

Gullrock, Port Gaverne



The History of a Pilchard Palace

1803 to 2011

by

Malcolm Lee

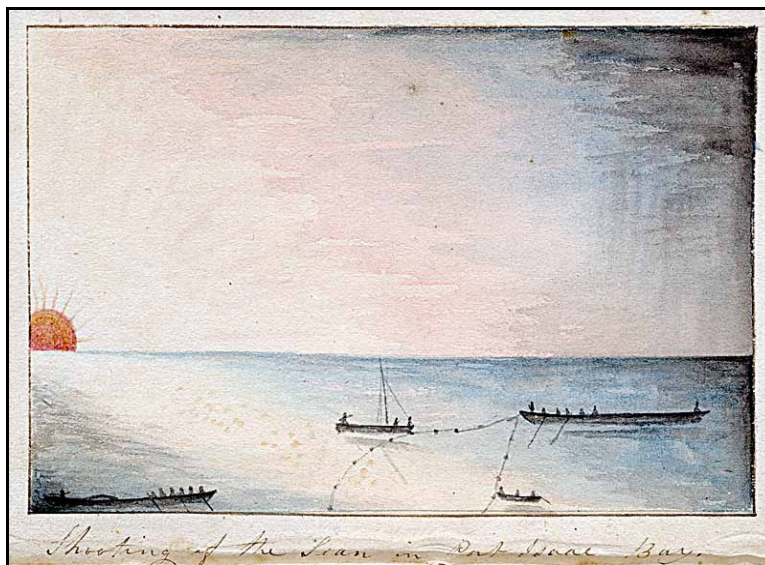
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The History of a Pilchard Palace

1803 to 1920: Liberty Fish Cellars

Gullrock was built in the early years of the 19th century as an industrial building known as a fish cellar, or more exotically in east Cornwall and Devon, a Pilchard Palace. It is one of four such buildings in Port Gaverne constructed about the same time to process the huge shoals of pilchards arriving around Cornish shores. There were also four more Pilchard Palaces in Port Isaac and two more in Port Quin. Our building was undoubtedly constructed in the early summer of 1803 to be ready for the main pilchard season in August. The land on which it stands was leased on 11th May 1803 by John Cock of Port Isaac to Philip Ball, a Mevagissey merchant, for £110, with an annual rental of 5 shillings (25p). The lease describes the land as “*Plot of ground, part of Harris' Hill, part of a tenement in Tregaverne in Endellion, in occ. of Jas. Strout, being 160' n.w. to s.e., and 96' from the rivulet towards the north, with all houses, cellars and buildings to be erected there. Lessee to have access to Port Gavern haven through the gateway at n. corner thereof, by a road extending from the gateway to the plot; also use of water in common with adj. tenants.*”¹ This early link with Mevagissey merchants continued in Port Isaac, as the current working fish cellar was run by the Mevagissey firm Pawlyn Bros into recent times and is still known as the Pawlyn Cellars by older residents.

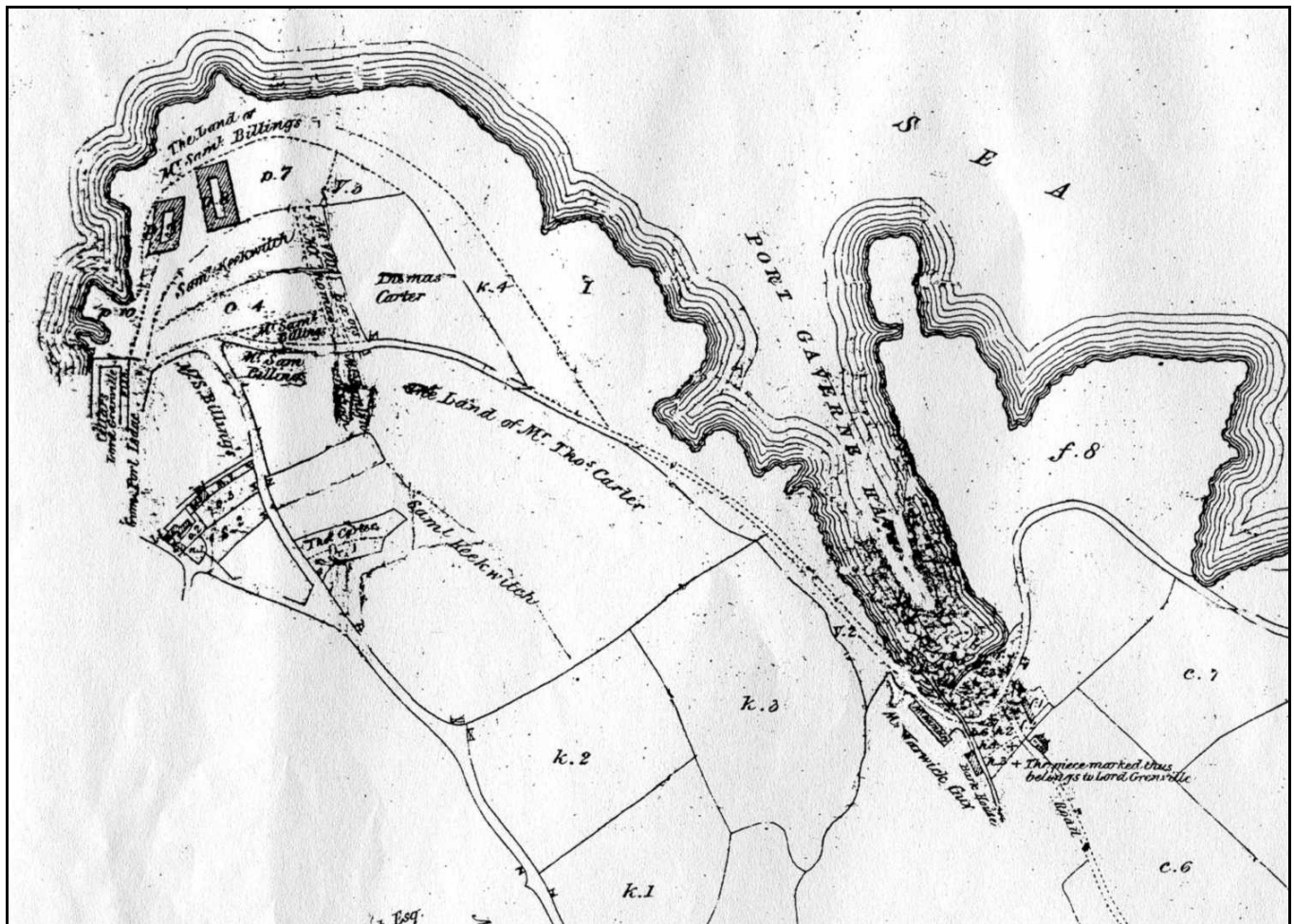
That 1803 lease was what is known as a ‘Three Lives Lease’, and the three lives mentioned in the lease are “*Phil. Ball and Nich. Truscott Ball, sons of lessee, and Peter Truscott Smith, s. of Peter Smith of Mevagissey, sailmaker*”. A three lives lease was common practice in the 18th and early 19th century. In a normal lease, if the lessee died then the land reverted back to the landlord with no compensation for the unexpired part of the lease. With a three lives lease, on the death of the original lessee the lease is transferred to any of the three named persons still surviving. The lease terminates either when all three named have died, or the specified end date of the lease, whichever is the earlier. It was usual practice to name younger sons, in the hope that they would outlive the father. As Peter Smith’s son and Philip Ball’s son had the same middle name it is probable that Peter was Philip’s brother in law. Perhaps Truscott was the boys’ grandmother’s maiden name. Three life leases were often for 31 years, and on 28/29th September 1834 we see the executors of John Farnham Cock entering into a new lease to James Stephens, shopkeeper of Port Isaac and his brother-in-law Jonathan George, yeoman of Endellion. The lease had a consideration of just £41, much lower than those heady days of 1803, and no doubt reflected the diminishing fish trade by this time. The property was described as “*Cellars, buildings and premises called Liberty Sean Cellars*”¹, the first land document to give our cellar a name.



'Shooting of the Sean in Port Isaac Bay' by John Watts Trevan 1835

Sean, or Seine, refers to a fishing company using a seine net, and the Liberty Cellar was built for the Liberty Seine Company as the premises for storing equipment and processing the fish. Writing in 1835, John Watts Trevan gave an account of the pilchard industry here “*This is the most important of all the fishing on this coast. About thirty years since pilchards came here in such abundance that several gentlemen of the neighbourhood*

resolved to have a sean on this with every appearance of success. Adventurers from all quarters began to adopt the same plan, then it was heave and go who and who should have parts. Committees were formed to adopt the most eligible plans. Large and extensive cellars were begun to be built. Seans and other materials connected thereto ordered to an outlay of about the tune of thirty thousand pounds and all was hustle and confusion for two or three years at Port Isaac, Port Quin, and Porth Karn Hun [Port Gaverne]. Some of those seans as the 'Good Intent' meet with singular success having caught nearly twelve hundred hogsheads of fish the first year, and some of the other seans had minor successes and soon fish were caught for eight or ten years after, some of those seans taking from six hundred hogsheads and others of less quantities upon an average, yearly. But from that time to this the fish have scarcely visited the coast, in consequence thereof several of the seans have been cut up and sold with all boats and other materials thereunto belonging, and the cellars either sold or falling into decay. About twenty hogsheads were caught this last year by the joint adventure of the following seans, 'Union' at Porth Karn Hun, 'Industry' at Port Isaac, and 'Fenice' [Venice] at Port Quin. The fish make about £3.10.0 [£3.50] per hogshead now in the Italian market but the Neapolitan Government at present lay an import duty of eighteen shillings per hogshead, and the Tuscan about the same."² A hogshead can vary, but customarily contains around 2,500 to 3,000 fish and weighs some 4½ hundredweight (230kg)³.



Earl Fortescue's Manor of Treore Estate Map c1800 showing the three newly built cellars above Port Isaac and none in Port Gaverne, although there is a long thin rectangle in the same location as the roadside arm of the existing Union Cellar.

Trevan's 'hustle and confusion' and 'heave and go' is borne out by the documentation. There were three new cellars in Port Gaverne erected for that 1803 pilchard season. Apart from the Liberty Cellar, the land on which the Rashleigh cellar stands was leased out by Warwick Guy on 10th September 1802 and that for the Venus cellar leased out by John Cock on 9th December 1802¹. The Union cellar was already established and catching quantities of fish. An undated estate map of Earl Fortescue's Treore Manor (*probably about 1800*) shows a long rectangular building in the same location as the roadside arm of the Union cellar. The map notes it was owned by 'Mr [Abraham] Hambley', with the adjacent land owned by Warwick Guy. Possibly the existing building was extended shortly thereafter to form the triangular cellar we see today. This map also shows three of the Port Isaac cellars built on higher ground above the harbour - Good Intent cellar owned by Lord Granville (*demolished to build the old school*), and Earl Fortescue's own Mary cellar (*now Coastguard cottages*) and Providence cellar (*an arm of which remains adjacent to Coastguard cottages, with one of the cottages called*

Providence). The Industry cellar is right by the harbour and remains in use by our fishermen. There were also two cellars at Port Quin – Venus/Venice cellar, now parking for the National Trust cottages, and the Caroline/Carolina cellar across the stream in St Minver parish, now holiday accommodation.

In the season prior to the building of the three new Port Gaverne cellars, these were the quantities of pilchards landed in our area (up to 28th August 1802)⁴ –

<i>Seine</i>	<i>Hogsheads</i>	<i>Approx. No of Fish (at 2,500 per Hogshead)</i>	<i>Approx. Tonnes</i>
Fox*	300	750,000	67.5
Providence	300	750,000	67.5
Union	650	1,625,000	146.3
Industry	650	1,625,000	146.3
Good Intent	700	1,750,000	157.5
Total	2,600	6,500,000	585.1

* In summer 1802 the Fox seine might have been housed in what was later known as the Mary Cellar in Port Isaac. There are references to a Fox seine at Port Gaverne, which was probably an alternative name for the Rashleigh Seine. The parties named in the three lives lease dated 10th September 1802 for what was to become the Rashleigh Cellar, were “Edw. Fox of Egloshayle, merchant, on behalf of self and partners in Rashleigh Seine” and the three lives named were “Rob. Were Fox, jun., s. of Rob. Were Fox of Falmouth, merchant, Edw. s. of lessee, and his bro. Geo.”¹ All were members of the influential Fox family of Quakers from Falmouth. Edward Fox (1749-1817) of Egloshayle supplied important mineral specimens to the great collector, Philip Rashleigh, after whom the cellar is named. Robert Were Fox Junior (1799-1877) became a renowned geologist, scientist and inventor, and was a prominent member of Victorian and Cornish society. In 1848, he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society.

With these huge quantities of pilchards being taken in 1802, and all the convenient Port Isaac locations already occupied, that empty land adjacent to the beach in Port Gaverne valley was a logical place for expansion.

What was involved in this important Cornish industry, in which Port Gaverne played a significant part? In the summer of 1850, Wilkie Collins, a Victorian novelist, visited St Ives and gave an evocative description of the whole process from sighting the shoals to processing the pilchards⁵. The scenes at Port Gaverne a few decades earlier must have been similar -

The first sight from the cliffs of a shoal of pilchards advancing towards the land, is not a little interesting. They produce on the sea the appearance of the shadow of a dark cloud. This shadow comes on and on, until you can see the fish leaping and playing on the surface by thousands at a time, all huddled close together, and all approaching so near to the shore, that they can be always caught in some fifty or sixty feet of water. Indeed, on certain occasions, when the shoals are of considerable magnitude, the fish behind have been known to force the fish before, literally up to the beach, so that they could be taken in buckets, or even in the hand with the greatest ease. It is said that they are thus impelled to approach the land by precisely the same necessity which impels the fishermen to catch them as they appear - the necessity of getting food.

With the discovery of the first shoal, the active duties of the "look-out" on the cliffs begin. Each fishing-village places one or more of these men on the watch all round the coast. They are called "huers," a word said to be derived from the old French verb, huer, to call out, to give an alarm. On the vigilance and skill of the "huer" much depends. He is, therefore, not only paid his guinea a week while he is on the watch, but receives, besides, a perquisite in the shape of a percentage on the produce of all the fish taken under his auspices. He is placed at his post, where he can command an uninterrupted view of the sea, some days before the pilchards are expected to appear; and, at the same time, boats, nets, and men are all ready for action at a moment's notice.

The principal boat used is at least fifteen tons in burden, and carries a large net called the "seine," which measures a hundred and ninety fathoms in length [Fathom = 6 feet/1.8 metres], and costs a hundred and seventy pounds - sometimes more. It is simply one long strip, from eleven to thirteen fathoms in breadth, composed of very small meshes, and furnished, all along its length, with lead at one side and corks at the other. The men who cast this net are called the "shooters," and receive eleven shillings and sixpence a week, and a perquisite of one basket of fish each out of every haul.

As soon as the "huer" discerns the first appearance of a shoal, he waves his bush. The signal is conveyed to the beach immediately by men and boys watching near him. The "seine" boat (accompanied by another small boat, to assist in casting the net) is rowed out where he can see it. Then there is a pause, a hush of great expectation on all sides. Meanwhile, the devoted pilchards press on - a compact mass of thousands on thousands of fish, swimming to meet their doom. All eyes are fixed on the "huer;" he stands watchful and still, until the shoal is thoroughly embayed, in water which he knows to be within the depth of the "seine" net. Then, as the fish begin to pause in their progress, and gradually crowd closer and closer together, he gives the signal; the boats come up, and the "seine" net is cast, or, in the technical phrase "shot," overboard.

The grand object is now to enclose the entire shoal. The leads sink one end of the net perpendicularly to the ground; the corks buoy up the other to the surface of the water. When it has been taken all round the fish, the two extremities are made fast, and the shoal is then imprisoned within an oblong barrier of network surrounding it on all sides. The great art is to let as few of the pilchards escape

as possible, while this process is being completed. Whenever the "huer" observes from above that they are startled, and are separating at any particular point, to that point he waves his bush, thither the boats are steered, and there the net is "shot" at once. In whatever direction the fish attempt to get out to sea again, they are thus immediately met and thwarted with extraordinary readiness and skill. This labour completed, the silence of intense expectation that has hitherto prevailed among the spectators on the cliff, is broken. There is a great shout of joy on all sides - the shoal is secured!

The "seine" is now regarded as a great reservoir of fish. It may remain in the water a week or more. To secure it against being moved from its position in case a gale should come on, it is warped by two or three ropes to points of land in the cliff, and is, at the same time, contracted in circuit, by its opposite ends being brought together, and fastened tight over a length of several feet. While these operations are in course of performance, another boat, another set of men, and another net (different in form from the "seine") are approaching the scene of action.

This new net is called the "tuck;" it is smaller than the "seine," inside which it is now to be let down for the purpose of bringing the fish closely collected to the surface. The men who manage this net are termed "regular seiners." They receive ten shillings a week, and the same perquisite as the "shooters." Their boat is first of all rowed inside the seine-net, and laid close to the seine-boat, which remains stationary outside, and to the bows of which one rope at one end of the "tuck-net" is fastened. The "tuck" boat then slowly makes the inner circuit of the "seine," the smaller net being dropped overboard as she goes, and attached at intervals to the larger. To prevent the fish from getting between the two nets during this operation, they are frightened into the middle of the enclosure by beating the water, at proper places, with oars, and heavy stones fastened to ropes. When the "tuck" net has at length travelled round the whole circle of the "seine," and is securely fastened to the "seine" boat, at the end as it was at the beginning, everything is ready for the great event of the day, the hauling of the fish to the surface.

Now, the scene on shore and sea rises to a prodigious pitch of excitement. The merchants, to whom the boats and nets belong, and by whom the men are employed, join the "huer" on the cliff; all their friends follow them; boys shout, dogs bark madly; every little boat in the place puts off, crammed with idle spectators; old men and women hobble down to the beach to wait for the news. The noise, the bustle, and the agitation, increase every moment. Soon the shrill cheering of the boys is joined by the deep voices of the "seiners." There they stand, six or eight stalwart sunburnt fellows, ranged in a row in the "seine" boat, hauling with all their might at the "tuck" net, and roaring the regular nautical "Yo-heave-ho!" in chorus! Higher and higher rises the net, louder and louder shout the boys and the idlers. The merchant forgets his dignity, and joins them; the "huer," so calm and collected hitherto, loses his self-possession and waves his cap triumphantly; even you and I, reader, uninitiated spectators though we are, catch the infection, and cheer away with the rest, as if our bread depended on the event of the next few minutes. "Hooray! hooray! Yo-hoy, hoy, hoy! Pull away, boys! Up she comes! Here they are! Here they are!" The water boils and eddies; the "tuck" net rises to the surface, and one teeming, convulsed mass of shining, glancing, silvery scales; one compact crowd of tens of thousands of fish, each one of which is madly endeavouring to escape, appears in an instant!

The noise before was as nothing compared with the noise now. Boats as large as barges are pulled up in hot haste all round the net; baskets are produced by dozens: the fish are dipped up in them, and shot out, like coals out of a sack, into the boats. Ere long, the men are up to their ankles in pilchards; they jump upon the rowing benches and work on, until the boats are filled with fish as full as they can hold, and the gunwales are within two or three inches of the water. Even yet, the shoal is not exhausted; the "tuck" net must be let down again and left ready for a fresh haul, while the boats are slowly propelled to the shore, where we must join them without delay.

As soon as the fish are brought to land, one set of men, bearing capacious wooden shovels, jump in among them; and another set bring large hand-barrows close to the side of the boat, into which the pilchards are thrown with amazing rapidity. This operation proceeds without ceasing for a moment. As soon as one barrow is ready to be carried to the salting-house, another is waiting to be filled. When this labour is performed by night, which is often the case, the scene becomes doubly picturesque. The men with the shovels, standing up to their knees in pilchards, working energetically; the crowd stretching down from the salting-house, across the beach, and hemming in the boat all round; the uninterrupted succession of men hurrying backwards and forwards with their barrows, through a narrow way kept clear for them in the throng; the glare of the lanterns giving light to the workmen, and throwing red flashes on the fish as they fly incessantly from the shovels over the side of the boat - all combine together to produce such a series of striking contrasts, such a moving picture of bustle and animation, as not even the most careless of spectators could ever forget.

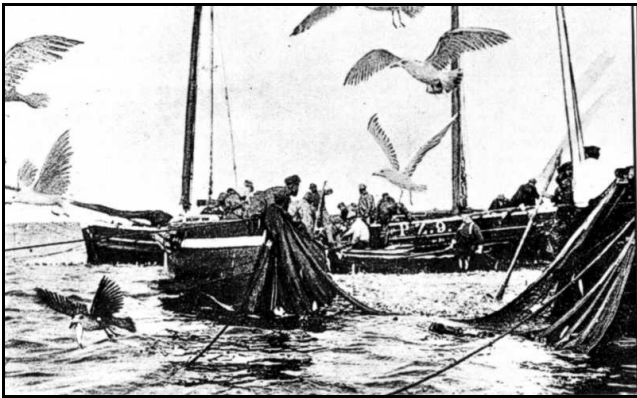
There are few reports of the hustle and bustle found inside a working pilchard cellar, not least because the stench was quite overpowering to sensitive Victorian noses. The smell of curing Pilchards meant food and wages for local folk, so it was no doubt a welcome inconvenience which rapidly faded into their background. Wilkie Collins was brave enough to venture inside a pilchard cellar whilst at St Ives and his description would have mirrored the scenes to have been seen in the Liberty cellar during those early years of the 19th century.

Having watched the progress of affairs on the shore, we next proceed to the salting-house, a quadrangular structure of granite [slate in North Cornwall], well-roofed in all round the sides, but open to the sky in the middle. Here, we must prepare ourselves to be bewildered by incessant confusion and noise; for here are assembled all the women and girls in the district, piling up the pilchards on layers of salt, at three-pence an hour; to which remuneration, a glass of brandy and a piece of bread and cheese are hospitably added at every sixth hour, by way of refreshment. It is a service of some little hazard to enter this place at all. There are men rushing out with empty barrows, and men rushing in with full barrows, in almost perpetual succession. However, while we are waiting for an opportunity to slip through the doorway, we may amuse ourselves by watching a very curious ceremony which is constantly in course of performance outside it.

As the filled barrows are going into the salting-house, we observe a little urchin running by the side of them, and hitting their edges with a long cane, in a constant succession of smart strokes, until they are fairly carried through the gate, when he quickly returns to perform the same office for the next series that arrive. The object of this apparently unaccountable proceeding is soon practically

illustrated by a group of children, hovering about the entrance of the salting-house, who every now and then dash resolutely up to the barrows, and endeavour to seize on as many fish as they can take away at one snatch. It is understood to be their privilege to keep as many pilchards as they can get in this way by their dexterity, in spite of a liberal allowance of strokes aimed at their hands; and their adroitness richly deserves its reward. Vainly does the boy officially entrusted with the administration of the cane, strike the sides of the barrow with malignant smartness and perseverance - fish are snatched away with lightning rapidity and pickpocket neatness of hand. The hardest rap over the knuckles fails to daunt the sturdy little assailants. Howling with pain, they dash up to the next barrow that passes them, with unimpaired resolution; and often collect their ten or a dozen fish a piece, in an hour or two. No description can do justice to the "Jack-in-Office" importance of the boy with the cane, as he flourishes it about ferociously in the full enjoyment of his vested right to castigate his companions as often as he can. As an instance of the early development of the tyrannic tendencies of human nature, it is, in a philosophical point of view, quite unique.

But now, while we have a chance, while the doorway is accidentally clear for a few moments, let us enter the salting-house, and approach the noisiest and most amusing of all the scenes which the pilchard fishery presents. First of all we pass a great heap of fish lying in one recess inside the door, and an equally great heap of coarse, brownish salt lying in another. Then we advance farther, get out of the way of everybody, behind a pillar, and see a whole congregation of the fair sex screaming, talking, and - to their honour be it spoken - working at the same time, round a compact mass of pilchards which their nimble hands have already built up to a height of three feet, a breadth of more than four, and a length of twenty. Here we have every variety of the "fairer half of creation" displayed before us, ranged round an odoriferous heap of salted fish. Here we see crones of sixty and girls of sixteen; the ugly and the lean, the comely and the plump; the sour-tempered and the sweet - all squabbling, singing, jesting, lamenting, and shrieking at the very top of their very shrill voices for "more fish," and "more salt;" both of which are brought from the stores, in small buckets, by a long train of children running backwards and forwards with unceasing activity and in bewildering confusion. But, universal as the uproar is, the work never flags; the hands move as fast as the tongues; there may be no silence and no discipline, but there is also no idleness and no delay. Never was three-pence an hour more joyously or more fairly earned than it is here!



Tucking the Pilchards at Sennen⁴ (left) Cellar workers in a Pilchard Palace at Sennen⁴ (right) both pictures c1880

The labour is thus performed. After the stone floor has been swept clean, a thin layer of salt is spread on it, and covered with pilchards laid partly edgewise, and close together. Then another layer of salt, smoothed fine with the palm of the hand, is laid over the pilchards; and then more pilchards are placed upon that; and so on until the heap rises to four feet or more. Nothing can exceed the ease, quickness, and regularity with which this is done. Each woman works on her own small area, without reference to her neighbour; a bucketful of salt and a bucketful of fish being shot out in two little piles under her hands, for her own especial use. All proceed in their labour, however, with such equal diligence and equal skill, that no irregularities appear in the various layers when they are finished - they run as straight and smooth from one end to the other, as if they were constructed by machinery. The heap, when completed, looks like a long, solid, neatly-made mass of dirty salt; nothing being now seen of the pilchards but the extreme tips of their noses or tails, just peeping out in rows, up the sides of the pile.

Unfortunately, Wilkie Collins was not able to stay to see the next part of the process, which would have taken place some weeks later, so he continued his story on the word of an infirm old man with a wealth of experience.

Having now inspected the progress of the pilchard fishery, from the catching to the curing, we have seen all that we can personally observe of its different processes, at one opportunity. What more remains to be done, will not be completed until after an interval of several weeks. We must be content to hear about this from information given to us by others. Yonder, sitting against the outside wall of the salting-house, is an intelligent old man, too infirm now to do more than take care of the baby that he holds in his arms, while the baby's mother is earning her three-pence an hour inside. To this ancient we will address all our inquiries; and he is well qualified to answer us, for the poor old fellow has worked away all the pith and marrow of his life in the pilchard fishery.

The fish - as we learn from our old friend, who is mightily pleased to be asked for information - will remain in salt, or, as the technical expression is, "in bulk," for five or six weeks. During this period, a quantity of oil, salt, and water drips from them into wells cut in the centre of the stone floor on which they are placed. After the oil has been collected and clarified, it will sell for enough to pay off the whole expense of the wages, food, and drink given to the "seiners" - perhaps defraying other incidental charges besides. The salt and water left behind, and offal of all sorts found with it, furnish a valuable manure. Nothing in the pilchard itself, or in connexion with the pilchard, runs to waste - the precious little fish is a treasure in every part of him.

After the pilchards have been taken out of "bulk," they are washed clean in salt water, and packed in hogsheads, which are then sent for exportation to some large sea-port - Penzance for instance - in coast traders. The fish reserved for use in Cornwall, are generally cured by those who purchase them. The export trade is confined to the shores of the Mediterranean - Italy and Spain providing the two great foreign markets for pilchards. The home consumption, as regards Great Britain, is nothing, or next to nothing. Some

variation takes place in the prices realized by the foreign trade - their average, wholesale, is stated to be about fifty shillings per hogshead.

As an investment for money, on a small scale, the pilchard fishery offers the first great advantage of security. The only outlay necessary, is that for providing boats and nets, and for building salting-houses - an outlay which, it is calculated, may be covered by a thousand pounds. The profits resulting from the speculation are immediate and large. Transactions are managed on the ready money principle, and the markets of Italy and Spain (where pilchards are considered a great delicacy) are always open to any supply. The fluctuation between a good season's fishing and a bad season's fishing is rarely, if ever, seriously great. Accidents happen but seldom; the casualty most dreaded, being the enclosure of a large fish along with a shoal of pilchards. A "ling," for instance, if unfortunately imprisoned in the seine, often bursts through its thin meshes, after luxuriously gorging himself with prey, and is of course at once followed out of the breach by all the pilchards. Then, not only is the shoal lost, but the net is seriously damaged, and must be tediously and expensively repaired. Such an accident as this, however, very seldom happens; and when it does, the loss occasioned falls on those best able to bear it, the merchant speculators. The work and wages of the fishermen go on as usual.

Some idea of the almost incalculable multitude of pilchards caught on the shores of Cornwall, may be formed from the following data . At the small fishing cove of Trereen, 600 hogsheads were taken in little more than one week, during August, 1850. Allowing 2,400 fish only to each hogshead - 3,000 would be the highest calculation - we have a result of 1,440,000 pilchards, caught by the inhabitants of one little village alone, on the Cornish coast, at the commencement of the season's fishing.

At considerable sea-port towns, where there is an unusually large supply of men, boats, and nets, such figures as those quoted above, are far below the mark. At St. Ives, for example, 1,000 hogsheads were taken in the first three seine nets cast into the water. The number of hogsheads exported annually, averages 22,000. In 1850, 27,000 were secured for the foreign markets. Incredible as these numbers may appear to some readers, they may nevertheless be relied on; for they are derived from trustworthy sources - partly from local returns furnished to me; partly from the very men who filled the baskets from the boat-side, and who afterwards verified their calculations by frequent visits to the salting-houses.

Such is the pilchard fishery of Cornwall - a small unit, indeed, in the vast aggregate of England's internal sources of wealth: but yet neither unimportant nor uninteresting, if it be regarded as giving active employment to a hardy and honest race who would starve without it; as impartially extending the advantages of commerce to one of the remotest corners of our island; and, more than all, as displaying a wise and beautiful provision of Nature, by which the rich tribute of the great deep is most generously lavished on the land most in need of a compensation for its own sterility.

That infirm old man skipped over the packing and pressing of the fish barrels or hogsheads, as it is this part of the process which involved that three rows of bricks with its uniform series of holes to be seen running round the walls of any fish cellar, including Gullrock. The holes are 26 inches (65cm) apart and in front of each hole was placed a packed barrel. From this, we can deduce the barrel was around 2 foot in diameter (60cm), and as the row of holes is on both sides of the wall, we can also deduce from the building's dimensions that Gullrock had a maximum capacity of around 300 barrels, representing some 750,000 fish or 67 tonnes.



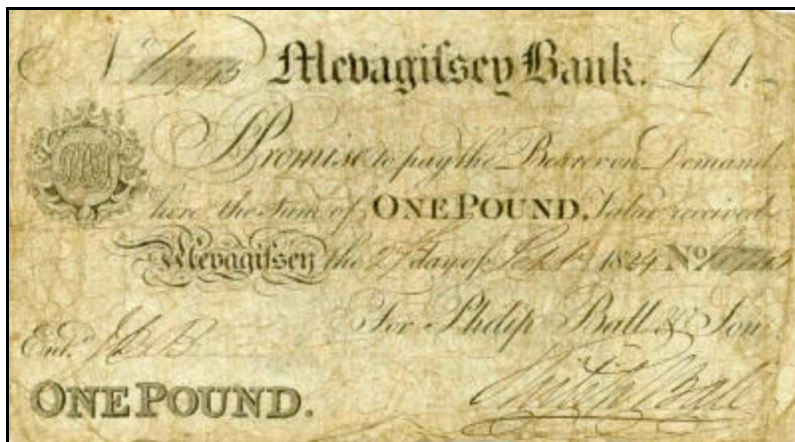
Left: Socket holes in the wall at Gullrock today. Right: Sir Robin Knox-Johnston demonstrating the pressing of the pilchards to presenter Michael Aspel when the Antiques Roadshow visited the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth (Series 26 Episode 5 broadcast 5/10/2003).

The staves in these straight-sided fish barrels were not as tight as in a whisky barrel, and they were known as 'leaky barrels'. After the barrel was positioned, a 10 foot long pole was inserted in the hole, and a weight was hung on the end. Wooden blocks were placed above the barrel lid, so the pole and weight acted as a lever to press down and squeeze the oil out of the fish. The oil oozed out of the loose fitting staves and dripped into a gutter. Those three rows of brick were built with a slight slope to facilitate the oil flow into a storage tank. This valuable by-product actually paid all the running costs of the fishing enterprise.

Huge quantities of salt were required, and acquiring this often caused problems. The best salt was sea salt from France, but from 1803 until the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Britain was at war with France. The alternative was rock salt from Cheshire, but this stained the fish and reduced the value of the processed fish in the major markets of Italy⁶. There was also a large duty on salt, although there was exemption for salt used in curing

pilchards. Smuggling of sea salt was not uncommon at this time. The Philip Ball who leased the land to build the Liberty Cellar was a prominent Mevagissey fish merchant and Mevagissey was the prime Cornish pilchard port. It was not too surprising that when a parliamentary select committee was set up to look into the use of rock salt in the Pilchard industry, and in particular to consider the proposals to place an additional duty on imported salt, Philip was a principal witness for the Cornish pilchard industry. He travelled up to London in May 1817, and his evidence gives an insight into the workings of the trade. He refers to the enormous catch in Mevagissey Bay on a single night during the 1816 season of 12,000 hogsheads (2,760 tonnes) being enclosed by seine nets, with 8 or 9,000 being landed at Mevagissey, the rest in nearby locations. In the whole season there were 30,000 hogsheads (6,900 tonnes) caught, although this was not the largest catch, as some 45,000 hogsheads (10,000 tonnes) had been caught in earlier seasons. On that monumental night there were 30 Mevagissey seines, and 6 to 12 seines from other locations, within the bay. Each seine consisted of 3 boats, manned by a total of eighteen men, and the cost of the fishing equipment alone totalled £700. He estimated there would be 3 to 4,000 seaman employed when the fish were being caught. On land, he estimated that a successful catch would drain the countryside of people to carry the fish from the boats to the cellars, and each cellar would employ 15 to 20 women in salting the fish and carrying salt between the various curers. Possibly around 15 to 20,000 persons were employed in the total fishing trade⁶.

Typical Mevagissey bulk salt warehouses stored 6-8,000 bushels of salt (150-200 tonnes), although there were also smaller fishermen's salt stores on a small scale. At that time, French sea salt was around £2.13s.4d (£2.67) a ton including duty of 9s.6d (37.5p), compared to British rock salt of £2 a ton. Salt was used at 6 bushels (0.15 tonnes) per hogshead, equivalent to 8s (40p) per hogshead for French salt. Regarding expenses for each hogshead, the women fish packers were paid 2s (10p), the superintendent 1s (5p), and the barrel 5 to 6s (25-30p). The fishermen were paid a quarter of what the fish sells for. Ball stated that other parts of Cornwall may make higher payments for fishermen. The cost of the boats, nets etc was the responsibility of the proprietors, as were any repairs and maintenance. The proprietors received an export bounty of 8s.6d (42.5p) for each hogshead, and Philip Ball confirms that without this bounty they could not carry on this trade at all. Prices for the hogsheads varied from year to year, and Philip Ball quotes 15-18s (75-90p) five years earlier (the glut year of 1812), but much higher in 1816 at 49s (£2.45) and in 1815 at £5.2s (£5.10). 1814 was a particularly good year, with 55s (£2.75) per hogshead realised⁶.



Mevagissey Bank Pound Note signed by Philip Ball just two months prior to the collapse.

Philip Ball started the Mevagissey Bank in 1807, but this collapsed in November 1824⁷, which is no doubt why the Liberty Seine was put up for auction in the Golden Lion, Port Isaac on 28th July 1825. The auction comprised the Liberty stop and tuck seines with four boats and materials, 7,000 bushels (175 tonnes) of salt, as well as a quantity of oil⁴. With 7,000 bushels of salt, it seems the Liberty cellar was being used as a bulk salt warehouse at this time, no doubt to supply other local seines.

As Trevan noted, the golden age of the pilchard on the north coast had passed by the 1820s, and other seines were sold in the 1820s and 1830s. The Fox seine was sold in January 1821, and the Rashleigh seine was purchased for £60 in March 1837. In Port Isaac, the Mary seine was sold on 19th April 1831, the Industry seine in April 1840 and the Good Intent on 14th April 1841⁴.

At the time of the Tith Map of 1840, The Liberty and Venus cellars are shown as owned by James Stephens, although the lease for the Liberty cellar confirms he was only part owner with his brother-in-law Jonathan George. Trevan records this about James Stephens “*Shopkeeper. From Mevagissey, his father being gardener*

to J. H. Tremayne Esq. of Hellegan. Married Betsy, daughter of the late Mr. J George of Pennant in this parish. They have one daughter."² An old family album records that their daughter, Mary, was born on February 21st 1826 at half past nine³. She went on to marry Warwick Richard Guy³, son of Mark Guy senior who owned Rashleigh and Union cellars in 1840. The title map shows that there was a lime kiln attached to the seaward arm of the Liberty cellar. It was smaller than the surviving kiln on the other side of the valley, and had gone by the time of the 1880 Ordnance Survey map. Betsy Stephens died in 1872, and when James Stephens died in 1876 Mary Guy was their only child. She would have inherited his assets, but presumably transferred the Liberty and Venus cellars to her eldest son Mark junior, since on 14th August 1885 he was using them as security for a £400 loan from Royal Camel and Bottreaux Lodge of the Independent Order of Oddfellows, with a further £150 on 14th August 1890. The 1885 loan document describes the Liberty cellar as 'now a coal store'¹.



Liberty Fish Cellar: View from the lane 1906 (left). Looking inside the courtyard c1911 (right). The original entrance is visible.

Mark Guy had more money problems, since on 25th March 1886 he mortgaged Rashleigh and Union cellars for £500 to Richard Parnell of Altarnun. He raised a further £100 on 9th July 1891 when he conveyed all four cellars to his father with the loans outstanding. On 10th January 1893 his father conveyed the properties back to Mark on payment of the outstanding mortgage, but on 19th June that year he re-mortgaged them again with the Camel and Bottreaux Lodge of the Independent Order of Oddfellows. On 1st October 1910 he transferred a £500 mortgage with John Parnell of Advent to the Mid-Cornwall branch of the Independent Order of Rechabites¹. Some of these mortgages were still outstanding when Mark Guy died on December 7th 1918³.

1920 to 1957: Bide-A-While Hotel

With the post-war slump, it took some time to dispose of Mark Guy's properties, but on 5th October 1920, the Liberty cellars had a new owner in the name of Rosina Mabel Ashton. The conveyance lists the vendors as Mary Anne Guy and Walter Ogilvie Wellington, a Wadebridge accountant (the executors and trustees of Mark Guy's estate), with a price of £275, of which £150 was to go to the Oddfellows in part payment of the £535 outstanding from Mark Guy's 1885 and 1890 loans, and the £125 residue to the vendors⁸.

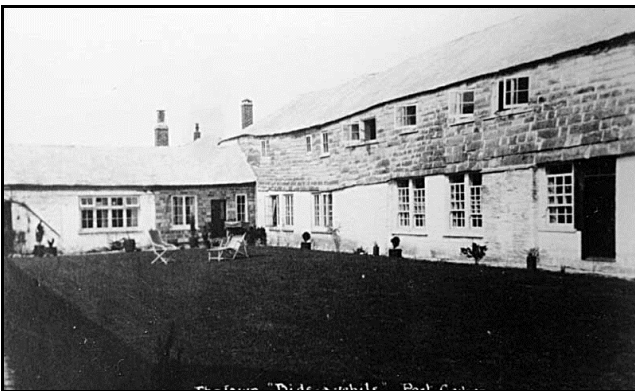
Mrs. Ashton was a primary school teacher from London who had inherited some money⁹ and wanted to turn the Liberty cellars into a private hotel, which she called Bide-A-While. In the 1911 census she was listed as Mabel Ashton, a certificated school teacher, born in Plymouth. She lived with her husband Lionel, a bootmaker's clerk, at 76 Elers Road, Ealing. He was born in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, and both were 33 years old. With them was her older sister Amelia Nelson (37) and Amelia's 10-year-old daughter Winifred. During the First World War, Lionel was a Stoker 2nd Class in Drake Battalion of the Royal Naval Division. He died on 13th May 1915 from wounds received at Gallipoli in the Dardanelles Campaign¹⁰. The Royal Naval Division was also known as 'Winston's Little Army', formed at the direction of Winston Churchill then First Lord of the Admiralty. It was comprised wholly of sailors but they never fought on ships. Apart from Gallipoli, this division also fought in the Battle of the Somme. This article describes the horrendous conditions Drake Battalion faced in the Dardanelles – *'26th April 1915 0800hrs The 1st Division, including the band as first aid party and stretcher-bearers, went ashore as part of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force in the Dardanelles. Drake Battalion formed up on the beach and in silence, marched in single file to a place on the cliffs about a mile away. It was very cold and little sleep was had. 27 April 1915. They were bombed by two Turkish planes but the bombing was not successful. The Turkish artillery was also shelling the position. There was no shelter for the men as*

orders had been given not to dig-in for fear of digging up dead men. Bodies were strewn all over the cliffs. 7th May 1915. Drake Battalion left for the trenches.’¹⁰ His wounds were undoubtedly received whilst lying exposed and under shellfire as the battalion was pinned down beneath the cliffs. His name is not in the Commonwealth War Graves records, so he probably died on a hospital ship and was buried at sea.



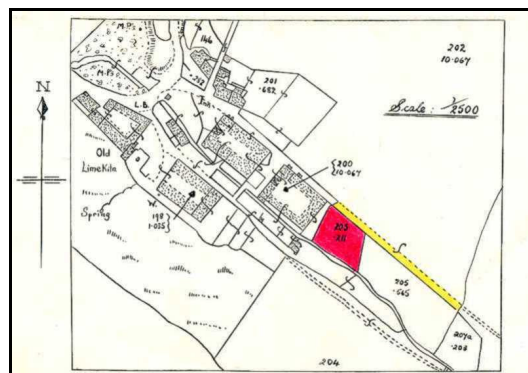
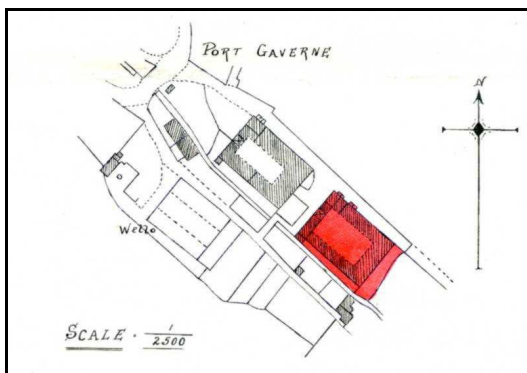
Two early pictures of Bide-A-While. On the left is from 1922, and the right is 1925 just after the landward arm had been removed.

A study of photos from the 1920s shows the conversion was done over a number of years, with more being opened up over time. Old Jim (*Uncle Jim*) May told David Bolton that he was one of those who demolished the landward arm of the cellar around 1925, as Mrs Ashton wanted to bring more light into the courtyard¹⁶.



Courtyard and side path at Bide-A-While c1930

The original 1803 lease mentioned ‘*use of water in common with adj. tenants*’ which may have meant use of the stream, as a fish cellar would have needed water for cleaning the fish prior to packing in barrels. The 1920 conveyance includes this clause ‘*together with the right in common with all others who have or may hereafter have the like right to the use of the Well situate on the south western side of Rashleigh Cellars and shown on the said plan with access thereto*’⁸. Whether or not it was one of the early rights, it must have become common practice for those living in the Liberty cellar to get their water from here. Mains water did not reach this part of Cornwall for another decade, so everyone needed an assured supply of this essential commodity. The right to use the well is included in the current land registry papers (*Title number CL268178*), although anyone visiting the Rashleigh cellar now in the hope of quenching their thirst would have to dig it out first!

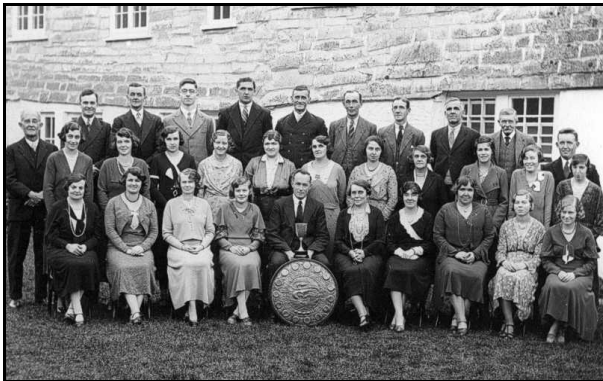


Conveyance Plans: 1920 (left) showing well, and 1939 (right) showing the farm road with those cattle driving rights.

On 6th June 1939, Mrs Ashton purchased the field behind Bide-A-While from Bessie Steer for £90. The conveyance included ‘*a right of way and passage for the Purchaser and her successors in title owner and*

owner occupier and occupiers of the premises hereby conveyed in common with all others entitled thereto at all times and for all purposes connected with her and their user and enjoyment of the premises hereby conveyed and every part thereof and with or without horses carts carriages and vehicles of all kinds and cattle over and along the strip of land coloured yellow on the said plan to and from the premises hereby conveyed⁸. Should any occupier of Gullrock wish to take a herd of cattle towards Brooklands Farm and bring them back, this right is still included in those land registry papers.

Mrs Ashton was a lover of music and became an active member of the Port Isaac Choral Society when it was formed in 1930 to raise money to help build the Port Isaac breakwaters. In 1935 the choral society won the music shield in the annual County Music Festival, and all the members were photographed in the Bide-A-While courtyard, proudly displaying their trophy. In 1996, when the Port Isaac Chorale won that same shield, the earlier photograph was recreated in the garden of Gullrock.



Left: Port Isaac Choral Society with the shield and cup won at the County Music Festival in 1935. Ronald James is the conductor (behind shield) and Mrs Ashton is alongside him. Right: Port Isaac Chorale in 1996, having won the same County Music Shield. Janet Townsend is the musical director, and in the back row there are four members of what was to become, a few years later, Port Isaac's Fisherman's Friends – Peter Rowe, John Lethbridge, Nigel Sherratt and Jon Cleave.

When war came, Mrs Ashton filled Bide-A-While with evacuee children. Wartime conditions meant few would be holidaying in Cornwall, so this may have been a practical option to keep the hotel and its staff employed. All the evacuees billeted throughout Port Isaac came from Lionel Road School in Brentford. This was less than a mile from Elers Road in Ealing where Mrs Ashton lived in 1911. Was it just coincidence that children from her old haunt were evacuated here, or did she suggest it to someone in Brentford? She may have been at Lionel Road School, possibly even taught some of the parents of those evacuees. She would certainly have been familiar with their home locality. Mrs Ashton never had children of her own, but seemed happy to act as surrogate mother to so many. By all accounts, she was firm but fair with the children, at what must have been a traumatic time for them. As a former schoolteacher, she knew kids will be kids, and indiscretions from youthful high spirits were quickly forgotten. It must have been quite a culture shock coming from the city to this rural retreat with open fields and beach with outdoor bathing right on the doorstep. She kept up with her evacuees after the war, looking after one called Reginald Brooks and treating him as a son. Perhaps his parents had been killed. She gave him and one other evacuee, Peter Gomm, a silver propelling pencil as a memento¹¹.



Evacuee children from Lionel Road School, Brentford at Bide-A-While in 1940. Peter Gomm is third from the right in the group photo.

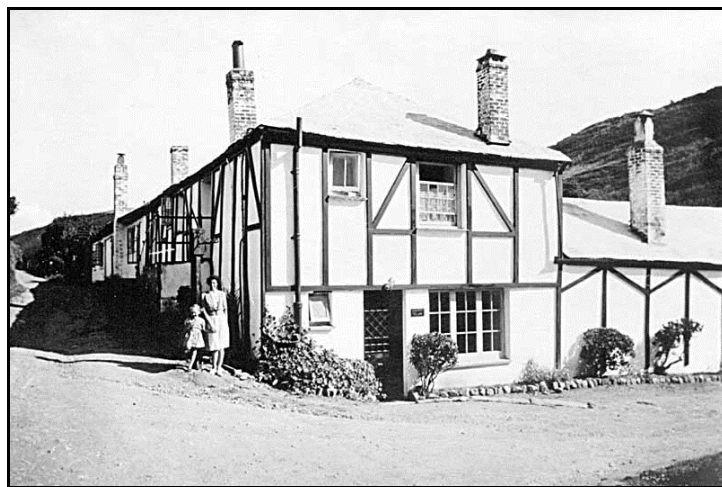
In 1990 a very elderly lady turned up at Gullrock to look around. She introduced herself as Mrs Ashton's niece (*she may have been Winifred who lived with her in 1911*) and said she had stayed with her aunt for almost 2 years towards the end of the war recovering from peritonitis, then a most serious condition. She subsequently

emigrated to Australia and was making a pilgrimage back to the UK. She remembered the evacuees and helping her aunt with the work around the hotel. Mrs Ashton taught the children dancing in the hotel lounge, now the cottage 'Suncove'⁹. A series of pictures from 1940 of the evacuees at Bide-A-While shows them dancing in the courtyard, so Mrs Ashton must have been teaching the children right from the start. Mrs Ashton's musical abilities were well appreciated by St Peter's Church, as she became choir mistress in August 1940, with many of the evacuee children bolstering choir numbers. In December 1941 she added the duties of church organist, replacing Miss Ruth May. With lots of children in close proximity, sickness could spread rapidly. In October 1941 the Reverend Stenson-Stenson's monthly report stated '*I am sure we are all terribly sorry that sickness has broken out again amongst the choir and give our sympathy with Mrs Ashton and her children in their enforced absence from church.*'¹² The children's views on the absence went unrecorded.



Mrs Ashton – the evacuees' surrogate mother 1940

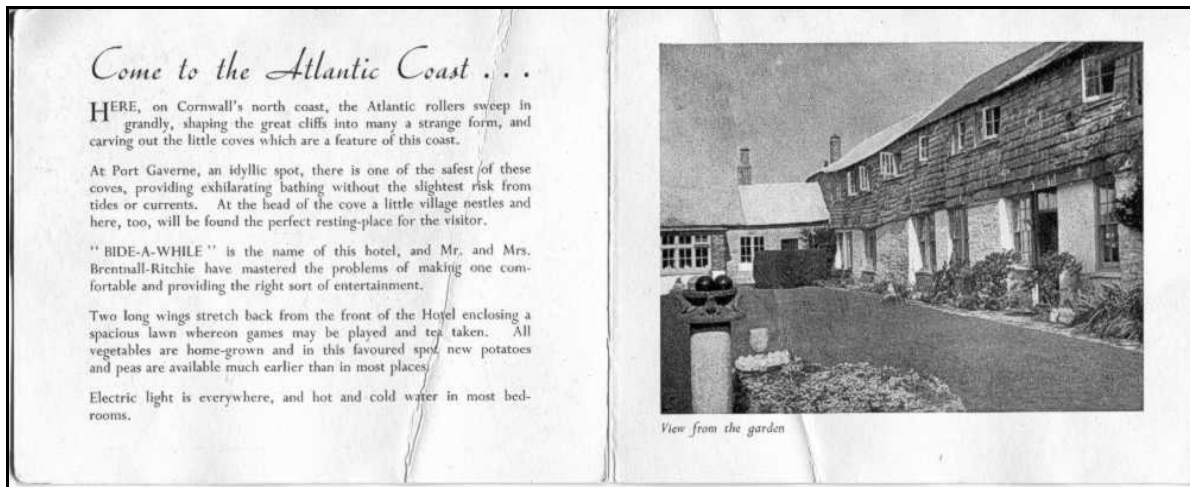
At the age of 68 Mrs Ashton decided to give up being an hotelier, and sold Bide-A-While to Reverend Dennis Warden Holt on 31st January 1946 for £4,000⁸. She moved to Heybrook Bay near Plymouth, later moving back to West London and then to Kent. She died around 1960¹¹.



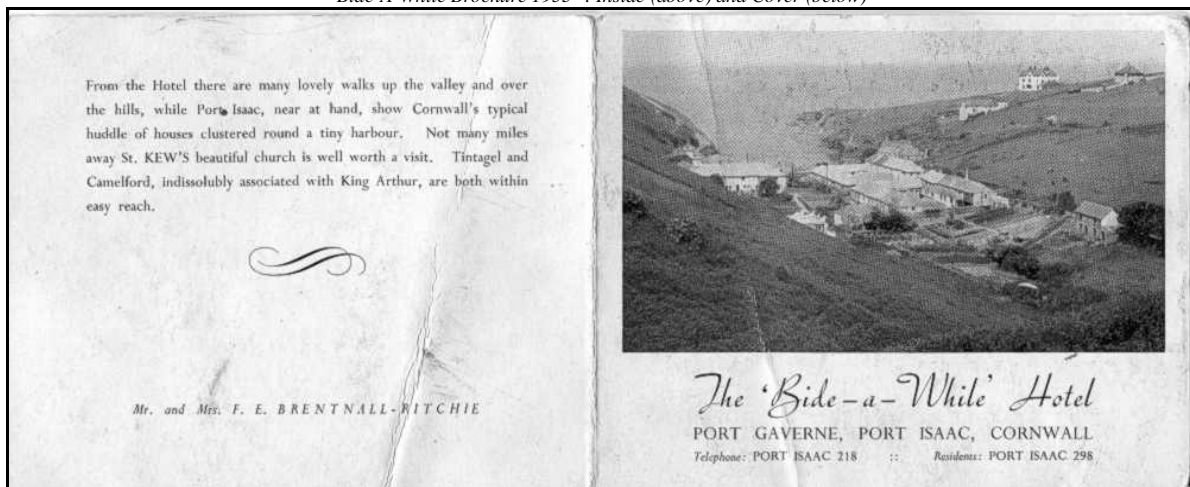
Bide-A-While in August 1946, Mr Ritchie's first season

Reverend Holt had been Vicar of St Thomas Blackburn from 1938-46 and was in the Royal Army Chaplain's Department as Chaplain to the Forces from 21st June 1939. He was married at All Souls, Bolton on 20th June 1942 to Kathleen Margaret Harper (aged 21), where he was described as 'Clerk in Holy Orders Batchelor of St Thomas's Vicarage, Blackburn', and was then aged 36¹³. His address in the conveyance was given as the Vicarage in Mevagissey, so presumably he had just moved from Blackburn. It seems unlikely that he ever ran Bide-A-While as a hotel, as he sold it a few months later on 17th July 1946 to Francis Edwin Brentnall Ritchie

for £8,000⁸. 65 years on, few good reasons come to my mind to account for a 100% profit in just 5½ months, and we may never know whether it was Mrs Ashton or Mr Ritchie who got the sharp end of the deal.



Bide-A-While Brochure 1953¹⁴: Inside (above) and Cover (below)



The new owner was a former RAF pilot who told local people he had been a Flight Lieutenant. Googling his name came up with The London Gazette supplement for 21st December 1943 showing Francis Edwin Brentnall Ritchie (160927) was made Flight Sergeant on 10th November 1943¹⁵, but nothing about subsequent promotion. Hotel brochures showed he liked to be referred to by the double-barrelled name Brentnall-Ritchie. As would be expected, he had a substantial mortgage of £4,900 with the Co-operative Building Society. He ran the hotel for ten years when his wife apparently left him, the property was abandoned and it was repossessed by the building society. The story I heard, which may have been elaborated with each telling, was that he just walked out of the hotel whilst visitors were in residence. There was no one to take any money, so those wishing to stay got a free self-catering holiday. When new visitors arrived, current guests explained the situation that they could either fend for themselves and have a free holiday, or find another hotel. This apparently went on all summer¹⁶. It was only a decade after the wartime 'make do and mend' spirit and seems plausible. A good story anyhow!

1957 to the present day: Gullrock

Whatever the truth about the 1956 season, Bide-A-While was repossessed that year. The Co-operative Building Society found a potential buyer in Minta Neville Curtis and Nora Winifred Curtis, who had a different idea for the building's use. They applied for planning permission to convert Bide-A-While into a group of 7 separate properties for renting out as self-catering holiday homes, which was granted on 11th March 1957. Once permission was obtained, on 25th March they purchased the property for £2,750. This was secured by a 100% mortgage from the Co-op⁸, so they never had to put up a penny to acquire the building, although the conversion costs were unlikely to be small. They renamed the building Gullrock, by which name it is still known. The original plans show that there was to be a garage serviced by a new drive where the property called Breock now stands. There is no evidence on the ground for that projected drive, and this may never have been done. They borrowed an additional £900 on 3rd January 1961⁸, most likely for the conversion of the unused space into

Breck. David Bolton recalled the Miss Curtises were two charming old ladies, and when he was looking to purchase Gullrock a few years later he asked about Breock's planning permission. They airily said "We saw that nice Mr Jones at Wadebridge and he said it would be quite alright."¹⁶ Mr Jones probably meant that when planning permission was formally requested he could see no objections, but they took this as the go-ahead.

Despite the formality about Breock, David and his wife Sheila purchased Gullrock on 29th January 1965 for £17,000, subject to taking over the existing mortgage of £2,976.11s.6d (£2,976.58)⁸. They moved into the property called Trevale with their three children, Sara-Jane, Andrew and Sally, as well as the family pets, which must have been a bit crowded in the summer. At the end of each September Gullrock closed, and the kids opened the door between Trevale and Seaways to spend the months until the Easter re-opening spread out in the bigger bedrooms. Just before the start of their third season at Gullrock came the Torrey Canyon disaster when one of the world's largest supertankers containing 120,000 tonnes of crude oil struck the Seven Stones rocks off the Isles of Scilly and polluted 120 miles of Cornish coastline. This looked like a catastrophe for their business, but that season was actually one of their best¹⁶. As they say, there is no such thing as bad publicity.

David, and later his son Andrew, was a stalwart member of the crew of the RNLI inshore rescue boat which had been stationed in Port Isaac from 1967. Before the days of pagers, sending up the maroon signal rockets alerted everyone that a rescue was needed. On hearing the bang, crew members dropped everything and raced to the launch. It is said that David's car shot up Port Gaverne hill with lights flashing and horns blaring, and woe betide those who got in his way. Sheila, and later David, became chairman of St Endellion Parish Council continuing their public service tradition. In 1975 they filled in the old fuel store to create another property called Trevoise, where the present writer now lives. Sheila died in 1980, and the children had moved away, so in 1985 David decided to sell Gullrock as a going concern. This was a difficult time to find buyers, and at the end of 1986 the plan was changed to sell, over a period of years, each of the properties separately on 999 year leases, with the freehold transferred to a management company controlled by the owners once all nine had been sold. This was successful, with the first property sold in August 1987. In 1993 David got married again, to Julia. In 2008 the last, Trevale, was sold to his son, at which time David and Julia moved to St Teath. Gullrock now has several owners, and most of the places are let out to visitors as self catering holiday homes.

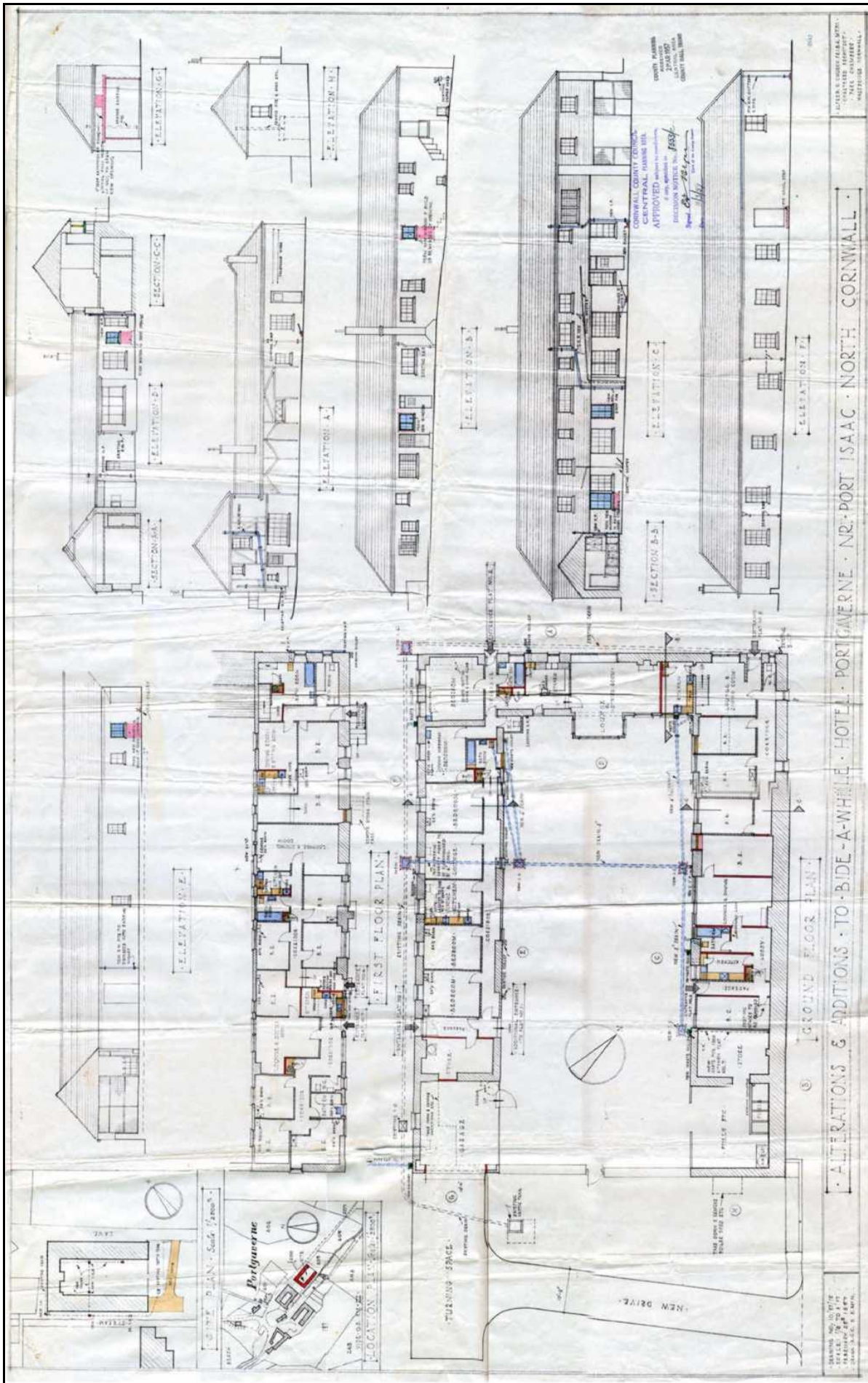
At the end of this decade, the Liberty Pilchard Palace will have been serving the tourist trade for 100 years. It is to be hoped this will continue for a long time to come, but who knows what the future may bring.

*Malcolm Lee
November 2011*

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Website: www.gullrock-port-gaverne.co.uk

References *(all internet data was as accessed from the websites in November 2011)*

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7. **Mevagissey Bank:** <http://www.mevagisseymuseum.co.uk/musexhibits.html> image from <http://www.davidlay.co.uk/BidCat/detail.asp?SaleRef=X008&LotRef=170>.
8. **20th Century Conveyances and plans:** From original documents held as part of the management company (*Fabletown Ltd*) records for Gullrock.
9. **Mrs Ashton's Niece:** Personal recollection of comments made during her 1990 visit to Gullrock.
10. **Lionel Ashton:** Information on death - <http://www.naval-history.net/xDKCasAlpha1914-18A2.htm>. Information on Drake Battalion and Gallipoli campaign - <http://www.wartimememories.co.uk/greatwar/ships/drakebattalion.html>.
11. **Evacuee Children:** Personal information and photos from Dave Gomm, St Beward, whose late brother Peter was an evacuee at Bide-A-While from 1940 to 1944. Both kept in contact with Mrs Ashton after the war up to her death.
12. **St Peter's Church Reports:** From the following editions of the Bodmin Deanery Magazine under 'Port Isaac'; September 1940, October 1941, and January 1942.
13. **Reverend Holt:** Marriage - http://www.lan-opc.org.uk/Bolton-le-Moors/Little-Bolton/allsouls/marriages_1937-1947.html (*half way down the very long page*). Chaplain to the Forces <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/34651/pages/5398/page.pdf> (*half way down first column*).
14. **Bide-A-While Brochure:** Given to me by the late Sheila Jarvis, Port Isaac, who stayed at Bide-A-While in 1953.
15. **Mr Ritchie:** Promotion to Flight Sergeant - <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/36294/supplements/5534/page.pdf> (*near top of second column*).
16. **David Bolton:** Personal recollection (*with no guaranteed accuracy*) of various comments made to me about Gullrock by David Bolton since I moved here in 1988.



1957 plans to convert Bide-A-While Hotel to Gullrock⁸