Who were the Port Isaac Fishermen in the early 17th Century?

It is rare to find the actual names of ordinary working folk surviving from early documents, but in 1626 and again in 1629 Francis Basset, as Vice-Admiral of the north of Cornwall, was charged with compiling a survey of the maritime resources within his area (from St Ives up to Boscastle). The latter half of the 1620s saw England again at war with Spain and France and the government needed to know what ships and seamen were available to help protect our shores. On 20thJune 1626 the Council of War requested the Lord High Admiral, the Duke of Buckingham, to require a 'general muster' from each Vice-Admiral 'of all such mariners, sailors and seafaring men as are within their jurisdiction and to return true certificates to his Grace of their numbers, names, ages and dwelling places'. Basset's surveys records the names of 64 fishermen in St. Endellion parish (which he called St. Ellion) almost 4 centuries ago, whose surnames confirm the longstanding relationship with the sea by our local families.

It would have been pretty clear to everyone that this government compiled survey was intended for use by the press-masters as an aide-memoire of the seamen available at each port for forcing into naval service. There had been longstanding difficulties in pressing the mariners of the south west, who, perhaps surprisingly, received ample support from local mayors and prominent persons in obstructing government demands. At a time when fish was such a staple diet, no doubt the genuine concerns as to who would catch the fish needed for the local people if the able-bodied were all press-ganged, or perhaps a less worthy reason as to who would provide the (smuggled) fine wines and spirits for his lordship's table, might have influenced the decision to put local needs above national ones. In April 1625 Sir James Bagg reported that a muster of 600 pressed seamen had been frustrated by Sir John Eliot (the Vice-Admiral for south Cornwall, and Bagg's rival for the job) sending the men home, putting forward the excuse that he understood the death of James I and accession of Charles I on 27th March 1625 negated the impressment orders. Captain John Pennington wrote on 9th April 1627 that he had sent warrants to Sir John Drake, Vice-Admiral for Devon, and the Mayor of Dartmouth for the pressing of 160 men, but both replied they could find none. He clearly though there was collusion, as his letter continued 'I know there to be men and good men, which do absent themselves and are winked at'. On 2nd April 1628 it was Sir John Drake who wrote to Edward Nicholas, Secretary to the Admiralty, 'to press men is in vain for they will not go'. That same month the Mayor of Saltash was reported to have treated the impressment order with contempt. He encouraged the seamen to avoid the press by publicly reading the impressment warrant and then openly declaring in the street that he did not know where to find any seamen! The Mayor of Plymouth was no more forthcoming, as our hapless Captain Pennington found when he bargained with the mayor for an anticipated 3-400 men. The constables of the wards bought in only 10 or 11 old men not fit for service, and Pennington suspected deliberate concealment. Sir James Bagg, after supplanting his rival for the Vice-Admiral's job, also complained about a lack of assistance from the mayors of Dartmouth and Plymouth, even suggesting to the Lord High Admiral that to 'have [the mayor of Plymouth] by the heels will give example to others'. Throughout the days of the press-gangs, astute fishermen found themselves elsewhere when they came calling, and were well able to take those broad hints as to when would be a good time to be 'at sea'.

These are the 64 local names from the two surveys, 29 of whom feature in both surveys (albeit with variant spellings). Of those names who only appear in one list, the elderly fishermen in the earlier list may have died or were no longer able to work at sea by 1629. The younger ones in the later list were probably too young to go to sea in 1626. Others may simply have been overlooked by the compilers, possibly accidentally rather than by design. The ages should not be taken as accurate in either list, as those given rarely differ by the expected 3 years and in many cases appear to have become younger in the later survey. The earlier list was done in a rush of just a few days in August 1626 and perhaps an estimate was all that was expected. The later survey was done at a slightly more leisurely pace during January and February 1629, but it may be that, even if the men knew their exact age, these were deliberately falsified to mislead subsequent press-gangs.

Analysing the 1626 notes, of the 44 men listed, 29 (59%) were at sea, perhaps typical in summer. In 1626, all the men were reported as 'fishermen', whereas in 1629 an attempt was made to classify them into 'mariners' (master mariners or other types of senior seamen), 'sailors' (an ordinary seaman engaged to sail the vessel) and 'fishermen' (those others who worked on board, typically close inshore rather than deep sea). The 1629 survey lists 1 mariner (Roger Davys), 35 sailors and 14 fishermen.

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Reference

Gray, Todd. 1990. Early Stuart Mariners and Shipping. The Maritime Surveys of Devon and Cornwall, 1619-35. Devon & Cornwall Record Society New Series Vol. 33.

Francis Basset's Surveys of North Cornwall Mariners, Sailors and Fishermen

Fishermen of the parish of Endellion   **[St Ellion]**

1626 Survey Data for St Endellion (St. Ellion)		
Name	**Age**	**Notes**
John Aunger	46	at sea
Ralph Billinge	60	
Richard Billinge	16	
John Bray	60	
Nicholas Browne	30	at sea
Richard Browne	62	
John Browning jun.	20	at sea
John Browninge sen. ['at sea' crossed out]	70	
Richard Carveth	37	
John Chevalle	40	at sea
Thomas Collen	23	
Ferdinand Collinge	35	at sea
Robert Davies	50	at sea
Nicholas Emott	68	at sea
Thomas Emott	30	at sea
Richard Forde	20	at sea
John Gilbert	65	
Christopher Grigg	50	at sea
Francis Grigg	46	at sea
William Grigge	40	at sea
Thomas Guy	30	at sea
Raphe Guy	40	
George Hicks	45	
William Hickes, ['at sea' crossed out]	35	
Humphrey Jackett	27	
John James	50	at sea
Thomas James	38	
George Jefferie	44	
Oliver Moyle	60	at sea
Christopher Olver	26	at sea
John Olver	20	at sea
Nicholas Parson	20	at sea
John Pearse	60	at sea
John Rowe	45	
Anthony Stone	61	
John Tom	27	at sea
William Trefry	24	at sea
William Trefry	20	
John Trenden	25	at sea
Thomas Trenoden sen.	50	at sea
John Triplett	23	at sea
John Waye	60	at sea
Robert Wills	44	at sea
Total 44 Seamen (26 at Sea = 59%)		

1629 Survey Data for St Endellion (St Ellion)		
Name	**Age**	**Notes**
John Anger	40	Sailor
Ralph Billing	54	Sailor
Richard Billing	20	Sailor
Thomas Billing	16	Sailor
Christopher Brea	20	Sailor
William Browne	30	Sailor
William Browne	50	Fisherman
John Browninge	25	Fisherman
Richard Carveth	38	Fisherman
John Colline	20	Fisherman
Thomas Colline	27	Sailor
Joseph Collins	34	Sailor
Ferdinand Collen	30	Sailor
Richard Couch	18	Fisherman
Robert Davye	40	Sailor
Roger Davys	50	Mariner
John Dea	18	Fisherman
Thomas Denman	45	Sailor
Thomas Emmett	30	Sailor
William Emmett	20	Sailor
Christopher Grigge	50	Sailor
John Grigge	22	Fisherman
William Grigge	40	Sailor
Thomas Guy	30	Sailor
Ralph Guy	40	Fisherman
George Hickes	43	Fisherman
John Hickes	52	Sailor
William Hickes	40	Fisherman
Humphrey Jackett	32	Sailor
John James	40	Sailor
Thomas James	40	Sailor
George Jeffery	47	Sailor
Gilbart Jeffery	15	Sailor
Christopher Olliver	30	Sailor
John Olliver	26	Sailor
Richard Olliver	20	Sailor
Thomas Oliver	16	Fisherman
John Parker	18	Fisherman
Nicholas Parson	19	Sailor
Edward Poulstagg	30	Sailor
John Rawe	50	Fisherman
Anthony Stone	60	Sailor
John Tom	25	Sailor
Anthony Trebell [name crossed out]	60	Sailor
William Trefry	30	Sailor
William Trefry	21	Fisherman
Thomas Trenoden	20	Sailor
Arthur Triplett	25	Sailor
John Tripplett	35	Sailor
John Waye	50	Sailor
Total 50 Seamen (1 Mariner, 35 Sailor, 14 Fishermen)		