

Potting in Port Isaac

Potting has a varied history at Port Isaac, especially during the twentieth century. Prior to the late 1950s and 60s, the potting industry was conducted using the traditional pot made of withies or willow. The traditional pot had severe limitations compared to its modern equivalent, but these limitations ensured that the fishing effort was minor and the stocks were not affected. Today, modern parlour pots are designed to not only catch the fish, but to ensure they cannot escape. Furthermore, they withstand the bad Atlantic weather, and fishing is capable all the year around, so this has an obvious effect on stocks. However, there are some promising signs recently of many small lobsters on the sea bed, which may be partly due to the Padstow Lobster Hatchery, who release thousands of immature lobsters onto the grounds after they have outgrown their most vulnerable stage.

The pilchard and herring were by far the most valuable fisheries historically at Port Isaac, Port Gaverne and Port Quin, whereas now the shellfish fishery is the only one locally, and is conducted by a handful of fishermen who work many parlour pots using high powered boats. It is a very interesting contrast between the traditional sailing craft using withy pots, to today's fibre glass powerful vessels, using pots made of modern plastic materials which do not rot and which are capable of lasting for years. Fishing is still however the most dangerous occupation in the British Isles, and many of the local fishermen are descended from traditional fishing families, and they have an inbuilt sense of the sea.

I do recall clearly that during the early 1960s when I was leaving school, the local potting situation was very poor indeed. All boats were wooden, and the majority were either quite old or very old. Withy pots were still being used, but were being replaced by wire pots which the fishermen made from old wire. Whilst lobsters attracted a reasonable price, this was pre Common Market, and the marketing of brown crabs and also lobster could not be compared to today when much goes to the continent. Spider crabs were not even landed - the favourite method of disposal being to break their backs on the boat's gunwales. Fishing was not a viable option for myself and several other local young men who sought careers elsewhere.

Others decided to take a job away from Port Isaac, and save sufficient money to enable them to return to Port Isaac to buy a boat and go potting. Those who took this chance were eventually rewarded following the joining of the Common Market, and the improvement in fishing methods and gear.

Some of the fishermen grew the withies in withy gardens in local valleys, and made their pots in their own fish cellars or at some suitable location in the village. To pick and prepare the withy was very time consuming, as was making the pot. This activity took place following the finish of the herring season after Christmas and during the winter months and early spring when the only fishing available to the men was some hand lining for cod and ling if the weather was fine, and some trawling. However, if the winter weather was adverse, the income for the fishermen was negligible or indeed nil. This was the period when the salt herring were eaten.

Ground sea was a continual hazard for withy pots near to shore, and this sea condition may be identified by large 'roller' type seas breaking on the coast. Furthermore, a bad gale usually blew in May, and the men called this the 'May Rag'. Many did not put their pots out until they thought the May Rag was over. So the withy pot season was short. Also the withy were easily damaged on the sea bed, and with the constant hauling.

A 'back' of pots is a string of pots tied together which are laid on the sea bed in a line. Pots shot around the shore are usually shot as singles, ie one pot to one buoy rope.



Anthony Provis - the harbour master between 1945 and 1961. He was much respected by all the village and especially the fishermen. He is seen here carrying withy pots he made in the large fish cellars to his small cellar beneath the Pentus. Photo courtesy Geoff Provis, circa 1955



Bruce Rowe - a modern day fisherman standing in his cellar in front of his parlour pots. Bruce left school at 15 and fished with his brother Charlie and father Jack. He has had a number of boats including the HOPE, MCB. SRJ and his present one the OUR BELLE ANN (500 hp) Photo courtesy Geoff Provis, 2009



An interesting picture showing the time when withy pots began to be replaced by wire. Note the withy pots against the wall in the background. From left to right, Dick Howe, Frank Rowe, Dick 'Trapper' Morman and Bill Brenton. Photo courtesy Stephanie Berry (nee Brenton), circa 1960

Scenes such as this were once common place, and this gave the village its unique character. Dick and Frank were working on the pots, but 'Trapper' and Bill were just there for a yarn. Note the traditional attire, wearing distinctive Navy blue cotton Guernseys.



Frank 'Nibbs' Brown putting a catch of lobsters into a store pot at Long Pool, Port Isaac. Long Pool is below the Old School.

Photo courtesy Stephen Found, circa 1955

Nibbs was a real character who lived all his life at the bottom half of Port Isaac, and at sea. I never ever saw him in the top half of the village.



George 'Jordan' Honey preparing a 'back' of withy pots on Port Isaac Beach. He is putting bait onto the sticks of wood, 'skivvers', which hold the bait in the pot. He is seen wearing a pair of leather boots, and it is believed he was the last to do so at Port Isaac prior to the use of rubber ones.

Photo courtesy Stephen Found, circa 1930