

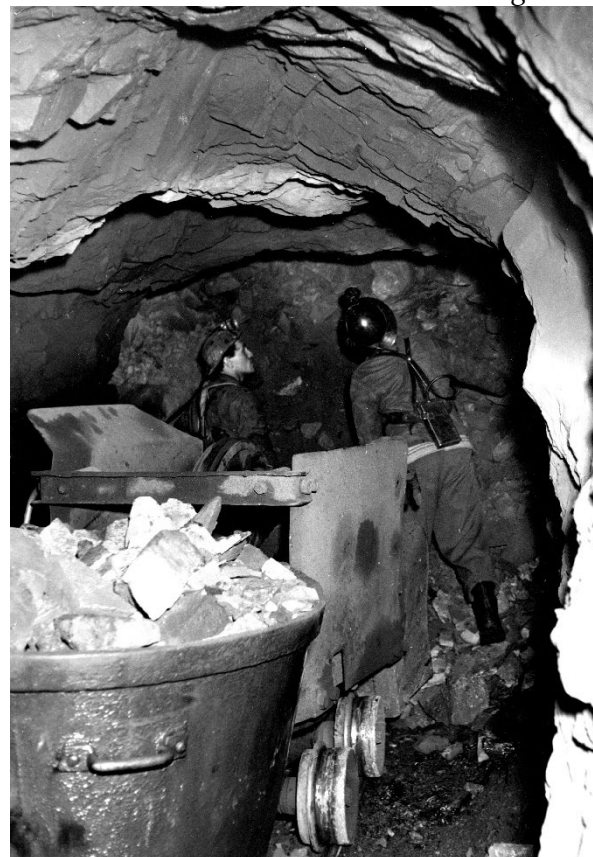
**CHANGING
PLACES
OF WORK
BLÖTBERGET**

INTRODUCTION

KEY FACTS

- Former small mining community outside of Ludvika in Dalarna
- Mining has taken place there since the end of the 18th century
- The mine closed down in 1979, mainly due to a lack of profitability
- A lot of ore left, suggested to be well-suited for hydrogen based steel production
- Nordic Iron Ore wants to re-open the mine, but there have been some delays
- A purchase agreement with Cargill Metals exists for 25 million metric tonnes of iron ore concentrate to a value of \$35 billion
- Construction of the new mine has not yet begun

A look into the old mine at Blötberget.



**Sheffield
Hallam
University**

One of the old mining machines used in mines like the one in Blötberget, outside the Mining Museum in nearby Grängesberg. Among the rocks seen on the ground are pieces of iron ore.



MAPPING CHANGE

Mining activity has been present in Blötberget since the end of the 18th century, though the serious expansion of it can be said to have begun in earnest in 1902, under the direction of the Vulcanus company. What enabled the sudden expansion was that the s.c. Gilchrist-Thomas process had meant that the phosphorus content of the ore was no longer a disadvantage. Additionally, the Frövi-Ludvika railway had been established in 1873, and the Ludvika power station could provide electric power by 1901.

While the small community that grew up around the mine thrived for decades, they were strongly impacted by the steel crisis of the 1970s. The iron ore mine closed mainly due to a lack of profitability in 1979, despite protests from workers and plenty of ore left in the ground. The mine was a major employer in the area, and the closing led to a slow depopulation and reduction in local commercial activity.

EU's CBAM tariff has led to expectations of increased demand for green steel, and the local iron ore is supposed to be very suitable for this end due to a high iron content. The company Nordic Iron Ore is therefore seeking to open the mine again, though the project is currently only in the early stages of planning. The goal is for the mine to be finished by 2026, though the CEO himself acknowledges that this is a very optimistic projection. Multiple delays have already occurred, the initial plan being to open in 2015. Nordic Iron Ore has an offtake agreement with Cargill, but requires further investment before it can open. The new mine is planned to be fully electric, using fossil-free energy to extract the ore.

The most pressing future need expected is for recruitment of workers, and provision of training and education locally. A re-opened mine would of course generate new jobs directly, but also likely create additional jobs though the need for amenities and services. The re-opening is believed, by those we spoke to, to bring greater economic stability for Blötberget, assure the survival and prosperity of the village, and possibly attract more residents or new local businesses. Chiefly, the residents we spoke to would feel a sense of pride and prestige, due to the cultural and historical significance of the mine and their identity as a mining community.



**“There's good
sh*t in the
ground, and
[...] the ore
isn't going
anywhere!”**

**- Ronne Hamerslag,
CEO of Nordic Iron
Ore**

**Nordic
Iron Ore**

CHANGING PLACES OF *WORK*

Old miners in the area whom we spoke to all enjoyed their work immensely, and though it was hard and dangerous work they look back on it as something very positive. In the mine it was always completely dark, often wet, and quite stressful. There was a constant risk of cave-ins, poor air quality, and the days were long. But workers were paid quite well, the employment was reliable, and they had strong union support, which overall made them very comfortable. They enjoyed the independent nature of the work, the importance placed on personal responsibility, and the tight-knit camaraderie. Overwhelmingly men worked in the mine, though since the 1930s women were also allowed, though not underground.

The nature of the mining work itself has changed significantly over the years due to technological development, and the work has become safer, better paid, and more respected in terms of status. It has also become more automated, and today fewer workers are needed to efficiently run a mine. The old miners we spoke to believe that these improvements have also diminished the social nature of the work, since more remote and isolated work means less time spent in physical proximity with colleagues.

CHANGING *PLACES* OF WORK

In the times when the mine was operational, social relationships between the workers were close-knit, according to participants. Social cohesion was strong, and people spent time together outside of work. Informal social activities and impromptu gatherings such as *fika* were more common among women, whilst men preferred formal associational life and planned activities. Associational life has declined after the closing of the mine, which had previously done much to support various hobby clubs. Residents we spoke to shared an understanding that the place and the mine were one and the same; that their village would not have existed if it were not for the mine, and that the social and commercial decline they have lived through is due to the closing down of the mine.

Yet Blötberget has survived and still stands - smaller and less lively, but still around. The village has developed into a quiet, close-knit, residential area that prides itself on being friendly and welcoming. The people are confident about their future prospects, with or without the mine. While many welcome the mine, they are certain that Blötberget would also be just fine without it, because there will always be people who prefer to live a quiet life close to nature and the country-side.



“Before the mine, there was no community.”

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Former miner from Grängesberg

MANAGING CHANGE

The closure of the mine gave workers an unconditional choice: find another job locally, or move away and find another job elsewhere. A few were able to retire; some remained unemployed and suffered poor mental health as a result. While unions had tried to prevent the closure, their large protests were ultimately ineffective.

Presently, locals we spoke to try to stay informed as far as they are able to, and generally view the prospect of the re-opening in a very positive light. Initially, there was some worry that the mine would drain the local groundwater, or have other environmental effects. The residents felt that their fears were assuaged by NIO, by way of arranging meetings and information gatherings. The communication between NIO, Ludvika municipality, Blötberget residents, and local development firm Samarkand2015 was generally perceived as functioning well.

Blötberget residents have no concrete way of influencing the changes, and can ultimately just hope for the best. Both the changes of the past and the anticipation of the future is instead managed socially, through e.g. the activities of a historical association in Blötberget and a mining museum in Grängesberg. They preserve the history of the local mines and keep the memory of them alive, whilst they wait and hope a mine to return and forge a continuity between past and present.

This snapshot is a part of the communication efforts of the the research project *Changing places of work: A place-based approach for re-imagining work in fossil free industrial towns of the future*. It presents a brief picture of one of the study sites examined within the scope of project. For more information, see:

<https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/changing-places-of-work-a-place-based-approach-for-re-imagining-w>

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Photos on pages 1, 2, and 5 from the mine in Blötberget, curtesy of the Blötberget cultural association.

Photos on pages 3 and 7 from the Grängesberg mine museum, taken by authors with permission from the museum.

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