
Spar boxes

These unusual objects, the making of which seems to have been unique to the north of England and Isle of Man, provide a very clear link between facets of the area's mineral resources and its social and economic history, and deserve to be considered here as part of the geodiversity of the AONB.

Spar boxes are cabinets lined with crystals of minerals found in the lead mines of the North Pennine dales. They vary in size from small cabinets of less than a metre across to larger ones of several metres.

Some spar boxes are comparatively simple and comprise a small cabinet lined with colourful crystals selected purely for their aesthetic effect. More elaborate spar boxes incorporated mirrors, models of mining or architectural features, and on occasions a number of lighting effects. Some spar boxes incorporated stuffed and mounted birds, in addition to minerals.

A number of 'spar models' or 'spar towers' are also known. These consist of assemblages of selected crystals mounted in the form of a tower or mound and commonly covered by a bell jar. The tradition of making spar boxes seems to have been concentrated in the lead mining areas of the North Pennines, the iron mining areas of west Cumbria and the Isle of Man. It is known that spar boxes were exhibited competitively at shows in the dales. There is no evidence of spar box making in other UK mining areas.

Fluorite, in various colours is usually a major component of local spar boxes, accompanied by quartz, calcite and commonly by examples of ore minerals including galena.

An interesting feature of many North Pennine spar boxes is the inclusion within them of minerals clearly identifiable as being derived from the west Cumbrian iron ore field. These include striking examples of aragonite, calcite and on occasions haematite in a number of forms. It seems that some form of trade or exchange of specimens was routinely practiced by miners and spar box makers.

Spar boxes provide a superb opportunity to link the appreciation and understanding of earth science with an unusual rural craft tradition.

Spar boxes in the AONB

Spar boxes were once commonplace items of domestic decoration in many dales cottages. With the passage of many years since the demise of widespread lead mining, and the increasing interest and associated commercial value placed upon mineral specimens, spar boxes have attracted the attention of dealers and collectors. This has seen many examples leaving the area.

Killhope, the North of England Lead Mining Museum, holds a major collection of spar boxes. These include the famous Egglestone Spar Box, probably dating from around the end of the 19th Century and believed to be the largest ever made.

Wider importance

Although spar box making cannot be seen as a form of systematic collecting and curation of mineral specimens as scientific objects, it is an extremely important facet of the local mining tradition. Surviving spar boxes represent both an interesting resource of mineral specimens and an important legacy of a tradition almost unique to this mining field.

Many of the surviving spar boxes are known to have been assembled in the AONB, especially in Weardale, from locally mined minerals. In addition to their obvious cultural interest, spar boxes offer an extremely valuable, and rather novel, means of introducing the rich mineralogical heritage of the area to a wide audience.

Conservation issues

As it is known that the making of spar boxes figured prominently in the spare-time activities of many North Pennine miners, it is likely that large numbers were made during the peak years of mining in the 18th and 19th centuries. Within living memory, spar boxes were comparatively common objects in many dales households, though they are generally scarce here today. Many have been acquired by dealers and collectors, and no longer remain within the AONB. Some, perhaps many, may have been destroyed.

The collection held at Killhope is almost certainly the largest and most complete collection of these curious products of the area's mining legacy.

Selected references

Forbes, I. (undated); Symes and Young, 2008.

Figures

(Figure 71) Spar box with North Pennines minerals © Killhope Lead Mining Museum. ([See PDF](#))

[Full references](#)