Delve Deeper
Audio Trail Five
The Duke of Bedford's Grand Plan: Tavistock Town

This guide gives you an opportunity to find out more about Tavistock and its fascinating history. Use it to enhance your trail around the town, or as a follow up after your visit.

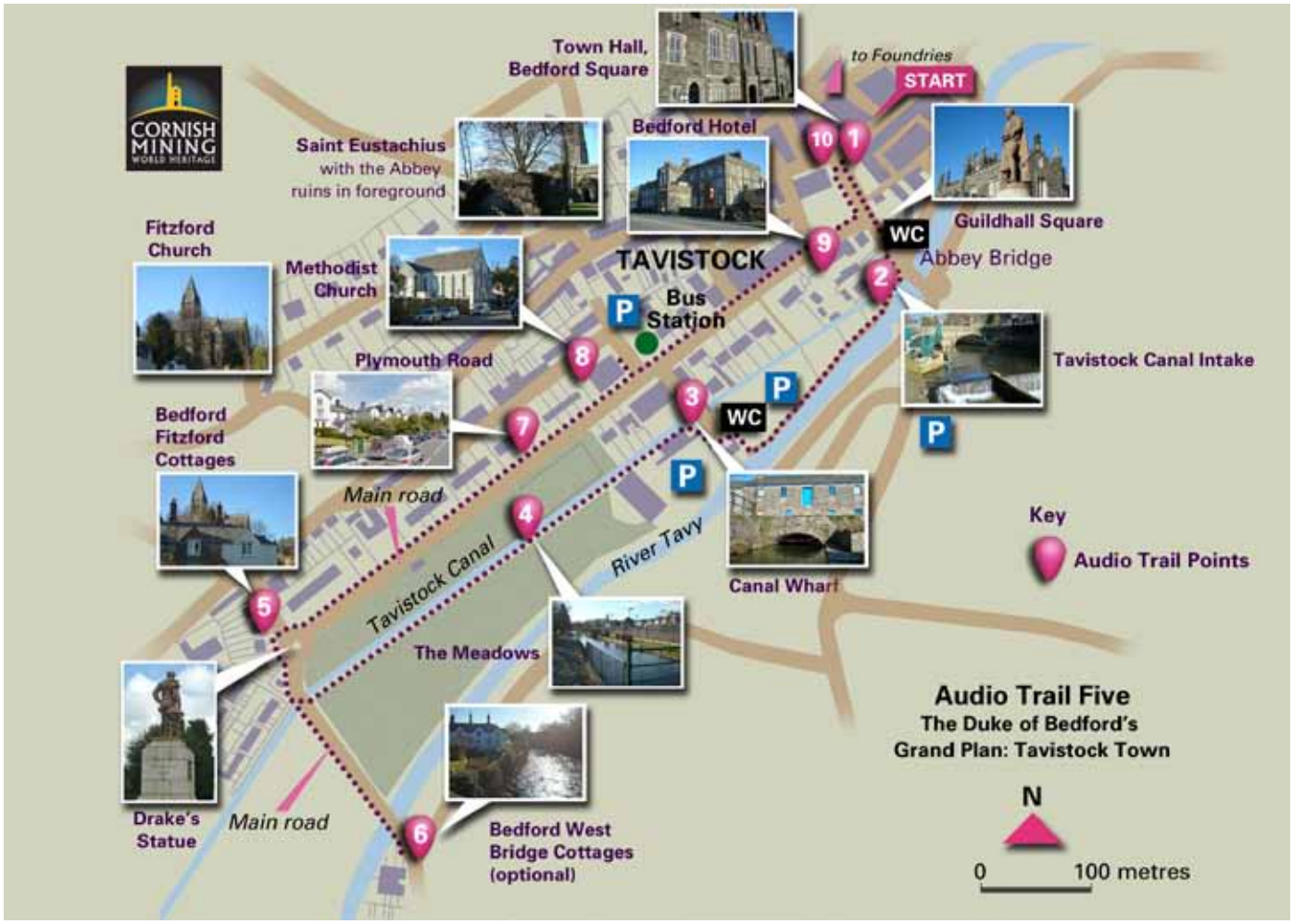
Tavistock and Cornish Mining

Between 1700 and 1914, the metal mining industry of Cornwall and west Devon transformed the landscape. It fed the Industrial Revolution in Britain and influenced the development of our modern world.

The Cornwall and west Devon mining landscape consists of ten areas with distinct personalities. Tavistock is in the eastern most part of the Cornish Mining World Heritage Site, along with the Tamar Valley Mining District.

World Heritage Site status recognises the importance on a global scale of Cornish mining's historic landscapes, its outstanding mine buildings and other features.

Cornish miners and engineers developed technologies which transformed mining worldwide. Their innovations and skills were vital to the Industrial Revolution and helped shape our modern industrial society.



The Bedford Legacy (Audio Point 1)

Photo: Barry Gamble

Tavistock Town Hall.

The façade of the Tavistock Town Hall, with Bedford Square in front, is one of the best known town-centre views in the Westcountry. The local Hurdwick stone used in its construction, and other public buildings, has a very distinctive green appearance. Its origin is volcanic and a variety of flow patterns and vesicles may be seen within the texture of the stone. As a building stone it has the advantage of being relatively easy to cut into masonry blocks but the d*isadvantage that it is porous and weathers poorly being particularly susceptible to frost damage.*

The building work was started by Francis, the 7th Duke, whose name and the date 1860 is written on the front wall. Sadly the Duke died in 1861 without seeing it. The Town Hall was opened in February 1864, with a programme of celebrations that went on for three days, and featured, in particular, an 'Exhibition of rare and Valuable Works of Science and Art etc'. The main interior decoration featured nineteen portraits of people who were connected with Tavistock at some point during the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ten of them were painted by Lady Laura Russell, a skilled artist who married into the family, and who presented copies that she made of portraits hanging on the walls of Woburn, the family seat. The Tavistock Town Council own the Hall and hires it out for public and other events; the main hall having a stage and seating capacity for 200 people. Behind the Hall is the market area, bounded on one side by the River Tavy and on the other by an impressive range of shops that line the suitably named Duke Street. The whole area represents an interesting example of mid-Victorian town planning.

Pannier Market (Audio points 1 & 10)

Photo: Barry Gamble

The ornate sign at the entrance to the Pannier market.

As part of the grand re-development of the town centre by the Bedford Estate in the mid-nineteenth century an effort was made to bring together all market activity (with the exception of the cattle market and corn market) under one roof. Slum properties, in the area of St Mathew Street, were demolished and in their place the present Pannier Market was constructed. The term 'pannier' refers to the baskets of goods which were brought to the market.

When the new Pannier Market was opened in 1862 the traders were moved into it. Other market places were closed and street trading ceased. The relocation of the market to its present location together with the building of new shops in nearby Duke Street improved the appearance of the town centre but inevitably caused the decline of Bank Square and surrounding streets, a decline which has continued until the present. The cattle market, which had previously been in the Guildhall Square, was transferred to a new site in the Old Plymouth Road, now Whitchurch Road.

Opened in 1862 the walls of the market are built from Hurdwick stone with slate roof and a granite floor. The timber roof trusses are supported on the end walls and two internal rows of arches. In recent times with the arrival of national supermarkets within and on the outskirts of the town there has been a gradual change in emphasis of the Pannier Market.

From being a mainly produce market, there is now a varied range of other goods including crafts, clothing, garden plants and hardware items. Improved lighting, heating, and better toilet facilities have improved its attractiveness. It is today a popular place for 'browsing'. Between the Pannier Market and the river is Market Road which with the river-wall was built in the 1860s. A plaque on the river-wall marks the site of the 'East Bridge', an old medieval bridge which survived until the late eighteenth century when it became redundant following the opening of Abbey Bridge.

Guildhall (Audio point 1)

Photo: Tavistock Museum

Guildhall and Bedford Square, 1893.

The Gothic style Guildhall which was built on the site of the old Abbey Mill. The Guildhall was built at a cost of £4000 to Francis the 7th Duke, and was formally opened in September 1848. The new building was described at the time of its opening as comprising 'an extensive room in which the court is held, a magistrates room and other apartments, under which is the bridewell comprising six cells, a dwelling for the police superintendent, a fire engine etc'. From the outset the main room served two major functions, as purpose-built courtroom and as avenue for public meetings. Within a few years this Gothic creation was also to serve as a backdrop to the statue of its creator, Francis the 7th Duke whose statue stands uncomfortably between car parking bays. In 2000, as part of a wider re-organisation of the administration of local justice the Magistrates Room was closed. Deprived of its principal function the Guildhall has, since then, had to await a decision about its future use.

Tavistock Canal (Audio point 4)

The River Tavy, a fast flowing watercourse, has cut a steep channel through metamorphosed sedimentary strata on its way to join the River Tamar. Its waters are often seen to be stained brown from the peat in its upper moorland catchment. Over the years its floodwater meanderings within the town areas have been confined by abutment walls and generally the river has accepted this fate, but just occasionally it threatens to show its real power. The last serious flooding of the town occurred in 1890 but since that time there have been a number of very close calls.

Photo: Barry Gamble

The Tavistock Canal.

The river feeds the Tavistock Canal at a weir just downstream of Abbey Bridge. The 7.2 km long Tavistock Canal takes an almost north-east to south-west route from Tavistock to the former copper port of Morwellham in the Tamar Valley. Barges on the canal carried copper ore, extracted from the local mines at Mary Tavy and Tavistock, to Morwellham. Here it was loaded into vessels which sailed to South Wales where the ore was smelted. On the return leg the canal was used to import into the district building materials, coal and mining materials, and limestone for agricultural purposes.

The construction of the Tavistock Canal was commenced in 1803 but it took nearly 14 years to complete, largely on account of difficulties encountered in the 2.4 km hard rock tunnel section under Morwell Down. The main canal was estimated to cost £40,000 in 1803 but the final cost was £67,000 when completed in 1817. A branch canal 3.2 km long was also built to the slate quarries at Mill Hill, this was opened in 1819.

An important feature of the canal is a slight gradient which allows water to flow along its length thus allowing it to function both as a waterway and as a leat to power water wheels in mines and farms along its route. Horses were used to haul the iron barges along the canal; one horse pulling a laden barge with the current and two horses pulling a laden barge against the current. At the tunnel horses were unhitched from the barges which were pushed and poled through; a hard physical task especially when working against the current. In the 1850s experiments were tried to haul barges back through the tunnel on a wire rope operated by a waterwheel but these were not successful. The canal operation also suffered from the requirement for double handling of cargoes. It emerged from the tunnel 72 m above the River Tamar port of Morwellham. At this high-level terminus goods were unloaded from the barges and re-loaded into trucks which were hauled up and lowered down an inclined plane track leading into the quay area.

Down at the quays the goods were then offloaded from the trucks and placed in the holds of the waiting ships. Despite these problems the Tavistock Canal remained a busy waterway until the arrival of the railway in 1859, and finally closed for navigational purposes in the 1870s when the Duke of Bedford bought the whole canal system, including the branch canal to Mill Hill, from the canal company. Sadly no photographic records seem to have survived of the canal in operation.

The transfer of ownership back to the Bedford estate and its purchase in 1933 by the West Devon Electric Supply Co. for use as the water supply to the Morwellham hydro-electric station, has fortunately resulted in the salvation of the canal. Had this not been the case there is every probability that much of the little waterway would have long ago been infilled by the adjoining landowners, and lost. The canal and Morwellham power station are owned and currently operated by South West Water.

This whole Wharf area was formerly the site of the terminus of the Tavistock Canal leased from the Bedford Estate by Gill and Company, at the time of the canal's completion. The wharf was its hub, built between 1816 -19 against the Bedford Estate's wishes by Gill and Company whose attitude to the Estate's local agents was not always honourable. Here, off the aptly named Canal Road, was the busy waterside area where the loading and unloading of barges took place. On the far side of the canal, where the new library and residential complex now stand, was the public wharf, flanked by the slate-hung Canal Company offices built in 1803-04. The building abutting the south side of the canal on the left was a coal store, and the one on the right straddling the feeder channel was a granary. Others were canal company offices and worker's houses. On one of these there is a plaque to commemorate John Taylor, the mining manager linked with the promotion and early construction of the canal who went on to become a mining consultant and entrepreneur of international note. On the southern side of the site parallel to the river, a thick section of wall is all that remains of a pair of lime kilns which used canal water to drive a water-wheel, powering an inclined railway to carry coal and limestone onto the kiln top. As a commercial centre the canal and its terminus died in 1873, a victim of the railway, and the canal became a backwater. The half-century of intense activity in this area has, however, left us with a legacy in the buildings. The warehouses and other commercial buildings have, over the years, found other functions, most spectacularly in the transformation of a derelict store, originally a coal shed, into The Wharf, a vibrant arts centre. Another building, formerly the wharf offices, is now a Quaker meeting house. The two-storey granary building is of particular interest since it was built directly over the canal, with arched loading doors visible on the roadside elevation. In 1936 the building was purchased by Mary Gallup and she generously donated the property to the local Guides through a trust.

Bedford cottages (Audio points 5 & 6)

The sheer number and distinctive character of Bedford cottages in Tavistock makes them an appealing topic to contribute to ducal themes. The most impressive clusters are at West Bridge and at Fitzford (where the massive church built by the Bedfords may also be seen):

Fitzford Cottages (Audio point 5)

Photo: Barry Gamble

Fitzford Cottages with the Fitzford Church behind.
These were erected by the Bedford Estate in 1862. There are thirty-six cottages with large gardens at front and rear, built in six terraces close to the Tavistock Canal. The name of the estate was taken from the Fitz family, that had once had a mansion in the area, and of which only the gatehouse, next seen on the left, has survived. On the point of collapse in 1869 it was demolished to be re-built on the same site two years later. It is now a private house.

Fitzford Church (Audio point 5)

Photo: Barry Gamble

It was designed by Henry Clutton for William, the 8th Duke. It opened in 1867, a time when the town continued to spread westward. The new church was to meet the needs of a growing, predominantly working-class population, and was at first, referred to as the 'miner's church'. Many people felt that the Parish Church would not be able to deal with such a rapid rise in numbers, and that also, because of its middle class image it was not well-suited to minister effectively to semi-literate working-class families. Responding to these feelings the Duke built this huge edifice, at a cost of £12,000, in the Italian Lombard style that he favoured. No sooner had the church opened than the bottom fell out of the local mining economy.

A viable congregation for the new church never materialised. After years of struggle it was closed in 1914, to re-open for a brief period between 1936 and 1947. In 1952 the Church of England passed it on to the growing Roman Catholic community, and it was re-consecrated as 'The Church of our Lady of the Assumption'.

West Bridge Cottages (Audio point 6)

Photo: Barry Gamble

West Bridge Cottages.

The neat rows of cottages which may be seen were erected by the Bedford Estate in 1850 as part of a wider re-housing programme aimed at reducing overcrowding in the centre of the town and providing housing for rural farming and mining communities. Between 1845 and 1865 approximately 300 cottages, known as Bedford Cottages, were built in and around Tavistock. They were to a standard design of kitchen, living room, scullery, two or three bedrooms, and a garden plot that included a pigsty, and a standpipe shared with a neighbour. On the walls of these cottages, as with other buildings for which the Dukes of Bedford were responsible, constant, none-too-subtle, hints as to their origins feature in their construction. There is a plethora of ducal coronets and letter B's. The average cost of construction was £70. As a general rule cottages were let to those with residential qualification. Rents varied between 1/6 and 2/- per week, representing an annual return on nvestment of 5% - 7%.

Francis, the 7th Duke, whose statue was seen in the Tavistock Guildhall car park, is credited with the building of this remarkable stock of model housing. After he died in 1861 the work of building the cottages was carried on for a further decade by William, the 8th Duke. Credit is also due to John Benson, the Bedford Estate's local agent who passionately

argued the case for these cottages, and to Welsh born Theophilus Jones, the architect and surveyor most closely involved in the carrying out of the programme. He was totally committed to the purpose of the enterprise and, like the Duke, insisted on high standards in the execution of the work.

The explanation for the 7th Duke's decision to carry out this development lay in the steep rise in the town's population – up from 3420 in 1801 to 8147 in 1851. The Sanitary Report of 1846 found that 453 families, with a population of 1516, lived in single-room accommodation, while a further 275 families had only two rooms each. It was reported that 'the average of persons to houses throughout the town is about 8.5, while in London and Liverpool it is about 7'. The building of these cottages co-incided with clearance of the worst slum-areas in the town centre for new civil and commercial development, and resulted in many local people being re-located to better housing. Beside the cottages at West Bridge, and nearby at Fitzford, there are other groups of cottages in the town area at Parkwood Road and Trelawny Road.This riverside estate near the West Bridge was the centrepiece of the whole project, and was to become a showpiece, attracting attention by presenting itself as a model of what modern working class housing could be. It was also the largest of the estates, with 64 cottages, terraced and featuring both front and back gardens. The location of this, and other estates, on the fringe of the urban area, owed something to the belief that such areas would offer a healthier and more moral environment than the town-centre, and something also to the calculation that a location outside the area covered by street lighting would mean exemption from the gas rate.

Such projects welcome as they were, made only a minor contribution to solving Tavistock's problem of a shortage of working-class housing in the mid and late 19th century. While the programme proceeded, the copper boom continued to attract migrant workers and their families, and the population continued to grow. It was to be the collapse of the mining industry in the last quarter of the century, and the subsequent decline in the population, that was to be a far more potent factor in dealing with the housing shortage. When the Bedford Cottages came on the market in the Bedford Estate sale of 1911, the Duke offered advantageous terms to the sitting tenants, many of whom, as a consequence, came to own their own homes.

Plymouth Road (Audio point 7)

Photo: Barry Gamble

Town House, Plymouth Road.

The Plymouth Road was built between the 1820s and 1840s and is essentially the Champs-Elysees of Tavistock, a wide road which leads eastward from the town centre. It is flanked by Georgian and early Victorian terraced villas which were the homes of the gentry, professional classes and wealthy citizens. Along it you can see three former schools, all paid for by the dukes of Bedford.

Tavistock Abbey (Audio point 8)

Photo: Barry Gamble

The Abbey ruins

The Abbey was laid out on a standard Benedictine plan except that the secular area was east of the cloister rather than on the more usual west side. This was probably because the Fishlake stream made a loop across the valley bottom before it ran into the river Tavy. The abbey precinct occupied ground between the river and the northern slope of the valley, with the Fishlake stream marking the eastern boundary, and providing a convenient site for the monks' cornmill. Water for domestic purposes was diverted from higher up this stream and led into the precinct, probably by more than one conduit. There is documentary and archaeological evidence for runnels and drains in the western part of the enclosure. The precinct would have been enclosed, probably by a wooden fence or palisade. The dwellings and offices at this, Saxon, date would also been of thatched timber, but the church, the most important structure, although small in comparison with later rebuildings, may well have been built of stone. As stone replaced wood, it was largely with a grey-green volcanic freestone obtained from quarries to the north at Hurdwick. Once enclosed the bounds of the monastery remained unaltered for five centuries, and can still be traced in the town. Some of the late medieval walls are standing, notably along the river bank and between the Bedford Hotel and vicarage gardens. Certain land outside the precinct, such as meadows to the west, a deer park across the river, and woods to the north and east, were also attached to the monastery, and later still recognised as part of the ''abbey site''. Eighteenth century plans show a canal-like fish pond running along the side of the meadows where Plymouth Road is now. Fish were plentiful in both the Tavy and the Tamar, although the pond would have suited eels and also have taken drainage from the slope above.

Bedford Estate Office (Audio point 9)

At the top of Plymouth Road on the corner is a small single storey building which is now occupied by a firm of accountants. This was the Bedford Estate Office where from 1820s until the 1960s the Duke of Bedford's local estates where administered. The Tavistock estates constituted only one part of the Duke's country-wide possessions, each part of which was administered by a permanent local staff, working under the general direction of a central office in London. The power and influence that the Duke and his officials could exercise was considerable, covering every aspect of the public, social, political, and economic life of the community. The estate office was therefore the place where decisions were made, in the absence, for most of this time of any form of effective local government. After the sale ofthe bulk of the Bedford estate properties in 1911 the office

remained, with a reduced staff, to supervise the few remaining responsibilities. With the disposal of the last properties in the 1960s the curtain fell, so ending a chapter of Tavistock history that had lasted for more than four centuries.

Bedford Hotel (Audio point 9)

Photo: Barry Gamble

The impressive façade of the Bedford Hotel.
About 1720 the then tenant, Jacob Saunders, knocked down the former Abbey refectory and chapter house to build himself an expensive house, but his son died without children and the lease was bought by the Bedford estate. From 1752 to 1822, as Abbey House, it provided accommodation for the Stewards of the Devon estates, and in 1822 was converted into an inn. In deference to the former abbey, this was built in the Gothic style, and is now the Bedford Hotel.

Tavistock Foundries

The Tavistock Foundries are not part of the audio trail, but still worth a visit.

Tavistock Iron Works

Courtesy of Tavistock Museum

Plan of the Iron Works, 19th century.
Near the entrance to Vigo Mews was the site of the Lower Foundry started in 1800. William Bray, the Duke's steward, had a share in the foundry, which was soon taken over by a larger firm, the Tavistock Iron Works, financed by John Gill the banker. The site of the Lower Foundry was near the river but the more extensive Upper Foundry was the other side of the Millbrook and supplied by another new leat, taken off from the Millbrook and brought across fields (now the grounds of Kelly College) to the back of the industrial area. Here the water fell over several wheels to power equipment used in the processes of making cast iron. There was also manufacture of wrought iron and brass.

The Tavistock Iron Works supplied the domestic needs of the town, machinery for the local mining industry, and had an export trade for shipping. The firm of John Gill, followed by his son Thomas and their partners, owned the iron works until 1864, when it was briefly held by an Ordnance Company, and in 1868 sold to Joseph Mathews and his partner, previously of the Bedford Foundry. Thomas Gill died in 1861 the Tavistock Iron Works gave up the ground south of Parkwood Road, some of which was subsequently developed for housing. But north of Parkwood Road the stone-built foundry buildings remain and have been re-developed for housing; the arched windows with iron frames are typical of industrial architecture of its time. A site by the northern boundary was investigated archaeologically in 2007, exposing the foundations of part of the early foundry such as the casting shop and hammer mill. The smiths' shed is now Anthony Park, the 1866 date on the tie bar relates to repairs by the Ordnance Company. The bed of the Millbrook which ran alongside was covered over. Two other sheds to the east have been similarly modified into apartments and given the address Heritage Place.

Tavy Iron Works.

Photo: Barry Gamble

Tavy Iron Works today.

From the upstream side of the bridge can be seen the site of the Tavy Iron Works. The brothers James and Henry Pearce set up a foundry on the southern bank of the river in 1852, where there had formerly been woollen mills. The Pearces were general engineers who made mining machinery but tended to concentrate on domestic products such as fireplaces and the kitchen ranges that were so important to Victorian housekeeping. Initially there were two sheds on the left of the river, with a house between them, later used as an office; this is now the house at the corner.

Stannary Bridge Road was opened in 1995, along the route of a previous railway embankment and is part of the A386 route out of Tavistock towards Okehampton. There are good views of the river Tavy from Stannary Bridge. Just upstream is Hawkin's Weir, constructed in 1800 to supply the leat to the Lower Foundry, which ran behind the Parkwood cottages. Today nothing of this leat remains except some stretches of dry ditch.

Water power was provided by an old leat, originating at Mount Tavy from the Taviton and Kingford streams, and brought down the hill to an undershot waterwheel on the eastern shed where it drained into the river. This southern site was too narrow for expansion; in 1869 land on the northern bank of the river was leased and new workshops, including a casting shop, added. The pattern shops and office remained on the southern side. By this time, the railway had been extended from Tavistock, crossing the river on a viaduct above the western end of the Tavy Iron Works ground and continuing in an embankment. For convenience a footbridge, at an annual rent of half-a-crown, was thrown across the river, but castings made in the new premises had to be taken by road for finishing, across Vigo Bridge. In the river bed above the bridge is the remnant of a pier of the footbridge. The Pearce brothers built and occupied a pair of houses, Rock Park, south of Mount Tavy Road. A number of their workers lived in a row of terraced cottages built on a steep hillside above Mount Tavy Road. After the brothers died, the works continued under different management until taken over by the Budge family from Lumburn in 1905. Iron working continued, with an interruption for the First World War, until in the late 1920s trade became uneconomic. A number of manhole covers made by the Budge foundry can be seen in the town area. During the First World War, with the foundry not in use, the water from the leat was carried above and across the river in a large pipe near the footbridge, to generate electricity by a turbine which was housed in an extension of the foundry shed by the river. Electrical power for the town was also supplied by a gas producer engine in an extension to the north side of the shed. Until recently the northern site was occupied by the electricity company but it is currently awaiting re-development. The southern foundry site has been converted to residential accommodation.

Bedford Foundry

Near the top of Bannawell Street a short diversion to the right into Lakeside will reveal a long industrial style of building which was formerly the Bedford Foundry. This was comparatively short-lived, but was important during the mining boom of the mid-nineteenth century. It was started in 1844 by the engineers Thomas Nichols and John Williams, soon afterwards joined by Joseph Mathews. It was originally powered by the Fishlake stream but in 1862 they installed 'a powerful steam hammer of the Harvey patent'. In 1868 Nichols and Mathews bought the remainder of the lease of the Tavistock Iron Works, and relocated to Parkwood Road. Today the building is much restored and part of it is used by a long established undertakers business.