

The Grose Family of Ilsington, Devon

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Introduction

At a Dartmoor Tinworking Research Group (DTRG) event in Ilsington in February 2014, Dr Tom Greeves gave a presentation on tanners and tinworking in the area. He described the Grose family who played a crucial role in the development of the mining industry around Ilsington from the 1860s until the early C20th and suggested that someone might like to build on his research. Tom has been privileged to correspond with and then interview William Ambrose Grose (the younger) who remembered much about some of the mines in the Ilsington area from the late C19th to the early C20th. William became an honorary member of DTRG, and his obituary appeared in the January 1995 Newsletter. I became more interested in the Grose family when I came across the photographs featured in this article. They have been reproduced with the permission of the owner, John Rose, and some of the family history is based on his research.

Cornish Roots

The name Grose (and its variants) has been around since Norman times, being Old French for 'big' or 'fat'. This particular spelling is, for some reason, common in Cornwall. The name Ambrose Grose also has a long history, appearing in Cornish church records as early as 1575. The Grose family in Devon used the forename Ambrose five times within three generations, suggesting that they were descended from an ancient Cornish line.

The Ilsington branch of the Grose family originated from Roche. William Grose was baptised there in 1789 and married Mary Ann Parsons in 1819. They had three sons: Joseph baptised born in 1819 (died 1840), Pharaoh 1827 and William Ambrose 1838. The family lived at Criggan Downs, north of Bugle, and in 1851 William was a tin streamer, as was 12-year-old William Ambrose, while Pharaoh worked as a tin miner. This must have been a harsh start for the brothers but they both left Cornwall for Devon in the early 1860s and went on to become respected mine agents and managers.

The Move to Devon

Pharaoh married Mary Anne Roach before leaving Cornwall and they had their first child in 1854 in Roche. By the time their next child arrived in 1860, they were living in Brixham, Devon. The census of 1861 shows the couple living at Drew Street, with two children and by then William Ambrose had joined them. Pharaoh is listed as being a mining agent and William Ambrose a miner, although quite where they were working is not known, except that it must have been one or other of the iron mines in that area. Later that same year, William Ambrose married Emily Thomas in Constantine, Cornwall, and appears to have stayed there with her for a few years.

The first record of Pharaoh holding a management position was in 1863 when he was at Chinter Iron Mine as chief agent. By 1866 he was responsible not only for Chinter, but also Five Acres, Sharkham and Drews Iron Mines, later adding Parkins to his remit. In 1873 he became manager of three iron mines: Goodrington, Barton and Furzeham. William Ambrose also began his management career in 1863 as chief agent at Brixham Iron Mine, the most productive in the county. All these mines were owned by William Browne, who managed several mines in mid Cornwall, including one at Constantine, where he might well have come across the Grose family. This may have been the connection that secured the brothers good positions far from home.



Captain William Ambrose Grose

John Rose Collection

Pharaoh and Mary Anne went on to have six more children in Brixham, but when Pharaoh died at the age of 50 in 1878, Mary Anne moved with most of the children to the East End of London. Removed from Devon, none of their offspring entered the mining industry. It was to prove a different story for William Ambrose and his wife Emily, who had 11 children, two born in Constantine and the others in Ilsington parish. In 1864, William Ambrose was appointed chief agent at Haytor Iron Mine, taking on Atlas Iron Mine in 1865 and Smallacombe and Hatherby as well in 1866, again, all then owned by William Browne. When their second child, Ambrose John, was baptised in Constantine in February 1866, Smallacombe, Devon, was given as the address. The first census in which the family appears in Ilsington parish was in 1871, when they were at Mine Cottage, Haytor Vale, and 32-year-old William Ambrose was described as a mine agent. As well as acting as chief agent at Haytor until 1883, William had stints managing other iron mines, such as Rock Hill and Shotts, also in Ilsington parish. The next census, in 1881, found William and Emily

and their (by then) nine children finally in Ilsington village at Lewthorn Cottages. William was described as a 43-year-old mine agent and the two oldest boys, Ambrose John (16) and Pharaoh Orlando (13), were both iron miners.

Although living in Ilsington village, William was not employed at one of the more local mines until 1889, when he became chief agent at Atlas Tin Mine, a post he held until 1898. In 1891 the family was still at Lewthorn Cottages and was then complete with the addition of two more children, Sydney in 1882 and Maud Mary in 1883. William was working as a mining engineer and of the four oldest boys still at home, Pharaoh Orlando was a mining blacksmith and the other three were working as tin miners. Also living with the family was a four-year-old grandson, Norman Alfred Grose, son of eldest daughter Georgina, who was a parlour maid when he was born in 1886.

Towards the end of his time at Atlas Tin Mine, William Ambrose again became chief agent at Brixham Iron Mine and remained so until 1904. In the 1911 census he was listed as mine agent for tin mines but whether he was still working then is unclear. William Ambrose died in January 1915 at the age of 77. His estate was valued at £62 0s 8d and administration was granted to his wife Emily.

The Next Generation and Beyond

Of the six sons of William Ambrose and Emily Grose, only one decided on a career outside the mining industry. That was William Samuel, who, aside from a spell as a tin miner in the early 1890s, became a blacksmith for GWR, living in Exeter and then Newton Abbot. None of the five daughters chose to marry miners. Two sons, Joseph T. and Charles H., were merely listed as tin or iron miners in the censuses, but the careers of the other three, Ambrose John, Pharaoh Orlando (the two oldest) and Sydney (the youngest), are better recorded.



**Some of the Grose family at Owlacombe
R to L: Pharaoh Orlando and wife Annie Vincent,
Ambrose John and daughter Mona**

John Rose Collection

Ambrose John Grose married Jessie Bunney in St Stephens in Brannel in 1886 and had three children there. The first of these was William Ambrose (the younger) who corresponded with Tom Greeves in later life. He revealed that during much of the 1890s his father was away mining in Michigan and West Africa, while he and his mother stayed in St Stephens. There are passenger records that show Ambrose John returning from the USA in March 1898 and departing for the Gold Coast (Ghana) the next month. When he finally returned, he commenced work as manager of Hexworthy Tin Mine. The family remained in St Stephens until at least mid-1900, after two other children had been born there. They joined Ambrose John sometime before March 1901, when they were recorded in the census as living at Hensroost Mine, Hexworthy. William Ambrose was soon put on the payroll as a messenger boy but later began an engineering apprenticeship in Buckfastleigh. From 1908 to 1921 he worked at Holmans of Camborne, a large engineering company that specialised in rock drills. He then emigrated to the USA, where he married his Cornish wife, Bessie Fine.



Holman Bros factory in Camborne
Holman Rock Drill Collection, Stephen Lay

Ambrose John moved on in late 1903 to Owlacombe Mine and was the underground manager there by 1906. His career then entered a new phase and he began working abroad again, this time in Asia. There are incomplete passenger records of two visits to Bombay, in June 1910 and May 1914 and one to Sri Lanka in 1920 but only one of his return from Bombay in September 1924, when his occupation was given as mine agent and his address as Owlacombe. He was 58 years old at the time of this last trip, but he obviously had boundless energy and enjoyed travel. He died in 1951 at the age of 85.

Pharaoh Orlando Grose is recorded in the 1881 census as an iron miner at the age of 13, although within ten years he had become a mining blacksmith. A lack of work combined with a sense of adventure took him on a journey to the USA in June 1892, where he met and married a Cornish woman, Annie Vincent Jeffrey, in Negaunee, Michigan. The couple returned to England and by late 1899 were living in Brixham when the first of their three children was born, and Pharaoh Orlando found work at a

Brixham Iron Mine. By April 1910, when one of their children was baptised at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Ilsington, their address was given as Owlacombe, which indicates that Pharaoh Orlando had begun work in the tin mining industry. More detail is given in the 1911 census when he is described as a blacksmith employed at a tin mine, living at Mine or Orchard Cottage, Stormsdown. Not long after, like his brother, he began a series of visits to work at the Kolar gold fields in India. There are incomplete records of visits between 1916 and 1932, probably lasting for about three years. His occupation was listed as boilersmith and his home address was given as Owlacombe. Again, work and travel did not dim his vigour; Pharaoh Orlando died in 1961 at the great age, for his life and time, of 93.



Pharaoh Orlando Grose in India

John Rose Collection

Sydney Grose, being the second youngest of 11 children, was nearer in age to some of his nephews and nieces than he was to his brothers Ambrose John and Pharaoh Orlando. His nephew Norman Alfred Grose grew up with Sydney in Lewdown Cottages, and for many years they played cricket together for Ilsington Wanderers. Sydney may also have been close to another nephew William Ambrose (the younger) who recalled that his uncle worked as a pump man at Hexworthy Tin Mine in about 1901. By July 1906, Sydney and nephew Norman Alfred were the miners in charge of the morning shift at Owlacombe Mine, where Ambrose John was the underground manager, when a fatal accident occurred. During the morning shift several holes had been bored for gelignite to blast a new shaft. The afternoon shift began by removing the spoil from the morning's blasting and then proceeded to drill

more holes. An explosion occurred that killed one man, John Henry (Harry) Campion of Bickington, and seriously injured three others, including Alfred Warren of Buckfastleigh, whose arm required amputation. The inquest was told by Sydney Grose that the most likely cause of the accident was that part of a charge from the morning's operations had not gone off.



Sydney with mother Emily and brother William Samuel

John Rose Collection

This must have been a harrowing experience for everyone concerned and it was not long afterwards that Norman Alfred began a series of trips to the USA to work in Miami, Arizona, a copper boom town that attracted miners from all over the world. Norman Alfred met his own end there in a mining accident in November 1924, aged 38. His workmates paid for the passage of his body back to Devon and he is buried in the graveyard in Ilsington, near his grandparents, William Ambrose and Emily.

Sydney, meanwhile, continued working in mines in Ilsington parish. However, within a month of marrying Emily Horwell in July 1910, Sydney, like his elder brothers, went to work in the USA, returning via Plymouth in August 1911. In the 1911 census, Emily was living with her parents in Bickington, stating that she was the wife of a tin miner. In April 1916, however, Sydney was working locally when he appeared before Ashburton magistrates and was fined £1 for storing explosives without a licence at a mine near Haytor. Sydney Grose died in 1943 at the relatively young age of 61.

What struck me during this research is how much can be learned about Dartmoor mines, and mining in general, by following the lives of ordinary people. It is also remarkable that despite being born and/or brought up in Devon, the sons of William Ambrose and Emily Grose mostly chose Cornish women as wives. This was even the case for Pharaoh Orlando and William Ambrose (the younger) who both found their Cornish wives in the USA. The mines of Dartmoor could not have been worked without the Cornish, and the story of the Grose family shows what an enormous contribution they made to the industry in Devon.

Sources

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