



Perran-ar-worthal

Local History Group

The Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site

Ainsley Cocks talked to a packed room on Tues 25th Sept about the mining past of this area and its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

He told us that the spine of Cornwall and central Devon is “probably the best mining district in the world” (Dr Roger Burt, Professor of Economic History). UNESCO recognised this area’s significance for its outstanding value to humanity aiming to preserve the site and protect the heritage assets through planning whilst working to improve access and education. This World Heritage Site is split into 10 separate areas from St Just to the Tamar Valley forming the largest industrial site in the UK and containing over 450 different minerals . The local one is based around the Gwennap mining district

Metals retrieved were mainly tin and copper which were used alone or for making alloys. In 1780 HMS Victory was sheathed in 3,923 sheets of protective copper below the water line to protect the wooden hull and in 1810 the first tin plated cans were produced. Arsenic was also produced and used as an insecticide and also as a medicine!

Although there was small scale smelting in Cornwall most of the metals were sent to South Wales to be smelted and coal was returned in the empty boats to run the mine engines in Cornwall so ports such as that at Portreath were built. Mining increased wealth in the local area and increased the size of settlements as workers housing was built. The mine owners built great houses estates and gardens. A specialism in mineralogy and geology developed in Cornwall alongside a skilled mining workforce recognised worldwide. William Bickford developed the safety fuse patented in 1831 and used his factory at Tuckingmill to produce it as an offshoot to his jute mill. Cornish Stamps and other machinery were sold all over the world as were Cornish beam engines (a hybrid of an earlier Watt design) which were more efficient and worked under higher pressure. These were the largest steam engines in the world and were produced by Harveys in Hayle and at Perran foundry.

As mining in Cornwall had started to decline by the end of the 18th century Cornish miners migrated abroad in large numbers to find work, especially in South Africa and Australia, but they have a presence in 175 mining sites across the globe. They took not only their mining expertise, but also their Methodism, soccer, and Cornish pasties to places as far away as Mexico (where pasties made with added chillies are still sold today). In Australia 3% of the population have Cornish roots including former Prime Minister Robert Hawke.

As a result of funding brought in by achieving World Heritage Status, there are 51 projects currently running in this World Heritage Site and £91 million pounds has been spent since 2006. Mining sites have been restored with improved public access, as most recently at Wheal Busy, where the engine house and boiler house have been cleared and restored. The Man Engine was built to celebrate the tenth, (“tinth”) anniversary in 2016 and raise the profile of the heritage sites along with a series of cultural programmes to help to reach a wider audience and increase tourism in the old mining area.

Ainsley concluded that there is still a lot of work to be done but the projects are continuing to save and promote the mining heritage unique to this area.

Ruth Ward