

The Pilchard Palaces

When the pilchard industry was at its height in the first decade of the 19th century, we had ten fish cellars or 'Pilchard Palaces' busy processing the millions of fish caught off the local coast. They are our largest buildings, and nine of them still survive, at least in part. A typical cellar was built to a rectangular plan about 36 metres (120ft) long by 27 metres (90ft) wide, although restricted space meant that some were of a triangular design. Each cellar was the commercial premises of a separate fishing company and comprised an open central courtyard with covered side arms some 6 metres (20ft) wide. There may also be accommodation, a salt store, and sail/net lofts to store the equipment. The perimeter walls were usually a metre (3ft) thick with the bottom 1½ metres (4ft) constructed from slate, and the upper part from Cornish cob (a mix of mud, straw, slate fragments, and lime which sets into a type of concrete). Within the slate section, usually on both the inside and outside faces, were inset three courses of bricks forming a row of holes, the bricks being topped with a wooden beam. The holes were an important component in pressing the fish. They were 65cm (26in) apart, so that a 60cm (24in) wide barrel/hogshead could be placed immediately in front of each hole, with a 3 metre (10ft) beam, weighted at the end, slotted in each hole to press down on the barrel lid and squeeze out the fish oil.

the three displays on the Port Isaac, Port Gaverne and Port Quin 'palaces' prepared by Malcolm Lee

References

19th Century Port Gaverne Property Lease data: From documents forming part of the National Trust deposit for their Cornish properties. Details are on this national archives page (under 'Endellion' properties) - <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=021-x399&cid=-1#-1>

Listed Buildings data: <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk>

Noall, C, 1972: Cornish Seines & Seiners. Bradford Barton, Truro. 160pp (Port Isaac, Port Gaverne & Port Quin pp142-3).

Trevan, J W, 1835: Summary Memoirs of the Parish of ENDELLION Prior to the year 1834. Reproduced by Port Isaac Local History Group, Port Isaac, in 2010.