

Port Isaac Harbour

Just imagine how isolated Port Isaac was in olden days, when transport was mainly by horse and wagon and sailing vessel. The village developed its own character and dialect, with many people being related. Newcomers to the village were referred to as strangers.

At one time non-locals were advised to be out of the village by dark!!

The hard rough nature of the village developed similar hard rough characters, the majority of the village being very poor. However, there were many cases of very intelligent men who could not realise their potential due to the very limited opportunities at Port Isaac. Instead of following what would normally be considered an ideal career, these men became community leaders, due to their natural leadership abilities. Strangers to the village saw these men as just fishermen, but the locals knew who they were, and they were respected within the community.

The View From Lobber

It was originally hoped that with the building of the Breakwaters, that Port Isaac would become a popular port attracting visiting fishing vessels from other ports such as Newlyn, but due to the poor positioning of the Breakwaters this did not have a chance of occurring, as only partial protection was given to the harbour.

The busiest time for the harbour was initially through the pilchard seining, and then with the herring drifting, but the herrings failed in the early 1930s. Since entry to the Common Market in 1968, the potting industry has expanded, and this now is the only fishery at Port Isaac supporting only a handful of boats, but the fishery is of a high value. To Port Isaac people, the harbour and surrounds represent the heart of the village, where men worked and met, and where all village matters were discussed. The local term is 'yarning'.

The quaint, picturesque older part of the village has, in recent years, become a magnet for the 'better off' visitors who like to spend their hard earned cash on cottages to be used as second homes. The unfortunate result is that the village no longer contains local Cornish people, but this is a fate common to other pretty fishing villages around our coasts, and there appears to be no answer to this problem. Certainly in the olden days, many locals were very poor indeed, and I do not recommend returning to those desperately hard times.

Superstitions

Most fishermen were very superstitious, as their livelihood depended on successful catches of fish on the dangerous Atlantic Ocean in very basic vessels.

Never whistle aboard a boat - During the days of sail, the men whistled aboard to 'whistle up the wind'.

However, after the sailing days, the men did not want the wind, so they viewed whistling as just asking for the wind to blow.

Never paint a boat green - It was considered bad luck to paint a boat green. I do not know the logic behind this, but logic did always apply to superstitions. What mattered was whether or not the fishermen believed them.

Myths

Many myths and a few legends are associated with the area:

A Mysterious White Vessel - On occasions a white sailing vessel sails across the outer reaches of Port Isaac Harbour.

Cheney Hunt - A ghost named Cheney Hunt can be heard near Bodannon Farm, Trewetha, and it is the sound of a galloping horse (a family named Cheney once owned Bodannon, which was then a substantial house).

Names of Coast and Fishing Marks

Over the centuries, the fishermen gave their own names to features on the coast such as caves and rocky outcrops. Similarly good fishing locations at sea were given names. These were named 'marks', and were located using features on the land. With the advent of electronic equipment, these marks are no longer used to such an extent, and are dying out. My fishing book contains details of many of these.

Similarly, local names given by local people are dying out or have already gone. My book gives details of many of these, but I am afraid up and down the coast, much history has been lost.



This picture taken in about 1960 shows a natural harbour facing the north west and open to the Atlantic weather. The Breakwaters were built at the end of the 1920s, but the Western Breakwater was built too far in because of financial reasons. The harbour has always been difficult to work. Note how the older portion of the village is condensed in a small area.



A common view of old Port Isaac showing the isolated nature of the village and the many wood boats moored closely together, circa 1900. Note the large Wesleyan Chapel on the right of the picture which has been demolished.

Courtesy Malcolm McCarthy.



An old photo of fishermen having a yarn by the main Fish Cellar steps. The building behind them is the Slipway Hotel.

Courtesy Stephen Found

The sight of men working and yarning together around the harbour gave Port Isaac its character. The village then consisted of mainly local people, and the bottom half of the village was inhabited by local Cornish people. The present situation is there for all to see, but it is one repeated along the coast of Cornwall where pretty seaside villages have become the mecca for the holiday trade. The counter argument is that the holiday trade is the main industry bringing wealth to the county. This writer does not have an answer to that question, and would certainly not wish to return to the days of poverty and shortages. The loss of local Cornish people, characters, dialect, stories and general way of life is however a matter for regret, and this writer and PISCES are making an effort to preserve some of the past.

Geoff Provis, June 2012

Local author - 'The Fishermen of Port Isaac' & 'The Seafarers of Port Isaac'.