

DANESCOMBE MINE, CALSTOCK, CORNWALL

Danescombe Mine is a former copper and arsenic mine, which was worked on and off throughout the 19th century. Its beginnings are obscure, but it was working before 1837 when it was restarted under leases granted by Lord Ashburton and the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe. This company was wound up in 1842 and the 30" pumping engine was sold to the South Hooe lead mine on the other side of the river, and the steam whim to Marke Valley in Linkinhorne. There were further operations at the mine and the closely related Wheal Calstock mine between 1846 and 1868, the company's name being changed to Calstock Consols in 1850. The machinery was sold off in 1872. Then the mine was restarted again in 1888, and both copper and arsenic were produced. After 1900 production ceased, though there was some later prospecting in the valley.

The varying fortunes of the Danescombe mine, and the replacement of copper by arsenic as the main product, were the result not only of the unpredictability of mining, but also of the changing economic situation. Copper mining was rendered unprofitable in Cornwall by the discovery of deposits in Cuba, South Australia, Chile, and then Michigan, culminating in the great copper slump of 1866-8.

Tin became the mainstay of Cornish mining after copper declined, but the opening-up of the Australian tin deposits brought about a slump in the 1870s, then those in the Malay states, and after 1900, in Bolivia, further injured the Cornish tin mines.

In 1891 there were 6,156 men and boys classed as miners in Cornwall; seven years later this number was 2,749. Thus the events in Danescombe are representative of the experience at all Cornish mines, and even today, the decline of the world tin price can make Cornish tin uneconomic to mine, and thus what was once the country's main industry is virtually extinct.

The restoration of the mine

The part of the mine buildings which are now leased by the Landmark Trust from the National Trust and let out for holidays was restored in 1972-3 by architect Paul Pearn of Pearn and Procter, of Plymouth. The grouping formerly housed an engine, and a Cornish boiler and crushing plant. The building was extremely dilapidated: only the structural walls were sound, and there was no roof or windows. All the machinery had been taken out in the 19th century.

During the restoration a new staircase of steel strings and traditional cast-iron open chequer type treads was introduced and new floors were inserted at the levels of the original platforms. A concrete slab was poured at the entrance level over the pit which formerly housed the condenser. This and the higher ground floor were finished with the salvaged slate flagstones.

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The upper floors were laid over now softwood joists; the new floor covered what would have been the large hole for the tall condenser. The roof trusses, of softwood, were left exposed, whilst the covering is random width Delabole slates with a grey clay ridge tile. It is almost certain that the original slates would have come from that famous Cornish slate quarry or one very near it. The cast-iron window frames were reinstated.

The buff-coloured bricks for the quoins which had originally been made at Calstock nearby, were matched and a new flight of steps was made between the boiler house and crushing plant building. A terrace of open timber slats was created at the top of walls which once carried the axles of the winding gear and balance wheels, surrounded with a traditional balustrade of diagonal criss-cross members painted in the red-oxide colour still commonly in use in the county.

Almost the only alteration which was made to the original plan was the new top window, formed by glazing the gap where the lever of the main engine once protruded. The glazing has been arranged in small overlapping pieces, an economical form of re-use still found in early industrial buildings and forming its own rather appealing aesthetic. Under the Pearn restoration scheme, this formed a top bedroom with a wonderful view down the valley and an en-suite bathroom, with a twin room beneath, with a separate loo and washbasin. The iron staircase descended direct into the kitchen, with an open plan sitting area beneath.

This configuration lasted happily until 2022-3, when more stringent fire regulations and a desire for better insulation prompted a re-think, to the building's current configuration for two people. The staircase has now been boxed in to provide a better fire exit route, and the kitchen has moved to the first floor.

Danescombe Mine remains one of Landmark's quirkiest and best loved buildings, keeping alive the memory of arsenic mining in Cornwall.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Danescombe Mine sleeps up to 2 people. To book this or any other Landmark building for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk

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