

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Foxdale's proud heritage as a thriving mining village

In this latest *Buildings at Risk* article, Patricia Newton, of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, looks at the mining heritage of Foxdale. She explains how the settlement developed during the 19th-century boom in the industry and how, following its decline during the 20th century, the intentions of the island authorities to preserve important surviving buildings have sometimes not been matched by the actions of the government.

Louisa, Hodgsons, Potts, Old Flappy, Maghies, Bawdens, Beckwiths and Bell Hole were familiar names to the 400 men and boys employed in the heyday of Foxdale mines producing 100 tonnes of lead ore per week following the sinking of the first shaft at Farraghers in 1831.

Thanks to their development and that of a granite quarry the thriving village of 'Foxall' grew up at the foot of the lofty Barrule mountains.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s Edward Moore Gawne of Kentraugh was persuaded to sell off parcels of land belonging to Barroil and Ballamore estates in the parishes of Malew and Patrick to enable houses to be built, many to a set building line, along the Castletown to St John's Road. Shops, including the miner's Co-op, bakeries, later butchers served the miners; the Struan Barrule stream supplied Ballamenaugh Corn Mill.

In the words of an 1862 reporter: 'Under the fostering care of their esteemed Captain(s), [Grose, Bawdens and Kittos], and the liberality of the Mining Company, useful institutions have arisen, and the neighbourhood is now noted for its zeal in every good work.'

Education – In April 1844 the following post was advertised: 'A school master CAPABLE of teaching the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic, is wanted for the FOXDALE MINES SCHOOL – He will be provided with a house----'. Initially this house was Lilybank.

By 1848, 170 pupils were examined annually in public and 'despite being in a mountainous district of the island' the Lieut Governor, the Archdeacon, the principal of King William's College and four parish vicars were present.

Later the company subscribed generously towards the expense of opening Foxdale 'British School' with a Church of England foundation and services were held in the school.

In August 1858 the Foxdale Working Men's Institute, 'a beautiful edifice 40ft long and 20 ft wide for the mental cul-



Foxdale Chapel 1832

(Picture courtesy of the iMuseum)

ture of the working men' was erected.

Church and Chapel – An 1860s report stated: 'A stranger passing the road from Peel to Castletown on Thursday last, would have been struck with the unusual bustle and excitement.

'From every hillside and valley crowds of persons in holiday attire wended their way to the busy and thriving village of Foxdale.

An enquirer would have been told that the corner stone of a NEW Wesleyan Chapel was about to be laid by the worthy captain of the mines.

'The Wesleyans at Foxdale number so large a proportion for the mining population that a second place of worship was absolutely required, and the corner stone was to be truly laid on this occasion.

'The change in the appearance of the men at present, and the recollections of Foxdale up to within a very recent period, prove the great good that has been effected in

a very few years. The chapel is to be built contiguous to the mine and will, when completed seat 200 persons.

'There will be a lower room for school and other purposes. About 4 o'clock the Mechanics' Institute which had been placed at the disposal of the trustees was opened for the tea meeting, and for some hours was filled and refilled until nearly 400 persons had partaken of the cup which cheers.'

Built in six months, the chapel opened for service on October 5, 1862.

Two years a document containing 'the names of the trustees, and ministers of Ramsey circuit and Peel branch, the doctrines of the Primitive Methodists, the statistics of the Connexion taken last Conference, a plan of the land, and of the circuit and branch, the last number of the *Mona's Herald* and *Manx Sun* together with some coins of this reign were put in a bottle and deposited in a cavity in the foundation stone of the new Gothic style Primitive Methodist Chapel.'

Located at 'Dingle Nook' the original 'Baltic', so called because the whitewashed beer house on a wintry night looked like an iceberg, must have provided some mighty bottles!

After the congregation had outgrown the 'British School', funds were raised for the building of a separate church, St Paul's; built of rubble stone and dressed granite in just seven months and seating 250 persons its foundation stone was laid in May 1874.

As evidence in papers, in another sealed bottle, the architect was James Cowle and contractor John Callister of Foxdale.

The Archdeacon commented that it was nearly 30 years since he had seen Foxdale when the school was built and now there were rows of neat cottages where before there was scarce a dwelling, but now they were in the centre of a large and flourishing Foxdale mines.

Dominating all with views over the mines were the Mine Captain's houses, Foxdale House and later Brookfield,

distinguished by their square format. The topography of this 'mountainous' arealed to a pattern of homes strung out along the roadside with numerous shafts, engine houses, powder houses, wheel cases and buddles occupying the valley sites in-between.

Then the Ramsey railway link via St John's, with its own station building skirting up the backs of the terraced houses and crossing the road to the mines on a viaduct, was opened in August 1886; it provided an alternative to the nine-mile horse and cart trail for hauling lead to Douglas.

Designed with eight buttresses by John Nicholls, engineer of the mine, built of local stone and sited so that can be seen from practically all points of the village, in 1903 the Victoria Clock Tower was a gift of the directors of the Isle of Man Mining Company to the inhabitants of Foxdale and the first public monument erected to the memory of Queen Victoria.

Until electrified, its mechanics relied on the weekly climb of its internal ladder by Foxdale stalwart Paul Lemaire.

But by 1911 production of cheaper lead elsewhere forced the Isle of Man Mining Company out of business.

In an auction lasting two days, in October 1911 machinery including four Cornish pumping engines, two pairs horizontal direct action winding engines, one horizontal winding engine, five beam winding engines, five diagonal winding engines, three pairs horizontal capstan engines, three horizontal condensing steam engines, and 14 water wheels, and buddles was sold off.

One wheel has a happy ending – it now powers the water-powered roundabout at Silverdale Glen.

A special train was run from St John's to get people to the sale, but in May 1943 the station closed, albeit the line survived for goods traffic until 1960. The Baltic also closed but its spirit carried on in the renamed Foxdale Inn.



Foxdale working men's institute and clock tower



Foxdale mines by B. Stowell, 1858

But what has happened to the complex of mining chimneys, shafts, and buildings that comprised this landscape?

Unlike Laxey, there were no real showcase/tourist attraction mining structures.

Instead, in the 1960s the Local Government Board took the attitude that the 'eyesores' had to be got rid off; an engine house was reduced to a stump and 'buried' amongst a concrete batching plant; the 'deads' at Louisa had been re-worked and little of the remaining structures were left.

The railway viaduct had already gone but now its stone supports followed suit.

So what has happened to this thriving community and its buildings?

Of Ballameanagh Mill with its 'French Burr stones, one pair each of barley and oat stones, flour dressing machine, barley machine...and connecting thrashing and winnowing machines', nothing remains.

Yet Circular 5/99 The Foxdale Local Plan June 1999 - Para 8.9 F/R/RB/1 Recommendation stated: 'The

Department of Local Government and the Environment should prepare a report identifying and investigating those buildings which have played an important role in Foxdale's mining history.

'The report should include all those buildings identified in paragraphs 8.2. and 8.3 as well as the lines and features of the former shafts and existing mining structures and water courses.

'This in turn will include a recommendation for appropriate buildings to be registered.'

Para 8.10 F/P/RB/2 also stated: 'All of the buildings referred to in paragraphs 8.2-8.8 inclusive must as far as possible, retain their original features and appearance viz The Reading Room / Miners' Pay Office, The Miners' Co-op, The Miners' Bakery (was the Tackle Box), Foxdale House, Brookfield House, Station House / Railway Station, Louisa Wheel Case and Buddle, Maghie's Wheel case, Bawden's Shaft,

Powder House.'

Despite appointing a consultant to undertake the research work, the department didn't make allowances for developers including the highways department let alone their own intransigence.

Village House, 1854, with its attached former shop set back in a dominant position above Mines Road and Main Street junction, was registered. It was saved from dereliction and privately restored.

Opposite, the 1870 miners' bakery was subject to two applications to demolish it to improve the road junction; the proposal was twice recommended for refusal at appeal by planning inspectors, only on the second occasion to be overturned by the Council of Ministers.

With its historic connections to the development of the village, names inscribed in the hot walls above its extant oven, with the support of the then conservation officer, this building was demolished by a department that could not begin to understand the meaning of community heritage.



A branch line train at Foxdale station, ready to return to the junction with the Peel and Ramsey lines at St John's. The viaduct and clock tower are in the background (Picture courtesy of the iMuseum)



The Moore family in front of Foxdale House

The former 'British School' was saved privately and converted to a residence.

Likewise the Wesleyan Methodist chapel which celebrated being the first building to get electricity in the village in 1932.

St Paul's future is partly in the hands of a community based enterprise to open up use of the building but is still at risk and unprotected.

Foxdale House and Brookfield remain externally unaltered but the latter is not occupied.

In 1992 the planning committee resolved to register the Victoria Clock Tower - but it took another 25 years for them to complete the paperwork.

The adjacent institute with its good hall, small reading room and lending library was swept away leaving a garden and seating area.

Opposite the isolated office building survives, unused.

And the mining remains - Louisa's circular concrete buddle which being stone underneath was probably an earlier structure and the only really recognisable one left on

the island disappeared under motorcycle scrambling and subsequent redevelopment; happily Louisa's or Hodgson's wheel case survives and hopefully private investment may reinstate a wheel - but its not protected.

The striking nine-metre long stepped Pott's wheelcase, another unique 1890 concrete structure, with traces of the wooden shuttering used in its construction and remains of a wooden beam across the top of the structure, has been infilled so that just the top of its walls protrude above ground, leaving it a meaningless statement.

Pott's circular powder house was swept away to create a private car park; another, Maghie's, survives buried in the undergrowth.

Likewise the latter's beautifully arched bridge and former wheelbase.

Most of the losses were as a result of developments approved by the planning divi-

sion of the time.

What reference was made to the recommendations of the Foxdale Local Plan? In most cases, nothing.

Did planning officer's even read it or attempt to understand what they were giving permission to destroy?

The moral of the tale seems to be do not rely on planners sticking to the policies in their policy documents!

If you want a village's heritage conserved more direct action including education of both planners and the community is needed.

Not geographically the centre, but certainly the heritage centre of the village, the former railway station, is a 'mine' of information looked after by Foxdale Heritage Trust.

Happily they have obtained a grant from the Manx Lottery Trust to do up the building.

In future years a recognised mining trail might evolve but that in itself will not save the buildings and structures that are not cared for.

Let us hope that there is not another 'Foss' or waterfall of loss of heritage in Foxdale.