

Pilchard fishing



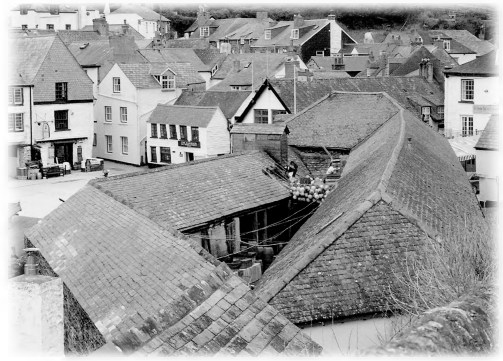
An old picture of the four pilchard cellars at Port Gaverne. These were built during the very early days of the nineteenth century and were financed by private individuals.

Courtesy of Olive Strout, circa 1920

Both Port Isaac and Port Gaverne were conceived and built during the days of the pilchard seining industry, which traditionally was as important to Cornwall as tin mining. The pilchard industry died out locally during the early to mid-nineteenth century, when the fish numbers diminished due to over fishing and new more powerful vessels fishing further out to sea, thereby breaking up the massive shoals which previously had always slowly moved towards the Cornish Coast.

With Port Isaac being so isolated, the coming of the pilchard was anticipated with relish, and there was always great excitement when shoals were spotted. The better off members of the community financed the industry, and these men were named 'adventurers'. They provided finance for the huge nets, boats, and for the building of the large cellars, also known as palaces, which in many places have been preserved, although they are now mainly used for accommodation. These cellars were used for storing the pilchard nets and gear, plus their main function of curing the fish.

The pilchard season only lasted for two months, and the many workers were paid a wage by the 'adventurers', so the fish provided nourishment as well as money, and many were salted down for the winter. The cellars were given romantic names, and the Port Gaverne ones were named *Union*, *Venus*, *Liberty* and *Rashleigh*. The Port Isaac ones were *Industry*, *Good Intent*, *Providence* and *Mary*.



The industry pilchard cellars at Port Isaac. Note the unusual shape as there was insufficient space to build the usual large square shape.

Picture by Geoff Provis, 2009

Other pilchard cellars at Port Isaac have been destroyed, the old Port Isaac School being built on the site of the *Good Intent* Cellar.



The seine boat watching the entrapped shoal inside the seine net.

Picture courtesy of Brian Stevens - St Ives Museum, circa 1900

The Catching Operation

Shoals of pilchard were usually spotted from a vantage point on the cliffs by men known as Huers, and in many places a set of signals was used to guide the pilchard boats to the fish. At Newquay, a Huer's hut is still in situ. We can only guess how the Port Isaac and Port Gaverne men were directed to their fish as we have no records.



Pilchards ready to be dipped out of the tuck net. Sometimes the seine net stayed in situ for about five days whilst being emptied, as only so many fish could be cured at a time. After this time the fish would die, so those that had not been taken to shore were released.

Picture - courtesy of Brian Stevens, St Ives Museum, circa 1900



Above - pilchards being dipped out of the tuck net using dipper baskets. Note how the baskets are made with gaps in the sides to allow the water to escape. Usually the presence of a smartly dressed man in a bowler hat identified him as one who was perhaps one of the 'adventurers'.

Picture courtesy of Brian Stevens, St Ives Museum, circa 1900



This is a live tuck. The fish have just been brought to the surface and have yet to die. They are struggling for oxygen.

Courtesy of Brian Stevens, St Ives Museum, circa 1900

The Keep Net

The main seine net was known as the keep net and was about 950 feet long by about 50 feet deep. The top or head rope had corks tied to it, and the bottom or foot rope had weights to keep it on the sea bed. When a shoal was spotted, the Master Seiner in the seine boat shot the seine net around the shoal and attempted to enclose it. If the ends of the seine net did not meet, another net, the Stop Net, was shot across the gap in an attempt to close the gap. Note, the men always waited for the shoal to move to a suitable location in which to shoot the main net, ie somewhere with a sandy bottom was ideal, as sometimes the net would stay in the same location for several days whilst it was emptied of fish.

To get the fish out of the keep net, another net, the Tuck Net was shot actually inside the keep net. The foot rope sank to the bottom, and of course the head rope stayed on the surface. To get the fish out the men used a simple but clever method. They splashed the water with their oars to drive the fish towards the head rope. When they thought the fish were in the best position, the men hauled on ropes which were attached to the foot rope and the fish were slowly hauled to the surface where they were lifted out of the sea by dipper baskets. The fish were then conveyed to shore and the laborious operation of carting the fish to the cellars to be cured began.

During the curing process, the pilchards were built up into solid rectangular blocks about five feet high with alternating layers of fish and salt. The fish stayed in this position for four or five weeks with the drained oil being saved for other purposes. When cured, the fish were washed, and then placed in circular layers in large casks known as hogsheads. These casks were then pressed in the cellars using pressing stones, when more oil was extracted. Finally the majority of the casks were exported by sailing vessel to Italy, and the remainder sold in this country.

Vast quantities of fish were landed throughout Cornwall. On one occasion at Port Isaac, a seine held 1000 hogsheads of pilchard. A hogshead weighed 4.5 cwt.

In olden times, communities paid tithes to the church, and early proof of the demise of the pilchard at Port Isaac is the fact that in 1836 we paid tithes as one tenth of herring, whereas the rest of Cornwall paid with pilchard.

Over the centuries the pilchard was more important to the area than any other fish, and vast quantities were landed and sold. The herring did become important following the demise of the pilchard, and this is dealt with in the next section. The main evidence left of this vast industry is the preserved cellars, so they are worthy of your attention. I recommend an inspection of the one remaining Port Isaac Cellar and the four at Port Gaverne bearing in mind that the Port Gaverne cellars are private property.

Just imagine the considerable investment required to purchase the land and build these premises as well as the huge nets and paying the numerous workers involved. A massive industry, and I am afraid to say the 'class' system was much in evidence, with the 'well to do' few providing the finance and also reaping the profits. However, the working class were grateful for the work, and for the nourishing fish. Thankfully, the Port Isaac Industry Cellars are still used by the fishing industry, and it is possible to see where pressing poles were held into the pilchard industry.

The sailing vessel trade was heavily involved with this trade. Sailing vessels exported the fish and also brought salt to Port Isaac and Port Gaverne from ports such as Liverpool for the curing process.



The team of workers pictured at St Ives who were used for curing pilchards in one of the pilchard cellars.

Picture - Brian Stevens - St Ives Museum, circa 1900

To give you an idea of the size of the industry I include details of a sale of the Fox and Rashleigh seines at Port Gaverne: 3,000 fathoms of net, 16 cwt of lead, 35 cwt of foot and head ropes, 25 seine barrels, 2 sets of mooring and wharping, 20 cwt of mooring ropes wharps and grapers, 20 cwt of old junk, 3 boats, 25 cwt of good cork lurker, double sets of oars, masts, capstans, yards and bars, a large quantity of poles, bucklers, plugs, press stones, several hundred pilchard casks, pickle casks and a variety of other articles together with about 5,000 bushels of British salt.

The pilchard was vitally important to the whole of Cornwall. For full details of this subject see the book published in 2009, 'The Fishermen of Port Isaac' by Geoff Provis - available in some local shops