

A Brief History of the 'Bedford Cottages'

Abstracts from 'West Devon Borough Council Conservation Area Character Appraisal - July 2009

(full report at <http://westdevon.gov.uk/article/3599/Conservation-Area-Appraisals--Management-Plans>)

Industrial background to Tavistock's rapid population growth of the early 1800s



Bedford Cottages in Dolvin Road

Tavistock prospered as a result of the copper boom of the mid-19th century. The practise of copper mining had been in operation in Cornwall and West Devon since the Bronze Age, but from the 1770s, until the end of the 18th century, the copper trade had been dominated by the mines of Anglesey in northern Wales. The 1790s saw the closure of a number of mines across Dartmoor, but of great significance to the future of Tavistock was the 1796 discovery of copper in the vicinity of the neighbouring hamlet of Mary Tavy.

Tavistock was to benefit, not only economically from the consequent establishment of the mine, Wheal Friendship, but from the achievements of one man, John Taylor, who in 1799 arrived to take up the post of manager. Beyond his more immediate concerns in

the running of the mine, it was Taylor who was to be the principal force behind the creation of the four and a half mile long Tavistock Canal, built to provide a more economical form of transportation for the ore from Tavistock to the quay on the Tamar at Morwellham. The canal was fed by a leat off the River Tavy and from 1817, metal ores were put on boats in the newly created wharf in what is now Canal Road, and taken to Morwellham Quay. This provided an important service to the mines around Tavistock such as Wheal Crowndale and Wheal Crebor, which were located just to the south of the town. During this time, it is unsurprising that Tavistock was to experience its first great period of rapid expansion: between 1801 and 1821 the population rose from 3,420 to 5,483.



Westbridge Bedford Cottages

The initial prosperity of the early years of the 19th century was followed, during the 1820s, by a brief period of uncertainty: 'we are still oppressed with people out of employ', as Wilson, agent to the Duke of Bedford, wrote in 1827. In 1844, however, the discovery of the copper lode that would lead to the founding of Devon Great Consols – at its height the richest copper working in Europe – was made near Tavistock at Blanchdown Wood. The lodes proved not only to be extensive, but high in quality, and from the mid 1850s to the mid 1860s the mine required the labour of over 1,000 men, women and children for its basic operation. By 1861 the population of Tavistock had risen to almost 9,000 inhabitants, nearly double the 1821 number.

The urgent need for healthy housing

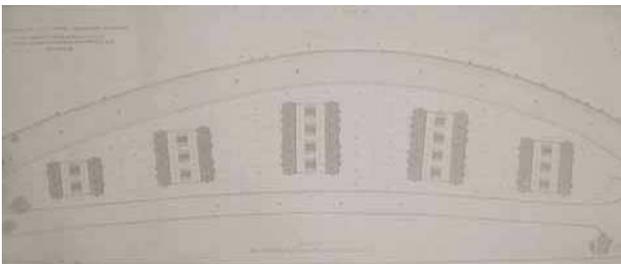
The effect of these rapid rises in population was to place an even greater burden upon the town's provision of housing, which had been little improved during the first half of the 19th century. In the early 1830s, 150 families, comprising approximately one third of the population, were residing in single rooms, and by 1846 this had risen to 453. Illness was commonplace within the overcrowded, insanitary streets; in 1849, in addition to epidemics of typhoid, typhus and scarlet-fever, Tavistock suffered several outbreaks of cholera.

The pressure for intervention on the part of Francis, 7th Duke of Bedford, came not only from the town's residents, but also from his younger brother, Lord John Russell, throughout his parliamentary career an unwavering advocate for social reform.

Russell had been involved in the Chadwick Report, a study of living conditions which included the finding that, proportionate to size, Tavistock was experiencing an overcrowding situation which was worse than London or Liverpool. The position of the Duke himself was not straightforward: Francis, acceding to the title in 1839, had inherited an estate encumbered with considerable debts. 'It will be necessary to shut up the old Abbey for a time', as he subsequently wrote of the family's principal seat at Woburn, 'it must be my part ... to repair the breaches that have been made, or the family importance and influence in the Country will sink into ruin'.

By 1843, Francis, the 7th Duke of Bedford, had responded to the widespread concern by engaging the services of architect and surveyor Theophilus Jones. Two years later, when the former's financial straits had been eased by the early profits from the Devon Great Consols mine, the first group of model cottages, located beside the river at Dolvin Road, was begun.

Building the 'Bedford Cottages'



Layout Plan for Westbridge Cottages c1850

The first 18 brick cottages were built in Dolvin Road on the eastern side of the river in Dolvin Road. Built of brick with gabled slate roofs, each of the eighteen cottages was planned to comprise a single room to the front and a shared service wing to the rear, enclosing one side of the cobbled yard; an attic storey was situated above. Jones's simple brick façades were adorned with dentilled eaves, timber canopies above the doors, and hood-mouldings to some of the windows.



Parkwood Cottages

The building of a further 64 cottages began at Westbridge in 1850: 'the Duke of Bedford 'is now erecting a number of dwellings for the labouring poor', as William White reported in that year. Formed this time not of brick – a costly material, by now reserved for the chimney stacks and the lining of the new sewers – but of rubble stone, with gabled porches offset between the houses for the preservation of symmetry. Each of this second group of dwellings was provided with a kitchen, notable for its modern cooking range, a living-room and a scullery on the ground-floor, and three separate bedrooms above: 'these are not cottages, these are villas', one contemporary exclaimed, and

certainly conditions were far superior to those in the cramped dwellings the Duke was endeavouring to replace.

Outside, the cottages were endowed with an ash-pit, a garden, and space for the housing of a pig; the yards, with clothes lines supported by their granite boundary posts, served to function as drying grounds. By no means a luxury enjoyed by all of Tavistock, the cottages were further served by running water, with each pair of homes sharing access to an outdoor tap:

The Duke, much satisfied with Jones's work, had the Westbridge design recorded in plan and elevation in a series of lithographs, and in 1859-1860 it was to form the basis for the terraces begun at Parkwood Road and also beside the canal at Fitzford. Once again rental priority was given to Tavistock's local inhabitants.



Fitzford Cottages

The 7th Duke, Francis, was to die shortly before the Fitzford Cottages' completion, and the last series was to be built by his successor in 1866, along the curved street of Trelawny Road. Departing from the earlier cottages in plan and elevation, the effect of these houses was to be more suburban, with yellow-brick quins and bay-windowed ends. Internal arrangements were also altered, with a tap provided in each back kitchen and a water-closet replacing the earth-closets of earlier houses.

By 1870 the Bedfords had created within Tavistock a total of around 170 workers' cottages.

In the following years, the urgent need for estate-provided accommodation was to ease, as the prohibition of speculative building was lifted and the copper mines fell into decline. The cottages continued to be maintained by the Dukes of Bedford until the sale of the estate in 1911.

Other 'Bedford Cottages' were built to support mining communities around Tavistock at Mill Hill (24), Wheal Maria (20) and at Morwellham (20).

Today, the Tavistock Bedford Cottages are all grade II listed apart from four paired cottages in Dolvin Road and the later houses of 1866 onwards in Trelawny Road.



Trelawny Road Cottages and a view from Glanville Road