

THE STORY OF PERRAN FOUNDRY

Perran Foundry was built and developed by the Fox family of Falmouth to manufacture the machinery required by the rapidly expanding copper mining industry of Gwennap in the late 18th century. Throughout the 19th century it increased the range of its products and supplied both local and overseas markets. It became an integral part of the Foxes industrial empire, which embraced coal and iron mines, iron foundries and copper smelters in South Wales, coastal shipping, tramways and the wharves and warehouses at Perranarworthal. Midway in the 19th century control of the Foundry passed to the Williams family. Physically the industrial plant and settlement is small, but it punched well above its weight, second only to Harveys of Hayle in importance. It achieved a national and international reputation for the quality of its products.

The story begins in 1769 when George Fox II negotiated a lease over land on the north side of the Kennal estuary from Stickenbridge to the present Norway Inn, whilst at the same time his uncle George Croker Fox I leased land on the opposite side of the river at Carclew. They were both Quakers and astute businessmen, who foresaw the benefit and potential profit of establishing a safe port close to the expanding copper mines of Gwennap, so they built wharves, warehouses and timber ponds at Perran Wharf, the present Perranarworthal.

Initially it became a thriving port importing coal, timber and machinery and also limestone and guano for the local farms and exporting copper ore. As the industrial revolution progressed, the demand for copper rapidly increased and the mines expanded in numbers and size with ever deeper workings. To accommodate the demand for mining machinery the Foxes recognised the benefit of establishing a Foundry to manufacture these requirements close to the mines and in 1791 Perran Foundry was founded. Lacking technical expertise the Foxes enlisted as partners ironmasters and smelter experts such as Peter Price, who became the first works manager. Lacking a local source of iron the Foxes leased the Cwm Felin ironworks at Neath near Swansea along with some collieries and iron mines. There they built two very large blast furnaces to supply Perran with pig iron.

The first director of the Foundry was George Fox II, who had been manager of the port facilities at Perran Wharf and who built and lived with his family at Tredrea. The driving force behind the venture was Peter Price, who married Ann Tregelles of Falmouth, became a Quaker, but who in 1799 moved to Neath to become manager of the Abbey ironworks leased by the Foxes. George Fox II continued as director of the Foundry and Port until his death in 1812. He was succeeded by his son George Fox III, a deeply religious intellectual, who relied heavily on his able works manager Benjamin Sampson of Tullimaar. Sampson was an ex miner and entrepreneur, who was the principal shareholder and manager of the highly profitable gunpowder works in the Kennal valley.

The widowed George Fox III and his five daughters moved away from Perran in 1822 and the directorship passed to his young cousin Charles Fox, a remarkably gifted man, an intellectual, an ardent Quaker, an able administrator, who followed the tradition of the Quakers by taking a deep interest in the welfare of his employees.

Previous to his stewardship the foundry had concentrated on manufacturing the numerous requirements of the mines such as winding engines for hoisting the ore, waterwheels, stamps for crushing the ore, pumps, pipes and capstans and was just beginning to cast the massive bobs or beams for the pumping engines. Until about 1830 the huge cast iron cylinders for the pumping engines were cast and bored by the highly skilled workforce at the Abbey ironworks at Neath and shipped to Perran, who supplied the pumps, valves and pipework for the famous Cornish Beam engines. In the 1820s an export trade was established instigated by the Cornish miners working

overseas and 1500 tons of engines and associated machinery was shipped from the Strangweke quay near the Pandora to dewater the incredibly rich silver mines in Mexico.

A problem now arose as the expansion of the Foundry was being constrained by the shortage of water to drive the 5 large waterwheels during the summer months. So around 1830 a coking oven and gasometer were built on the site to provide steam power during the 4-5 months of low water. The gas was also used for lighting the substantial houses built for senior management at Perran Wharf.

After the death of Benjamin Sampson in 1840 the Foundry ran into financial difficulties, whilst a few years later Charles Fox retired to his country retreat at Trebah, where he designed and developed the now well known gardens.

He was succeeded by his nephew Barclay Fox named so, as his mother Maria came from the Quaker Barclay family, founders of the bank. Barclay was a young man, who had been groomed by the family to manage the Fox business empire. He was an energetic and able administrator and cultured man, friend of some of the leading writers of the day, who with his sisters Anna Maria and Caroline were instrumental in founding the Falmouth Polytechnic. He appointed the experienced and competent James Carnell as works manager and began negotiations with the wealthy Williams family to raise more capital for the Foundry. The Williams', who owned the rich copper mines of Gwennap, had long held an interest in the Foundry and now they took a half share, but retained Barclay as manager, a post he held until his untimely death in 1854. By 1857 the Fox family had divested themselves of all their interests in the Foundry and in 1860 Michael Henry Williams took overall control and it became Williams Perran Foundry.

The period 1840-1860 had seen the manufacture at Perran of many Cornish Beam engines for draining mines in Cornwall, in other parts of Britain and overseas. They were installed in the familiar engine houses dotting the countryside in Cornwall, with some preserved in Australia and Mexico. They were used in many pumping stations in Britain and Perran cooperated with Harveys of Hayle in manufacturing the 3 massive engines used to drain the polders at Haarlem in Holland. The Foundry had achieved a world wide reputation for the excellence of its products and an engine from Perran was displayed at the great exhibition of 1851 at Crystal Palace. All this from a relatively small workforce rarely exceeding 200 men and boys, but highly skilled and industrious.

After 1860 the Foundry was managed first by Michael Henry Williams, who lived at Tredrea and then by his uncle Sir William Williams, who lived at Goonvrea. The business prospered in the 1860's despite a rapid decline in copper mining, but with tin mining enjoying some of its better years and with pumps required for Victorian waterworks and a thriving export trade in mine machinery the Foundry had a full order book. Sir William Williams died in 1870 and his eldest son Sir Frederick Martin Williams MP became the principal partner and managing director of the Foundry with Mr Shilston of Tremough as his business director.

By 1880 the collapse of copper mining in Cornwall sounded the death knell for the Foundry, as unlike its fellow foundry at Hayle, no attempt had been made to diversify its products. In that year the last Beam engine was shipped from Strangweke quay at Restronguet and the Foundry ceased operations in 1883. Some attempts were made to revive the industry, but they were unsuccessful and short lived.

In 1891 the site was leased by the Edwards family, who ran the adjacent Perran corn mill. The premises were used until 1911 for the manufacture of woollen goods such as blankets. When competition from the north of England forced the closure of that business, it was used for the

manufacture and storage of agricultural products. In 1969 it was taken over by J.Bibby and son for use as a distribution centre for their agricultural products until finally closing in 1987. Since then it has been a story of gradual decay and dilapidation until the recent acquisition of the site by Devington's, who plan to develop the site for residential use.

Chris Burton. November 2011.