone but new walls, using cement, have been built behind the old walls to provide better support and prevent future collapses. Better footpaths have also been constructed to provide safer access.

Andie finished her most interesting talk by explaining how volunteers could assist Historic England and enhance the organisation’s facilities and public displays.

Tricia & Keith Jagger