

Some more facts, and myths, about Tavistock

Tavistock was the site of a wealthy Benedictine Abbey founded in AD 961. Tavistock takes its name from the river Tavy which flows through the centre of the town. It was granted a market charter in 1105 and developed a prosperous wool trade producing cloth known as Tavistock Kersies, and then in the 14th Century became a Stannary Town where tin was weighed and assayed.

With the dissolution of the abbeys by Henry VIII the lands were given to John Russell who became the 1st Earl of Bedford. It was the 7th Duke of Bedford who in the 19th Century rebuilt the centre of Tavistock, his wealth coming from the tin mines in the area.

So how true is the legend of Tavistock's first Cream Teas? Well, it is said that when the Abbey was being re-built after being plundered and badly damaged by a band of marauding Vikings in 997AD, the monks rewarded the local workers by feeding them with bread and 'clowted cream'. Unfortunately for those workers it is highly unlikely that the monks topped their 'clowted cream' with strawberry preserve in the true Devon tradition. Sugar hadn't made its way to England in the 10th century and so fruit preserves were made by mixing fruit pulp with honey and allowing it to dry in the sun, creating a texture more like that of a jellied sweet. So, it is more likely that the workers' treat would have been made up of rye bread, clowted cream, dollops of honey and a jug of ale.

The 7th Duchess of Bedford single-handedly changed the eating habits of a nation. The story goes that in the 1840s she was visiting her friend the 5th Duke of Rutland at Belvoir Castle when she found herself faint from hunger in the mid-afternoon. Having decided that feeling peckish in the afternoon was most undesirable, she created a light meal made up of cakes and sandwiches to accompany her beloved pot of tea and the traditional English afternoon tea was created.

Tavistock is at the eastern edge of a world heritage site. The Tamar mining district around Tavistock comprises part of the UNESCO Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site. In the 18th and 19th Centuries copper and then arsenic were extensively mined in this area.