

The Horn of Plenty 1866–2016

Pauline Hamilton-Leggett looks back over
150 years of history in the Tamar valley

PHOTOGRAPHS P H-L COLLECTION

Looking west towards the Cornish hills from the house

On a clear day the uninterrupted views over the Tamar valley from the Horn of Plenty Country House Hotel on the Devon and Cornwall border are magnificent. The house nestles into the foothills of Dartmoor four miles west of Tavistock in the midst of farmland. Kit Hill, recognised above the River Tamar by its dominant mining chimney, was given to the people of Cornwall to celebrate the birth of Prince William (Duke of Cambridge) in 1982 by his father Prince Charles (Duke of Cornwall). In the far distance – to the right of Kit Hill – is the transmitting station on Caradon Hill, Bodmin Moor. The hotel and its celebrated restaurant are set in almost five acres of beautiful gardens, with the walled kitchen garden as old as the house itself. Every guest is greeted at the door and warmly welcomed into the homely atmosphere.

But now let's travel back to the mid-19th century, to the year before land was purchased on which to build the house now known as the Horn of Plenty. In 1865 a huge party was held for the hundreds of workers in sheds in the valley below on the site of the Devon Great Consols copper mine. Celebrating 21 years of the mine in that year, 1240 employees consumed vast quantities of food and drink and spent the afternoon in sports and games; each of the workers received their normal day's pay. Approximately 500 men and boys worked deep underground at the mine, and 600 above ground alongside 200 women and girls. The mine company had even built a railway to transport the copper ore to

Morwellham Quay, nearly five miles distant. The copper mine was the richest in Europe and had seven separate workings, each with a mine captain.

Captain James Richards was the most respected and this house, built for him by the Duke of Bedford's Estate, was to a high specification.

The site was chosen carefully, on a hill sheltered from the east and north winds, and bought from the Estate separately from the mine on a 70-year lease in 1866. James Richards, aged 50, his wife Jane and 10 children moved with their servants into their new home. At first called Honeytor House (after the nearby farm) James renamed it 'Tamar View' from the obvious spectacular view of the river far below. However, all was not well at the mine when the house was built: the workers rose up against the owners, complaining of poor working conditions and wages. Hundreds of troops were sent by train to Tavistock from Plymouth to stand by to march on the mine in case of violence, which was eventually allayed. The railway line had only been open for seven years.

Three daughters – Jane, Celia and Thirza – all married from the house in nearby St Paul's church, Gulworthy. Their father was to live only 12 years before dying in 'Tamar View'. His funeral was reported as the largest Tavistock had ever witnessed, with several



The Bawden family on the entrance steps, 1903



A rare photo of Moses Bawden (on steps), mine captain of Devon Great Consols, 1903



'Bawden's Bungalow' (on the right) on the trans-moor road on Dartmoor

hundreds of people in the funeral procession. His wife died the following year.

The next occupant was another mine agent, Captain Moses Bawden, who with his wife Jane, five daughters and one son moved to 'Tamar View' in 1879. Three further daughters were born in the house – Amy, Nora and Ethel – but three year-old Ruth and son William, aged 19, died there. At the mine, copper prices fell drastically so arsenic and tin were mined until eventually, by 1901, fortunes dwindled and work ceased after 57 years. Church bells tolled throughout the valley for the death of the mine and Moses, ill in bed at the time, turned to the wall and wept. Moses had paid £1 a week rent for 'Tamar View', but was able to raise £450 to purchase the lease on the house in 1902.

The family lived at 'Tamar View' for a total of 39 years. Moses died at home in 1916. Some of the daughters married from the house in Gulworthy church, and three unmarried daughters cared for their father after the death of their mother in 1904. Amy and Nora became tennis stars and played in tournaments throughout Devon before the Great War. Amy married a clergyman, and Nora the farmer next door in 1917. The daughters sold the lease of the house for £400 back to the Bedford Estate in 1918. The junction of the road nearby is known as Bawden's Corner, and the only remnants seen of the Devon Great Consols mine today are the tall chimneys in the valley-side forest. Moses Bawden was also captain of many mines on Dartmoor, and east of the Warren House Inn a bungalow was built in about 1900 for him to stay on his visits to the moor where his capital, enterprise and energy did much for the mining industry. The

wooden dwelling, known locally as Bawden's Bungalow, was destroyed 40 years ago.

The next occupant in 'Tamar View' was Theodore Stephen Bliss, steward to the Duke, who lived there with his wife Susan and two sons until 1948 when they retired and rented a cottage in nearby Sydenham Damerel. Stephen died in 1954 and Susan in 1981, at the age of 96. Some intermittent working at the mine of copper, arsenic and tin continued until 1940, and surprisingly prospectors for tin even made a search as late as 1985.

Lawrence Edward Levett and his wife Nellie bought the remaining 14-year lease on the house in 1948, but Lawrence died in 1959 before it expired. The house had been sold as part of a large sale of the Bedford Estate in 1956, which included Endsleigh House upstream close to the Tamar, but the lease enabled Lawrence to remain at the house until his death.

Commander Percy Kingswood RN and his wife Marjorie purchased the house, selling it to Patrick Stevenson for £10,000 in February 1966. 'Tamar View' was 100 years old and Patrick and his wife Sonia, after a year of renovating the house and building the dining room on the west side, opened their restaurant on 12 May 1967. Patrick, a formidable character, renamed the house 'Horn of Plenty' meaning 'cornucopia', a symbol of abundance and nourishment. Their aim was to provide excellent food, stimulate taste buds and to entertain their guests in the idyllic setting of the house on the hill, with views overlooking Cornwall. They were both professional musicians; Sonia trained as a violinist at the Royal College of Music and Patrick was an opera singer. Sonia's skill and love of cooking had been astounding their guests at their



The Bawden sisters in the Ladies Cup at Launceston Tennis Tournament, 1903



Tamar View in 1956



The Horn of Plenty, 1970s

home in London and their move to Devon, with two young sons, was a bold one.

With their sheer hard work and determination it was named Britain's Restaurant of the Year by Egon Ronay, who visited the Horn of Plenty many times. In 1976 Sonia became the first woman in Britain to be awarded a Michelin Star.

Staff employed lived locally and were treated as members of the family. Patrick had worked for the Southern Railway before singing became his career, and he built a



Patrick and Sonia Stevenson in the kitchen



Patrick and Sonia used to devise themed dinner menus served with the country's wine, each inviting guests to 'drink as much wine as you like.' Here we have an Austrian menu

large 00 gauge model railway with dozens of engines in the coach house. It was not until 1985 that the house became a hotel, when Patrick was persuaded by his wife to convert this building into bedrooms. The gardens have little changed, and beneath the house a pipe carries rainwater from a huge tank filled from the roof into a bog garden below the restaurant. Famous chefs have frequented the restaurant including Keith Floyd, who filmed his first cooking programme with Sonia, cooking fish at the Horn of Plenty. Sonia was a pioneering chef and has written many recipe books. Many celebrities have stayed at the hotel, including John le Carré when he was writing *The Little Drummer Girl*.

The Stevensons sold the thriving hotel and restaurant in 1990 to Ian and Elaine Gatehouse, and Peter Gorton became the chef. In 1999 it was sold again to Paul Roston and Peter Gorton became a partner in the business, continuing as head chef. Four guest bedrooms were opened in the main house in 2000. The Rostons were absentee owners of the hotel, living in London and visiting very occasionally.

The hotel was sold to Julie Leivers and Damien Pease in 2010. Julie works in front



Sonia Stevenson feeding hens in the garden in the 1970s

of house and Damien, an accountant, behind the scenes in a supportive role. Like the Stevensons they were novices in the hospitality industry. Julie invited Sonia Stevenson back to the Horn of Plenty in 2012 to cook with head chef Scott Paton and to host an evening of fond reminiscences.

Julie and Damien added new bedrooms in the coach house in 2014, bringing the total number to 16, and have restored the original period features, adding modern comforts and sophistication. Special events are held throughout the year and chef Scott Paton, who joined the team in 2011, entices all diners to return to sample his creative culinary delights. The owners have made huge changes and been rewarded with a host of awards for both accommodation and dining: in 2015 the Horn of Plenty won the Silver Award in the prestigious Visit England 'UK Small Hotel of the Year', followed in 2016 by 3 AA Rosettes for the restaurant. Julie and Damien are justly proud of the many awards and accolades they have won in recent years, and are grateful to their dedicated and hard-working team.

Julie is passionate about the welfare

of residents and diners. Forty weddings a year are held in the house and gardens, a luxurious and romantic venue. The Horn of Plenty weaves its magic spell on all guests, the jewel in the crown being the world-renowned restaurant begun by Sonia Stevenson, continued by Peter Gorton and now run by Scott Paton and his team. Any produce from the walled kitchen garden is used in the menus, provided by the knowledgeable gardener, and food is sourced locally with a dozen daily deliveries. The invasive creeper on the front of the house may have been replaced by a chocolate vine (*Akebia quinata*), but the sturdy appearance of the house has little changed since the mining days in the 19th century. ■

STOP PRESS The Horn of Plenty has raised a total of £36,825 over the past five years for Macmillan Cancer Support through its charity lunches, held every January to March. This year guests at the lunches generously donated a record sum of £8600.



The Horn of Plenty today