

## **“What are the Cornish boys to do?”**

In 1998 South Crofty, the last working tin mine in Cornwall, closed down. This closure marked the final stage in the long-predicted demise of Cornish mining, an industry that could trace its roots proudly back to Roman times and earlier.<sup>1</sup> Within days of the announcement, graffiti appeared on the wall bordering the mine, lines from a recent folksong:

Cornish lads are fishermen  
and Cornish lads are miners too  
but when the fish and tin are gone  
what are the Cornish boys to do? <sup>2</sup>

This lament signalled the central role that mining has played in Cornish culture; it had been synonymous with Cornishness since the days in the mid-1700s when underground copper mining had spread rapidly across the county. During the succeeding century, buildings had sprouted up across the Cornish landscape to house the steam engines that powered Britain's industrial revolution. The iconic role of engine houses and mining in the life of Cornwall was celebrated and reinforced by the motto 'fish, tin and copper' attached to the coat of arms of the new Cornwall County Council in 1889. But what did Cornish boys - and girls - really do to earn their crusts in the generation between 1880 and 1920?

The majority, by this time, no longer worked underground. In the 1850s mining directly employed around a third of Cornish workers, but this position of dominance was lost when the hammer blows of recurrent economic crises began to pummel the industry after the mid-1860s. By the early 1880s almost one in three, or 30,000, Cornishmen and women were working on farms, double the declining number in mines and quarries.<sup>3</sup> The second biggest occupation in terms of pure numbers was soon to become domestic service, which accounted for around 15,000 women just before the First World War. Other major employers, each with workforces of between 6,000 and 10,000, were the building trades (mainly carpenters and masons), transport by water, road and rail and, for women, dressmaking. So a more accurate motto in 1889 might have been 'farms, tin and domestic service'; by the 1920s this could have been revised to 'farms, domestic service and carpentry'.

However, on closer investigation the columns of numerical data marching across the published Census tables quiver and crumble into dust. Like painterly representations, these messages from the past inevitably impose spurious order on a messier reality. Such snapshots freeze contemporary actors in time. We must try to by-pass their seductive allure, unfreeze them and release the flow of time. In these years Cornish workers found their way uncertainly across new occupational landscapes carved out by a torrent of change. There were few signposts as older patterns and ways of life vanished for ever. Testimony to the heroism of past generations of Cornish workers lies in their negotiation of these changes, and the twists and turns of the capitalist economy.

Change was bubbling under the surface even where things might have seemed most stable. The number of agricultural labourers and farm servants almost halved from 1881 to 1921 as farmers came to rely more heavily on family labour. Cornish farmers

were fortunate in avoiding the worst traumas of the 'great' agricultural depression that followed the import of cheap American grain from the 1870s. In contrast to most of England, rents held up as farmers concentrated instead on pastoral farming and reduced their acreage under grain. But pastoral farming was less labour intensive, so demand for farm hands fell sharply.

Change in this period was most keenly experienced in the once all-conquering mining industry. As early as 1879 the President of the Royal Institution of Cornwall pronounced, in apocalyptic terms, the death of Cornish mining – 'an industry that has for the present at least, if not for ever, departed from amongst us, carrying with it the loss of surplus wealth to one class, but well nigh life itself to another'.<sup>4</sup> This obituary turned out to be premature, but was regularly and dolefully repeated over the next century and a quarter. In 1898 Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote: 'I see Cornwall impoverished by the evil days on which mining (has) fallen'. He wondered whether tourism might offer hope,<sup>5</sup> only to change his mind by 1908 when a short-lived boom reintroduced optimism into Cornish mining circles. Even so, the 1921 Census shows that by that year most Cornish mines had temporarily closed again, and the workforce had halved from its 1880s level.

The most visible change in the mines in this period was the virtual disappearance of the female surface workers who had been employed to dress the ores, a process that involved breaking rocks into smaller pieces with a variety of different sized hammers and sorting the ore from the surrounding rock. In 1881 around 2,000 women, most of them young, still worked at the mines; by 1921 there were fewer than 200. The 'bal maiden' (bal being the old Cornish word for mine) was fast becoming a figure of nostalgia, and a spell at the dressing tables was no longer the common experience for women in the mining districts, as it had been for their grandmothers. Yet, as one door shut another opened, at least for men: china clay production quadrupled from 1874 to 1914<sup>6</sup>, and the number of clay workers more than doubled.

The local engineering industry had thrived on the demand from the mines; many small jobbing foundries foundered with the mines' closure. Even Harvey's at Hayle, once the largest engineering firm west of Bristol, had to close its works in 1904.<sup>7</sup> Yet some survived: Toy's foundry at Helston, which had opened in the 1840s, switched its production from mining machinery to agricultural implements and to the maritime sector, and worked on into the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Holman's Foundry at Camborne was even more successful, building up a large export trade selling mining drills across the globe.<sup>9</sup> Other enterprises rose and fell. The short-lived National Explosives Company at Hayle Towans, on the coast to the east of St Ives, produced cordite and nitro-glycerine and employed 700 workers in 1906<sup>10</sup>. The company flourished during the War, but with the coming of peace in 1918 production was rapidly run down and the works closed soon after. Meanwhile, ship repairing, particularly at Falmouth, where the first dry docks had been completed in the 1860s, was poised on the brink of major expansion.

Fishing also underwent change, more than many other industries. Newlyn, in the 1840s described as 'a confused assemblage of houses' with 'nothing remarkable to attract attention',<sup>11</sup> saw considerable investment in new boats and piers from the 1870s, as the railway extended the market for fresh fish. Cornish seine fishing had been described in the 1840s in wondrous terms: 'the quiet, yet busy action of the

fishermen, as they plunge the basket into the water and at each dip, raise, as it were, a stream of liquid silver, produces an effect at once unique and beautiful'.<sup>12</sup> But this picturesque inshore fishing was fast giving way to deep-sea fishing. While the structure of Cornish fishing fleets - small sailing boats each with half a dozen crew - remained unchanged, competition from more efficient steam drifters began to squeeze out local fishermen in the 1890s. In 1896 there were loud complaints that 'up country boats come here, clear our seas, sweep our bays clean'.<sup>13</sup> Their presence triggered riots that same year at Newlyn, and the Royal Navy were called in to keep the peace. But the Cornish fishing industry between the wars was a shadow of its former self. Porthleven had once been home to scores of herring boats; by 1934, there were none.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, declining fortunes outnumbered new opportunities across Cornwall. While some opportunities disappeared, others appeared. The chronic problem in Cornwall at this time was that not enough of the latter came to offset the former. One further option remained for those seeking work: 'In 1902 the landlord of the Queen's Head [at Chacewater near Truro] disappeared; rumour had it that he was gone to South Africa'.<sup>15</sup> A culture of emigration took hold. For some in the 1890s it became a deliberate household strategy, and younger sons were packed off to South Africa in the hope that their remittances would help pay the rent for the family smallholding back home. Unfortunately, the gold dust that attracted them also lodged in their lungs, and many returned to Cornwall to eke out a life cut short by crippling lung disease.

Social historians have drawn attention to the two economies of the nineteenth century, a formal market economy of waged labour, dominated by men, and an informal one of non-waged labour, the domain of women and children.<sup>16</sup> Women in farming families worked as hard as men, usually without pay. Jane Greet, a farmer's wife at St Stephens by Saltash in the 1880s, 'rose at 3.30 am every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday to cup cream from the scalded milk, to load the cupped cream, the scalded milk, the home-grown fruit and the lightweight vegetables into the spring wagon to catch the first ferry across the Tamar at Saltash to Plymouth market in all weathers'.<sup>17</sup> And it was not only farmers' wives who faced a lifetime of toil. A Truro woman remembered her mother's routine before the 1914 War: 'it seemed to me that mother was always cooking, cleaning or washing, apart from looking after nine children'.<sup>18</sup> The skills she imparted helped her daughter, at the age of fourteen, into the inevitable domestic service, which in Cornwall usually a single servant working lonely, long hours for a trading or professional family.

Even when women's work was paid it was rarely well paid. The Earl of Mount Edgcumbe in 1883 commented on 'a beautiful collection of knitted frocks' produced by the 'maidens' of Cornish fishing villages, lamenting: 'Would that their handiwork was paid for in a manner more advantageous to themselves and their families... the custom being that they are in most cases paid by those who supplied the wool in goods from their shop by which the employers made a double profit'.<sup>19</sup>

Paid labour, for women and for children, became less common in this period. In 1857 there had been 148 boys under the age of fourteen working at Dolcoath mine in Camborne, and 119 girls, the youngest just seven years old.<sup>20</sup> By the 1880s compulsory and then free schooling combined with legislation to limit child labour. Child paid labour did not cease entirely, as absences from school registers into the

early twentieth century at harvest time attest, but it became less of an essential element of the family economy.<sup>21</sup>

As some occupations declined and others expanded, as permanent skilled work became less available and unwaged labour became more widespread, making do and survival could become an all-consuming concern. However, 'Cousin Jack' was well equipped to become a jack-of-all-trades.<sup>22</sup> A tradition of part time work and dual occupations was well entrenched, and many divided their time between mining, smallholding and occasional fishing, especially in the rural industrial communities of the west. In the boom years of fishing 'you would find all kinds of men in the mackerel boats; masons, carpenters, tailors and shoemakers, and they were all welcome, because back in the 1860s and 70s there were not enough real fishermen to man all the boats'.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, 'during the summer season St Just men often came to Newlyn to go to sea... On the other hand, when fishing was bad in the winter, many Newlyn fishermen walked to St Just to work 'on grass' (at the dressing operations) at the mines'.<sup>24</sup>

As traditional Cornish industries declined, Cornish men and women found new ways of coping with change in the world of work. By the 1920s women were beginning to boost the family income by catering for visitors. Meanwhile, some of their menfolk followed their trade abroad, and others who remained learned new skills and adapted old ones. And despite the constant struggle to make ends meet, dignity was maintained and respect demanded. The bitter industrial dispute that wracked the clay country in 1913 and the more widespread strikes and unrest in 1919/20 following the Great War showed that Cornish workers could retain their defiant spirit even in adversity.

- <sup>1</sup> Allen Buckley, *The Story of Mining in Cornwall* (Fowey: Cornwall Editions, 2005), 12-18.
- <sup>2</sup> The folk song was 'Cornish Lads', composed in 1991 by Roger Bryant.
- <sup>3</sup> Data from *Census of England and Wales 1881, Vol. III, Ages, condition as to marriage, occupations, and birth-places of the people*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1883; and *Census of England and Wales, 1921, County of Cornwall*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1923/24.
- <sup>4</sup> William C. Borlase, 'President's Address', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, 21, 1879, 151-167.
- <sup>5</sup> Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Cornish Magazine, Vol I* (Truro: Joseph Pollard, 1898), 237.
- <sup>6</sup> William Page ed., *The Victoria History of the County of Cornwall, Vol.1*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1906), 577.
- <sup>7</sup> Edmund Vale, *The Harveys of Hayle: Engine builders, shipwrights and merchants of Cornwall* (Truro: D. Bradford Barton, 1966), 15.
- <sup>8</sup> *Victoria History of the County of Cornwall*, 576
- <sup>9</sup> Clive Carter, *Cornish Engineering 1801-2001: Holman, two centuries of industrial excellence in Camborne* (Camborne: Trevithick Society, 2001).
- <sup>10</sup> Bryan Earl, *Cornish Explosives: A History from 1800-1976*, (Camborne:Trevithick Society, 2006), 190ff.
- <sup>11</sup> J.S.Courtney, *A Guide to Penzance*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1845), 70.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Cited in John Rule, 'The home market and the sea fisheries of Devon and Cornwall in the nineteenth century' in Walter Minchinton (ed.), *Population and marketing: two studies in the history of the south-west* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1976), 123-39.
- <sup>14</sup> P. Cows, 'Fishing in a Cornish port 60 years ago', *Old Cornwall*, vol. 2.8, 1934, 6-11.
- <sup>15</sup> H.L.Douch, *Old Cornish Inns*, (Truro: D.Bradford Barton, 1966), 117.
- <sup>16</sup> Barry Reay, *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 51.
- <sup>17</sup> John Tucker, *A Cornish Farmer's Boy* (Studley: Brewin Books, 1993), 5.
- <sup>18</sup> Alice M.Brannlund, *Memoirs of a Cornish Housewife* (St Austell: Alice Brannlund, n.d.), 3.
- <sup>19</sup> *International Fisheries Exhibition Catalogue* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1883).
- <sup>20</sup> Allen Buckley, *Dolcoath Mine: A History*, (Camborne: The Trevithick Society, 2010), 171.
- <sup>21</sup> Barry Reay, *Rural Englands*, 65-69.
- <sup>22</sup> Cornish emigrants in North America began to be known as 'Cousin Jacks' in the 1840s when they sought and found work in the mines for other family members, including the ubiquitous 'Cousin Jack'. See Bernard Deacon, 'Chameleon Celts: the Cornish in the Americas' in Michael Newton ed., *Celts in the Americas* (Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, forthcoming).
- <sup>23</sup> R. Pearce, 'Old fishing ways at Looe', *Old Cornwall* 2.5, 1933, 1-7.
- <sup>24</sup> J.Kelynack, 'Reminiscences of Newlyn', *Old Cornwall* 2.8 1934, 20-25.