VISNES
-more than a coppermine

Karmøy municipal
Visnes

In 1864/65, Thorbjørn Brueland from Jæren was fishing for herring off Visnes.

After a while, he needed to go ashore to answer a call of nature, and at the turn of the tides in Grønnevikken, he made a discovery that would necessitate rewriting not only the history of Karmøy and Visnes, but also that of Norway.

The find was copper pyrite in such abundance that Vigsnes Kobberverk AS was started already in 1865. This was a time of prosperity in Norway and in the course of its first seven years, the mine’s work force increased from around 20 to over 500. In a few years, the fishing and farming community of Visnes was converted into a hectic mining town with nearly 3000 inhabitants!

From 1877 and through the following decade, Vigsnes Kobberverk produced 65% of Norway’s total output of pyrite ore and played a central role in the Norwegian and Nordic mining industry. Due to its high quality, the Vigsnes copper was a much sought-after commodity. That was the reason why Vigsnes copper was used in the Statue of Liberty.

Vigsnes Kobberverk invested a lot in modern technology and introduced several technical innovations at an exceptionally early date. One example is the pneumatic boring machine which was put to use in Visnes 90 years before it was introduced at Røros. The telephone was installed only five years after Bell invented it in 1875, and electrical lights illuminated the mining area only six years after Edison’s invention of the incandescent bulb in 1879. This was in fact seven years before Norway’s capital got electric lights! Charles de France was the key figure in the mine’s first period. He was a great garden and flower lover and had a large park laid out, which has subsequently borne the name of Fransahagen ["France’s garden”].

The park was designed to “make up for the barren landscape and for the sake of order and neatness”. It was important that mine employees from Central Europe should not “fall into a state of gloom because of the desert-like scenery”. Fransahagen was laid out in the rolling countryside immediately north of the mining area, and with its many roads and paths, it grew into the pearl of the mill’s lands. Deciduous trees were planted, among them poplars, elms, limes, beeches and various species of silver fir.

Pavilions were raised on little knolls, and duck ponds, bowling alleys and vegetable gardens were set out elsewhere.

Because of all this, Fransahagen became a green oasis in a landscape otherwise blighted by sulphur. The northern part of the property was called “Mill’s Land”. Here the mill ran a farm during its first period of operation. Between the many knolls, grass was cultivated in small patches of land, and small roads were built to link these fields together. The roads were built by miners who for reasons of health could no longer work in the mines. The roads were well adapted to the terrain and were of a high standard. This was so that the “privileged” could use them as bridle paths.

During the first 30-year period, Vigsnes Kobberverk was on foreign hands. In 1899, prospecting operations started at Rodkleiv Mine and in 1909, Norwegian interests took over. Work at Vigsnes Kobberverk continued until 1972. Today the old mining area of around 110 acres is public property. The foundation Vigsnes Grubeområde
administers approximately 41 acres, and this foundation has over the years become an active museum with many buildings and activities. The northern part, with the many bridle and walking paths are managed by the Nordrogaland and Sunnhordland Council for Outdoor Activities and Recreation. This area, together with the foundation’s property, is the most frequently-used hiking area in Northern Karmøy.

From colourful heathland to sulphur-blighted fields and back!

Mining had a great impact on the heaths around Visnes, which were blighted by sulphurous fall-out. Today, after operations at the copper mill have ceased, the heather is back in more than one way.

On the holms and in the fields around the mines, the heather thrives and shows us what the landscape looked like for centuries before mining began. These treeless and seemingly barren heathlands were an important resource for the fisherman farmer. As heather is evergreen, it provided sufficient animal fodder through the winter season. It was indispensable as firewood and was also used to make tools and utensils. Today the heather and Visnes are linked together in a very special way. The Karmøy Heather Centre, established in 1996, is housed in splendid premises just south of the Mining Museum’s administration building. Here visitors are introduced to the old lifestyle of the Karmøy fishermen farmers and shown the characteristic heath landscape and heather-related products. Heather is grown and heather-related products are manufactured at the Karmøy Heather Centre, something which may contribute to increasing our understanding of the need for preservation of these heathlands.

The entrance of the coppermines in Visnes

Photo: Ørjan B. Iversen