

The Horn of Plenty and The Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company

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The Mine and its Times

In the Spring of 1866 the Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company took a lease from the Duke of Bedford's Devonshire Estate for a plot of land amounting to a little under a hectare near the hamlet of Gulworthy about two miles south-west of Tavistock, and close to the road to Gunnislake. The rent was set at £2.50 per annum and the term was for 70 years. The company planned to build a large house on this site for the manager of their mine, at the time an extraordinarily successful example of Victorian mining enterprise. Although within the area or sett of land granted to the company by the estate for mining purposes, permission to build a house had to be separately negotiated. In the event the house, known for many years as Tamar View, was, for the next fifty two years, occupied by two individuals closely connected with the Devon Great Consols Mining Company with their families. This extends well after the mine had ceased operating in 1901 but the story of their lives whilst at Tamar View is closely interwoven with the fortunes of the mine itself to a large measure.

The site was chosen carefully. At its back it was sheltered from the cold north and east winds by the ridge of land along the crest of which ran the road known as Waggon Lane. This linked the mines, neighbouring settlements and farms with the riverside ports of Morwellham, New Quay and Gawton on the navigable River Tamar. Even more than in the past when the road had first acquired its name it fully deserved this name from the heavy flow of carts moving to and from the quays 4.5km distant, although the railway built by the mine in 1858 linking it and some of its neighbours to Morwellham, had taken a significant share of the traffic off this highway. At its front the ground fell away to the west and south to give magnificent views of rare beauty over the surrounding countryside. In the nearer distance the view was of the Tamar flowing through its gorge over 100m deep, between steep, wooded rocky slopes. By way of contrast, but adding to the interest of the scene, was Devon Great Consols mine itself on the northern side of the river set amongst the woodlands, whilst on the opposite bank was the busy mining town of Gunnislake, with its renowned and ancient mines such as Clitters and Drakewalls. Looking further westward the view opens out to the summits of Kit Hill and beyond to Caradon Hill some 17km distant.

Although the ominous signs of the decline which was to extinguish copper mining in Cornwall and west Devon had already cast a deep shadow across the long worked mining districts in the west of this region, the outstanding record of success and prosperity at Devon Great Consols appeared even at this time to offer some grounds for optimism and confidence for the future. Begun in August 1844 it made its first significant find of ore three months later, and at the end of its first full working year it was able to declare a profit of £73,623 from an income of £116,068. The six fortunate shareholders who had floated the company on just 1,024 shares received £71 on each share! That it could distribute 63% of its receipts as profits was due to the immense size of the lode as well as its richness. Its shallowness too, meant that working costs were very low. It soon became the largest mine in the region and went on in its first ten years to raise 182,000 tons of ore helping the copper mining industry of south-west England to reach its all time peak of production in 1856. In that year the mine accounted for one ton in every seven of the 209,305 tons produced in the region. However, in contrast to the industry overall which fell away in the next ten years Devon Great Consols increased output by 36%.

Preparing for Change

Even so, this had not been achieved easily. During this period the company's receipts increased by a mere 6%. The mine by increasing its efficiency was able to work lower grade ore profitably. However whilst it had successfully reduced costs it had not pushed these down at the same rate as prices had fallen. Dividends had fallen by 5.6% and profit per ton was now 90p per ton lower than in the previous ten year period. The mine company concluded that cost cutting would not solve the problems of the accumulating low grade ores and decided to change its strategy. It resolved to diversify and to treat the low grade ores so as to extract the arsenic that they contained instead. The company calculated that they could profitably mine the many thousand tons of arsenical pyrites which still formed a thick lining to the walls of the abandoned sections of the former enormous copper lodes which had been the basis of its fortune in the earlier years of its workings and which had made it the largest copper mine in western Europe. Devon Great Consols

would in a short time become the largest producer of arsenic in the world and this new venture would help to extend its life for a further 33 years. All this however was in the near and longer term future. In the meantime the mine was still very profitable. Profits at the last years Annual General Meeting had been £55 per share and in May 1866 the mine would still be able to declare a dividend of £43 per share. Proven ore reserves were equivalent to two years production and the price of the £1 shares was still above £500. Clearly at this time, although there were many challenges ahead the company appeared to have sound reasons to be optimistic. Difficulties were being addressed and moves were in hand to solve the company's problems.

At the same time the increasing scale of output, deepening of the mine and complexity of operations had led the company two years earlier to invest in an entirely new account house and administration office towards the centre of the mine now called Hawkmoor House. With this facility fully working the company next planned to move the manager of the mine, Captain James Richards, to a new and more appropriate house at Tamar View known in its earliest days as Honeystor House from the farm nearby on whose land the house was to be built. Born in Tavistock, Captain Richards had gained experience working in mines in Ireland and in Wales, before being invited to return to Devon to work at Devon Great Consols by the mine's legendary discoverer Captain Josiah Hitchins. Joining the mine a month after it had started, he rose quickly and was promoted to the position of Manager in 1850 in succession to Captain Hitchins who was retained as a consultant by the mine. Captain Richards had been deeply involved in the company's climb to fame and fortune, and it was under his leadership that the mine reached its pre-eminent position. During these years of great achievement he worked closely with his brother Isaac, six years his junior, who was responsible for the dressing machinery of the mine making more than 20,000 tons of saleable ore from the enormous tonnages of material extracted from the mine. This machinery was widely acknowledged to be of a very high standard with many of the systems being developed by Isaac Richards himself, and several detailed accounts of it were published at the time. Undoubtedly this equipment made a crucial contribution to the financial performance of the company especially in its cost cutting programme, referred to earlier. It was Isaac too, who was a leading exponent of the plan to diversify into production of arsenic by the company.

With this record of success and innovation and their reputation being so closely linked to the fame of the renowned Devon Great Consols mine, James and Isaac launched jointly into a new phase of their careers, setting up as Mine Agents in Tavistock. They offered to be managers and pursers of mines, able to undertake mine inspections, provide reports and practical advice to mine directors and shareholders.

The Later Years and Epilogue.

Unfortunately the years ahead were to prove more difficult and troublesome than could have been foreseen. Many changes of policy were forced upon the company as it struggled with the continuing decline in prices on the one hand and dwindling reserves on the other. The stresses that this continuing situation caused within the company between workers, managers and shareholders erupted in strikes, arguments at company meetings and a disappearance of the co-operation which had been a feature of the mine in many ways. Relations with the Bedford Estate deteriorated also. Finally and most sadly it came to affect relations between individuals who had worked together on the mine for decades.

The collapse from the prosperity of 1866 was swift and relentless. Dividends sank in six years from £44,032 to just £6,144 in 1872 and in the four following years Devon Great Consols paid no dividend at all, after 28 years of continuous and outstanding profitability. Whilst the production of arsenic was proving to be very successful and the plant had been trebled in capacity, it could not offset the loss of a large part of the copper sales. Prices here were down by virtually a quarter for the same period. The mine too, was now deep, wet and continued to have high maintenance costs particularly for large quantities of baulk timber to keep open the many large cavities which had been created when the enormous lode had been worked out.

At this point the original company was wound up by its shareholders to enable a new company with more shares to raise new funds. This was to finance a search for tin underneath the exhausted copper levels which was commended to the company by Captain Richards and firmly believed by many other mine agents in the locality and beyond. The mine's founder Captain Hitchins was also convinced that this was the best hope of a secure future for the mine. One of the shafts, already 230 fathoms deep, was selected as the most promising site for sinking down to 300 fathoms and the difficult, expensive and arduous task was doggedly pursued until that level, which had been prescribed by the Bedford Estate when the company had been reconstructed, was reached in 1879. Sadly, Captain James Richards did not live to see this exploratory work completed as he had died in August 1878 after a long illness. An immensely popular and respected man the procession at his funeral was four abreast consisting of several hundred people, many of them from the mine following a large number of carriages carrying almost all the mining agents of the district. Most unusually he received a funeral service from the Anglican church but was buried in a Non-Conformist cemetery, reflecting the breadth of his standing in the community. Soon after this loss his widow, Jane died in April 1879. During the last difficult months of Captain Richards' illness his responsibilities had been assumed by his brother, Isaac and it was to

him that the company turned, promoting him to the position of manager in succession to his brother, but he was not to become the next occupant of Tamar View.

This was Mr. Moses Bawden and his family who were to live at the house for the next 39 years leaving in May 1918 when the final link between Tamar View and the mine company that built it came to an end. Mr. Bawden was a man with considerable experience in the mining industry of Devon and Cornwall and with many influential connections. One of these was with the recently appointed director of Devon Great Consols soon to be elevated to be the managing director of the company. This was Mr. Peter Watson, whose uncle, holding shareholdings in many British metalliferous mines, had supported both of them in Cornwall when they were at an earlier and formative stage in their careers. Mr. Bawden had moved to the Tamar Valley area in 1864 from the Camborne area and had become involved with a number of mining concerns in the district, many of them as purser, a position he was unanimously appointed to at Devon Great Consols on Midsummer Day 1879 which was followed by his move into Tamar View.

Unfortunately the search for tin at depth, which had begun in 1872 was unsuccessful and although a second exploration at a seemingly promising point was made a few years later, this too ended in failure and hope of developing a future for the mine in this direction was abandoned. From this point on the company was not systematically investing in the search for new resources and its decline continued. By 1901 the end was near, with the arsenic market weak, the company which had borrowed money against future sales, found that it was unable to repay the loans. At an extraordinary meeting of the shareholders, it was resolved to wind up the company and Mr. Watson was appointed as liquidator. Mr. Bawden, ill at the time and confined to his bed, on hearing the news is traditionally said to have turned his face to the wall and wept. Hundreds of people in the valley shared the same feelings and church bells were tolled solemnly as if to mark the passing of a much loved member of the community.

For Mr. and Mrs. Bawden the situation was doubly serious. As an employee of the company Mr. Bawden's salary would cease as it would for the more than 300 other people still working at the mine, but they stood also to lose their home for as one of the company's assets it would be sold to help pay off the liabilities. Fortunately for them they were able to raise funds privately which enabled them to buy the lease of Tamar View which had 34 years remaining, from the liquidator in August 1902 for £450. Mr. Bawden was to continue living at Tamar View until his death in January 1916 although sadly his wife, also named Jane like Mrs. Richards, had died in February 1904 a short time after they had secured their home. Following their father's death the family, several of whom were living away from the vicinity, resolved to sell the lease and in 1918 it was purchased by the Bedford Estate for £400. The long association of the Bawdens with Tamar View remains at the present day as the junction of the road leading from the house to the sweeping corner of the Tavistock to Gunnislake road is still referred to as 'Bawden's corner'.

The house, known in more recent times as The Horn of Plenty, remains still as a fine property in a beautiful setting and although there are no visible external signs to link it the industrial and financial power which surged through west Devon more than a century ago it does serve as a reminder of those times. The gracious style of the house might have gone some way to reassuring and perhaps also surprising the officers of the Bedford Estate, At the time they were very sceptical that the mining company would ever erect a building of sufficient quality that it would last beyond the term of their mine lease. They also believed they would always skimp on standards because of the mines uncertain future. At Tamar View the wealth of the company and the special setting of the land offered by the Bedford Estate came together to produce a memorable combination.