

Cornish Online Parish Clerks

CORNWALL, ON THE extreme south-western tip of Great Britain, is a land of mineral-rich ores and once-rich fishing grounds. On two sides it is bordered by ocean; on the third, by Devon. Her people have been miners since the Phoenicians visited the British Isles to trade for tin; they have been miners, farmers, anglers and sea-going adventurers.

Separated from the rest of England by the River Tamar and their Celtic traditions, Cornwall remained a unique entity through much of its history. Many place names retain the distinct Cornish language in their spelling and pronunciation: Ruan Laniorne, Treweek, Perranzabuloe, to name a few.

Cornwall was once prosperous. It had the largest and richest tin and copper mines in the world. However, in the 1840s, Cornish tin mining collapsed as cheap imports arrived from South America. In the 1860s, copper mining collapsed too, leaving china-clay as the last pillar of prosperity. During this period, there were food riots as precious grains were shipped to areas where higher prices were paid, leaving Cornish folk to eat turnips, if they were available. People could not earn enough to buy bread; the average miner earned nine shillings per week — mines were closing everywhere — while people found themselves chasing jobs that were ever more elusive. Epidemics scourged the land, especially cholera in 1849, when 70 percent of the population of one village died within weeks.

Between the epidemics, lack of economic opportunities at home, and the lure of possible prosperity abroad,

combined with inexpensive or even free transportation, is it any wonder more than half the population — a much higher percentage than even the Irish — chose to leave the land they loved?

Fortunately for the miners, their skills were in demand elsewhere. Cornish miners (and those in related trades) spread throughout the world. Mexico, South America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada, as well as the US, needed their expertise. Large Cornish colonies thrived in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, as well as Nevada and California. Many more went to mines in Pennsylvania. Wherever they went, they took a special love for Cornwall, which they often passed on to their descendants.

Many of these descendants are now searching for information regarding their ancestors via the Internet. If you have Cornish connections, you are fortunate when it comes to genealogy-rich websites. There has been an explosion of such websites over the past few years, enabling many to follow their family trees back generations.

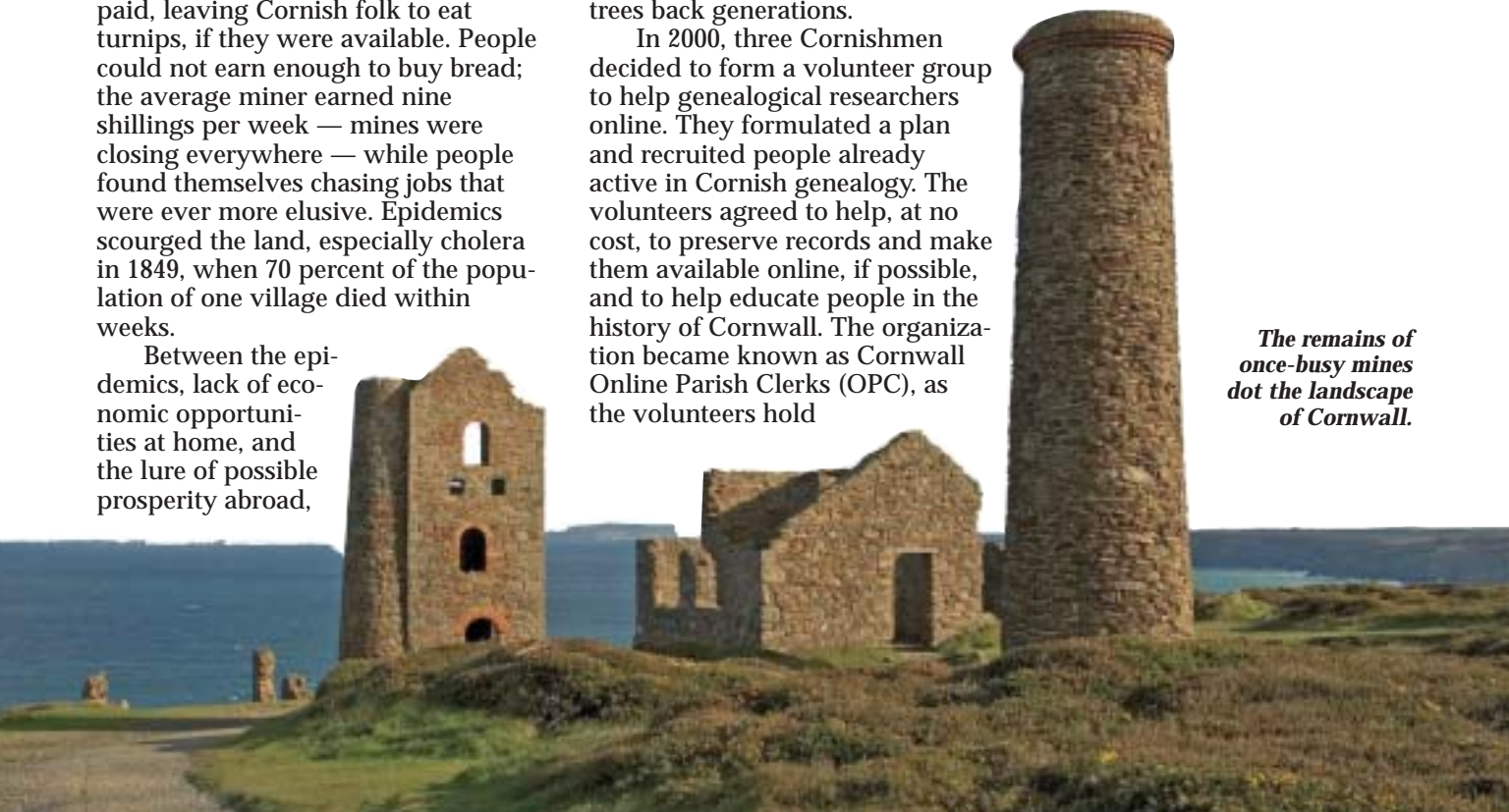
In 2000, three Cornishmen decided to form a volunteer group to help genealogical researchers online. They formulated a plan and recruited people already active in Cornish genealogy. The volunteers agreed to help, at no cost, to preserve records and make them available online, if possible, and to help educate people in the history of Cornwall. The organization became known as Cornwall Online Parish Clerks (OPC), as the volunteers hold

ARE YOU CORNISH?

If your name starts with Tre-, Pen-, or Pol-, you probably have Cornish roots. Celtic names such as Polkinghorne, Polprase, Penwith, Trethewey, Tregwin and Trelawney originated in Cornwall. However, those with “English” names — Allen, Thomas, Stephens — have deep roots there, too.

Many people do not realize Cornish folk moved to Wales, Ireland and northern England to work in various mines — when their descendants dig deeply, they find they are Cornish after all!

The remains of once-busy mines dot the landscape of Cornwall.



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many of the same records as parish clerks of yesterday. RootsWeb-award winning, the concept has now spread to eight other counties in the UK. The other British OPC Projects are Cumberland/Westmorland (www.cumberlandandwestmorland-opc.co.uk); Devon (<http://genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/OPCproject.html>), Dorset (www.dorset-opc.com); Kent (<http://kent-opc.co.uk>); Lancashire (www.lan-opc.org.uk); Sussex (www.sussex-opc.org); Warwickshire (www.hunimex.com/warwick/opc/opc.html); and Wiltshire (<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/david.brown6666/wiltsohc>)

Each volunteer adopts a specific parish (or more than one) and decides what information is most needed for that particular place, turning to whatever sources they can. Currently, there are some 97 volunteers from all over the world who have taken on three-quarters of the parishes in Cornwall — and the number is growing. Some OPCs have established websites full of data. Others prefer to reply to individual e-mail requests, as some of their material is copyright

PARISHES

Here's one basic way to approach British governmental units: Counties equate to states in the US, and parishes, some quite small, others large, act as counties do in the US. Parishes have been the governmental structure of choice for centuries. Even earlier, administration was based on "hundreds". It's key to determine the relevant parish, as records were, and are, kept by that designation. Many parish records extend back to the English Civil War of the 1640s, and some even go to 1558. There are some 219 parishes in Cornwall, three-quarters of which are served by an OPC; they also may be able to help with inquiries for those not included.

restricted or does not lend itself to websites. One OPC has a database of more than 120,000 names, all interconnected across parish boundaries, and holds regular "Great Granny Hunts" at local libraries. The Cornwall OPC project has an agreement with both the Cornwall Record Office and the Church of Latter-day Saints, which have authorized transcription of their records; more than half of the OPCs are now engaged in that work.

To find a list of parishes and the associated OPC, together with website links, a map of Cornwall, and a helpful list of resources and specialized databases, visit

www.cornwall-opc.org.

Various OPCs are involved with other efforts to promote their goals; some are transcribing the West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser newspaper, including all births, marriages and deaths and court cases, along with interesting articles, from 1836 to 1887, on the Internet at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~wbritonad>. others are transcribing the censuses:

1841 and '91 are complete, while 1851, '61, '71 and '81 are currently being compiled. Part of the FreeCENS effort, Cornwall Online Census Project has forged ahead of other counties in completion of their work, which can be seen at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~kayhin/ukocp.html>. All participate on the Cornish Lists at Rootsweb, www.rootsweb.com. One list is for all things Cornish, the other strictly for genealogy. Listers are very willing to help researchers, too; after all, the motto of Cornwall is "One and All"!

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The historic fishing village of Mevagissey on the southern coast of Cornwall.

