

THE BASSET FOUNDRY

This is the story of a Perranwell family who ran a local business for a hundred years passing on the management from father to son over four generations. They were capable and resourceful engineers, who showed a remarkable ability to diversify, allowing the business to ride out difficult times, when many similar operations failed. The business was originally called the Basset Foundry, but came to be commonly known as Visick's after the family name.

The works are located on what was a navigable waterway near the junction of the Carnon and Kennal valleys. It is close to the Tregaskis quay built in 1849 as a wharf for unloading coal and timber supplies required by the local mines located on a site near the present car sales area in the Bissoe valley. Captain Tregaskis was a friend of the Fox family, who worked on methods of deepening rivers and the rapid discharge of cargoes. Some ten years later a Perranwell resident called John Jewell established a small foundry just west of this quay and concentrated on repairing mining equipment. He relied on water power and this was realised by extending the leat serving the Perran Arsenic works and taking water from the Trewedna stream just below the bridge in Perranwell village to drive his waterwheels. The venture was short lived and closed in 1876 after a period of losing years coincident with the collapse of the local copper mines, whilst the nearby wharf was abandoned owing to competition from Devoran docks.

John Jewell then converted the foundry site into the Cornwall and Devon Chemical Manure and Bone Works and added another waterwheel. This was again a very short lived venture, which closed in 1882. The works lay derelict until 1895, when Walter Visick and his brother William acquired a 60 year lease from the Basset estate allowing them to reopen the foundry.

Walter Visick was the driving force behind this venture and he is recorded as being a youthful and skilled pattern maker at the Perran Foundry and when it closed in 1879 he set up a small engineering business at his home Veto House [now Tregew] near Perranwell Station. He now set about renovating the derelict works, building and installing a new and more powerful waterwheel, building a dam at Perranwell to divert the full flow of the Trewedna stream along his leat. This resulted in violent protests from the Jose family at Mellingley and other residents of Tarrandean, who depended on the stream for their water supply. They demolished Visick's dam and pulled down his fences and threatened to attack his workers if they tried to repair the damage. The matter was resolved after an acrimonious law suit with Jose as the winner. However soon after a friendly agreement was reached between the warring parties.

In 1899 the whole of the Basset estates in Perranwell were sold off and Walter Visick bought out his original lease. From 1900 to 1914 with his drive and ability he built up a fledgling family business into a thriving engineering concern with 20 employees. His success was largely due to the intelligent use of cheap water power and diversification from making and repairing mining equipment to fabricating manhole covers, gratings, lampposts, railings and domestic items such as cooking ranges.

In 1914 the engineering works were requisitioned by the government and contributed to the war effort by casting iron casings for mortars and grenades and much ship repair work was sub contracted from Falmouth docks. The firm survived the post war slump by making spare parts for agricultural equipment and making mining machinery for export in addition to its pre war staples.

Walter Visick actively managed the company until his death in 1934 aged 82 and so passed a tough, determined and very capable engineer. He was succeeded by his son Charles Visick,

who managed the company through the war years, when it was again taken over by the government for casting such items as gun mountings and components for Bailey bridges.

Charles Visick died in 1945 and his son Cecil B Visick succeeded as chairman of the company. The era of reliance on cheap water power was now over, as mains electricity had been introduced rather belatedly in 1941. The economy was again in the doldrums, but the company survived by manufacturing industrial pumps and steel components for house building along with its pre war stock in trade.

Cecil's son Peter Visick took over as manager in 1972 and negotiated some prestigious contracts like the building of the Ross bridge at Penzance and the harbour gates at Charleston as well as diversifying into hulls for fishing boats. He took advantage of the reopening of Wheal Jane and Mt Wellington mines by repairing mining machinery. Despite his valiant efforts the company was forced to close in 1986. The foundry was taken over by the King Harry Steam Ferry Company, but this lasted for less than a year and in 1987 engineering finally ceased on the site.

Chris Burton May 2011.