

Our Former Pilchard Fishery

200 years ago the humble pilchard was caught here in staggering numbers, and Port Isaac, Port Gaverne and Port Quin would have been bustling to process the many millions of fish caught each year in late summer and autumn. Preservation of such huge quantities of fish needed specially constructed buildings known as fish cellars, or, more exotically, 'Pilchard Palaces'. There were ten such buildings here, all but one of which survives today, at least in part. By the 1840s the pilchard rarely came this far up the north Cornwall coast, and they became derelict until adapted for other uses.

The pilchard is found in vast shoals, but is more usually associated with slightly warmer waters than surround the UK. It has only ever been recorded here off the south west peninsula, especially in Cornwall where it is an ancient industry. John Norden visited Cornwall in the late 16th century and his map shows a pilchard seine in Mevagissey bay, the workings of which would have been similar to the scene John Watts Trevan sketched in our bay 250 years later (see the Trevan display).

Fishing was important here in Norden's time, as he mentioned it in his description of the places he visited "Portissick, a hamlet and haven, wondrously increased also in buyldinges of late yeares by fishinge. Port-kerne, [Port Gaverne] a litle cove for fisher-boates; and ther was somtymes a crane to lifte up and downe suche comodities as were ther taken in to be transported, or brought in and unladen: and ther have bene divers buyldinges, now all decayde since the growing of Portissick. Port-quin a litle hamlet and harbour ner the former, muche increaseing by fishinge also."

It was in the late 18th century that the pilchards began to arrive in huge quantities, but by the time John Watts Trevan wrote his summary memoirs a few decades later in 1835 they had virtually all gone and those pilchard palaces were deserted (see the Trevan display).

At the close of the 18th century, Port Isaac had four cellars; the Industry cellar by the harbour (still in use by our fishermen) and on the higher ground above the harbour were the Good Intent cellar owned by Lord Granville, and the Mary and Providence cellars owned by Earl Fortescue. The Industry cellar may well have been founded in Norden's time, but the cellars on the higher ground had probably been the result of the expansion of the pilchard industry around this time. There were two cellars at Port Quin; the Venice cellar and the Carolina cellar, which may also have been founded in the 16th century. In Port Gaverne at that time there was just the Union Cellar, although it was a smaller building then.

In the season up to 28th August 1802, these were the quantities of pilchards landed in our area –

Seine	Hogsheads	Approx No of Fish	Approx Tonnes
Fox*	300	750,000	67.5
Providence	300	750,000	67.5
Union	650	1,625,000	146.3
Industry	650	1,625,000	146.3
Good Intent	700	1,750,000	157.5
Total	2,600	6,500,000	585.1

* In summer 1802 the Fox seine might have been housed in what was later known as the Mary Cellar in Port Isaac.



Scooping pilchards from the seine into boats for transfer to shore, St Ives circa 1870

With these huge quantities of pilchards being taken in 1802, and all the convenient Port Isaac locations already occupied, that empty land adjacent to the beach in Port Gaverne valley was a logical place for expansion. There were three new cellars erected in Port Gaverne for the 1803 pilchard season; the Liberty Cellar, the Venus cellar and the Rashleigh cellar. This was undoubtedly when the Union cellar was extended to become the triangular building we see today.

Each of the cellars was operated by a separate company of adventurers who owned the boats and fishing gear and employed the fishermen and cellar workers. The pilchard season started in late July, when lookouts, known as huers, were posted on high ground to scan the sea's surface for that distinctive dark purplish patch of an arriving shoal near the coast. Once spotted, the huer would then use a system of semaphore with gorse branches to direct a boat to surround the shoal and shoot the nets. As there were ten separate companies operating in competition off our coast, there was no doubt some arrangement to ensure they did not all attempt to descend on a shoal at the same time and get in each other's way to risk the loss of the shoal. Perhaps they had a similar system to St Ives, where each company was allocated a section of coast, or 'stem', on a rota system, so everyone had a fair share over the season.

The seine net was 160 fathoms long by 6 fathoms deep (1 fathom = 6 foot/1.8 metres), and there were corks at intervals along the top rope so the net would float and form a circular wall from the sea bed to the surface. Shooting the seine was a skilful operation and could only be done when the shoal was in shallow water or the fish would escape under the net. Once caught, the seine would be dragged close into harbour and anchored down. Once the shoal was safe, the net would be surrounded by gigs and other small boats into which the men scooped the fish for the short journey to shore. This process may take many days depending on size of the shoal and the available manpower. In the peak season, all the manpower in the district would have been diverted to secure this bounty.

The fish were taken from the shore into the cellar using a two man 'gurrie', a square open box with two carrying handles, which held 1,000-1,200 pilchards weighing some 100 kilos. Local children would often hover near the cellar entrance and rush forward to steal fish off the guries. As the carriers had their hands full, a boy with a long cane was paid a few pence to run alongside and try to whack the hands of any miscreants who got too close. This castigation had little effect and the petty pilfering seems to have been tolerated with the children getting to keep their painfully obtained spoils of perhaps a dozen fish an hour. No doubt the fishermen saw it as an amusing diversion with its own form of rough justice, besides which they had probably done the same themselves a few years earlier. In any event, with the millions of fish coming ashore the children could only remove the tiniest portion of the sea's bounty. One wonders if they later got their own back on the boy with the cane!

Processing the fish in the cellars was a two stage operation. First the fish were 'bulked' in the cellar courtyard by forming them into a huge mound of alternate layers of pilchards and salt. The Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins visited St Ives in the summer of 1850 and gave this evocative description of bulking "...a whole congregation of the fair sex screaming, talking, and - to their honour be it spoken - working at the same time, round a compact mass of pilchards which their nimble hands have already built up to a height of three feet, a breadth of more than four, and a length of twenty. Here we have every variety of the "fairer half of creation" displayed before us, ranged round an odoriferous heap of salted fish. Here we see cronies of sixty and girls of sixteen; the ugly and the lean, the comely and the plump; the sour-tempered and the sweet - all squabbling, singing, jesting, lamenting, and shrieking at the very top of their very shrill voices for "more fish," and "more salt;" both of which are brought from the stores, in small buckets, by a long train of children running backwards and forwards with unceasing activity and in bewildering confusion. But, universal as the uproar is, the work never flags; the hands move as fast as the tongues; there may be no silence and no discipline, but there is also no idleness and no delay. Never was three-pence an hour more joyously or more fairly earned than it is here! The labour is thus performed. After the stone floor has been swept clean, a thin layer of salt is spread on it, and covered with pilchards laid partly edgewise, and close together. Then another layer of salt, smoothed fine with the palm of the hand, is laid over the pilchards; and then more pilchards are placed upon that; and so on until the heap rises to four feet or more. Nothing can exceed the ease, quickness, and regularity with which this is done. Each woman works on her own small area, without reference to her neighbour; a bucketful of salt and a bucketful of fish being shot out in two little piles under her hands, for her own especial use. All proceed in their labour, however, with such equal diligence and equal skill, that no irregularities appear in the various layers when they are finished - they run as straight and smooth from one end to the other, as if they were constructed by machinery. The heap, when completed, looks like a long, solid, neatly-made mass of dirty salt; nothing being now seen of the pilchards but the extreme tips of their noses or tails, just peeping out in rows, up the sides of the pile."

The fish was best if left in bulk for five or six weeks, although this may be shortened at times of peak throughput. Whilst in bulk the heap would exude a mixture of salt, water, offal and fish oil, which drained into a reservoir in the middle of the cellar. The oil was scooped off for subsequent sale and the remaining mixture was used as a manure on the local fields.

At the end of bulking, the fish underwent the second operation by being washed and packed in straight sided barrels, or hogsheads. These were then moved to the edge of the cellar walls for pressing, utilising that row of holes still visible in most of our former cellars. The holes are 26"



Cellar 'maidens' and the overseers pose at Sennen, 1880

(65cm) apart for the standard 2 foot (60cm) wide barrels. After they were positioned immediately adjacent to the wall, a 10 foot (3 metres) long pole was inserted in each hole, and a stone weight was hung on the end to act as a lever pressing down on the lid to extract more oil from the fish. This oozed out of the loose fitting staves and dripped into a gutter below to flow into a storage tank. The fish oil, or 'train', was a most important by-product, as its sale paid all the running costs of the seine company.



Breaking the bulked pilchards and packing into barrels at St Ives 1870. The man with the top hat and cane is presumably the owner, with his cellar foreman alongside. A boy and a man can be seen to their left with a gurrie, and children are working behind them.



A traditionally packed pilchard hogshead



Using those socket holes for pilchard pressing (Falmouth Maritime Museum)



Socket holes in the wall of the Union Cellar, Port Gaverne

Huge quantities of salt were used in preserving the fish, with 150 kilos required for each hogshead of fish (around 230kg) produced. Bulk salt stores were required locally and the Liberty Cellar in Port Gaverne fulfilled local needs. It was owned by Philip Ball of Mevagissey, one of Cornwall's premier pilchard merchants, who founded the Mevagissey bank. Following several poor seasons, the bank closed its doors in the autumn of 1824. All the bank's assets were sold, including the Liberty cellar in July 1825. The sale inventory included 7,000 bushels (175 tonnes) of salt, enough for curing well over 1,000 hogsheads. The best salt was French sea salt, but Britain was at war with France until 1815, so Cheshire rock salt (which we now spread on the roads in winter) was substituted. This gave the flesh a brown colour and was not generally liked.

In 1817 Philip Ball gave evidence to a Parliamentary select committee on the use of salt in the pilchard industry. From his evidence on wage costs, we can deduce how much money that put into our area in the early part of the 19th century. The lowest sale price he quotes for a hogshead of pilchards was 75p in the glut year of 1812, but reached £5.10 in 1815. The local fishermen received a quarter of the sale price, the women fish packers received 10p a barrel and the cellar superintendent received 5p a barrel. If we use his lowest sale price on those 2,600 hogsheads produced in 1802, this would represent direct local wages of almost £900 for the parish, which in 1801 consisted of just 156 families. The £900 in direct wages is not all, as there will be other wages for coopers to make at least some of the barrels, as well as those of village craftsmen providing services to the various companies. It can be difficult to put such figures in context, but those direct wages alone represent almost £6 a family when a farm labourer might only receive £5 a year. This demonstrates the importance of the humble pilchard to the wellbeing of our area in those early decades of the 19th century. The subsequent failure to arrive would have spelt real hardship.

compiled for PISCES by Malcolm Lee



Probably the only pilchards found in Port Isaac today!

References

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