



Quarry People

Mining in Liskeard

Liskeard became a boom town in the 19th century when copper, tin, lead and silver mining took off in the surrounding areas. Many mining families moved up from the west and many were housed in poor quality “courts. Others made substantial profits from mining and the legacy of fine houses and public buildings is still to be seen. Several architects grew to prominence including Henry Rice who helped shape the image of the town with over 100 buildings. You can follow the Henry Rice Trail with a map available from Stuart house. When the boom ended many Cornish miners emigrated to Australia, America, Mexico, Canada and South Africa where they earned the reputation of being the best hard rock miners in the world. In 2006 the Cornish mining World Heritage Site was created with Liskeard & District Museum as the interpretation point for the Caradon District.

The Caradon Mining District

Located in the south-eastern corner of Bodmin Moor, this area is open exposed granite moorland, mostly more than 1000 feet above sea level. Nowhere else within the World Heritage Site are such extensive mining remains found that date from such a limited period of operation (1840-90). They reflect a good example of a ‘boom to bust’ Cornish copper mining landscape.

Although, like the other Cornish granite uplands and Dartmoor to the east, this area had been extremely productive during the mediaeval and post-mediaeval periods when its tin ore was worked by extensive streamworks, the evidence for the working of the underground tin lodes suggests only shallow, relatively small scale operations. Much of the land was regarded as little more than poor, exposed, upland sheep country.

This was to change in 1836, however, when a small group of prospectors located a major copper lode traversing the Seaton Valley on the southern slopes of Caradon Hill. Within four years mines

were being established everywhere within the district in an attempt either to find extensions of the South Caradon lode or to find others parallel to it. To the north, the old Clanacombe and

Stowes mines were reopened as Phoenix United – here, too, substantial resources of copper ore were found, though with the added bonus of rich tin alongside. Elsewhere, the attempts were less successful. The mines working the immediate extensions of the South Caradon lodes – East Caradon and West Caradon – were the most successful – some of the others were little more than trials or speculations and were soon no more than memories, whilst a small number worked patchily for decades, barely paying their way.



Wheal Mary Ann (World War I)

The development of these important copper reserves was initially fraught with difficulties, however. Lying far from the coast and lacking surfaced roads it proved difficult to bring to the area the equipment, fuel and supplies vital for the development of the mines, and equally problematic to export the copper ore which they were producing.

It took ten years to build the railway which was to link the mines to Liskeard – the nearest stannary town, and from there to the port of Looe and it was not until the 1850s that it linked up the majority of the mines and quarries which had sprung up in the area.



Caradon Miners

A further problem also linked to the remoteness of the Caradon district was that there was no tradition of settlement in the area. As the mines became established, thousands of miners drawn from all over Cornwall initially established shanty towns on the exposed downs. Although these had something of a reputation for lawlessness akin to the Wild West they were short-lived, and new settlements of terraced cottages, complete with chapels and schools were soon being built near the mines.

Minions (originally called Cheesewring Railway), Darite, Pensilva (originally Bodminland), Upton Cross, Common Moor and Crow's Nest were all established during this period, St. Cleer and Henwood expanded substantially to house the incomers, whilst Liskeard rapidly developed into the administrative centre for the mining district.

Mining records show that over 650,000 tons of copper ore was mined within the district in little less than three decades. Inevitably, given the worldwide development of copper mining during this period, the boom was short-lived. As copper prices slumped, the smaller and less successful mines quickly went bankrupt, and even the greatest amongst them – South Caradon – survived until the 1880s only due to its prodigious output. Phoenix United continued to work its rich tin lodes for a little longer, but its closure spelt the end for the railway and for the quarries which that had sustained. By the end of the 1800s peace and quiet had returned to the moor. An ambitious attempt to rework the Phoenix lodes during the first decade of the 1900s came to nothing, as did a re-prospection of the Silver Valley lodes on Craddock Moor for wolfram during the Second World War.