

The Local Herring Industry

Following the demise of the pilchard in the early nineteenth century, the herring assumed the utmost importance at Port Isaac. This remained so until the early 1930s when the herring failed due to a mixture of over fishing and new fishing methods such as the powerful new trawlers destroying the sea bed areas where herring fry grew. The disastrous effects of the failure of the herring on the community only highlighted the limited effect the potting fishery had on the welfare of the locals. Several businesses went bankrupt, and local men who were born to follow the sea found occupations elsewhere.

A good catch meant so much to the fishermen. It probably meant their families had enough food to eat, and some money to spend on essentials. It really was a battle for survival at times.

The method of catching the herring was totally different to that of the pilchard. Instead of a huge single net to encircle and trap the pilchards, a number of much smaller nets each about 90 yards long and of varying depth, were joined together and cork buoys tied to the head rope. This made the hang in the water like a sheet, and the whole series of nets were shot in the sea at dusk and floated in the tide with the boat tied to the end net. The unsuspecting herring then swam into the net and was enmeshed by its gills. The huge shoals of pilchard were easily spotted on the surface from some distance, but the herring swim a little deeper, so there was no outward sign of them. However, the fishermen knew the time of year they were likely to arrive, and they always listened to news from Clovelly in North Devon, as they knew that within ten days of arriving there, they would be at Port Isaac. The days when herring were plentiful, the period from the end of October until Christmas saw a hive of activity at the harbour.

Many non-fishermen helped crew the herring boats, and the men were paid a share of the catch.

If boats caught a large quantity of herring, the masters of the vessel took the boat into the harbour, and sued the boat in on the beach, and fish were shaken out of the net onto a sheet of canvas lying on the beach. In the olden days one crew member walked inland to notify fish jousts and farmers that fish were available. They then brought their horses and wagons to Port Isaac to buy the fish, and then sell in the country.



Port Isaac Railway Station is situated about three and a half miles from Port Isaac, and the fish was taken there by horse and wagon during the early days. This made a huge difference to the amount of fish which was marketed at Port Isaac until the railway reached Padstow. circa 1950

The fish were counted on the beach by the merchants. 3 herring made a cast, and to make a 100 herring, the merchants required 40 casts. The herring were put into wicker pads which held 200. Three pads were emptied into one barrel. The opening of Port Isaac Road Railway Station in 1895 made a huge difference to the numbers of herring sold.

During the good times when herrings were plentiful, the most common phrase heard in shops was 'pay when the errins come'. The locals bought goods 'on tick', with the knowledge that when the shoals of herrings arrived the bills would be paid. Little wonder they were named 'silver darlings'.

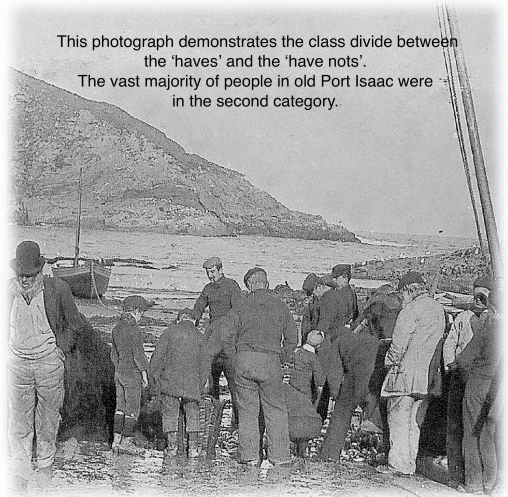
Shaking out

The nets containing the herring were kept in the middle of the deck, and when shaking out started at least one man was on the head rope and others on the foot rope or twine. (The twine is the main area of net). The net was slowly pulled out over the boat's gunwale, and any fish were shaken out of the net onto a sheet of canvas lying on the beach. In the olden days one crew member walked inland to notify fish jousts and farmers that fish were available. They then brought their horses and wagons to Port Isaac to buy the fish and then sell in the country.



The Brown family shaking out herrings. A good example to show how the shaking out was achieved. The boat on the right is either the Boy George or Winifred. Courtesy of Jim May, circa 1925

The herring fishing was a very labour intensive operation. The cotton nets needed to be barked in a hot fluid named kutch, and special bark houses were located at Port Isaac and Port Gaverne. Following this the nets were pulled by handcart to be dried on walls or fences before either being placed in sacks or put straight into boats. The boats themselves were heavily built with wide bilges to permit them to carry heavy weights. You must appreciate that wet nets full of fish are very heavy indeed. This made the fishery extremely hazardous, and several Port Isaac men were drowned conducting this fishery usually very close to port. The usual cause of the sinking was taking on too heavy a load with nets full of fish. This also usually occurred during fine weather.



This photograph demonstrates the class divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The vast majority of people in old Port Isaac were in the second category.

A unique photo found on a glass plate in an attic at Launceston. The man on the left is Warwick Richard Guy, a local ship, property and business owner. He is walking away from the scene of a poor catch of herrings being shaken out, and he is not at all happy. Probably the workers in the picture are in his debt. Photo courtesy of Geoff Provis, author of book 'The Fishermen of Port Isaac', circa 1895



A very old photo showing a large catch of herring after shaking out on Port Isaac Beach. The man, second on the left was really a mate on a sailing vessel, Thomas Mutton, my great-grandfather, but he was obviously helping out, or perhaps even he was home from his usual job, and he offered to go out herring fishing. Courtesy of Stephen Found, circa 1895

Herrings were smoked both at Port Isaac and Port Gaverne, and Port Isaac kippers became quite famous. The Port Gaverne smokehouse has been preserved, but only the top of the Port Isaac one remains which is easily visible from the harbour.

After a good catch, families salted down about 200 herrings in earthenware containers to see them through the winter. The fish were soaked for 24 hours prior to boiling in water which contained small potatoes in their peels which had been retained from their potato crop for this purpose. After boiling, the peels were taken off and thrown away as they contained much salt, and this kept much of the salt away from the actual potato flesh.

Many Port Isaac people were sick of eating salt herring or 'errin' as it was pronounced locally, whilst other people quite liked them.

Following World War Two, there was a brief revival, as there was little fishing effort during the War which allowed stocks to recover.

Carbide lights were used when drifting at sea, to notify the location of the boat. Flare lights were used at sea to notify a large catch, and when shaking out in the harbour. A flare light consisted of two wicks placed into a paraffin can.

Port Isaac paid tithes to the church in 1836 as one tenth of herring.

The fishermen today are much more independent, and they are able to ply their trade by themselves due to the nature of the vessels, and also the modern four wheeled drive vehicles which are able to manoeuvre on beaches, cancelling out the need for man power. Modern nets are so much lighter than the old cotton variety, and mechanical winches make light work of hauling heavy gear.

Many superstitions were associated with herring fishing. One unusual one was as follows: When the first good catch of herrings were made, many families said, 'time to cut the ham'. Salting down meat and fish was a common practice, and to cut the ham was seen as a way of celebration, similar to opening a bottle of champagne.

During the 1950s and 1960s, boats put nets aboard, and continually hoped for the herring to return, but apart from a very few isolated catches, they were disappointed. Gradually from the 1930s, boats were laid up, broken up or sold to another port. Amount marketed reduced considerably. These days, it is difficult to imagine the importance of first the pilchard, and then the herring to Port Isaac.



The Boy Fletch, a Provis family boat loading herring nets into the boat. The man holding the cork in the centre of the picture is John Provis, the great-grandfather of the writer. The cork was tied onto the head rope of the net, and more corks are waiting on the sand. Courtesy of Ian Honey, circa 1925

This picture again shows how much effort was involved just to get to sea. Here they are loading nets onto the vessel, and corks are being tied to the head rope. Note the heavy nets on the carriage.

An interesting point is that modern day tastes do not appear to appreciate the herring. In olden days they even acquired the name of 'silver darlings' such was their value to the population. Whenever I mention this to people, I am told that they do not like the herring bones, whereas the bones are actually quite soft in comparison to other fish. I have seen tons of herring go for pot bait, which is valuable for the potting men, but surely this nutritious fish deserves better. Doctors advise that the consumption of oily fish is good for the body, but even this has little effect on peoples' tastes.