Ken McKechnie at Caradon mines.

Historic Cornish mines provide the inspiration for thriller by Devon author

The old mine ruins that scatter the countryside at Caradon make for a dramatic picture, a scenic reminder of Cornwall's rich mining heritage. If you walk up to the relics today, you're likely to meet plenty of friendly ponies, quite a few dog walkers, and the occasional photographer. Yet in the mid-1800s, this landscape would have been teeming with people, all of them employed at the then lucrative copper mines.

Devon author Ken McKechnie took one look at this place and decided it would make the perfect setting for his new novel. When it comes to mines, Ken knows what he's talking about: he was a mining geologist for 40 years, a job that took him to mines all around the world. But living in Devon, with a Cornish background, he wanted his 19th century thriller, The Boy in the Dark, to be set at a mine closer to home.

Finding the ideal location for the story was proving problematic, however – until he found this spot: "I knew what I wanted in terms of the setting and the landscape, but I just couldn't find anywhere that was quite right," said Ken, who lives near Lapford in mid Devon.

"The story is loosely based on the Devon Great Consols mine at Morwellham in the Tamar Valley, which in its day was the world's largest copper mine. But I wanted my mine to be in a big, open space with wide vistas. I drove around a few places in Cornwall and when I came to Caradon I immediately thought: 'This is where I want my story to be set'."

The Boy in the Dark begins in the 1850s with Grace Pascoe burying her husband John, the best 'tribute' miner in the district but who was killed at the Wheal Emma Mine in mysterious circumstances. A tribute miner was one who'd bid for rights to work a section of a mine for a percentage of the value of the ore raised. John, being the most knowledgeable, was earning much more than the other miners when he died. Was his death linked to his journal, all written in code?

His 14-year-old son Thomas is now the family's main breadwinner and has to follow his father's footsteps down the mine. But he suspects his dad didn't die in an accident. Can he find out what really happened? Who can he trust to help him? And can he decipher the code?

Mention 'a novel set in a Cornish mine' and people tend to think of Poldark. But, says, Ken: "I don't think people will compare my book with Poldark because the Poldark books were historical romances. Yes, there is romance in my book, but it is essentially a thriller and I hope a real page turner.

"I haven't found another novel which is set in a Cornish mine since Winston Graham's Poldark books. There are some novels that mention mines but few, if any stories, are actually set in them. I don't know why that should be; perhaps it's because you need some experience of working underground to be able to write about it.

"I know what it's like to work down there – it's tough – but in the 19th century, it would have been even more grim. People look at the old mine ruins in the landscape now and think they look romantic but life for the workers was horrible. The only lighting the miners had were candles and if you've ever been underground, you'll know how feeble that light is. The front cover has a photo of a Cornish mine which was taken by a very talented local photographer, Simon Bone. It shows how cramped and dark the mines were and this is the picture that I wanted to convey in the novel.

"The air down there was terrible and the work was extremely hard and dangerous. Average life expectancy was 47 and many miners contracted lung disease from the bad air. Mining was also exploitative; the owners got rich from the miners' toil."

Ken spent three years researching Cornwall's mining history – and he discovered something which was to change his storyline: "The book was originally going to be about Grace Pascoe," he explained. "Grace was a 'bal maiden' – a woman who worked at the mines and I've always been fascinated by the role women played in mining. In 1860 there were 3,000 to 4,000 women employed at mines in Cornwall. But they only ever worked on the surface, they never went down the mines, so Thomas therefore became the main character because I needed the character to be underground.

"The great thing about Cornish mining is that the historical records are extensive and I was able to find many contemporary accounts of various Cornish mines," he added. "I wanted my story to be completely authentic. And all of the journeys taken by the characters in the books are real; you can track them on an OS map."

Ken has his own memories of Cornwall's disused mines: "My father grew up in St Austell and his mother was Cornish and is buried at St Blazey. When we were kids we'd spend a lot of time messing around at old mine workings."

Ken moved to Devon in 1998 and in recent years has finally been able to take up writing full-time. This is his third novel. He was offered a deal for the book by a publisher but preferred to self-publish it and is initially distributing it through local book shops, Facebook and on Amazon.

So does Ken envisage a series of books, just like Poldark: "I'd love to write a sequel if The Boy in the Dark does well. But for now, my hope is simply that people read it and enjoy it. During my career I worked at mines in Canada, Africa, the Far East and South America, including gold, diamond, silver

and copper mines. I often came across so-called Cornish Jacks, miners with a Cornish background. All of them retained a strong interest in their heritage. My particular hope is that the book goes down well with them – and indeed with anyone who has Cornish mining in their blood."

The Boy in the Dark by Ken McKechnie, published by Redgate Books, RRP £7.99.
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