

Cornish History Through the Ages

Imagine what it was like in Redruth Cornwall all the way back from the 13th through the 20th centuries being a woman. The following are a list of just some of the questions that come to my mind. How did Redruth get its name? What was Cornwall about and how did it grow and shrink with people over the years? And most importantly, what role did women play?

Redruth meaning “Red Ford” was a small village, until the year 1334 when the King granted the right to hold festivals and markets. These festivals would attract buyers and vendors from all around causing Redruth to grow in size. In the 17th century Redruth began to really expand because of new inventions that helped miners pump the water out of mines. Therefore, the miners could dig deeper into the mine, to get more tin and copper. In 1827, Redruth gained the gas light which helped them see down in the pitch black mines and in 1828 the town clock was built giving people access to the time of day. (Interestingly enough, it was later built higher in 1904.) The people in the 1820s saw the population grow up to 11,000 people. However, for miners the copper prices dropped considerably in 1861. Some of the Cornish had to move elsewhere. Many Cornishmen moved to the United States for better opportunities. An example is a man by the name Richard Thomas, who moved from Cornwall to New York. He then apprenticed a stonemason and emigrated to Mineral Point where other Cornish immigrants were going for the lead mining.

Life in the Cornish mines was quite rough for men, women and even children. A miner started as young as eight years old down in the mines with other siblings and family.(Jewell 7-8) Women also worked down in the mines and other jobs outside of the house.(Jewell 8) A young woman who was unmarried and in the labor force was called a bal maiden, “bal” meaning a

mine, and “maiden” meaning a young unmarried women. Women working for the mines date as far back as the 13th century. The age a bal maiden would start working was usually around 10 or 11 years old, but in some cases it was as young as six years old and continuing until they got married. The younger girls would usually sort and separate the ore. However, the older women would take hammers and separate the mineral from the rock. A typical work day in the summer for a bal maiden, was about 7 a.m to about 5 p.m. and dawn to dusk in the winter because of the shortened daylight hours. A bal maidens usually wore what they call a “gook” or a bonnet. A gook covers your head and goes down to your shoulders. It hung part way over their face for protection. There are two types of gooks one made for winter which was made out of felt and one made for summer out of cotton. They also wore shorter dresses or skirts which made it easier to move in and their bare legs would be wrapped in protective coverings.

Life of a bal maiden was quite rough with working in all sorts of weather conditions because most of or all of their work was above ground. They would often become ill from tuberculosis and bronchitis from all of the exposure to the mineral dust. They would often have muscle problems from the constant lifting and bending, from picking up the rock or minerals. Bal maidens would also get injuries to their left hands, from holding the mineral in the left hand and hammering with their right. The noise all around them could get very loud so they would often come up with their own type of sign language for communication. Also, many were exposed to harmful fumes from the mines causing digestive problems.

In the 1880s the copper industry in Cornwall slowly shifted into tin. Therefore, new machinery was made and by 1870 the number of bal maidens was cut by 50%. While this was going on the Metalliferous Mines Regulation Act 1872 prohibited children under 10 to be

employed by the mines. Children 10 to 14 had very limited hours and women could only work 56 hours a week. This made the already weakening mines weaken even more. Without cheap children and women to work the mines they made very little profit. By 1895 only 23 mines were left operational compared to the 307 mines in 1873. The Frue Vanner, an ore separating machine invented by W. B. Frue, replaced most of the women's jobs. By 1914 few bal maidens still had the job working for the mines.

By the late 1800s the economy in Cornwall had fallen from the lack of mining and the rise and fall of food prices. Many Cornish families moved to other mining communities throughout the United Kingdom. Between the years 1861 and 1900 35% of young women moved to other parts of the United Kingdom and 26% moved completely out of the country according to Wikipedia. The very last mine to have traditional bal maidens was called Dolcoath which closed in 1921 bringing traditional mining to an end.

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