

John Betjeman 1906-1984

John Betjeman, Poet Laureate of England from 1972 until his death, was known by many as a poet whose writing evoked a sense of nostalgia. He used traditional poetic forms, wrote with a light touch about public issues, celebrated classic architecture and satirized much of contemporary society for its superficiality. He had a great love for Cornwall and Port Isaac was a particular favourite of his and a source of inspiration to him.

Writing about Church Hill he said: "There is no doubt this is the way to approach Port Isaac, from St Endellion on the Polzeath side of the port. The final hill is very steep and there is only a disused quarry in which you can park a motor-car if you are not on foot. Not until you round a corner do you see any sign of Port Isaac at all. Then you see it all, huddled in a steep valley, a cover at the end of a combe, roofs and roofs, tumbling down either steep hillside in a race for shelter from south-west gales. A fresh-water stream pours brown and cold along the valley, under slate bridges, between old houses, under the road and out into the little harbour.

Port Isaac is Polperro without the self-consciousness, St Ives without the artists ... here are winding paths that climb up steps of beautiful blue-green Delabole slate to other winding paths, hills too steep for anyone with heart trouble to manage, roads and lanes too narrow for buses or coaches ...

Port Isaac has no grand architecture. A simple slate Methodist Chapel and Sunday School in the Georgian tradition hangs over the harbour and is the prettiest building in the town. On the opposite side of the water is a picturesque Gothic style school, from whose pointed windows the teachers could, if they wished, pitch their pupils down the cliff side into the harbour below ...

For that is the sad thing about Port Isaac. It is the kind of place Town Planners hate: the quintessence of the quaint. There are no boulevards, no car stands no clinics. The dentist calls once a week and brings his instruments with him in his car ...

The Community Centre is all wrong by Town Planning standards. It is not the public-house, but the Liberal Club. Anyone who knows Cornish fishermen must know that most of them do not drink, many are chapel-goers and a Liberal Club without a licence is the sort of place where you would expect to find them.

The trade of Port Isaac really is fishing ... Two arms have been built out into the water to keep back the bigger seas, while great guardian headlands keep the harbour calm in most weathers... The promise of a dark night after a shoal of pilchards had been sighted, the sound of rowlocks and splashing of oars in harbour water, boarding the fishing boat from the dinghy, the outside roar of the sea, the dark cliffs ... Unless, like me, you were a shocking sailor and sick all night and thanking God for the dawn light and the nearing cliffs of Varley Head as you made for home and harbour.

Even if you are no sailor, the smell of fish tells you the chief business of the port. And your eyes will tell you too ... all fishermen's houses ... all windows that can look out to sea, so that even as they die the old fishermen of Port Isaac may watch the tides. I expect the old people will all soon be moved to some very ugly council houses being built on the windy hilltop ...

But I like to stand in summer by the bit of wall in Fore Street, and lean over to look down at the harbour and inland at the little town below me. It is evening, harvest festival time. The small Victorian Church has been hung with lobster pots and dressed with crabs and seaweed - a harvest festival of the sea. Church is over, but Chapel is still on. As I stand on this view-point above the town, the seagulls are crying and wheeling, the flowery cliffs take the evening sun, the silvery slates of the old town turn pale gold. Above the lap of the harbour water, the wail of gulls and thunder of the sea beyond the headlands, comes the final hymn from the Methodist Chapel across the green and gently rolling harbour flood.

