



ROYAL CORNWALL POLYTECHNIC SOCIETY

Patron: HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

Falmouth Arts Centre Church Street Falmouth TR11 3EG Telephone (01326) 314566

A Brief History of the Society

The Post Office Packet Service had reached its peak and Falmouth was a thriving town when, in 1833, the Cornwall Polytechnic Society was formed.

Over 200 Cornish mines employed more than 30,000 people, producing much of the world's output of copper, tin, lead and zinc. The three children of a prominent Falmouth family, the Fox family, took an interest in the conditions of the people working in their foundry at Perranarworthal. They found that many of them had good ideas and suggestions about the work of the foundry, but lacked the means to develop them.

So the Cornwall Polytechnic Society was formed, *“to encourage the useful arts and to elicit the ingenuity and inventive powers of the young.”* Thus the word “polytechnic” was used for the first time in this country, and the Society became the first Polytechnic in Britain. It may prove to be the last.

In 1835, King WILLIAM IV bestowed patronage on the Society, which added the “Royal” to its name.

In the same year, the RCPS decided to build a Hall as a permanent home for the Society and its Annual Exhibition of the arts and sciences. The Hall cost £600 to build, and was used for the Exhibition in 1836, in spite of not yet having a ceiling!



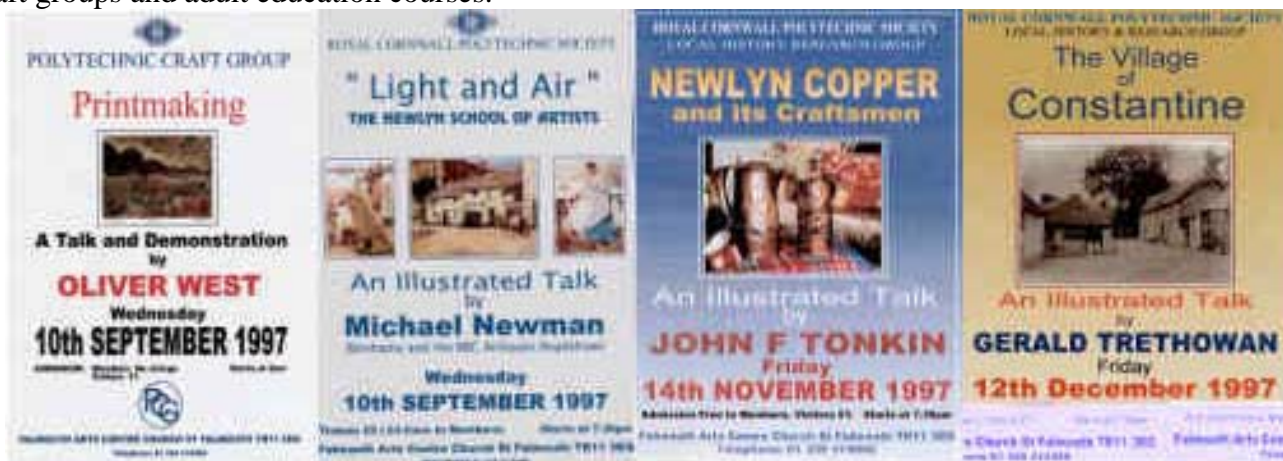
Throughout the 19th century, the Society played a prominent role in the industrial development of Cornwall. The Society was also at the forefront in developing the new skill of *photography*, and still houses a large collection of early photographs and historical records.

The Hall was originally used for *“objects connected with the sciences, arts and literature”* – but not for theatrical purposes, the Fox family being Quakers. This restriction was removed in 1889 to permit “dramatic plays”. In 1910, the Society was granted its first *“cinematographic licence”* – one of the first in Cornwall.

In 1854 the Falmouth Arts Committee was formed to present the performing arts in the theatre. Now called simply ‘Falmouth Arts’, it promotes a wide variety of activities, including theatre, music, film, dance, poetry and comedy.

Present activities of the Society

The Grade 2 listed building includes a 200 seat theatre, a main exhibition gallery, and three smaller galleries. Many period features remain, such as the wing staircases, the gallery windows, and the gallery ceiling. The galleries are well equipped, and many exhibitions take place throughout the year. The theatre and other rooms are used for conferences, public lectures, meetings, historical research, seminars, craft groups and adult education courses.



The **Local History Research Group** collects photographs, documents, and ephemera relating to the history of the Falmouth area, and conducts research into related topics.

Talks are organised on topics of local, historical interest, members of the Group visit schools and give talks to students at different levels, and students visit the As Centre to view material from our collections.

Every second year, the Group mounts a popular three week exhibition relating to the history of Falmouth and the area of the Carrick Roads [River Fal].

The RCPS possesses a large collection of old photographs, particularly of sailing vessels of this century. The Society has historically loaned manuscripts and reference material to [The Royal Institution of Cornwall](#), [Truro], and items for display at the Falmouth Maritime Museum exhibition.

A place in the community

Falmouth contains a rare treasure – a flexible arts venue in the heart of Cornwall. [The Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society](#) has maintained this lively and accessible centre since the building was constructed over 160 years ago.

In keeping with its 'Open Doors' policy, the Society welcomes new local history research projects which illustrate the [Heritage of Falmouth](#), much of which is derived from the Sailing Postal Packet era, an exciting period, which members and visitors will enjoy studying.

FP 20/11/1897: *Deaths FOX - At Penjerrick, on 18th November, Anna Maria Fox, eldest daughter of the late Robert Were Fox, F. R. S., aged 81 years. Sister of Miss Caroline Fox whose published journal and letters of their earlier history created a large amount of interest. For several years she was intimately associated with so many institutions, and scientific societies of Cornwall, that it would be difficult to enumerate them. She originated the idea of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, and was the last survivor of those who attended its opening meeting in the Falmouth Classical School on the 14th January, 1833. Her world wide reputation, ready interest in the welfare of others, and energetic character endeared her to all classes.*