

The Evolution of Helston's Leats and Kennels

The Kennels, or open water channels, flowing along the sides of many of Helston's streets are one of the town's best-known features. But why are they there and where does the water come from?

The word 'kennel' is old dialect from the 1700s, meaning a gutter or channel; it appears to be derived from the northern French word 'canel' (which is pronounced 'kennel'). Helston's kennels are part of a complex, and now mostly hidden system bringing stream water through many streets in the town. Look closely and you may even see tiny insect life washed down from the higher reaches of the River Cober where the water is diverted into the Town Leat to supply the kennels.

Mostly constructed in the 1700's and extended in the 1800's, these granite-faced water courses form one of the most extensive systems of any town in Europe. Water is taken from the River Cober several miles upstream using construction skills first employed by tin miners who worked the area around Wendron for centuries.

Well before the deep mines and their historic engine house structures which we still see across Cornwall today, tin was extracted by surface working known as 'streaming' or 'hushing'. Initially raking along stream beds, the early tanners became increasingly adept at diverting natural watercourses to run across veins of ore close to the surface, washing out tonnes of material containing cassiterite (tin ore). The diverted water was also used to drive waterwheels for the 'stamps' (machines which crushed the extracted materials) and the resulting dust was then washed to separate the pure ore.

Tin working in the Cober valley dates back well over 1,000 years and the upstream areas of Wendron grew to become one of the most productive regions in the South West. Water courses were of great value and constructing them was a recognised skill within the tanning workforce. It is thought that the first leats around Poldark Mine (Wheal Rootes) were created at the end of the 13th Century by the local Cistercian Monks.

Diverting streams could often prove a highly emotive issue and records show that rights to water were often contested in the courts in Helston. Ownership of the many leats had to be officially recorded in an extensive property register.

Over this period Helston, as one of the five Cornish Coinage Towns, benefited greatly from the increasing prosperity generated by the tin mines and the town's population grew quickly. In the 18th and 19th centuries, other trades in Helston boomed, most notably brewing, leatherworking and shoe making. For a short time in the 1800s a silver mine operated at the top of Wendron Street. The town also became a significant market trading centre for the region with a thriving cattle market.

No clear information about the kennels inception exists but it's highly likely that they were constructed to provide water to the town and subsequently to power waterwheels for motive power to these growing industries in Helston.

One of the earliest records is a text from 1738 which notes that Helston's four streets were well supplied with water because they each had "a little channel running through". An impressive feat of engineering the water is extracted from the River Cober below Wendron Church, flowing miles across farmland and, in the past, along the top of a specially constructed Cornish hedge, to enable the steady flow of water to enter the town at what is now Water-ma-Trout.

Records still exist of applications to extend and divert kennels to supply wheels for malshouses (breweries). Works to maintain and construct new routes for the water were tendered and managed by the then Helston Borough Council.

Undoubtedly the kennels were also used for street washing, especially along the elaborate granite pavings of Meneage, Wendron and Coinagehall Streets, befitting of a high-status town. The sloping floors of the market house (now the Museum of Cornish Life) were washed down with kennel water, especially necessary for the then unrefrigerated meat market, where it is said the smell of could be 'interesting'.

There is note in the 1914 Helston Borough Officer's Medical Report that the kennels "... catch a great deal of dust and generally contribute to the cleanliness of the streets. For a long time now no sewage has been allowed to run into these channels, while the Council is taking special precautions to prevent rubbish of any sort from being thrown into them". This suggests that the kennels were possibly mis-used in earlier times as human waste was collected from privies (over 300 of these existed in 1914) in galvanised sanitary pails. It's easy to imagine that a few of these, perhaps illegally, were tipped down the kennels at some point during the mid 1800s. Perhaps the pails in the old photograph of Coinagehall Street, above, are such pails.

We should all take special care of one of our town's most historic features – the water from the kennels runs straight back into the river and down to Loe Pool so it's very important to ensure the kennel water is kept clean and unpolluted.

Extracted from the article by David Turnbull for the Discover Helston Magazine 2020/21