

A Convict in the Family

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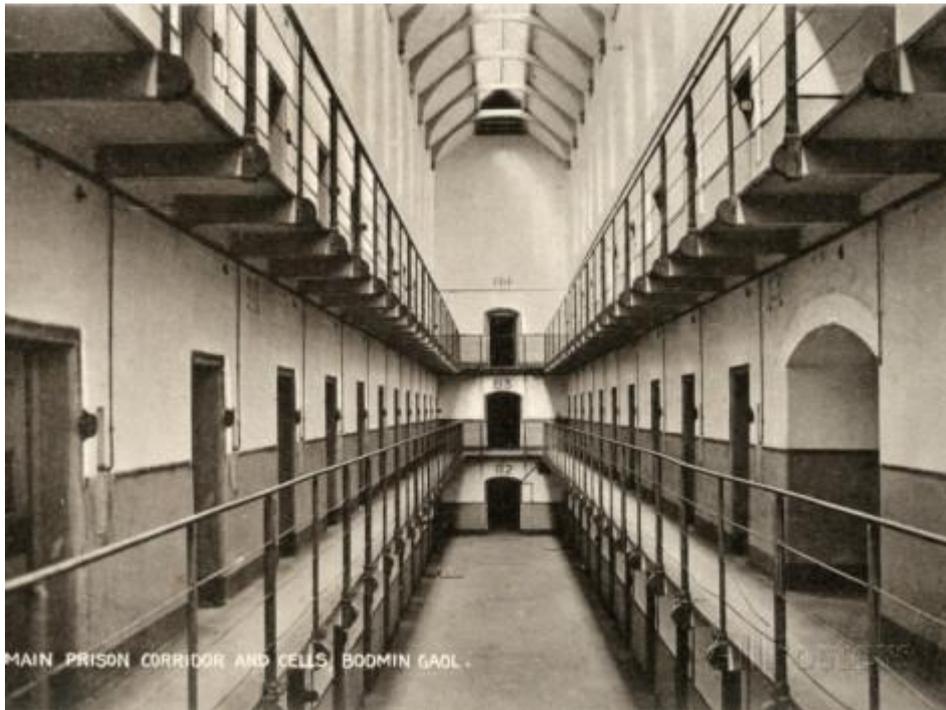
Just two generations back my great aunts felt ashamed of the convict foundations of our nation. Leap a generation and genealogists far and wide searched the records for their sometimes elusory convict ancestry. My own family trees produced no such figure - at least not in Australia. But I found one in a mining village in Cornwall – Plain An Gwarry or ‘the Hill’ – a mining village being absorbed as a suburb of Redruth.

Plain An Gwarry was built early in the Eighteenth Century to house miners for the nearby North Downs tin and copper mines. The conditions in this and other similar villages by today’s standards were appalling. In 1833 when Plain An Gwarry was over 100 years old it was reported that there were just 11 privies for over 130 dwellings. These houses were overcrowded with large, extended families and lodgers being taken in to supplement incomes. Streets were given names like Dirty Court and Poverty Court. My ancestor Richard Angove was born here in 1772 and my great grandfather (b.1837) and great great grandfather (b.1801) were probably born in the same house. Poverty was endemic the only relief being that the family possibly owned their house

In 1795 Richard Angove (my great great great grandfather) was sentenced, with a relative, to 2 years in Bodmin prison for the theft of 4 pence worth of tin ore. His young wife Christian (nee Grose) was pregnant. Wendy Angove in her history of the Angove family wrote:

“William Launder of Redruth, tinner, and Richard Angove of Redruth, tinner, were convicted of taking 20lbs of ore, value 2d, 20lbs of tin stuff, value 2d, the property of Sir John St Aubyn and others, adventurers of Wheal Peevor. Sentenced to hard labour for 2 years, and to be publicly whipped until their backs are bloody, in Bodmin, at the beginning and end of their punishment.” (1)

This was an extremely severe punishment in troubled times. Launder and Angove were either cousins or uncle and nephew and appear to have been ‘tributers’ (contract miners) in Wheal Peevor. An estimate of the theft in today’s values (2015) is difficult and the 4d could have been as low as \$40. Estimates of earnings of tributers about this time averaged from £2 to £3 per month so 4d would equal at least 1/120th of a monthly wage. However if their pitch (contracted area of the mine) turned poor or they had a poor contract they may have earned very little or nothing. Some prices of foodstuffs about this time (1801) included butter at 8d per pound, bacon 8d per pound and barley 6s bushel. The crime almost certainly was one of ‘kitting’ – taking ore from another part of the mine away from their own ‘pitch’ or designated place and presenting it as their own. This practice was generally frowned upon by miners and definitely so if the ore was stolen from another group of tributers’ pitch – in other words stealing from mates. However in this instance it appears that the ore was removed from a part of the mine not being worked by their fellows – in other words they were stealing from the company. This and the harshness of the punishment meant they had strong support amongst the community.



(Peter Higinbotham)

Low and, or declining, mineral prices were common and so severe depression dominated the west Cornwall mining districts during the 1790s:

“The Great Copper Slump of the 1790s hit Cornwall particularly hard; besides the copper coming from overseas, a discovery at Parys Mountain in Anglesey destroyed demand for Cornish copper. The Welsh ore wasn't especially pure, but there was so much of it, and so easily accessible, Parys Mountain quickly came to dominate the entire global market for copper. (2)

Many of the mines that were able to switch from copper to tin increased their tin production creating a situation of oversupply of that commodity as well and so reduced its price.

War had started with France in 1793 and there were fears, probably mostly imagined, in the ruling and propertied classes, of the miners adopting French revolutionary principles and actions. In the Quantock Hills in Somerset where Christian's brothers were working at the Dodington copper mines it was reported that:

“Every parish, without exception, was having to reach deeper and deeper into its collective pocket to support an increasing number of paupers, and starvation was never far away. Indeed, in 1794 a note was found fixed to a gatepost in Stogursey which threatened an armed uprising unless agricultural wages rose so that workers could buy bread. Another such note was found on the door of the parish church there in the following Spring.”(3)

Finally there was a crop failure throughout southern England in 1794 and 1795 and prices of basic foodstuffs quickly rose out of the reach of ordinary miners and agricultural labourers. Food shortages were often exaggerated by farmers who hoarded grains, and merchants profit taking by exporting grain from the county to obtain the best price.

Around the mining villages of Cornwall things were desperate. Thousands of miners were unemployed and many of them and their families were starving. They resorted to the time honoured tradition of rioting. John Rule has studied Cornish food riots in detail. He noted:

“Cornish miners of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were notoriously prone to riot, demonstrating their grievances publicly, theatrically and forcefully... generally the most frequent form of public disturbances were those riots provoked by rising food prices which at times could rise so suddenly and steeply as to leave many of the lower orders unable to afford or even obtain corn, flour or bread for their families subsistence. In such situations hunger could be extreme. It was especially so in the wartime harvest crises of 1795 to 1796...” (4)

Samuel Grose, Christian Angove’s older brother was working as a ‘Captain’ at the Dodington copper mines in Somerset at this time. He was in regular correspondence with mining agent William Jenkin who appears to have had a fairly close association with the Grose family. Hamilton and Lawrence in their history of mining in the Quantocks noted Jenkin’s letter to Grose on the ‘trouble’ in his family as follows:

"In the following October (1795) Kitty's (i.e. Christian) husband was again in trouble at Redruth for Samuel was told (by Jenkin) that ‘A strong rumour prevailed here yesterday that Kitty's husband was dead and that Dug (Lauder) was dying - and the Hill (Plain An Gwarry) was in an uproar. It was asserted that their death was owing to the severe whipping they had last week. But on enquiry I find it was a false report. I believe they had a pretty close trimming. I am sorry for thy sister who I understand is far gone with child, and must unavoidably suffer by her husband's misbehaviour.’" (5)

The riot that followed this cruel punishment was typical Cornish behaviour to injustice and in desperate times. It followed on from food riots in Redruth at the market earlier in the year. From this behaviour we can conclude that those being punished had the support of the community and that the spirit of revolt was very strong. From 1796 the copper price began to improve and the county slowly moved out of the depression. Although food riots were to continue whenever there was a crop failure and there was general rioting across the mining districts as late as 1847 with the failure of the potato crop.

Richard Angove survived his imprisonment and cruel punishment as he fathered a short-lived boy named Richard in 1798 and another of the same name in 1801. The first surviving male in the family in a direct line was named Richard. The last of this line died of typhoid fever in 1860 on the Lamplough gold rush (near present day Avoca) aged just 27. His younger brothers John and Samuel were in Daylesford in 1864. Of this period in Cornwall D.B. Barton noted:

“the county’s whole economy was based on mining and its ancillary trades and as the slump grew worse and yet worse the great exodus began to the Promised Lands of the mining regions of California, Nevada, Australia, and the like... In the 1860s the miners emigrated from despair and to avoid starvation.” (6)

Mining in Cornwall was in a gradual but permanent decline. As the copper, tin and lead mines closed those “Promised Lands” beckoned - the copper mines of South Australia and the gold mines of Victoria. We are all, at least in part, descended from these economic refugees.

End Notes

1. Angove, Wendy. *The Jigsaw Puzzle Tree*, The Author, Brigend Wales, 2003 p.78
2. <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/social-economic-history/the-truth-behind-poldark-stories-the-great-copper-slump> (accessed 26.7.15)
3. <http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/MembersOnly/Dunning.htm>
4. Rule, John. *Cornish Cases*, Clio Publ. Southampton, 2006, p.36 Note that the term “corn” was a general reference to mill-able grains. Apparently flour from barley was most commonly used for pasties and bread at this time.
5. Hamilton, John & J.F. Lawrence *Men and Mining in the Quantocks*, Town & Country Press, Bracknell, Berks. 1970 p.53 The first ‘trouble’ referred to here was definitely a ‘family squabble’ and was over who was the rightful owner of family property (in this case a bed) being used by Christian’s elderly father. In all probability the bed was inherited by Christian from her mother. That they should remove the bed from the father and replace it with an inferior one is an indication of how desperate they were at the time. The bed was not sold and was returned to the father.
6. Barton, D.B. *A History of Copper Mining in Cornwall and Devon*, D. Bradford Barton Ltd. Truro, 1978, pp.78-9