



The turntable team! From left on 25 June, the day after the lease for part of St Blazey depot was signed: Mervyn Allcock, John Boulton, Duncan Mitchell, Andy Allcock and Tim Hughes. Dana Roberts

Trail Blazey

Ben Jones talks to *Duncan Mitchell* about his new Cornish social enterprise... providing training for youngsters and servicing for 'main liners'.

Cornwall is at a crossroads. Tourism was already booming before the Covid-19 pandemic put a halt to international travel – bringing millions of visitors to the Far West. Property prices are rising steeply, causing a construction boom, and June's G7 summit in Carbis Bay put the county's wonderful coastal scenery on the world stage.

But scratch below that shiny surface and it isn't hard to find a very different story.

The lucrative tourist season is fleeting and offers largely low-skilled, casual employment for many locals – it's also dependent on the weather and the whims of short-term visitors. The decline of

traditional industries such as mining and fishing has left the county without the stable year-round economy enjoyed elsewhere in the UK.

Wealthy second homers from 'up country' have

“Possibilities include St Blazey acting as a base for regular main line steam operations in Cornwall – think Cornish 'Jacobite'”

driven prices beyond the means of many Cornish families, forcing some to leave the region and putting pressure on social housing. At the same time, the influx of tourists, second homers and retirees has exposed the inadequacy of the region's healthcare and public transport systems after decades of under-investment.

Parts of Cornwall are in the 10% of most deprived areas, not just in the UK, but in Europe. Away from the seasonal tourist honeypots, post-industrial towns such as Camborne and St Austell have high rates of poverty. Cornish GDP is just 64% of the UK average, and much of that is seasonal.

Industrial innovation

While most of us have a rosy view of Cornwall as a place of leisure and pleasure, the county has a long history of getting its hands dirty. Industrial activity goes back at least 4,000 years. By the 13th Century, Cornish tin was internationally important, bringing employment to this remote region for several centuries. Subsequently, mining for tin, copper and arsenic was joined by the extraction of china clay from the 1700s. This fine powder has an enormous range of applications, from porcelain to toothpaste. It is found in very few places around the world, with the Cornish product regarded as the finest available. Although the industry has declined in recent decades, it remains an important part of the local economy and a source of traffic for the railway, albeit much diminished from its heyday.

All this made Cornwall one of the cradles of Britain's industrial revolution, a place where the wealth and ever-increasing demands of industry created the conditions for innovation and refinement of high-pressure steam power to the point where independent railway locomotives became a practical proposition.

Almost exactly 250 years ago, the county's most famous engineer, Richard Trevithick, first saw the world in Tregajorran, near Redruth, in April 1771. Born into a mining family, his experiments



St Blazey with, middle right, the shed taken on by MPower, then the roundhouse and turntable and, at the top of the image, the workshops. *Peter Channon*



A sight to be witnessed again! Uncertainty about Cornwall's only turning facility is now at an end, with the lease of part of St Blazey to a new community group. In June 2010, Collett 4-6-0 No. 5029 Nunney Castle brings far more glamour than the everyday work of the Par depot – handling china clay trains. The Swindon engine – now part of the Hosking grouping and under overhaul at Crewe – was on a layover as part of the Steam Dreams 'Cornish Riviera' multi-day tour. *John Cooper-Smith*



St Blazey as was (I): A quartet of 'Panniers' parade against the backdrop of St Blazey's hipped roof on 25 August 1959. Nearest the camera are Hawksworth '16XX' 0-6-0PTs Nos. 1627 and 1624, then an unidentified '57XX' (with its smokebox door dart frustratingly covering its number) and classmate No. 3705. K C H Fairey/Colour-Rail

with steam traction resulted in the world's first locomotive-hauled railway journey in February 1804.

It's no surprise then that Trevithick's name is being honoured by the new community enterprise established to create training and job opportunities for disadvantaged youths in St Blazey and Par.

'Operation Trevithick' will create a new servicing facility for main line steam locomotives at the heart of Cornwall's rail network. It's the first phase of a plan by new social enterprise MPower Kernow C.I.C. To achieve this, MPower has leased a part of DB Cargo UK's St Blazey

depot, including the 65ft turntable and a 1990s maintenance shed. Led by locally born Merchant Navy engineer Duncan Mitchell and Mervyn Allcock MBE of Barrow Hill Roundhouse fame, 'Operation Trevithick' has exciting plans for its St Blazey site.

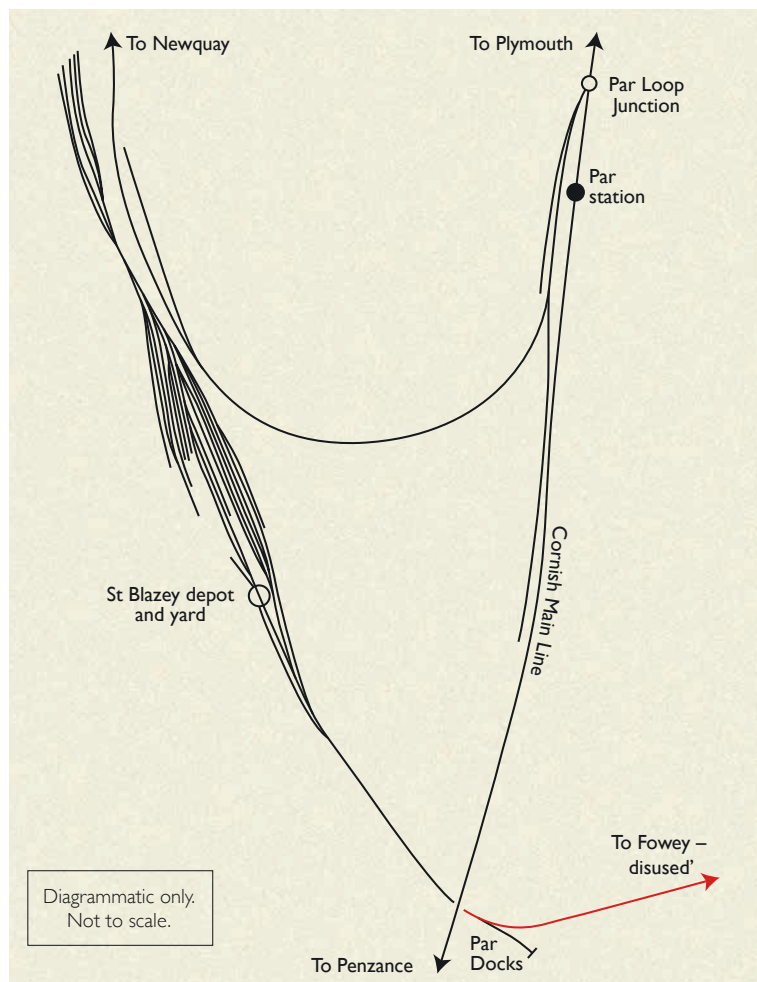
Training new generations

Before any of that can happen, the area needs to be cleared of vegetation, redundant buildings refurbished and the turntable repaired. MPower Kernow is working with local education and training organisations to establish a new vehicle

for delivering work experience and hands-on experience in a range of skills, from woodwork to plumbing, electrics, construction and engineering.

Although there is currently a construction boom in Cornwall, the industry is desperately

“ St Blazey depot is a remarkable survivor... even the land it occupies owes its existence to the local minerals industry. ”



BUILT ON CORNISH MINERALS

St Blazey depot is a remarkable survivor on the modern railway. Built in 1874 as the headquarters of the Cornwall Minerals Railway, which linked the harbours of Fowey and Newquay, even the land it occupies owes its existence to the local minerals industry.

For centuries, tin streaming in the river valleys above Par washed waste material downstream, gradually silting up the estuaries and changing the landscape. By the 19th Century, the Par River estuary was so silted that a canal was built from the new harbour at Par to the local mines and quarries. This was later replaced by a network of tramways, which was itself upgraded and incorporated into the Cornwall Minerals Railway. The majority of this exists to this day as the Newquay line and Par Harbour Freight Branch.

Duncan explains: "At one time there were literally thousands of people employed in mining in this valley. St Blazey has a fascinating

history built on mining and engineering, but at the moment the story is not being told."

The former 83E (or BZ in more recent times) famously features a half-roundhouse with nine stalls around the turntable. Unfortunately for enthusiasts, this unique building is now separated from the railway and used by several small businesses.

However, the roundhouse and turntable are Grade-II* listed and the former wagon repair depot and yard are still used by DB Cargo to maintain china clay wagons and Class 66 diesels. DBC's contract to move china clay for Imerys provides the depot's sole regular source of work and over the last decade the threat of closure has loomed owing to uncertainty about the future of the industry and rail's role within it. However, in 2020 Imerys and DBC signed a new contract which should see the traffic continue for at least a few more years.

◀ St Blazey sits among a complex array of passenger and freight lines at Par, which has a station on the Cornish Main Line.



St Blazey as was (2): Laira's Class 25 No. 7574 – still in green but with the 'D' prefix crudely scratched from its number at each end – rides the turntable on 13 June 1972. As No. 25224 the 1963-built 'Type 2' would be withdrawn in 1986. Just in shot on the right is also an unidentified 'Western'... K C H Fairey/Colour-Rail



Beginnings... a brand-new St Blazey, almost complete.
The Gwyn Truscott and the Late John Truscott Collection

short of skilled workers and Duncan is confident that 'Operation Trevithick' can help provide a route into secure, skilled and long-term jobs.

"It's the first rung on the ladder" he says.

"We're giving people a chance to be in a work environment and learn the skills they will need – not just practical skills, but teamwork, resilience and organisation.

"Cornwall Council has declared a 'climate emergency' and has set itself a target of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. Many more skilled people will be needed over the next decade if the county is to deliver the green technology required to keep that promise."

Since it was first mooted around six years ago, the St Blazey project has attracted support from councils, politicians, and training and enterprise agencies keen to promote economic development in this part of the county.

'Operation Trevithick' involves the creation of the locomotive servicing facility. A small core of paid staff supported by experienced volunteers will work alongside trainees to clear the site, repair the turntable and an inspection pit, and fit out the maintenance building nicknamed 'The Elephant House'.

Built in the mid-1990s, the latter was originally intended to house a wheel lathe, but this was never completed and the building has seen little use for more than 20 years. It now offers an ideal covered, secure base for training and commercial work. A derelict toilet block will also be refurbished and a classroom and office building are planned.

MPower Kernow will acquire, refurbish and install engineering equipment for trainees to undertake projects such as wagon repairs and converting grounded van bodies into 'glamping' accommodation or catering outlets. Both are much in demand, and will help MPower generate income from the local tourist industry.

“We're immensely proud of our industrial heritage... there's much more to Cornwall than pasties and Poldark.”



St Blazey as it is now... the grey building with a roller-shutter door is the 'Elephant House'; to the left, the original CMR roundhouse is now in industrial use. Ben Jones

Duncan says he's always considered himself "very lucky" that volunteering at the Bodmin & Wenford Railway as a youngster gave him "what was effectively a 'voluntary apprenticeship'."

"Helping restore steam locos such as GWR 2-6-2T No. 5552 later gave me the skills and confidence to go to sea as a ship's engineer. Since completing my Officer Cadetship in the late '90s, I have progressed through the ranks to Chief Engineer.

"I feel very privileged as the BWR gave me the foundations on which to build a great career, as well as amazing opportunities to work and travel all over the world. We want to give other young Cornish men and women the chance to do something similar."

He adds: "But the project has to be self-sustaining. Although we will receive an income from training organisations for each trainee, we need to find other sources of commercial income to make it work."

Both Duncan and Mervyn are confident that the locomotive servicing facility will also generate income when it is complete. Main line operators have already shown interest in using St Blazey as a base for operations in the West Country and its revival could be the catalyst for an expansion of regular steam operations in the medium to long term.

Indeed, long-term possibilities include St Blazey acting as a base for regular main line steam operations in Cornwall to attractive destinations such as Newquay... think Cornish 'Jacobite'.

Cornwall's only turntable

Key to this is the turntable, which was operational until a few years ago, but has since fallen into disuse. Although generally in reasonable condition, the two end 'carriages' are suffering from corrosion and rectifying that is a priority. Over the next few months, the main 'bridge' section will be jacked up, allowing the carriages to be lifted out for

“It’s the first rung on the ladder. We’re giving people a chance to be in a work environment and learn the skills they will need.”

repairs, with trainees assisting qualified engineers to undertake the work. Meanwhile, trainees will help restore the turntable pit’s brickwork, remove vegetation, inspect the centre bearing, de-scale and paint the bridge, and adjust the race rail.

Having rescued Barrow Hill Roundhouse from demolition in the 1990s and led its transformation into a thriving depot combining heritage and commercial activities (see issue T1), Mervyn Allcock knows how much work is required to make it happen.

When asked whether the main roundhouse building is part of the plans, Duncan chuckles.

“It’s a lovely idea – but it’s certainly not part of the plan for MPower Kernow.

“First of all, it’s not for sale, and fundamentally, the site is used productively as small industrial units for small local businesses which are an integral part of the local economy. Secondly, such

a project would require millions to restore the building and create such an amenity. Of course, it would be amazing to do, but it would need to stack up financially; and it would need a greater purpose than ‘nice-to-do’ heritage value alone.”

Mervyn’s experience at Barrow Hill demonstrates that it is difficult to make cavernous roundhouses pay for themselves purely as heritage centres. This is evidenced by the multitude of commercial activities that have been developed to support the museum element – not all of which are railway related.

“Ultimately, MPower has been created to benefit the local community”, says Duncan.

“The needs of the local economy – particularly the small businesses housed within the roundhouse building – would need to be the priority in any such scheme”.

However, he jokes: “If we were asked to develop a ‘Cornish National Railway Museum’

and someone came up with the money for both the restoration and to build a brand new set of purpose-built, cosy industrial units nearby to house the small businesses, then of course we’d all be interested... but one step at a time eh!!”

So, while the idea of Pannier tanks and ‘Prairies’ returning to that famous roundhouse may never be any more than a dream, ‘Operation Trevithick’ plans to provide a solid foundation for future railway heritage operations in Cornwall, bringing genuine economic benefits to an area that has much to offer both locals and visitors.

Although the project is at an early stage, it clearly has huge potential for both the regional economy and the railway heritage movement. Duncan concludes: “We’re immensely proud of our industrial heritage and we’re here to show that there’s much more to Cornwall than pasties and Poldark.” ■

▼ **Not something you’ll see any time soon... in 1985 ‘BZ’ was still an active BR shed, meaning that Tyseley’s *Clun Castle* could ease up into one of the 1874-built roundhouse’s stalls. The 1950-built No. 7029’s rare presence west of the Tamar on 6 September was as part of ‘GWR150’ celebrations. St Blazey was listed in its centenary year, and English Heritage cites the former CMR headquarters as “virtually unaltered” – albeit the 65ft turntable is a postwar version. Off limits for rail use, the shed is currently on the ‘Heritage at Risk’ register. *Neville Wellings***

