

Cornish Mineral Spar Tower - Newquay Heritage Archive & Museum



In 1982 a 'Cornish Mineral Spar Tower' was donated to the Newquay Old Cornwall Society. A note with it read that it was about 200 years old and had been made by a Cornishman who worked in a mine in the St Just, Penwith area. The word 'spar' refers to any shiny glassy coloured or white mineral. To build a 'Spar Tower' a framework is attached to a base, here an octagonal plate of marble, and filled in with white Plaster of Paris. Next the minerals are attached to its exterior with more plaster. Making 'Spar Towers' and also glass panelled 'Spar Boxes' containing decorative patterns or scenes using minerals is very much a Northern England tradition associated with lead, silver and iron ore mining. The craft dates to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, perhaps as early as 1830. The towers and boxes were used to as ornaments in the homes of miners. They could also be sold or put on display for a few pennies, perhaps at a local fair.

It is quite possible that the Cornishman that made the 'Cornish Mineral Spar Tower', on show at the Newquay Heritage Archive & Museum, had at some time worked in mines up country, such as in the North Pennines, Cumbria, and seen and admired the 'Spar Boxes and Towers' there and decided one day he'd make his own.

The parish of St Just, Penwith, borders along a stunning piece of coastline. The area is peppered with the remains of ruined tall chimneys, buildings that housed pumping or lifting engines, stamps for crushing ore, adits and shafts, mine waste dumps, workshops, calciners and count houses and little mining villages such as Botallack and Pendeen. There are written records of mining on this coast as early as the 1500's. All the minerals used in making the 'Cornish Mineral Spar Tower' - crystalline quartz in shades ranging from black, brown, orange and colourless, iron oxides such as specular haematite and black hard goethite, silvery pyrites and fool's gold and glassy cubic fluorite are commonly found in the St Just mining district. The calcite, as pure white tabular crystals forming rosettes and interwoven plates, used in the 'Cornish Mineral Spar Tower' is very characteristic for the area. This is an unusual object and relatively rare showing connections to Cornwall past as a great mining country with its wide selection of minerals.