



By Ivy Gao  
Word Count: 2,838

# THE DOLAUCOTHI GOLD MINES

An investigation into the mine's history during its major operating phase, how this was driven by entrepreneurship, and the efforts of one such entrepreneur

## Table of Contents

0	Glossary .....	2
1	Introduction .....	2
2	Literature Review .....	2
3	Methods .....	3
4	Research .....	4
4.1	Bernard Holman .....	4
4.2	Mining ventures during the 1900s .....	5
4.2.1	1905-1912 .....	5
4.2.2	1933-1938 .....	6
5	Discussion .....	7
6	Conclusion .....	8
7	References .....	9

## 0 Glossary

Alluvial: *recovering valuable material, in this case gold, from deposits of sand, gravel etc.*

Aqueduct: *artificial channel for transporting water*

Crosscut: *tunnel driven adjacent to orebody*

Crown lease: *lease of land or property owned by the Crown*

Gold standard: *where value of currency is fixed to a specific quantity of gold*

OBE: *Officer of the Order of the British Empire, award given to those who have made major contributions in their role*

## 1 Introduction

Recently, the UK has been experiencing a renewed interest in gold; the largest gold nugget in the UK was found just under a month ago (SHOAIB, 2024). Wales, in particular, is of great interest to prospectors; having been credited as perhaps one of the most productive within the UK previously (Bullion by Post, n.d.).

Welsh gold is concentrated in two areas, one of which is in Pumsaint, Carmarthenshire, location of the Dolaucothi Gold Mines which are now managed by the National Trust. Best recognised as the only known Roman gold mine in Britain, exhibiting features comparable to Roman gold mines found in Romania and Spain (Cauuet, Ancel & Cowburn, 2000), it also has had a varied and colourful history since the Roman times, becoming the site of countless entrepreneurial ventures once “rediscovered”. Of note, the two largest operations since the Roman times took place during the 1900s, a period when entrepreneurship was at its greatest.

There is a surprising lack of knowledge regarding this period at the mines, considering that it forms a significant proportion of the mine’s history. This study aims to address this. First, by exploring the entrepreneurship the mines inspired by carrying out a detailed investigation of Bernard Whelpton Holman, one such entrepreneur, and second, the history and impact of the activities that occurred, relating this to current attempts to revive the industry.

## 2 Literature Review

Current literature on the Dolaucothi mines primarily focuses on the Roman origins of the mines. For instance, Cauuet, Ancel & Cowburn (2000) provides detailed evaluations of archaeological findings from previous excavations such as extensive hydraulic systems, formed of aqueducts and drainage, characteristic of Roman mining. In another example,

Jones & Lewis (1977) emphasises how discoveries of nearby Roman structures such as the Pumsaint fort and a bathhouse, in addition to items such as pottery dating back to 75AD (see also Fig. 1), are evident of the mine's Roman origins and provide a timeline of mining activities during this era.

Elsewise, the National Trust website and the book, *The Dolaucothi gold mines: Geology and Mining History* (1986), provide an overview of the mine's history, including detail on how the mine was effectively "rediscovered" to harbour gold in 1844 which henceforth resulted in multiple attempts to set up a successful gold mining operation. However, major operations were only started in earnest during the 1900s. These two sources provide information on when and what companies were operating at the time, but do not cover this in depth.

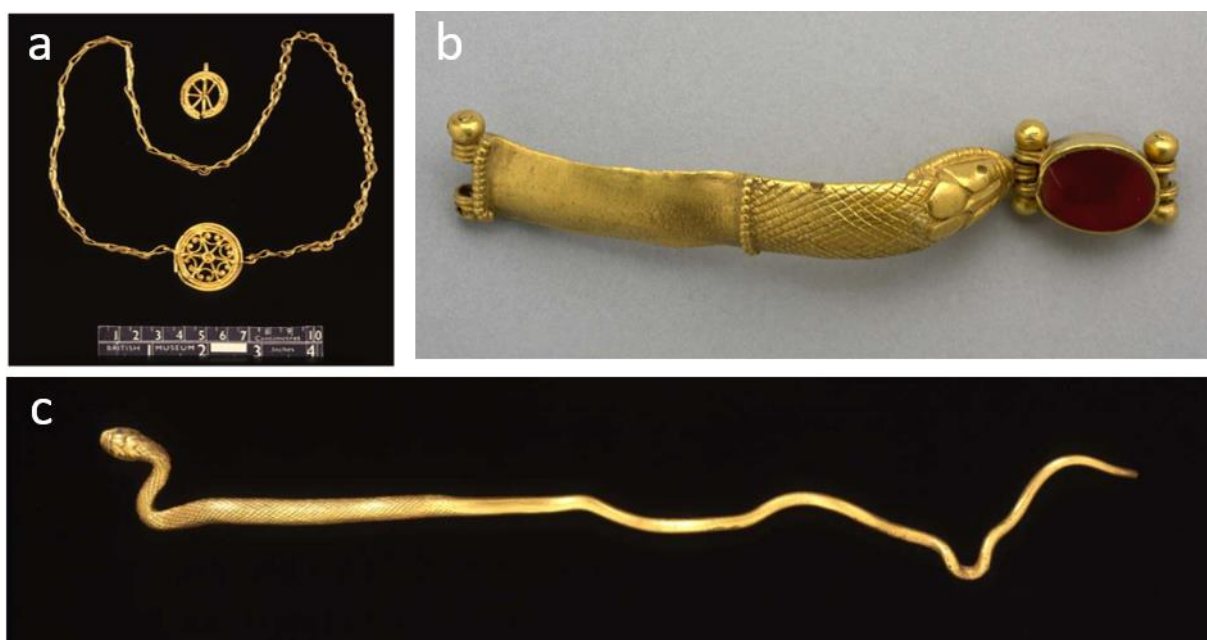


Figure 1. Roman items discovered at Dolaucothi: golden necklace and clasp (a), gold bracelets (b and c). From the British Museum.

### 3 Methods

Research on B.W. Holman was initially conducted via the Imperial College archives given his affiliation with the university. However no pertinent knowledge was found, hence information gathered from journals and newspapers were utilised to construct a biography and describe his involvement at Dolaucothi Mines.

Consultation with the National Trust office responsible for overseeing Dolaucothi Mines yielded additional insights about the mines, including access to unpublished material. Extensive use of newspaper archives provided primary sources for the investigation of the mine's activities and public perception during the 1900s. Searches were made using the key

words: “Dolaucothi Mines”, “Ogofau Mines” (alternative name for the mines), “Welsh gold mining” and “Roman gold mines”.

## 4 Research

### 4.1 Bernard Whelpton Holman

B.W. Holman was an entrepreneur who was highly interested in the Dolaucothi mines, participating in both major mining operations that took place during the 1900s.

He was born to Marian K Whelpton and Harold Holman in 1887 in Hendon, England (General Register Office, 2014). He underwent his secondary education in Cambridge (The National Archives, 2019), later going on to obtain a BSc although no record exists of what degree he had studied for and his place of education. It is plausible to assume he studied in a field related to Mine Engineering considering his future endeavours.

He had visited Dolaucothi mines between 1907-10 out of personal interest. During this time, he sampled a crosscut and declared it to be economical, with his findings later published (Holman, 1911).

Holman was allegedly hired as a mining engineer at Dolaucothi Mines in 1914 (Imperial War Museums, 2019), with other literature also stating that he was “... retained as a consultant” (*The Dolaucothi gold mines: Geology and Mining History*. 1986) when referring to the second major venture at the mines. However, current literature has established that all mining ventures had been shut down by 1912. As a result, I speculate that he was hired for some preliminary work before WW1 broke out.

With the onset of war, Holman was enlisted as a Royal Navy sapper, and remained in units associated with Engineering (Imperial War Museums, 2019). He was later awarded an OBE for his efforts in the war (The London Gazette, 1919).

After the end of the war, it was confirmed that he returned to London, securing a position as a professor at the Royal School of Mines, Imperial College, although the exact start date is unknown. However, it is evident that he held this position by 1928, as referenced in his article, “Copper in Antiquity” (Holman, 1928).

Holman played a pivotal role in establishing the second major venture at the mines, being credited for successfully obtaining the Crown lease needed for this (Liverpool Post and Mercury, 1933). The negotiations for this allegedly spanned 20 years, explaining the substantial amount of time which had passed between the two separate ventures. Roman Deep Mines Ltd was formed to oversee the operations and employed Holman as a consultant. The length of time he spent in this role is not specified but he most likely remained employed until gold mining at the mines ceased permanently.

Interestingly, during this time, reports indicate that he become involved in a proposal aiming to set up gold mining in Ireland (Select Committee on Mining Rights, 1935a). However, he withdrew from this business venture just several months later. His reasons for this are unknown but may be due to internal disagreements in the group as another report alludes to (Select Committee on Mining Rights, 1935b).

This was reportedly his last business venture, afterwards working in advisory roles such as vice president of the Parliamentary Science Committee for 1937 (The Parliamentary Science Committee, 1936) and later as WW2 broke out, as a member of the War Cabinet Engineering Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee on Engineering in Warfare, 1941). Furthermore, some newspapers suggest that he had been working on projects to develop armoured ambulances for the war (Newcastle Journal and North Mail, 1940) and been considered as a potential partner on a waterway development plan (The Huddersfield Examiner and West Riding Reporter, 1935).

Holman later moved abroad for a length of time, serving as Professor at the University of Cairo and Pakistan respectively during this time (Acton Gazette, 1964). Having moved back to London by 1961 (Sunday Dispatch, 1961), he passed away three years later at (Acton Gazette, 1964).

## 4.2 Mining ventures during the 1900s

### 4.2.1 1905-1912

As the National Trust revealed, the first major mining venture was initiated in 1905 by James Mitchell, who had previously experienced the South Africa gold rush. This proved successful enough that a new company, Ogofau Proprietary Gold Mining Company Ltd, was set up with additional capital to further capitalise on this (Swansea and Glamorgan Herald and Herald of Wales, 1908a). This allowed for the expansion of mining activities and further development, and as evidenced by Swansea and Glamorgan Herald and Herald of Wales (1908b), was greatly looked forward to by the local community due to a prior exodus from the area as a result of job scarcity.

However, it is arguable how successful this venture truly was; newspapers around the time reported on sudden, unexplained closures of the mines from time to time, which while temporary, did result in dismissals of up to 30 employees (The Welshman and General Advertiser for the Principality of Wales, 1908a). On one such occasion where an antiquarian society had visited the mines, a manager had remarked that they were “re-arranging financial matters” (The Welshman and General Advertiser for the Principality of Wales, 1908b).

By 1909, the lease was given over to a new company, Cothy Mines Ltd who explored the mine under advice from management (*The Dolaucothi gold mines: Geology and Mining History*. 1986). It is probable that Holman was involved in advising the company given that he was present at the mines during this time and had carried out sampling.

The local population still bore out hope for the success of the mines, given that the Welshman and General Advertiser for the Principality of Wales (1909a) states “the working class.... are travelling to the collieries for work” but that this operation could provide the opportunity for work closer to home (The Welshman and General Advertiser for the Principality of Wales, 1909b).

Unfortunately, this venture was ceased due to a sunk shaft penetrating some flooded Roman workings. It was considered a breach of the Crown lease to interfere with any water and given that suitable pumps were unavailable at the time (Edmonton Journal, 1934), the venture had to be abandoned in 1912. No further activity at the mines were recorded from this time onwards until 1933, the beginning of the second, but last major mining operation at Dolaucothi.

However, correspondence with the National Trust office suggested that there was still some activity occurring near the mines prior to this, directing attention to the work of Vernon (2020). He had found evidence of alluvial mining occurring during 1924 carried out by Caio Alluvial Gold Mines Ltd. Their rationale for establishing this included the richness of the deposits they had sampled as well as the history of gold mining in the area. It would be logical to assume that the Dolaucothi mines was still attracting aspiring prospectors to the area. Like previous ventures, this one was soon shut down; reasons for this are still vague.

#### 4.2.2 1933-1938

The last venture, arguably the most successful, began in 1933. As we know, Holman was able to obtain a Crown lease, with Roman Deep Mines Ltd managing the operation. Over the course of this venture, hundreds of tonnes of ore were being extracted each week. Enough gold was produced to render the venture economical enough to sustain for several years. Some of the produced gold was even used in the manufacture of Princess Marina’s wedding ring (The Welshman and General Advertiser for the Principality of Wales, 1934) as well as in other commissions of jewellery (Daily Mirror, 1935; South Wales Evening Post, 1936).

News from the time suggested that this was an exciting time for the local population given the increased job prospects – over 100 men were employed at some points. In addition, it was hoped that this would facilitate the development of local infrastructure including improved transport, housing and services (The Welshman and General Advertiser for the Principality of Wales, 1936).

This venture was able to mine out almost all accessible gold, with the only gold remaining locked in sulphides (*The Dolaucothi gold mines: Geology and Mining History*. 1986) which required extensive processing to extract. The prohibitive cost of this, and the need to send the ore abroad for processing made continuing the venture unsustainable and subsequently all mining operations were ceased by 1938. Dolaucothi Mines were then gifted to the National Trust in 1940 (The Guardian, 1940), remaining in their care since.

This last venture can be considered very successful compared to latter ones and Hall (1993) suggests this is partly due to Britain's abandonment of the gold standard in 1930 which enabled rises in the value of gold.

## 5 Discussion

The entrepreneurial ventures at Dolaucothi mines can be said to make up a major part of the mine's history and are perhaps what first drew attention to the mines. Additional searches conducted through newspapers archives revealed that mentions of the mines were limited to between 1900 and 2000, suggesting that these mines only came into the public eye once these major business ventures began. Indeed, these mines and the entrepreneurial attempts taking place also attracted interest from outside the country, with newspapers in Canada and Australia known to have reported on them (Edmonton Journal, 1934; The World's News, 1940).

Despite many unsuccessful attempts and the risks involved, the Dolaucothi mines continued to attract many entrepreneurs. This is perhaps most evident with Holman; despite being present for the failed 1905-1912 venture, he was not deterred but rather decided to make his own attempt. It is plausible that this was a common occurrence for all the entrepreneurs drawn to the Dolaucothi mines. Perhaps they had been inspired by previous ventures, such as those prior to 1900, or perhaps by the success of the Roman operation centuries ago. And when the spirit of entrepreneurship has been instilled, it does not easily disappear. For instance, Holman explored the possibility of establishing a venture in Irish gold mining, and Mr Tasmin-Davies, associated with Caio Alluvial Gold Mines Ltd, later set up a deep-sea salvaging venture (Vernon, 2020).

Although many entrepreneurs at Dolaucothi did not attain the success they envisioned, their endeavours still left significant impacts, particularly on the local community by providing employment opportunities, for instance. As our research suggested, new entrepreneurial ventures were eagerly anticipated by locals. Furthermore, the mines status as a National Trust site continues attracting visitors, bringing economic benefits to the area. It could be argued that these entrepreneurial ventures so many years ago contributed to this by bringing attention to the mines.



What was interesting to note that the timing of a venture may influence success. The 1933 venture was able to take advantage of the economic situation during that time and earn a greater profit from the mined gold. In a similar situation to then, the price of gold has recently increased in the UK (Cole, 2021), which may explain the current resurgence of the gold mining industry in the UK. Various companies and entrepreneurs are aiming to establish new gold mines and/or develop pre-existing ones (Barker, 2020; BBC News, 2019), perhaps attempting to utilise this opportune timing.

Wales is no exception to this, including the Dolaucothi Mines. Sarn Helen Gold, a junior gold exploration company, secured Crown leases for part of the Dolaucothi mines and the surrounding area in 2020 (The Crown Estate, 2022). They plan to focus on the surrounding area in order to preserve the Roman infrastructure present within the mines (Sarn Helen Gold, 2023). This is also a reasonable decision given the extent to which the Dolaucothi mines have been worked; there may be unprofitable quantities of gold remaining within the mines themselves. In addition, *The Dolaucothi gold mines: Geology and Mining History*. (1986) makes mention to a prior geological investigation that suggested gold was not limited to the area encompassed by the mines and that more could be potentially found in the local area.

Presently, no update is available on the success of these operations, but a report by Sarn Helen does indicate that they have identified promising sites for drilling in the vicinity of the Dolaucothi mines (Murphy, 2023).

## 6 Conclusions

From constructing the history of the Dolaucothi mines during the 1900s, we can see that entrepreneurial ventures made up a large proportion of this time. Entrepreneurs continued to be attracted to these gold mines, not even prior unsuccessful ventures could deter them – highlighting the enduring resilience of the entrepreneurial spirit. These ventures also had a significant impact on the local area, being well received and even keenly anticipated by the community for the benefits they provided.

While the original mines will likely no longer be opened for future ventures, clearly the accomplishments here have continued to inspire entrepreneurs who are now making their own attempts to establish ventures of their own. No gold has been mined in Wales since the last century, but could this change with this new wave of entrepreneurial activity? It will be difficult to predict their chances of success given the range of factors that influence this, but at the very least, they have timing on their side. Only time will tell now.

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