

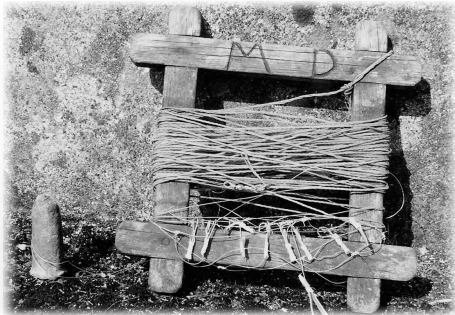
# Mackerel Fishing in Port Isaac

Mackerel fishing at Port Isaac has never assumed the importance of the pilchard or herring. The mackerel has been a useful presence throughout the summer months, and at various times in history it has been quite important. It is a mid-water swimming species, or pelagic, so therefore it is able to be caught by drift nets, but much of the traditional fishing was done by the use of plummets (see picture below of a plummet, courtesy of Geoff Provis). A short length of wire was placed through a lead weight, and at one end a length of line or gut was attached, and a single hook. The main hand line was tied to the other end. Boats towed the line and plummet powered by sail or an engine through the mid water area, and the mackerel was attracted to the bait which traditionally was a strip of mackerel, locally named a 'lek' or a spinner.



During the mid - 1950s, the limits of the plummet were apparent, as it consisted of only one hook. Local fishermen heard of lines used in Scotland and West Cornwall consisting of twelve hooks tied to a gut line, which was capable of bringing aboard twelve fish at a time. Eventually some trial lines were brought to Port Isaac, and the fishermen began to make these themselves. This dramatically improved the catching rate of the fish.

## A traditional Mackerel line



A wooden frame probably made by John Mills of the boat MILDRED. Note MD on the frame identifying the vessel. Corlene was a popular line to use during modern times, but prior to that cotton was used or other natural product. A length of gut at the end had twelve hooks tied to it on which were attached by short lengths of gut named teases. The hooks were about 10" to 1' apart.

Picture courtesy of Geoff Provis

The method of fishing this line was as follows, and this is still the method used locally today: Whilst the boat is motoring slowly, the lead is placed into the water followed by the hooks and then the main line. The lead ensures the hooks sink to whatever depth the fisherman requires. The fisherman then stops the lead falling and catches hold of the line firmly whilst it is being towed through the water. At the same time, he pulls the line to and fro to imitate the movement of small fish. The coloured elastic bands, or coloured rubber insulation which is tied to the hooks, help to give the impression of small bait fish. When the fish grab the bait, the boat is turned to its right or starboard, and this has the effect of bringing the line at right angles to the boat, thereby making the job of handling the line and pulling the fish aboard easier. The fish are then quickly knocked off the line, and the line returned to the water. Quick hands are essential.

A feature of this fishery was that it involved many part – timers, who fished either early in the morning or late in the evenings. Also, they worked together to carry their fish up the beach to the fish cellars, and similarly they pulled their boats up the beach. When the fish merchants left Port Isaac, this co-operation also involved washing and packing the fish into boxes, and even arranging transport to Plymouth Fish Market. There was a feeling of mutual co-operation amongst the mackerel fishing men.

At times the full time pot fishermen joined in the fishery, but their main efforts were directed at the potting. Occasionally the pot men caught the mackerel for bait.

## Mackerel Trips



The Edwards family from St Tudy, having just returned from a mackerel fishing trip on the Mapleleaf. The fishermen are Anthony Provis on the right and Jack Provis

Courtesy of Geoff Provis

Fishermen augmented their income by taking out paying passengers, named 'parties' in their boats on mackerel fishing trips. These were usually hourly or two hourly, and obviously they were only undertaken during the fine summer months. There were no safety regulations, and I recall as a teenager taking out paying passengers in my father's 16'boat the Josephine. Several boats took advantage of this way of making some extra money.

During the 1970s, a boat named the Darwin sank on the South Coast of Cornwall, and several trippers were drowned. Following this, stringent regulations were brought enacted. I believe that at the present time only one Port Isaac boat takes out paying passengers.



## Typical Port Isaac Mackerel Boats

A young Mark Provis sitting on the side of a boat talking to his younger mates. The small boats on the beach had been out on a potting and mackerel fishing trip in the morning. They were waiting to be hauled up the beach.

Courtesy of Michael Benz



## The Swift being hauled up Port Isaac Beach

From the left: Tommy Tabb, stranger, Bill Cowling, Dick 'Trapper' Morman and John Glover. The three older retired men are helping John haul his boat, the Swift up Port Isaac Beach. John had previously in the day come in from a mackerel fishing and potting trip.

Courtesy of Stephanie Berry (nee Brenton)

This simple photograph represents what I think is now missing from Port Isaac, due to the change of the village from a working class community, to a holiday resort boasting numerous holiday and second homes. The three men helping John are demonstrating the sort of community spirit which cannot be replicated today. The plus side today is that generally people are much better off financially, although the spread of Foodbanks in Cornwall suggests that many families are finding things very difficult, and other better off members of the community are coming together to help those less well off.

I recall as a boy handling the trolleys which were used to pull the boat up the beach. My job as a boy was to pick up the last trolley, and run up ahead of the boat and place it in line with the rest so the men could continue to pull up the boat.

The mackerel has always proved to be very useful to the fishermen. During the spring, summer and autumn months it provided a useful by-fishery, and its meat is tasty and nutritious. During hard times it has been a good standby for the family to eat. It has always been used for bait for long lines and lobster pots, and immature mackerel are eaten by other fish. So the fishermen were always pleased to see plentiful shoals of mackerel in the bay. These days, industrial fishing by huge vessels is reducing the numbers of these very useful fish.

The mackerel was a useful form of income for some Port Isaac families, as wages were traditionally very low in this area. In 2012 there is no mackerel fishery locally, although further west at St Ives and Newlyn, some boats 'hand line' on a full time basis for mackerel.

Prepared for a Pisces Exhibition by Geoff Provis, June 2012

