

## Business

# Why this man opened up a 19th-century mine on his Galway farm

The lead and silver mine had been closed for over a century but Keith Geoghegan saw a way of adding value to his family's beef and sheep farm, and spent seven years getting it ready for public tours – overcoming many hurdles along the way



**Tamara Fitzpatrick**

If you had visited Keith Geoghegan's Connemara farm in the 1800s, chances were you would have been handed a candle and sent 100m underground to mine for lead and silver.

Today, however, visitors to the farm get a guided tour of the mines and get to see what it was really like for the miners who worked there over 200 years ago.

"The mines are said to have been first discovered around 1850 by a local farmer who found silver and lead minerals while out digging the land to plant potatoes in the famine times," says Keith.

"The farmer would have found heavy tumbler-like rocks on the farm that were full of lead.

"Back then if you found something like that, you were obliged to go straight to the landlord and tell them, otherwise you ran the risk of being evicted if it was found out that

you knew there were minerals on your land."

A mine engineer named Captain Paul was contacted and he sank the first shaft in Glengowla Mines.

Lead and silver were the main minerals extracted from the marble-walled mines as well as octahedral fluorite crystals, some of which are now displayed in the National History Museum in London.

"The mines were operating until 1865 when the demand for lead from the west of Ireland dropped due to difficulty in transporting it," says Keith.

"Up until then, about 30 men worked underground and the same amount or more of women and children, worked over-ground.

"The men mined for the lead and silver and filled it into buckets which were attached to a rope and were hauled out of the mine by a horse over-ground."

Workers spent 24 hours a day in the 1800s draining water out of the mines, which are below water level and naturally fill up.

Workers descended the mine on a ladder, only guided by the light of a candle, according to Keith.

"It was dangerous work, and back then they didn't keep a record of



deaths or injuries," he says. Keith inherited the working farm with the mines in 1988 when he was just 17, from his bachelor grand-uncle.

He continued keeping cattle and sheep but after a decade of "just keeping it ticking over" he and his parents Paddy and Patricia looked into options to make it more viable.

"We visited mines in the UK that were open for tours and they seemed to be doing well," he says.

"At the time there were no mines in Ireland open for tours so we thought we had found a niche market in terms of making the farm more viable."

The first port of call for the Geoghegans was contacting specialists in the UK to carry out a

survey of the mines to assess if they would be safe to reopen if certain works were carried out.

After getting the green light and having planning permission granted to clear the entrances to the mines and carry out work inside,

Keith – who owned a plant-hire business – started developing the site.

### Filled with mud

"For the 100 years that the mines were closed, everything and anything was thrown down there and they had filled with mud and water," he says.

"There are a few different entrances to the mines and they had completely closed over with bushes

and trees. But they each had little stone walls built around them so we always knew where they were.

"I worked on it in between jobs – when I'd finish a job with the plant hire business I'd come home for a few days to work on developing the mine and farm. It probably wouldn't have been possible to do if I hadn't had the excavators and equipment."

Keith's first job was to open the overgrown entrances and clear the mud and water which had built up in the mines.

When that was done, he installed an electric water pump 120ft below the ground to keep the mines from refilling with water.

He left one entrance to the mines for visitors and covered the others,



**Seven-year project:** Keith put in steps, platforms, handrails and lights to make it safe for visitors to go 40m down into the mine



**Deep down:** 'The mines aren't claustrophobic – it's not like walking down through a long narrow corridor, they are six metres wide at some points'