

The Mines at Batère (Les Indis)

Iron ore has been collected on Canigou since before Roman times ...but for most of those centuries it was surface collecting or shallow 'open-cast' mining, with the iron ore treated locally in 'Catalan forges', with power derived from local rivers, and the local production of charcoal leading to a nude landscape.

With the arrival of the industrial revolution and its need for iron & steel, and the Bessemer Blast furnace process (1856), the way was open for a massive development in mining (in galleries) on three flanks of Canigou.

However the development didn't happen at first and the number of miners at Batère declined from about 120 in 1860, to only a dozen in 1880. The iron ore, though of high quality, could not easily be transported. It was carried on women's backs, on mules, then much later on carts (although the road from Arles to Corsavy was constructed in 1846, it didn't reach Batère until 1868).

Crucially, the railway eventually arrived in Arles-sur-Tech in 1898, and at the same time a new owner bought the mines, Joseph Pierre Monin.

In 1899 he built a 9 km ropeway between the mines at Batère and Arles, initially with wooden pylons. It was of the double-ropeway type, with one wire-rope (30mm) supporting the load and the other wire-rope (20mm) applying the motive force. It could carry up to 60 tonnes per hour.

A community sprang up at Batère, of 300-600 workers, variable in size depending on the success of the mines, but big enough to require the facilities of a village.

The mines were at their most successful just after World War 1, when Jean Courdomy, the father of Françoise Laffon of Corsavy, was there. He drew this map of the mine as it was in 1920:



Jean Courdomy's annotations are:

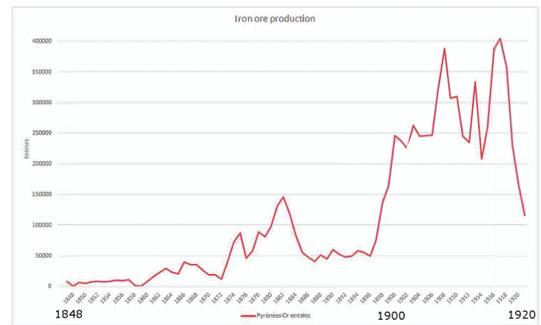
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|--|--------------------------------|
| 1. 1st houses encountered, with the current restaurant | 8. Stables |
| 2. My school | 9. Cow byre |
| 3. House of the Chief Operating Officer | 10. Offices |
| 4. National Gendarmerie | 11. Bakery |
| 5. Residence of the assistant heads | 12, 13. Ropeway stations |
| 6. My home (the canteen where Jean's parents lived and worked) | 14. Forge and compressor |
| 7. Workers' housing | 15. Pylons down to Arles (9km) |

Production of iron ore varied enormously over the years :

The change from using local catalan forges to exporting the ore to modern blast furnaces was slow. It was the arrival of the railway that really changed things.

The ore was mined in horizontal galleries, drilled or blasted into the mountain. The longest gallery was 1200m long at the 1167m level (ie. 1167m above sea-level).

Originally there was a roasting oven at the 1530 level; later 2 roasting ovens were built at Arles (in 1915).



Iron ore production in the region during the years 1848–1920



The ropeway was originally made with wooden pylons, then changed to taller steel ones, with bigger buckets.

(Another ropeway from the mines at La Pinouse down to Amélie was even longer, at 12km.)



There was a strike in 1900 ...over pay, the number of foreign workers (Italian, Greek, Spanish), the sites that were allocated to the workers, and the cost of the tobacco in the canteen. The owner, M. Monin, didn't like the local Corsavoyois and had to insist that "*workers are prohibited from carrying weapons in the mine*".

A gendarmerie post (of 3 men) was installed at Batère (No. 4 on the map)

In 1905 M. Monin wrote to the mayor of Corsavy (Jules Deit): "*The miners of Corsavy, undisciplined, want to do as they please, which cannot be reconciled with methodical industrial exploitation. I was forced to call on foreign labour because I do not find any in this country suitable for the work of our mine. If I didn't have foreigners, I would have to close the mine tomorrow.*"

The mine wasn't unionised until 1905. (There were other strikes in 1905, 1917, 1919, 1924, etc.)

The mine closed entirely during 1931-39. The railway in Arles was swept away in the aïguat floods of 1940. The railway land was sold off (!) after the floods so the railway could not be rebuilt, and so the ore was transported from Arles to Céret in lorries (owned by Jean Vaills, the mayor of Corsavy). Most of the ore was then transported by train to the furnaces in Decazeville (in the Aveyron).

Despite economic difficulties, in 1953 a new canteen and school were built at level 1750. However, with cheaper ore elsewhere, the mine went into decline and the company went bankrupt in 1987.



The miners' lodgings today (No. 1 on the map).

One mile above sea-level, it is used as a gîte d'étape by walkers on the GR10 route. Part of it is now a restaurant.