

The Count House

The Jewel in the Crown

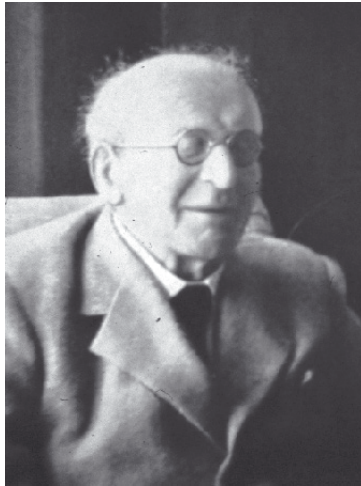
by Ian Wall with the help and support of
John Atherton and many others

'Of all our Club huts, Bosigran is the jewel in the crown' The Count House is a handsome building of weathered granite which harmonises with the evocative ruins of the neighbouring engine house of an old tin mine.

(*Cornish Perspectives* by Mike Banks CC Journal 1997)

The late Arthur Westlake Andrews (1868-1968) was born in Hastings on the 12th December and he is often referred to as the 'father of Cornish climbing'. Andrews, who has a fascinating history, will forever be linked to the history of the Count House and that has an equally fascinating history.

The 'Account House' got its name from the days when the Bosigran mine was flourishing, in the early part of the 19th Century. Tin mining had been carried out in the Morvah and Zennor Parishes since at least the 17th Century, which is mentioned by writers and historians of



A W Andrews.



STEVE ANDREWS

the time. The area between Watch Croft and the sea is a honeycomb of workings, some of which were dug in from the sea cliffs and some from where the veins surfaced as outcrops. Although these old workings are now blocked up, for safety reasons, they are reported as being from 20 fathoms to 120 fathoms deep. The Engine Shaft near the Count House, as we now know it, is actually 780ft deep (a fathom is 6ft). In 1838 more than a 100 people

were employed in the Morvah and Zennor Mines. The Bosigran Company gained permission to develop the land around what came to be known as the old Engine Shaft. It also secured the rights 'to erect an account-house and engine house' so it is from that time that the original buildings on that site date — the 1850s. Future mining development was on the basis that the miners could only work the pitches that they could identify from the upstairs window of the Account House. The main room in the building was the store for materials and the old coal-store the stables. The Account House was where the records were kept and the accounts handled, including the paying of the miners. It was also the



scene for the renowned Count House Dinners, which were provided for shareholders on days when the accounts were to be read and approved. It was common for the Account House to 'embody a prosperous appearance in order to reassure investors and to present a public face which was solid yet refined'.

In its heyday this was a very busy and dangerous industrial site, whose prosperity rose and fell according to the price of tin and copper. It was productively worked for a short time in the 1800s but was closed down when production dropped to only 150 tons of tin. A tithe map dated 1841 shows the engine buildings, smith's shop and the Account House buildings; the property of Bosigran, in the Parish of Zennor, belonging to H C Phillips and covering an area similar to that now owned by the National Trust. (See CC Journal 1962 for *The Carn Galver Mine* article by John and Ruth Neill and an extended reading list.)

A W Andrews had pioneered the first routes in West Penwith and popularised the area through a series of articles in the CC Journals. The first appeared in 1905 (Vol.VII/29) and he goes on to say 'for more than 25 years I have examined the district which lies on the north coast

of the Land's End Peninsula... and have not nearly exhausted its possibilities'. His interest continued for another 50 years – in total over 75 years of devotion to West Penwith, truly a lifetime of exploration.

During World War One D H Lawrence was staying in a cottage at Higher Tregerthen, midway between Gurnard's Head and St Ives with his German wife Frieda. It was while at the Count House and during their nightly singing sessions with Cecil Gray, a local musician who was renting the Count House at that

time, and like-minded 'Ranim' souls, that the local police first raided them. Frieda was a cousin of the Red Baron, the famous German flying ace, and they were suspected of passing bread and information to German submarines down at the coves at night. The locals knew all about the nocturnal cove activities and the 'Owlers', the smugglers who had used the coves for illicit activities since the early medieval times. It was believed that Lawrence, Frieda and Gray were the ringleaders of an elaborate spy network. Local feelings ran so high that one day locals armed with scythes and pitchforks set out for the Count House to murder Gray and throw his body down *Suicide Wall*. In his autobiography Gray wrote 'I was only saved, in fact, through the fortunate circumstance that the malevolence or the Cornish people was only exceeded by their cowardice'. Lawrence describes in his book *Kan-*

garoo (Chapter 10) how the locals again visited the Count House on seeing lights flashing from a seaward window, interpreting it as a signal of 'Owlers'. Gray was given a heavy fine. A few days later Higher Tregerthen was searched and papers taken. Three days after that Lawrence was told to leave Cornwall and report to the police in London; Gray gave them the money to do so. (See the article in *High* magazine by Terry Gifford – *DH Lawrence and the Count House*.) It is interesting to note that Gray was already being scared by the Count House 'Knocker', Bosigran's poltergeist, that emerges from the disused mine to plague the inhabitants of the Count House.

J L Andrews, nephew of A W Andrews, purchased Bosigran farm and the property shown on the 1841 map in the mid-1930s. At that unsettled time investors were advised to divide their capital between shares and property. The Andrews family had a long-standing interest in West Penwith and by using the Count House as a centre for climbers A W A, then about 65, had a renewed interest and activity.

It was A W A's initiative, enthusiasm and far sighted vision as to how Cornish climbing would develop that, with

only 31 routes in Cornwall established, he persuaded the Club to lease the property in 1938. Within that first summer about 20 climbers visited and stayed in the hut and it was reported that there were occasional visits made in the winter. The 'authorities seemed content with the start' but the Hon Custodian, with his incurable optimism thought that it might have been made more use of. "It is probably not well enough known as yet



Iain Peters, Keith Lawder and Dennis Bateman in 1961.

and there will be no doubt be an overflow next year, especially as a separate part of the house will be available for the use of members who want to bring ladies and family parties." Was this to be the first introduction of what is now a very popular event in our Club Meets Calendar — the Family Meet?

Andrews played an active role filling many offices in the Club's affairs throughout his membership of 58 years. As Journal Editor, Andrews introduced the Hut to the membership by saying 'It is a far cry to Bosigran, but it's a good place when you get there. The house has plenty of room for climbers with its big dormitory, with 12 fitted bunks (with Vi-sprung mattresses) and a Devon fireplace. The upstairs will be converted for lady guests and there would be a separate outside lavatory'. Andrews was then

appointed the first custodian. The Club eventually purchased the hut after the war but Andrews had already announced this fact in the 1939 *Journal*.

During the Second World War Arthur Westlake Andrews enrolled as a special constable at the age of 70 to guard his beloved Cornwall from enemy attacks; he knew every hiding place, possible landing site and footpath like the back of his hand. Andrews was an environmentalist at heart and predicted that the future masses would have an effect on the natural balance. He wrote:

Will there be ravens on Bosigran still
And has the buzzard got his usual nest
In the Great Zawn, or will they too have passed
To other hunting grounds with all the rest.

He was right and the masses did upset the balance of nature but now this has been recognised by the authorities and there is a voluntary year-round ban on Porthmoina Island. Please adhere to this voluntary agreement.

From the beginning of hostilities in 1939 the effect on the European coastline was dramatic. Every possible landing site had massive defensive structures placed on them, the Germans calling it their 'Atlantic Wall'. The Allies had to find a way through. This task was given to the Commandos and soon St Ives was established as a base for the newly formed Commando Cliff Assault Centre. Their mission was not to land on the beaches but on the intervening cliffs, at night, where they would have to scale the precipitous natural rock defences and carry out raids. The training programme was long and arduous and many Club members enlisted and took up major roles in the training schedule; in the future many enlisted service men were to join the Club. The Commandos have a long association with Cornwall and many have made considerable contributions to the Cornish climbing scene. Check the first ascent list in the guidebooks and see how many times Zeke Deacon, Mac McDermott, Vivian Stevenson, Peter Biven, Barry Biven, Mike Banks and Trevor Peck appear, then check out the route name that can be linked to service men by definition. Even in tricouni-nailed boots many routes of a formidable standard were completed. Incidentally, have you ever read Mike Banks's book *Commando Climber* published by J M Dent in 1955?

Just after the Second World War a Royal Naval Mountaineering Club Meet was being held at Bosigran. Keith Lawder, then a Rear Admiral, was at the Bosigran sink in his usual scruffy climbing gear when an Able Seaman arrived. Seeing Keith he went up to him and said, "Excuse me chief but what's all this buzz I hear about some bloody old rear admiral joining the meet." Keith quickly replied: "Oh! I wouldn't worry about that — I hear he's not such a bad old stick."

In 1950 A W Andrews and E C Pyatt wrote the CC Cornish guide, an individual and idiosyncratic description of climbing, interspersed with accounts of natural history, legends and original poetry. (The CC owns the literary copyright to A W Andrews's poetry) The rest of the 1950s saw the real coming of age of Cornish climbing. With the introduction of nylon ropes, rock boots and the gradual

appearance of reamed out engineering nuts, intrepid leaders were venturing into what at one time were considered to be inaccessible places. Also at that time the Cornish cliffs seemed to support the then acceptable 'artificial' or 'aid' climbing. If there was a weakness that would take gear, then there was the chance of a route. Since the hazy days of the 50s the development of climbing has seen a meteoric explosion, as can be witnessed in the recently launched guidebook. Andrews certainly had foresight and vision, but would he have approved?



Right up to the time of the latest renovation of the Count House the 'Knocker' has regularly made his presence felt. Is it so surprising that he has found comfort in such a place? With so many mines in close proximity to the building and those terrible working conditions there must be many a ghost who still roams the miles of underground workings. And the 'Owlers', trying to land their illicit goods on that treacherous coastline in storms, their 'spirits' will still be dancing on the spray as they get blown inland on gale force winds to wrestle under the eaves and between the wooden floorboards of the Count House.

In 1957 Major E H Marriott (Charles) was staying at the Count House recuperating from a fractured skull. (Remember this was before the building was renovated and areas moved round.) At about 4pm one afternoon in August he was sitting in the kitchen reading a book and having a cup of tea when he heard someone come in through the back door and climb the stairs. Marriott checked the teapot to see if there was enough for the visitor before continuing with his book. He noted the visitor had gone along the passage to the ladies' room and then back to the central room, which he was using, presumably checking on bed space. The visitor then walked back down the stairs (positioned on the far side of the wall behind the old range). Marriott, concerned as to the identity of the intruder, went to the old fuel store door to check outside, clear vision for 50 yards. He then ran round the building, again no one, so he checked each room without finding a soul. Unusually, for a warm, sunny afternoon in August, there were no cars in the car park or by the old Engine Shaft. Marriott was so convinced that somebody had been in the building because he had consciously checked the pot to ensure the new arrival could share a brew. That evening he asked all members staying in the hut, plus those camping in the vicinity, if they had called in during the afternoon — no one had. Marriott went over every detail of the

event to try to draw a convincing conclusion to the episode but he couldn't.

Several years later Marriott met a lady, who as a child, had stayed in the small room that is now next to the room often used by married couples. One night, half-asleep, the girl thought she heard her mother pass along the passage to the end room but immediately afterwards she saw a strange man standing by her bed looking at her. He disappeared almost immediately. However, the young lady was very clear about this in her own mind. John Atherton was one of Marriott's executors and when it fell to him to sort out his papers upon Marriott's death in 1985, he came across documented evidence to support the stories that Marriott had told the Athertons. Janet Atherton suspects that the little girl to whom Marriott had referred was in fact Denise Evans, daughter of Nea Morin.

In the mid 80s John and Janet, who already knew of the 'Knocker' story (although they were not at this stage aware of the written version) arranged to go climbing with friends staying at the Count House. Unfortunately one friend, Robin, was ill and the weather inclement, so, after checking on the sleeping 'invalid' who was in the large room at the St Ives end of the building, they settled down to drinking coffee. While they were chattering they quite distinctly heard Robin, who had obviously woken up, moving around upstairs. They couldn't work out why he had walked the full length of the building and into the Morvah end bunkroom without coming down the stairs, which he would have had to pass. Not wanting to go upstairs to check, in case Robin was washing, Janet sent John up. On his return he said that Robin was still in bed and asleep. When he did eventually wake up and go down stairs, Robin said that he had been in bed and slept through since the previous evening. Both John and Janet were in no doubt as to what they had heard.

The Count House offers a rare opportunity for families to be involved on official meets and the Family Meet held in July/August is always a well-booked favourite. The term 'Family Meet' must be taken in its broadest sense; there are grandchildren, friends of grandchildren, aunts and uncles, real as well as pseudo, even climbing child-minders. All have a great time with something for everyone, as some conversations overheard by Dave Gregory in *That Fly on the Wall CC Journal* 1996 will support: Disappointed parent: "Going to the beach? I thought you'd want to look at some of those overhanging 4cs. They're well-protected." Overhearing cynic: "He wants to look at those overhanging 38Cs on Treen Beach. They're not protected



'Sinistra' VS Bosigran.

at all!"

"They ought to stop the family meet"

"Good God why?"

"All these kids can climb better than us. It's very humbling. What will they be like when they get to our age?"

"Pathetic just like us."

The Count House, which was built an estimated 150 years ago and situated on one of the most exposed parts of Penwith's coast, had witnessed a lot of activity both practically and spiritually and these events had taken their toll on the structure. It was decided that the 'good old Count House' needed a little TLC; TLC — more like major heart surgery which is almost what it caused the Committee to have once the skin was rolled back and the organs of the beast had been exposed. The contractors who worked on the refurbishment suggested that the building was within 10 years of a 'structural disaster',

but once £51,661 of Lottery Sports Fund was secured to support the Club's budget the appropriate 'motions were passed' and the work began. After two and a half years' work and a virtual rebuild the hut was officially opened by Lord Chorley on the 31st October 1997. Since then it has proved to be one of the Club's most used huts, some say that since the refurbishment the 'Knocker' has disappeared. I'm not so sure; after all, who else could be regularly spiriting away all our white goods?

Despite it being a far cry to Bosigran, it's a good place when you get there.

Mountain Rescue Post

The Count House was a Mountain Rescue Post from around 1965 to 1981 and was even shown as such on the Ordnance Survey maps. The plaque was fixed to the front door. Equipment was provided at the Count House and included a Neil Robertson and a Thomas stretcher. It was Keith Lawder's idea to have a cliff rescue 'team' and it was activated when Jim Smith took over from him as Custodian. The Coastguard were not keen on cliff rescue in those days, so Jim was called out by them or the police. He then organised the rescue with any climbers he could 'rope' in. Eventually the Coastguard trained (with Jim's help in the early days) to become proficient in cliff rescue techniques. At about the time Dennis Bateman took over from Jim as Custodian, the hut's mountain rescue role ended.

The Count House Custodians

1938 – 1954	A W Andrews
1954 – 1965	K M Lawder
1965 – 1981	J W Smith
1981 – 1996	D W Bateman
1995 –	J R Atherton