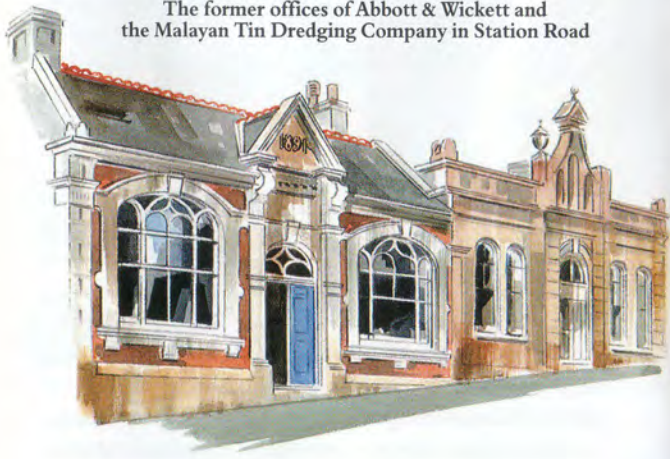


HISTORY OF REDRUTH

The former offices of Abbott & Wickett and the Malayan Tin Dredging Company in Station Road



Redruth is overlooked by the granite heights of Carn Brea, Carnmenellis and Carn Marth. Granite is an igneous rock formed from molten material generated at great depth below the surface. Vapours from the granite carried minerals into the rock's fissures before it finally set. In later ages the granite was lifted by earth movements and exposed to weathering.

On Carn Brea are the remains of Cornwall's largest hillfort (46 acres), enclosing Neolithic and Iron Age settlements. Minerals were probably extracted locally from the Bronze Age. Copper was worked from shallow lodes and tin was obtained from alluvial deposits. By 1300 tin streamers were working along the river at the bottom of Fore Street. The iron oxide from their workings discoloured the water turning it red, giving the town its name (*rhyd* = ford, *ruth* = red).

From Tudor times, as more costly underground working developed, the control of the mining industry passed into the hands of the wealthy land-owning gentry. The Industrial Revolution created a need for copper to make brass, a material necessary for the technological developments in machinery. The deep mining of copper after the 1730s raised Redruth's status to that of capital of the largest and richest metal mining area in Britain and at its peak, in the 1850s, produced two-thirds of the world's copper. Copper mining unlike tin mining was labour intensive and the local population increased. The engine houses still visible today are a reminder of the scale of mining activity. Each was built to contain a steam engine for raising ore and men, pumping water from the mine or for working equipment including the stamps which crushed the ore.

Despite the fortunes quickly made, working conditions were primitive and dangerous. Accidents and deaths frequently occurred. The average life expectancy of a miner was less than forty years of age. Women, known as bal maidens, worked on the surface handling the ore, and children started work from the age of eight.

Most mining families were desperately poor. Drunkenness, brawling and vice were common. Early Methodists found much support in Redruth. John Wesley preached many times at Redruth and Gwennap Pit, giving hope, comfort and inspiration to many. Methodism flourished and the chapels and churches became popular social centres – assisting in hard times as well as good and creating a strong lasting musical tradition. There were occasional riots against increases in basic food prices like bread and butter, and protests against working conditions and wage-cuts.



By the 1860s, Cornwall's copper production had peaked and was soon to decline. Tin mining lasted longer but provided fewer jobs. In addition, there was growing competition from mining fields elsewhere including the Americas, Australia and Africa. By the 1880s over two-thirds of Cornish miners had emigrated taking with them their unparalleled skills of hard-rock mining and their culture.

Redruth continued to flourish as a vibrant market town with a great many successful family businesses and it remains home to the County Rugby Ground. In June each year the town celebrates its proud heritage in a blaze of music and colour on Murdoch Day. The rich architectural heritage and fascinating history make Redruth a special Cornish town.



An artist's impression of Fore Street in the 19th century