

History

All towns have histories, although some would seem at first glance to have more history than others. We all know about these places with their own walls, castle and cathedral that prove that they are 'ancient towns'. Redruth has none of these but it does have a past. It's one, furthermore, that its people can be justly proud of.

The Redruth we see today is almost wholly a product of the last 250 years. It owed its growth to its good fortune in lying at the centre of what was in the 1700s one of the richest parts of land in the world. It was the deep mining of copper after the 1730s, which catapulted Redruth out of its status of quiet market town - in reality a village. Formerly overshadowed by its neighbours of Truro, Helston and Falmouth, it became one of the major urban centres in Cornwall.

The history of the town has, therefore, three parts. First, there was a long period during which it was a small market town of less than a thousand souls; then from around 1700 to the 1850s the town grew rapidly to house a population of over 8,000 as mining prospered; and finally, from the 1860s, the chronic problems of local industry heralded a period in which the town searched for a new role. Within this framework perhaps the best way to get a feel for the past of Redruth and its people is to walk around its streets.

CROSS STREET

Let's begin in Cross Street, beside Murdoch House and behind St Rumon's Gardens. Opened in 2000 the gardens are on the site of the former Druid's Hall that was once Redruth's cultural centre with library, assembly room and theatre. In 1910 it became a cinema, then a Bingo Club, before fire destroyed it in 1984. The cross of St Rumon is situated behind the gardens. Somewhere near this point, perhaps down towards the lights at the junction of Fore Street and Penryn Street, Redruth began to take shape back in the 1100s or 1200s. The name Redruth suggests the town's origin. It has nothing to do with scarlet women but in fact means red (the Ruth part) ford (the red).



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locomotive - a replica of which is situated on the Tesco's roundabout in the town - and he produced a process for clearing beer. Click www.murdochflyer.freeuk.com to go to the Murdoch Flyer website.

THE CHURCHTOWN

The small town, more properly village, around the ford had grown up some distance away from the parish church. This was typical of many Cornish parishes. After the 'unroofing' of St. Rumon's chapel in the later 1600s the townsfolk had to trek a mile or so out of the town if they wanted to attend church services. We can still follow Church Lane, then the main way out to the church.

The church with its small 'churchtown' of a few cottages and a former pub opposite, called the Three Feathers or The Feathers Inn, is overlooked by Carn Brea across the parish boundary. The present church building is a combination of old tower, built in 1490s, and rebuilt body of the church, enlarged in 1756 to accommodate the growing number of parishioners.

WEST END

Let's leave the quiet Churchtown and retrace our steps to the town, turning left at the top of Trevingey to come down Coach Lane, formerly Coose (Wood) Lane. At the bottom there are again reminders of more recent past. The car park on the left was in fact the site of the town's first railway station, when the line from Redruth to Hayle opened in 1838. By 1852 the railway had been extended west to Penzance and east to Truro, the viaduct (at first wooden) over the centre of town being built at this time and the present station opened.

Cornish mining was a notoriously unhealthy occupation, with a high likelihood of lung disease and premature death. Rather belatedly some resources were found to build a Miners' Hospital just down the road from West End. At first this was for convalescence only, but in 1871 an accident ward was added. In 1889/90 a Women's' Hospital was also built on the site and a children's wing followed 1898. Closed as a hospital in the mid 1990's, the site is now earmarked for housing along the same lines as that seen at Prince Charles' vision, Poundbury.

As we walk back towards the town centre from the West End we pass, on the left, the former terminus of the short lived Camborne - Redruth tramway. This linked Redruth with its neighbour four miles to the west and was the only tram service ever to be installed in Cornwall. It opened in 1902 but closed for passenger traffic as early as 1927, victim to growing competition from the buses.

FORE STREET

Coming down West End one gets the best vantage point for seeing Fore Street, Redruth's main shopping street since the early 1700s. In the 19th century Fore Street on market days and Saturdays was packed with stalls selling all kinds of products from limpets and mussels to pianos and organs. Even in the more difficult times after the 1860s Fore Street was still packed at times like Christmas. By the end of the 19th century, of course, Redruth had acquired some grand commercial buildings as befitted its rank as a shopping centre - for example Trounson's building, built in 1870 above the Town Clock and now occupied by Greens newsagents and Superdrug. Or there was Tabbs Hotel, an imposing four-storey hotel that was rebuilt in 1894 and stood where Iceland now have their store.

Food Riots

Yet, Redruth's role as a market town also made it prominent in other events. A large number of the expanding population dependent on mining in the 18th century were always close to the poverty line. For these folk finding enough to eat was always a struggle. In 1800 it was remarked that "there are a great number of families in the neighbourhood who never provided themselves with any other kind of food but barley bread, potatoes and salt pilchards from one week to another, with which they sip what they call tea (little more than warm water without milk or sugar)." When the price of barley rose, or the mines laid off workers, large numbers of people could be tipped into near destitution. And when that happened in the 1700s and early 1800s they rioted.

The Cornish mining population was famous then for its quickness to take direct action at times of hardship. Miners, and just as often wives of miners, would demand that food for sale at local markets be sold at a 'fair price', that is lower than its market price, and this they enforced either by violence or, more often, the threat of violence. As the principal market town of the mining district Redruth was the site of several food riots in the years before 1847, after which rising wages and a better-organised police force helped to end the practise of food riots.



Clock Tower Situated midway along Fore Street is the Town Clock which has stood on or very near this site for a long time, certainly since the 1700's. In 1828 the former wood built tower was demolished and replaced by a stone tower. In 1841 the open arches at ground level were closed in for use as Police cells. With the increasing height of the surrounding commercial properties the Clock Tower was extended in 1904 so that the miners living at the top of the town could see the time, and also chimes were added.

Heartland of Cornish Methodism

If we continue to walk up Fore Street towards the East End of the town we find ourselves

entering one of the heartlands of Cornish Methodism. The Wesley's had first come to West Cornwall in the early 1740s, attracted by the large population of miners and a rather dozy local Anglican establishment. In 1746 Charles Wesley, and a year later his more famous brother, visited Redruth and preached their evangelical brand of religion to the people in the open air.

These open-air meetings are traditionally supposed to have been centred on the old Market House in Fore Street or at Bank House in West End, where Wesley mounted the steps to address the populace. (Bank House has been rebuilt since the 18th century when it had a more commanding position over the bottom of West End.) The Wesley's' Methodism soon caught on and, by the 1750s, it was reported that "thousands" were attending open air meetings in Fore Street, in addition to the regular huge gatherings at Gwennap Pit, just a mile or two to the south east of the town, where no doubt many townsfolk joined in.

Flowerpot and Wesley

Methodism left its impact not just on the culture of the people but also on the physical appearance of the town. From contemporary photographs it can clearly be seen that one of the most commanding buildings in the town was the United Methodist Free Church, which stood where the car park now is at the top of Fore Street. The chapel (and the present car park) was known as Flowerpot. This was because of the flowerpot like urns that adorned the top of the chapel. Flowerpot Chapel was very large, seating 1,600 worshippers. It was built in 1865 just across the road from the former chapel (now Jim's Cash and Carry) and a review of Cornwall in 1872 described it as a 'very handsome' building, "said to be the finest dissenting place of worship in the west."

Of course, "Flowerpot" and "Wesley" were not the only chapels in town. The former Bible Christian chapel built in 1863 can still be seen at Treruffe Hill as can the Baptist Chapel at the bottom of Station Hill, this latter still actively holding services. And there's a fine and unusually ornate large Primitive Methodist Chapel in Plain an Gwarry - built in 1884.

Mining



From the top of Fore Street it's only a short step to the Pednandrea chimneystack, which has stood sentinel over the town since 1824 from its position behind Sea View Terrace. It was originally a lot higher, with four brick sections later removed. Pednandrea is a visual reminder of Redruth's reliance on the local mining economy in times past. Just outside the town there still exist many of those engine houses, now derelict, crumbling and empty, but once housing the steam engines that drained the mines, brought up the minerals and crushed the ores won from underground. Wheal Uny on the hill overlooking Redruth to the

south-west and Wheal Peevor to the northeast are the best examples of groups of engine houses

Emigration

Given the importance of mining to local employment it was a major catastrophe when plummeting world prices of copper and tin caused the closure of many mines or the sharp reduction of wages at those left open. The depression of 1866/67 heralded the bad times. In 1867 a "house to house visitation has revealed destitution scarcely equalled in the back slums of the metropolis and certainly never dreamt of as occurring in Redruth ... men going underground to work without breakfast".

The distress and trauma caused by the contraction of mining would have been worse had it not been for an option increasingly grasped by 19th century Cornish men and women - emigration. After the 1860s thousands of Redruth people left their homes for better prospects; some went to the mines and factories of Northern England and South Wales, but many more went overseas to North America, Australia and, later in the 1890s, to South Africa.

Green Lane - radicals and freemasons

If we walk back down Fore Street now and turn right along Green Lane we can see more pointers to Redruth life towards the end of the 19th century. On the left leading away from the town centre there are two buildings - not in themselves great examples of Victorian architecture but speaking volumes for the nature of Victorian society. The first is the Masonic Hall, built in 1876 for the town's freemasons.

Just a few yards further on we come across the opposite end of the political spectrum, in the Radical Club. While most self-respecting Victorian towns in Cornwall had their Masonic halls, few had a radical club. This was built in 1886 following a bitterly contested general election in 1885 when the Radical Liberal, C.A.V. Conybeare, won the so-called 'mining division' (Redruth with Camborne and the neighbouring villages) in a straight fight with a more establishment Liberal.

Leisure Capital of Cornwall

Coming down Green Lane brings us to the spiritual home of Cornish rugby - the Recreation Ground at the top end of Plain an Gwarry. Rugby football has a special place in Cornish life; the success of the Cornwall team at various times in the 20th century has provided a visible outlet for Cornish pride.

Plain an Gwarry

Plain an Gwarry joins the rugby ground at one end with the Brewery at the other. The present brewery is an old established one, Messrs Magor and Davey first built their brewery there as long ago as 1802. The brewery was only one of a number of industrial establishments in and around the town in the 19th century. Another famous son of Redruth, who lived in this area, was James Watt a leading figure in science and industry whose pumping engine revolutionised the metal and mining industries.

Alma Place

Let's walk back to the town centre from the brewery and turn left at the Baptist Chapel in Penryn Street up Station Hill. Here we pass the old market field now a car park on the left' and turn the corner into Alma Place. This was named after a battle in the Crimean war and

was only opened into Fore Street in the 1860s. Between Alma Place and Clinton Passage was Redruth's Market House, enlarged in 1878 but burnt out in a fire in 1982. Another building affected by the fire was the old Post Office, now impressively restored to its former glory and known as the Cornwall Centre. It houses the Cornish Studies Library; some small local produce shops; and the wonderful collection of the Tregellas Tapestries which depict the history of the County in 58 embroidered pictures. The Mining Exchange frontage can still be seen and this building is now used as a housing advice centre for the local district council. Built in the declining days of Cornish mining in 1880 as a place for share broking in Cornish mines, this emphasised Redruth's role as the 'mining capital of Cornwall'. Here also is the Coffee Tavern, or 'Lamb and Flag'. This was built in 1879 as a temperance tavern, to provide competition for the beer houses and inns of the town.

The Lamb and Flag Emblem - Now used by the Redruth Town Council as the emblem for the town, the Lamb and Flag was a mark used by Cornish tin smelting works to stamp their ingots of tin. The origin of this symbol is difficult to pin down but it seems to have been first used in the woollen trade in the middle ages. By the 1800s it was being suggested that the lamb represented purity, obviously a good selling point for the local tin smelters who had adopted the emblem.]

South Redruth - from Mining to Middle Class Suburb

Going under the railway bridge into Bond Street and beyond, brings us to an area that was only developed from the late 1870s onwards. In a sense this was Redruth's late Victorian middle class suburb. As the mines of Pednandrea and Wheal Sparnon closed, the various dumps and old dressing floors where the ore was prepared for smelting were gradually built over by neat rectangular streets of housing. Clinton Road, now one of the main ways out of the town to the south, was cut in 1878/79, partly as a means of giving work to unemployed miners, and it was soon embellished by state of the art villas.

In the 1880s and 1890s the town end of Clinton Road gained a number of institutions, notably a School of Mines and Art School in 1882/83, St. Andrews Church (replacing the chapel in Chapel Street) in 1883 and, opposite, the Free Library, built in 1895. By the turn of the century, Victoria Park had been laid out to commemorate the Queen's Jubilee and this part of town had taken on its present appearance - a far cry from the jumble of mining activity that took place there in the early 19th century. Redruth was making its transition from a market town dominated by mines and industry to a residential centre.

Now, into the 21st century, Redruth is going through another period of change. Shaking off the doubts of the 20th century, it now has the potential to rediscover its old confidence. The new Redruth will no doubt continue to be a no-nonsense Cornish town, based on the solid good sense and quiet community spirit of its people and building on the past to produce a sustainable future.

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