

Mining Heritage and Cultural Tourism: Case Studies in the Conservation and Preservation of Irish Mining Sites

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Until about 20 or 30 years ago there was a popular perception that Ireland was devoid of economic minerals. This was a notion even propagated by school text books a generation ago which assured us that "there had been no mining in Ireland". Today Ireland has the largest operating lead-zinc mine in Europe and gold is being mined too. But this is not a modern industry as mining has been traced in Ireland back until at least the C12th and widespread gold occurrences must have been exploited during the Bronze Age as evidenced by the large number of finds of gold jewellery from this period. Perhaps the most widespread period of mining in Ireland was from the late C18th until the late 1950's during which time lead, silver, copper, iron and coal were mined and it is from this period that most of the historic mining remains in Ireland date. But until recently these mining remains were generally only seen as a resource for the likes of building materials or for the disposal of waste.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of Ireland's diverse mining heritage and the socio-economic links of past mining with other parts of the British Isles and with North America. In many parts of the country the mining remains are now being seen as a valuable resource, especially for tourism and local community initiatives. The Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland has been a key player in helping to stimulate and support the preservation and economic reuse of the mining remains. Drawing on evidence from several recent large scale mining heritage projects including Allihies, Silvermines and the Copper Coast, this paper will explore the models used for preserving and popularising mining heritage in Ireland (and comparison to models from other countries). But it will also examine the threats to mining heritage, especially from environmental legislation.