

An Intriguing Story: Poona and the Aga Khan Emerald Mine

By JIM ENEVER

When an advertising pamphlet for the ‘Aga Khan Emerald Mine Holiday Centre at Poona, WA’ appeared in the late 1900s (Fig. 1), it reflected a commonly held belief that the history of Poona and its emeralds was inextricably tied to the involvement of the Aga Khan III in the story.¹

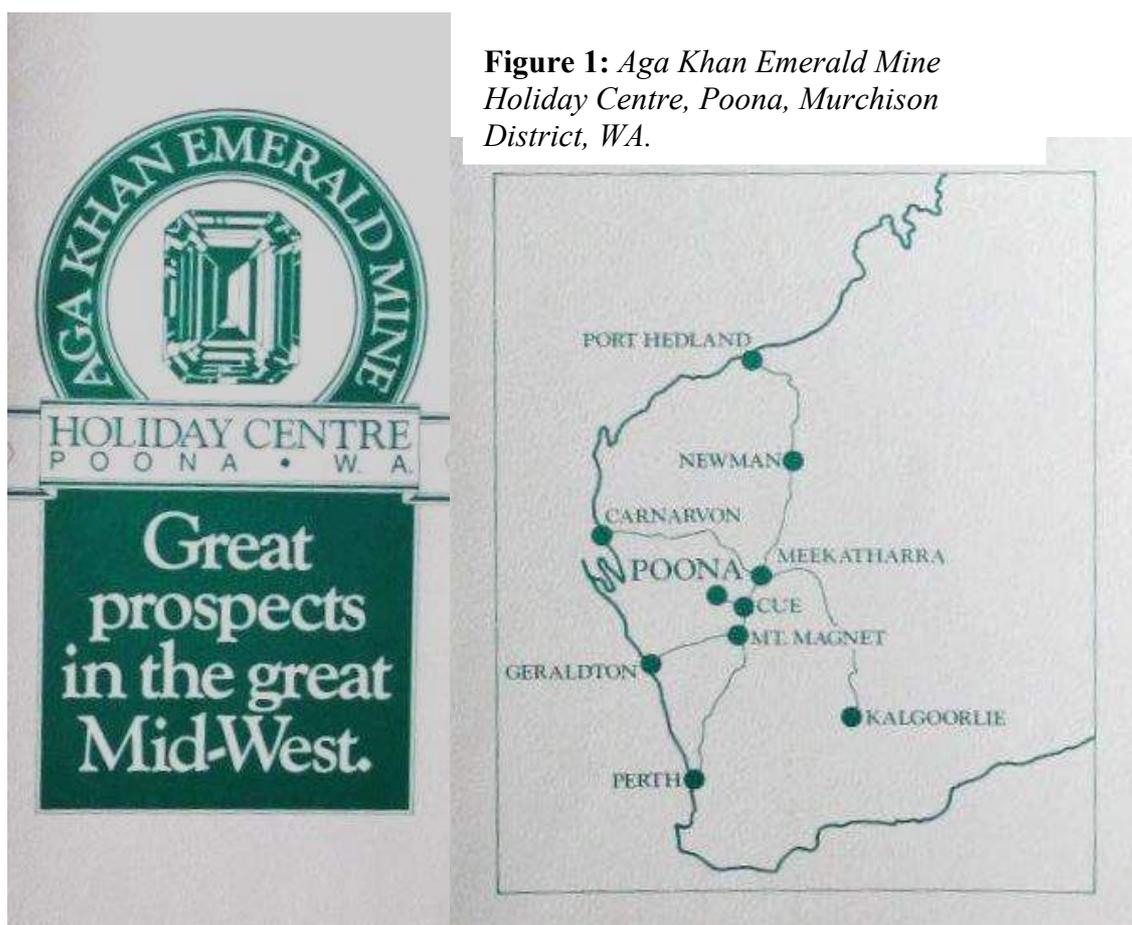


Figure 1: *Aga Khan Emerald Mine Holiday Centre, Poona, Murchison District, WA.*

Source: Information Brochure, State Library of Western Australia.

The assignment of the name ‘Aga Khan Mine’ stems from the period in the 1970s when the field was being re-activated, but had its genesis in the inter war period of the 1920s and 1930s when the involvement of the Aga Khan in activities at Poona was alleged to have occurred.² Whether supportable fact or ‘urban legend’, by the end of the twentieth century the idea of the Aga Khan’s involvement at Poona and the subsequent shipment of emerald ore to India had become entrenched in the folklore and was being promulgated in popular publications.³

In a recent comprehensive history of the Poona Emeralds, author Alex Palmer has given a summary of the oral traditions from the mining field that support the potential involvement of the Aga Khan III in mining activities at Poona during the

1920s and 1930s.⁴ It is Palmer's considered opinion that the most likely possibility was that the Aga Khan was a shareholder in the British company responsible for the most significant activity on the field at this time, and that some quantity of emerald bearing rock was transported to India for processing as part of these activities. The truth or otherwise of this is open to debate.

Discovery and early exploitation

The discovery of emeralds in the Poona district has been described with varying degrees of authenticity in a range of popular accounts. Possibly the most reliable version of the story can be attributed to WA Government Geologist, H.P. Woodward, who had a personal hand in the story and reported on the field in a comprehensive account of his geological survey of the area conducted in 1912 and published in 1914.⁵ In his report, Woodward summarised the events around the discovery:

While upon the Poona tin field in 1909 Mr Montgomery, the State Mining Eng., obtained a large clouded crystal of beryl from one of the prospectors, which he presented to the Geological Museum, in consequence of which the present writer while engaged upon a geological survey of this district was naturally anxious to locate the vein containing this mineral both with the object of observing its mode of occurrence and of obtaining further specimens for the collection. In this, however, he was unsuccessful...

Failing to personally locate the beryl deposits he next endeavoured to obtain information with regard to their occurrence from the prospectors who had worked at Poona at the time of Mr Montgomery's visit, but was again unsuccessful...

A few weeks later, when on the road to Mindoola, happening to camp at the "16-mile well", he met Mr A.P. Ryan (better known as 'Paddy'), who produced an assortment of minerals, amongst which were two crystals of green beryl, which proved to have come from Poona. Ryan, upon hearing that clear crystals of this minerals would be of considerable value, proceeded to Moorarie Station, upon the Murchison River, where his son was working, in order to obtain information from him as to the exact locality from which the stones were obtained, as he alone possessed this knowledge; after that he pegged out an area and made application for a reward claim.⁶

Woodward postulated that the finer, more crystalline stones that occurred strewn on the surface near to the initial discovery had derived from the weathering of veins of mica-schist containing the emeralds located directly beneath the ground surface in that area and had not been transported from elsewhere. Woodward collected a number of samples of the emeralds (Fig. 2) and sent them back to Perth for analysis, confirming the occurrence to be 'true emeralds'.

Within a short time of the discovery, a rush to the field occurred. Shallow workings had been developed over a fairly extensive area around the original discovery by 1915, with six leases held for emeralds at that date.⁷ Significant activity was limited to three leases, including the reward claim given to Paddy Ryan, for the development of which he had received government assistance.⁸ No record of emerald production from

the field is held by the WA Mines Department for this period. Stones sent to London for appraisal during this time proved generally disappointing.⁹

Figure 2: *Poona emeralds in matrix mica schist.*



Source: Woodward, H.P. *A geological reconnaissance of a portion of the Murchison Goldfield*, Geological Survey of WA, Bulletin No. 57, WA. Government Printer, 1914.

The most significant activity on the field during these early years was undertaken by two Canadian prospectors named Latham, backed by a Perth syndicate headed by J. Pearl, a Perth jeweler and gem merchant. Initial activities on their lease produced a multitude of stones of low quality. As activities went deeper, the quality of the stones progressively improved:

Near the fifty feet level some good stones were recovered. Though too pale in colour to be very valuable, they were comparatively free from the flaws and cloudiness of the surface specimens. Sixty feet down came a thrilling find. This was a fine crystal nearly two inches long. Each end was badly flawed, but almost one inch of the central portion was almost free from imperfections, and of good, though not perfect colour. The stone was despatched to Perth where the ends were roughly ground off in the workshop of Mr Pearl... In this condition the emerald weighed eight carats: subsequent cutting and polishing in Europe reduced the weight to five carats. The gem was eventually sold to a London dealer for £100. A little later, an even finer specimen was found... Unfortunately when this gem was removed from its bed of schist it was found to be broken into three pieces. But the comparatively small stones that resulted from the cutting of the three portions were finally sold for a total of £150.¹⁰

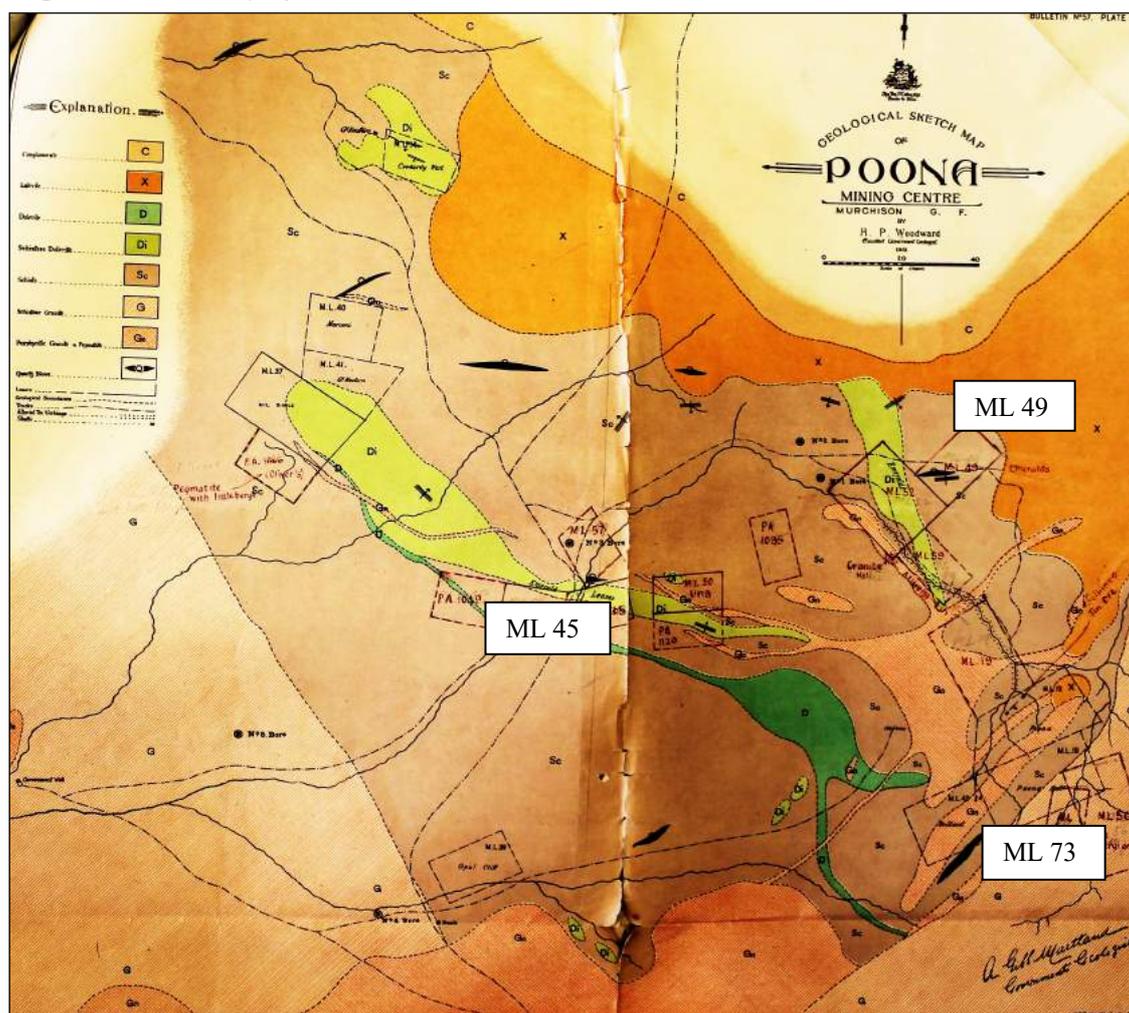
Early in 1914, Pearl travelled to England with the prize stones, as well as a collection of other specimens. 'His exhibits aroused the keen interest of the Montana Sapphire Syndicate, one of the world's leading firms of gem dealers'.¹¹ The Syndicate decided to send one of their experts out to conduct an appraisal of the field. With this in

mind, C.H. Walker arrived at Poona in late 1914 and proceeded to report on his observations. Walker was generally favourably disposed toward what he saw:

To sum up this property offers a fairly certain supply of emeralds [of average quality]... It offers the possibility of further finds of fine gemstones similar to the few already found, and there is always the chance of finding still superior stones such as command large prices in the gem markets of the world.¹²

On the basis of Walker's report, the Montana Syndicate committed to investing in the further development of the field, but the advent of WW1 put an end to this and to all other activity on the field.¹³

Figure 3: Summary of mineral leases held on the Poona Field, circa 1925.



Source R.C. Wilson, Report on the Beryl Deposits of Poona and Ferndale, WA Department of Mines Report, 1925, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.

Walker's report contained a description of the workings on the field at the time of his visit, focusing particularly on the leases being worked by the Latham brothers. On these leases there were four main shafts, partly vertical and partly on the underlay, to a maximum depth of around '60 or 70 feet'.¹⁴ Well defined lodges of beryl/emerald bearing material were obvious in all these shafts. The shafts were approximately '5 ft.

by 3 ft.' in dimension, equipped with windlasses and hide buckets for dirt removal. The valuable raw material was hand sorted, and the emeralds removed from the matrix rock by hand. This brief description remains the extant account of the state of the workings at the end of the first period of activity.

The field re-visited

The end of the war saw a re-kindling of interest in the Poona emeralds. A press report issued in April 1919 described new leases being pegged taking in the main areas of previous activity, including the sites occupied by the Latham brothers and Paddy Ryan.¹⁵ There are no contemporary accounts of any significant activities on these leases at this time. It was to be the growing international interest in the prospects for beryl as an ore of beryllium that was to drive the next phase of interest in Poona.

In 1925, R.C. Wilson, Assistant State Mining Engineer, was commissioned by the WA Government to survey the Poona field, and other deposits elsewhere in WA, and report on the prospects for economic mining of beryl. Wilson came to the conclusion that the patchy occurrence of beryl in the sites he studied would preclude economic mining for beryl at the ruling international price. With regard to Poona, Wilson felt that recovery of emeralds as gems might support on-going activities.¹⁶ The map of the Poona area accompanying Wilson's report (Fig. 3) summarised the status of leases held on the field to that time. Wilson reported that at the time of his visit to Poona, evidence visible on the surface suggested that the principal leases from which beryl had been recovered up to that point in time were leases 45, 49 and 73 (Fig. 3). Wilson's report paints a generally moribund picture of the field at this time, with little or no activity in evidence that might support some form of connection to the Aga Khan.

Scurrilous dealings

The next phase in the history of the Poona field evolved around the enigmatic figure of Lewis Marks. Sometime in late 1925, Marks arrived in Western Australia and began a romance with the Poona emeralds. Various descriptions of Marks range from a London gem merchant in search of a healthier climate in his later years¹⁷, and a scoundrel and swindler,¹⁸ it was Marks who kicked off a wave of interest in further development of the field. The circumstances around this are ambiguous, but what is certain is that by June 1926, Marks had obtained mining leases over two areas, ML 79, corresponding to the earlier claim 49 originally worked by the Latham brothers, and ML 80, corresponding to the earlier claim 45 given as a reward to Paddy Ryan.¹⁹ Marks registered these claims as Star 1 and Star 2 respectively. Accounts vary as to how Marks came to be able to reach this point. One account has Marks coming to Australia in a pre-planned mission to take up areas for gem stones. Another account, attributable to J. Pearl, the earlier investor in the field, is that Pearl had passed on his knowledge of the area to Marks after Marks had arrived in WA, and that then Marks had taken the initiative²⁰. A more intriguing account is that of Arthur Oliver, a prospector who had been working at Poona for some years and had been active on the field at the time of Marks's arrival.²¹ According to Oliver, he and two others had been working at Poona in 1925, and had secured several good

quality emeralds which he had brought to Perth in November 1925. In Perth, he was introduced to Lewis Marks to whom he showed his emerald samples. Marks apparently told Oliver that if he could have the samples he would send them to London with a view to raising interest in the UK to form a company to further exploit the field. Oliver, at this time, was apparently working under the understanding that he would be rewarded appropriately when a company was formed. In reality Marks appears to have side lined Oliver and proceeded to lobby UK interests in his own name, whilst applying for mining leases. To add insult to injury, Marks applied for and obtained forfeiture of the areas previously held by Oliver at Poona, from the local mining warden. Oliver complained bitterly to higher authority, and proceeded to attempt to form a company locally in Perth to exploit the field, but to no avail.²²

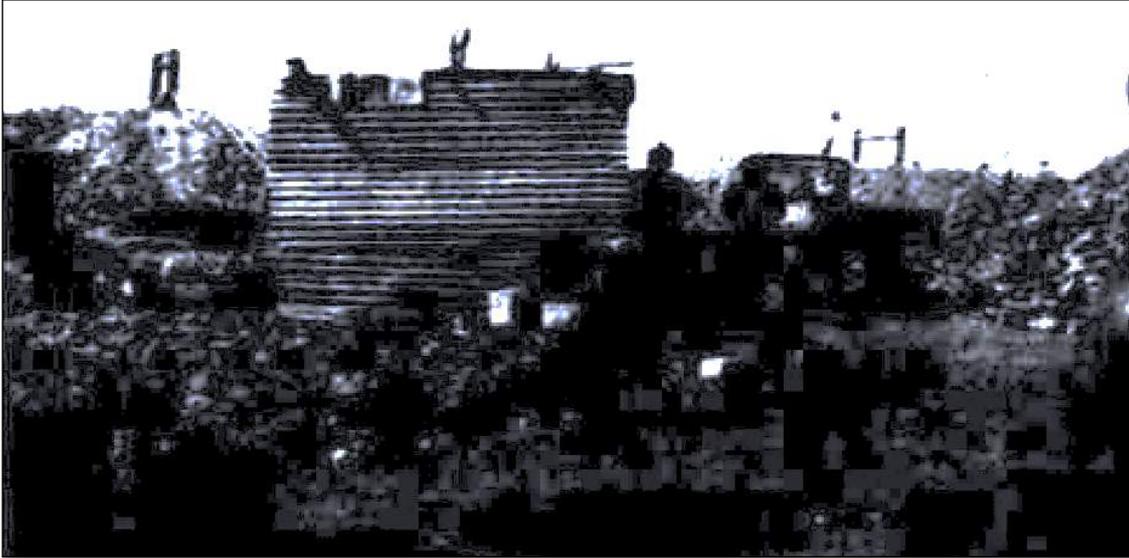
The eventual outcome of these machinations was the emergence of the 'Star Mining Syndicate' as the UK based interest set to take the lead in the further development of the Poona field. The records of the Star Mining Syndicate held in the UK records office, reveal more on the events leading up to acquisition of their leases at Poona by them.²³ In March 1926, an option agreement was reached between the Star Mining Syndicate and one Charles Rudolph Manns of The Hague, that if exercised would entitle the Syndicate to acquire certain mining leases in the Poona district in return for the issuing of £30,000 worth of fully paid up shares in the Syndicate to Manns or his nominees. The relationship between Manns and Marks in these dealings is obscure, as is how such an agreement could be entered into without any application for leases having been made by Marks at that date. Regardless of whatever murky dealings may have gone on, by October 1926, the option agreement had been exercised and Marks was able to state to the WA Mines Department that he held leases 79 and 80 on behalf of a syndicate for which he was acting as manager.²⁴ By February 1927, title over leases 79 and 80 had been granted to the Star Mining Syndicate, pending receipt of the company's memorandum and articles of association, which were duly supplied. By this time, Marks had applied for several further leases on behalf of the Star Mining Syndicate, as well as three leases in the name of his wife and a nominee. Eventually, eight star leases were registered to the Star Mining Syndicate.²⁵ It was, however, the activities on ML79 that would come to dominate the story.

Activities underway

Under the management of Marks, activities got underway soon after the first two leases were granted. After a period of activity described as 'general prospecting', work was initially concentrated on ML80 to re-visit previous development. By the end of 1926, Marks was able to report that a 'pocket was come upon which yielded a number of gems of considerable value', and that a 'parcel of emeralds despatched to London [were] of good quality and high value'.²⁶ By February 1927, activity was being focused on ML79. Sporadic reports by Marks in WA Mines Department records throughout the first half of 1927 describe shaft sinking and tunneling activities on ML79, with a lode '15 feet wide' being opened up and around 5,000 carats of stones being recovered and sent to London.²⁷ In August 1927, one newspaper account claimed that 'hoisting machinery had just been purchased and was to be installed', but judging by the

contemporary picture (Fig. 4) it is hard to see any evidence of this.²⁸ From Fig. 4, little appears to have changed on the ground since the time of Walker's visit in 1914.

Figure 4: *Poona Emerald Field, circa 1927.*



Source: *Geraldton Guardian Christmas Number, Saturday 24 December 1927.*

In a report tabled at the AGM of the Company in London in December 1927, Marks provided a summary of progress via a cable sent by the Company's agent in Perth, W.H. Ackland:

... shaft now 171 ft; still sinking. Emeralds improving in colour and size, but can only recover portion until rain comes and water available; has driven at 60 ft. about 70 ft. toward lenses proved contain emeralds...²⁹

At the meeting, the Company Chairman, E.J. Chapman, stated that a consignment of emeralds had been received, and that these had been examined by Mr Curtois, the Company's cutting expert, who stated that the quality of the stones was definitely improving with depth. Four of the stones had been cut and were on display at the meeting. In a newspaper report of March 1928, acting mine manager, Robert Hasted (who had replaced Marks) gave more details, stating that the main shaft had been sunk vertically to a depth of 98ft, and continued a further 91ft. on the underlay.³⁰ In one drive excavated from the shaft, 'a very good patch of emeralds has been struck, from which specimen gems in matrix, weighing about 1 cwt., has been railed to Perth'.³¹ A further 1,000 carats of stones had also been sent to London. In another account around the same time, it was reported that '11 men re systematically working... and continue to produce emeralds of greater number and better quality than previously'.³²

Amid scanty further reports of progress, and on-going speculative reporting of the Company's share dealings in the UK and Australian press, the company sent out mining engineer Geoffrey Bird in May 1928 to report on the status of things. His report back to the directors gave a detailed picture of the activities on ML 79:

Lease No 79, where the present work is being carried out, has an area of 24 acres. This lease is the only one that has been worked to any great extent in the district... Three small vertical shafts No 1, 2 and 3 have been sunk and have cut the lode at some 37 ft. below surface, and at this depth is the level known as the first level. The main shaft, formerly known as No 4 shaft, has been sunk to a depth of 72 ft. on the vertical from the surface and cut the lode at a depth of 50 ft. At the depth of 72 ft. is the second level... The first and second levels connect by a pass at the south end of the mine, also No 1 winze, first level communicates with raise from bottom of main shaft. From the second level, winze No 1 north has been sunk on the lode 53 ft., and winze No 2 north, 9 ft. Face of north drift first level has been driven 92 ft... Face north second level has been driven 96 ft... Face south first level has been driven 106 ft... Face south second level has been driven 90 ft... Considerable stoping has been done from the surface to the first level near shafts No 1 and No 2... Also stoping has been done on the back of the first level south of No 3 shaft... Stopping has also been done between the first and second levels at the south end of the mine... The south shaft is being sunk to cut the lode... The greatest depth attained as yet in the mine is at the bottom of winze No 1 north, 124 ft. below surface, the greatest length of lode opened up is on the first level, 198 ft. from north to south.³³

In his report, Bird claimed that to the end of May 1928, 18,630 carats of stones had been recovered. The vast majority of these had been of inferior quality and generally fractured, owing, he believed, to the impact of ground movements occurring in the near surface zone from which the stones had been recovered. Bird believed that there was evidence of improved quality of stones at the greater depths reached in the lower workings, and on the basis of this proposed the sinking of a:

new shaft, timbered throughout, which owing to its position and depth would have to be not less than say 9 ft. by 4 ft. in dimensions to cut the lode at the 300 ft. level below surface.³⁴

Bird suggested that the new shaft would have to be located in country rock remote from the indicated position of the 'lode', accessing of the lode being via a series of cross cuts driven at various levels as the shaft was extended. By connecting these cross cuts to the old workings, Bird believed that a ventilation circuit could be established. Bird also proposed that a concrete dam be constructed on a nearby creek to ensure a reliable water supply to allow 'washing' of the material to separate the valuable stones on a more permanent basis than previously. Bird estimated that the total cost of all these works would be around £4,600.

On the basis of Bird's generally optimistic report, the Company took the decision to adopt his plan. After the re-structuring of the Company, and the raising of additional finance, the plan was put into action in early 1929. Bird came back to Poona in March 1929 to take over as manager, with Hasted as his assistant. Throughout 1929, a series of less sensational reports than previously painted a picture of sober progress. By June 1929 the dam was completed and building works at the new mine site were under way.³⁵ A report in August 1929 suggested that planning was taking place toward

a system of mechanical sorting of the gems from the matrix.³⁶ By October 1929, the *Geraldton Guardian* was able to report:

At the shaft, tall poppet heads, engine house, blacksmith's shop, etc, and near the old shaft, a commodious dwelling and office under one roof gives the locality an increased appearance of mining activity. The three compartment shaft has been sunk to 80 ft. and is being timbered neatly and securely [Fig. 5].³⁷

Figure 5: *Star Emerald Co. Mine, circa 1929.*



Source: Personal collection of A. Palmer.

After what seemed to be encouraging progress to the end of 1929, by June 1930 the story had become gloomy. Bird had been recalled to London for ‘consultations’, and Hasted was applying for an exemption from lease conditions on ML 79 to allow work to temporarily cease whilst the Company attempted to raise further finance.³⁸ Exemptions had already been granted for all the other leases held by the Company to allow concentration on ML79.³⁹ The exemption for ML79 was granted, conditional upon details of activities and expenditure for the lease being provided. A report to the Mines Department dated 23 July 1929 briefly summarised the work that had been conducted on ML 79 to the date of cessation of activities.⁴⁰ Tellingly, the new shaft had been terminated at 176 ft. rather than the planned 300 ft. Apparently, the lode had ‘flattened out’ and the shaft had reached the lode at a much shallower depth than planned. A drive had been driven from the shaft at that depth for a distance of 141 ft., presumably to expose the lode. Emeralds recovered from that drive were reported to be of a quality not

markedly superior to previous. In a financial statement attached to the report, it was claimed that £19,975.5s.7d had been spent to that point. By the end of July 1930, all workers had been discharged and Hasted was acting effectively in a caretaker capacity. Further exemptions were applied for and granted for all the Company leases in June 1931, with a report attached to the effect that some further work had been done in the previous 12 months on ML79, with about 4,000 carats of stones being produced. A newspaper account in December 1932 reported that ‘after several years of inactivity on the Star Emerald at Poona, two men are at present treating the dump by [a] puddling process... so far the work has proved quite satisfactory’.⁴¹ Further exemptions were applied for in 1932 whilst the Company continued to attempt to raise finance in the UK in what were difficult financial times. This, however, was a forlorn hope. By the end of 1933, all the Company leases had been conditionally surrendered.⁴² In a statutory declaration tendered by Company solicitor C.T. Watkins in February 1932 in support of an application for exemption, he claimed that:

Notwithstanding the great amount of work done on the said leases and the recovery of a very large number of emeralds, the Company has not received more than about £500 from sales of emeralds.⁴³

Official records show that the Star Mining Syndicate produced a total of around 22,000 carats of emeralds during the years 1927 to 1933.

Other players

Apart from the activities undertaken by the Star Mining Syndicate at this time, several other groups took up claims and began operations during 1927 and 1928. By June 1928, there were 18 leases for emeralds registered on the Poona field, as well as a number of claims for tin. Among the other groups active at the time, the most significant was The Transvaal Trust and Finance Company, another UK company. Apart from this group, two Australian formed companies had begun operations, Adelaide Emeralds and Westralian Emeralds. By June 1928, these companies had amalgamated to form Poona Emeralds. Sporadic reports in the press described progress on the various leases during 1927 and 1928, with parcels of stones sent to London yielding generally disappointing results, but with the occasional story of some worthwhile gems being recovered.⁴⁴ By 1929, activities by the other groups, and their successors, were winding down, leaving the Star Mining Syndicate as the last man standing.

Overall, logic points to the Star Mining Syndicate being the most likely candidate for any possible involvement of the Aga Khan in mining at Poona at this time, given their prominence on the field, relative longevity, and tenure of ML79, the site later associated with the Aga Khan’s involvement.

The Star (Emerald) Mining Syndicate

The Star Mining Syndicate was registered in the UK on the 20th December 1910.⁴⁵ After having undertaken no significant activities up to 1926, the Star Syndicate was effectively a ‘shell company’ ready to be transformed into an emerald miner.⁴⁶ There is no evidence from the Company records that they acted proactively in relation to this

transformation. The trigger appears to have been the arrangement with Manns, the details of which remain obscure.

The original capital of the Company was £40,000 divided into 40,000 shares. During the latter part of 1926, the shares were divided into 5 shilling lots, first 160,000 in number and then increased to 240,000 to provide capital up to £60,000.⁴⁷ 120,000 shares were issued at no cost to Rudolf Manns and/or his nominees in full payment for the options over the Poona leases that Marks had taken out.⁴⁸ Presumably as a result of this transaction, Marks ended up as a substantial shareholder in the Company. Parcels of the remaining un-issued shares were sold off to the public by means of an underwriting arrangement with the firm of Tokenhouse Securities Ltd.⁴⁹ In February 1927, the Company was re-branded as the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate, in line with its new purpose in life.⁵⁰

From early 1927, reports began to appear in the English financial press of emeralds flowing in from Poona and the Company's shares increasing in value. By 1 January 1927, the Company's shares were at a premium.⁵¹ A newspaper account of this time made the claim that:

Already several thousand carats of emeralds have been shipped to this country, and according to the chairman..., over 150 stones have been cut, though apparently none has yet been marketed. The current high premium at which the Syndicates 5s shares are standing is seemingly based mainly on the hope of stones of better colour and quality being found at greater depth.⁵²

In February 1927, the *Financial Times* published an extract of a statement issued by the chairman of the Company, E.J.C. Chapman claiming that 4,012 carats of stones had been received to that date, from which 279 emeralds had been cut with a total weight of 165 carats.⁵³ Despite all this optimism, by this time experienced investors were becoming wary, and the WA Government was asking questions of the Company around the reliability of their reporting.⁵⁴ The Company's annual report tabled in December 1927 continued the optimistic line.⁵⁵ A further report in the *Financial Times* of March 1928 was able to claim that 'the largest movement in the whole of the mining sector [of the UK Stock Market] was scored by Star emeralds...'⁵⁶ By April that year, the same newspaper was reporting in a 'special article' on a notable event that had occurred on the Exchange the previous day, leading to the failure of one broker and the discomfort of others:

It [revolved around] dealings in the shares of an obscure mining company, Star Emeralds, which were run up to over £2 10s last account, but have since collapsed to 10s sellers. In the *Financial Times* of the 29th March, any readers who had been reckless enough to buy these shares were warned to secure as quickly as possible the then ruling price of £2 10s and be very thankful to get it.⁵⁷

By May 1928, the finger was being pointed at the directors of the Company for not having warned the shareholders as to the source of the speculation that had occurred.⁵⁸ The directors, in turn, issued a statement denying any inside knowledge of or

participation in the speculation. The Australian Press was somewhat more pointed in their comments, laying the blame for the turn of events at the feet of Lewis Marks. Among several articles published at the time with a similar tone, the account published in the Sunday Times Perth in June 1928 was typical:

It is no secret that Mr Lewis Marks, who was managing the Star Emerald Mine during the boom, did not let the grass grow under his feet, and before his recent departure for the 'Old Country', he is said to have boasted of having made £20,000 [from the boom].⁵⁹

From the nature of the events that had occurred up to the middle of 1928, it is hard to imagine the Aga Khan having been involved with the Star Emerald Syndicate up to that point. There is certainly no clear evidence for such a possible involvement from the extant records. This does not, however, categorically rule out the possibility. By early 1929 the Company was ready for a new start, with Bird's plan in hand, a new company structure in place, and additional finance raised by the issuing of further shares.⁶⁰ Any involvement that the Aga Khan might have had with the Star Emerald Syndicate can most likely be sheeted home to this period in its history.

In an address to shareholders at an extraordinary general meeting in February 1929, the Chairman said that he was sure:

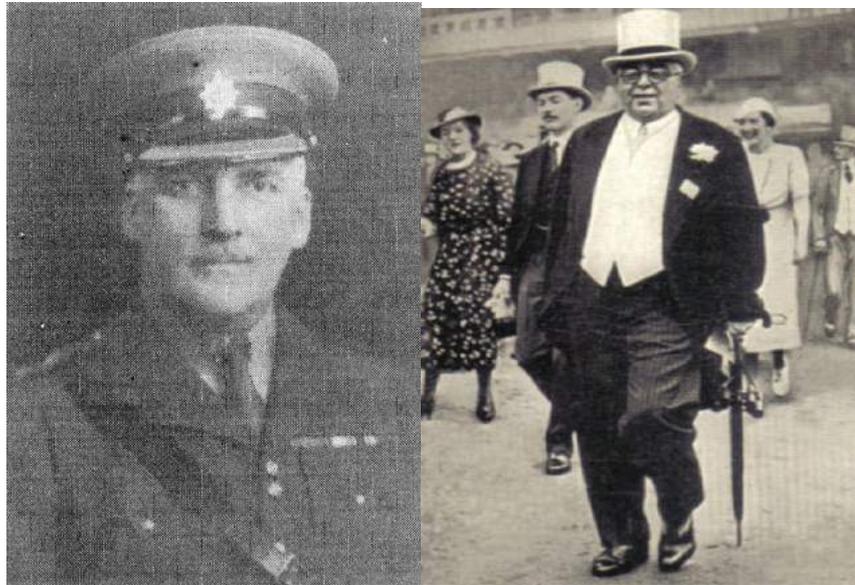
it would be a source of gratification to the shareholders to know that Col. Fielding, the eminent mining engineer, had joined the Board as a representative of new important financial interests now identified with the Company.⁶¹

As to what these new financial interests might be remains a mystery. There are no details recorded in the extant records of the Company that might shed light on the nature of any arrangement, and no reports in the contemporary press in the UK or Australia. There is no evidence in the incomplete Company records of any equity in the company being taken up directly by the Aga Khan, nor of any other form of investment. Scrutiny of the available documentation relating to the Aga Khan's investment portfolio of the time, held in the Beaverbrook papers of the UK House of Lords, similarly does not reveal any evidence of a direct investment in the Star Emerald Company among the listed interests.⁶² The list of securities held by the Aga Khan in early 1929, as revealed in the Beaverbrook Papers, suggests a very conservative investor with prime targets for investment being major international government institutions and defensive international private industry stocks (including some major international miners), not a penchant for gambling in speculative mining companies like the Star Emerald Syndicate.⁶³ This does not rule out the possibility of there being investments outside of the major holdings listed in the Beaverbrook Papers, or of an indirect investment by the Aga Khan through an intermediary, nor of the provision of finance to the Company outside of any equity considerations. By the time that the leases had been surrendered, the list of shareholders in the Company did not reflect any likely residual interest that might have obviously been connected to the Aga Khan.⁶⁴

The other tantalizing aspect of the Chairman's address lies in the person of Lt. Col. Rowland Charles Fielding DSO. Fielding was elected to the Board of the Company

in February 1929, and remained as a director until resigning toward the end of 1930, putting him in the picture during the period of most interest.⁶⁵ Fielding trained as a mining engineer, and had developed a reputation as an important mining consultant by the 1920s, working almost anywhere in the world where mining was being undertaken. He commanded a regiment on the western front during WW1, receiving a DSO, and producing copious letters home that became the basis of his acclaimed book, 'War Letters to a Wife'. Fielding was also connected to the English Peerage.⁶⁶ In many respects, Fielding was the sort of person who might have been connected to the Aga Khan and perhaps represent a conduit for the indirect involvement of the Aga Khan in the Poona story (Fig. 6). There is, however, no clear evidence of this in extant documents.

Figure 6: *Lt. Col. Rowland Charles Fielding, DSO /HRH Aga Kahn III.*



Sources: UK War Records / Wikipedia Picture Gallery.

The next phase

Listed among the shareholders in the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate in 1934 was Frederick Newbery, a London based mining engineer and convicted share fraudster.⁶⁷ Newbery had ambitions to see all the emerald leases at Poona amalgamated,⁶⁸ and after the leases were conditionally surrendered by the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate, Newbery moved to take up the ground in his own name. This took some time to achieve, but by September 1936 he had made application for and received tenure over the areas of greatest interest, including the site of the previous workings on ML79.⁶⁹ In February 1937, Newbery transferred the claims to the W A E Syndicate, a newly formed UK based private company with interests in collieries.⁷⁰ Interestingly, the local agent for the W A E Syndicate in WA was Charles Watkins, the same person who had acted as agent for the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate, suggesting some degree of continuity. Apart from the fact that mining activities were going on under the control of the W A E Syndicate during the period from 1936 until the leases were surrendered at the end of 1938, details of such activities are almost totally absent from the contemporary record.

In his comprehensive work on the minerals of WA, Edward Simpson, gives a brief retrospective account of what might have been happening on the claims at Poona during this period: '1936... the old workings were reopened and in level driven at 165 ft. depth, three shoots of emerald bearing biotite schist were cut through'.⁷¹

A version of what was happening during this period based on oral accounts is given by Palmer in his book on Poona.⁷² According to him, eight men were employed at the mine (presumably the workings on ML79) during this time, all of them apparently locals. Whatever the case, it was all over by the end of 1938, a report in the *South West Advertiser* stating that 'at Weld Range, where the W A E Syndicate have been mining for emeralds for some time, operations have ceased... and the plant disposed of'.⁷³ There is no extant documentary evidence for the involvement of the Aga Khan in the activities at Poona during this time, but it is not impossible.

The Indian connection

There is no evidence in the available descriptions of activities undertaken by the Star Emerald Syndicate of any emeralds or emerald ore being sent anywhere other than to London during their tenure of ML 79. No extant account of what might have been produced during the Newbery/W A E period, and also where any product might have been sent, appears to exist in the contemporary records. It is interesting to speculate on whether it might have been during this time that the stories about emeralds being sent to India may have originated. In 1932, Hasted, when applying for a lease exemption for

the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate, was recorded as saying that he had had approaches about the possibility of supplying emeralds and beryl to an un-named market.⁷⁴

In April 1934, one Durlabhji Tribhovan (Fig. 7), wrote a letter to the WA Chamber of Commerce enquiring about the prospects of importing rough emeralds from Poona and elsewhere in Australia,⁷⁵ and further correspondence followed in the same year, addressed to the WA State Mining Engineer. The correspondence set out a number of questions aimed toward establishing the possibility of importing parcels of stones to be cut in India and attempting to establish contacts. It is not clear if these enquiries ever led to anything, but one is tempted to join the dots, given the timeline.

Tribhovan was the patriarch of a family of gem merchants based in Jaipur, at a time when Jaipur was emerging as a world powerhouse in the international gem trade, especially in emeralds. The Durlabhji family

Figure 7: Durlabhji Tribhovan.



Source: L.A. Babb, *Emerald City, The Birth and Evolution of an Indian Gemstone Industry*, State University of New York Press, 2013, p. 94.

(the family adopted Tribhovan's own name as a family name during later generations) was to grow in prominence in the following years to a position of leadership in the international emerald trade.⁷⁶ It is unlikely that the truth or otherwise of speculation around a connection between Poona and Tribhovan will ever be established, given the lack of documentary records.

Post-World War II

By the start of WWII, all work at Poona had ceased and the leases were in abeyance. The complex story of the post war re-kindling of activities at Poona is well summarised by Palmer in his book. In 1974, Bob Bellairs took over ownership of the tenement covering the old ML79 from Allan Bond, and named the mine he was developing on that lease as the 'Aga Kahn Deep Mine', the first time that name had been applied to the workings on that site.⁷⁷ From that time, the operation progressively took on the look of a substantial modern mine (Fig. 8). Multiple changes of ownership have occurred over succeeding years, with fortunes varying. Occasional finds of highly valued stones are reported in the press, but overall, Poona has remained a frustration to its commercial operators. To amateur fossickers, however, Poona remains one of those must do sites.

Figure 8: *The Aga Kahn Deep Mine, circa 1981.*



Source: National Archives of Australia, NAA: A6135, K30/1/81/4 and 5.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, resolution of the truth or otherwise of the Aga Khan legend still lies open to debate. The hard evidence remains inconclusive, although there are some intriguing possibilities on the way through the story. On balance, it is still the oral tradition that one must turn to if one is to accept the substance of the story.

Acknowledgements: The author gratefully acknowledges the direction provided by Alex Palmer's book on Poona and its Emeralds, and the encouragement given by Alex during conversations around Poona. The author also gratefully acknowledges the help offered by the library staff of the WA Mines Department.

Endnotes

¹ The naming of Poona WA does not owe anything to the historical association of the Aga Khan with Poona India, and pre-dates any potential involvement of the Aga Khan with emerald mining at Poona WA.

² See for example, I.A. Mumme, *The Emerald*, Mumme Publications, Perth, 1982, p. 71.

³ See for example, *Aga Khan Mine, Poona, Cue Shire, Western Australia*, <https://www.mindat.org/loc>.

⁴ A. Palmer, *Poona W.A. and the Seekers of its Emeralds*, Hesperian Press, Perth, 2010, pp. 34-36.

⁵ H.P. Woodward, *A geological reconnaissance of a portion of the Murchison Goldfield*, Geological Survey of WA, Bulletin No. 57, WA. Government Printer, 1914.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ C.H. Walker, Report on the Poona Emerald Claims Western Australia, 1915, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.

⁸ *Murchison Times and Day Dawn Gazette*, 19 May 1922, p. 3.

⁹ Correspondence between Agent General for Western Australia and Imperial Institute of the United Kingdom, the Colonies and India, 1916, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.

¹⁰ *Geraldton Guardian and Express*, 21 January 1933, p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Walker, Report on the Poona Emerald Claims Western Australia, 1915.

¹³ *West Australian*, 11 March 1927, p. 14.

¹⁴ Units used in this paper: 1 inch = 25.4 mm; 1 foot = 0.3048 m; 1 acre = 0.4047 hectares.

¹⁵ *Western Argus (Kalgoorlie)*, 29 April 1919, p. 6.

¹⁶ R.C. Wilson, Report on the Beryl Deposits of Poona and Ferndale, WA Department of Mines Report, 1925, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.

¹⁷ See for example, *The Adelaide Mail*, 1 January 1927, p. 15.

¹⁸ Personal account by Arthur Oliver of events at Poona in 1925/1926, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.

¹⁹ WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

²⁰ See for example, *West Australian*, 11 March 1927, p. 16.

²¹ Personal account by Arthur Oliver of events at Poona in 1925/1926, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.

²² See for example, accounts of Oliver showing off samples of emeralds with a view to raising interest in a mining venture in *Daily News*, 24 August 1926, p. 8, and 1 September 1926, p. 6.

²³ Records of the Star Mining Syndicate, UK National Archives, BT/32083/113322.

²⁴ WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

²⁵ *WA Government Gazette*, 26 April 1929, p. 1057.

²⁶ *Geraldton Guardian*, 9 October 1926, p. 4 and 18 December 1926, p. 4.

²⁷ WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

²⁸ *West Australian*, 16 August 1927, p. 11.

²⁹ *The Financial Times London*, 22 December 1927, p. 4.

³⁰ *Geraldton Guardian*, 24 March 1928, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 3 March 1928, p. 1.

³³ Copy of undated report by Bird to the Directors of The Star Emerald Mining Syndicate held in WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Geraldton Guardian*, 21 June 1929, p. 4.

³⁶ *Sunday Times Perth*, 11 August 1929, p. 6.

³⁷ *Geraldton Guardian*, 4 October 1929, p. 4.

³⁸ Sworn statement by R. Hasted in WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

³⁹ *Geraldton Guardian*, 23 May 1930, p. 4.

⁴⁰ WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

⁴¹ *Geraldton Guardian*, 6 December 1932, p. 2.

⁴² *WA Government Gazette*, 1 December 1933, p. 1865.

⁴³ Statutory Declaration by C.T. Watkins held in WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.

- ⁴⁴ See for example, *Sunday Times Perth*, 29 July 1928, p. 4.
- ⁴⁵ Records of the Star Mining Syndicate, UK National Archives, BT/32083/113322.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *The Financial Times London*, 16 December 1926, p. 6.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Copy of Certificate of Incorporation of a Company for the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate Ltd, SROWA AU WA S4153.
- ⁵¹ *The Financial Times London*, 1 January 1927, p. 6.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 27 January 1927, p. 6.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 25 February 1927, p. 4.
- ⁵⁴ See for example, correspondence between the Company and the WA Minister of Mines in the WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.
- ⁵⁵ *The Financial Times London*, 22 December 1927, p. 4.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20 March 1928, p. 10.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 April 1928, p. 7.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 May 1928, p. 8.
- ⁵⁹ *Sunday Times Perth*, 24 June 1928, p. 4.
- ⁶⁰ *The Financial Times London*, 1 February 1929, p. 6, and 6 February 1929, p. 14.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1 February 1929, p. 6.
- ⁶² Beaverbrook Papers, UK House of Lords, BBK/C/195.
- ⁶³ The Aga Khan took his investment advice largely from Lord Beaverbrook. In the first half of 1929 he submitted a list of his investments to Beaverbrook for his vetting. There is no mention of any direct involvement of the Aga Khan as a shareholder in the Star Emerald Syndicate contained in the listings. The listings date from April 1929 to June 1929.
- ⁶⁴ Annual return of the Star Emerald Mining Syndicate, 1935, UK National Archives, BT/32083/113322.
- ⁶⁵ Records of the Star Mining Syndicate, UK National Archives, BT/32083/113322.
- ⁶⁶ See for example, summary of the life of Lt. Col. R.C. Fielding in *Rugby Advertiser*, 18 September 1945, p. 3.
- ⁶⁷ Newbery was involved in a major share manipulation scheme in 1930 that caused a sensational stir in the UK press of the time. After a drawn-out trial, Newbery was sentenced to three years penal servitude, a conviction that was later overturned on appeal. *The Financial Times London*, 9 July 1931, p. 4, and 18 November 1931, p. 4.
- ⁶⁸ See statement by Newbery in WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.
- ⁶⁹ See advertisement in *West Australian*, 25 July 1936, p. 24, re application for ground at Poona.
- ⁷⁰ See listing of newly registered companies, *The Financial Times London*, 17 August 1936, p. 6.
- ⁷¹ E.S. Simpson, *Minerals of Western Australia*, WA Government Printer, Perth, 1948-1952, Vol. 1, p. 202.
- ⁷² Palmer, *Poona W.A. and the Seekers of its Emeralds*, p. 32.
- ⁷³ *South Western Advertiser*, 4 November 1938, p. 3.
- ⁷⁴ Statement by Hasted supporting application for lease exemption July 1932, WA Mines Department records, Microfilm Roll 871039/26ML79.
- ⁷⁵ See correspondence with WA Chamber of Commerce, SROWA, AU WA S20/S259.
- ⁷⁶ L.A. Babb, *Emerald City, The Birth and Evolution of an Indian Gemstone Industry*, State University of New York Press, 2013, p. 94.
- ⁷⁷ Palmer, *Poona W.A. and the Seekers of its Emeralds*, p. 51.