



John Norden's 'Pilchard Fishing' in Mevagissey Bay 1584



John Watts Trevan's 'shooting the sean in Port Isaac Bay' 1835

The Pilchard Fishery of Endellion Parish

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 more usually associated with slightly warmer waters than surround the UK. As an industry, it has long been recorded here in the southwest of England, especially in Cornwall. John Norden visited Cornwall in the late 16th century and his map shows a pilchard seine fishing in Mevagissey bay, the workings of which would have been similar to the scene John Watts Trevan sketched in our bay 250 years later.

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 fishing. **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 brougnt 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 fishing 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. He gave this account of the industry "This is the most important of all the fishing on this coast. About thirty years since pilchards came here in such abundance that several gentlemen of the neighbourhood resolved to have a sean [seine] on this with every appearance of success. Adventurers from all quarters began to adopt the same plan, then it was heave and go who and who should have parts. Committees were formed to adopt the most eligible plans. Large and extensive cellars were begun to be built. Seans and other materials connected thereto ordered to an outlay of about the tune of thirty thousand pounds and all was hustle and confusion for two or three years at Port Isaac, Port Quin, and Porth Karn Hun [Port Gaverne]. Some of those seans as the 'Good Intent' meet with singular success having caught nearly twelve hundred hogsheads of fish the first year, and some of the other seans had minor successes and soon fish were caught for eight or ten years after, some of those seans taking from six hundred hogsheads and others of less quantities upon an average, yearly. But from that time to this the fish have scarcely visited the coast, in consequence thereof several of the seans have been cut up and sold with all boats and other materials thereunto belonging, and the cellars either sold or falling into decay. About twenty hogsheads were caught this last year by the joint adventure of the following seans, 'Union' at Porth Karn Hun, 'Industry' at Port Isaac, and 'Fenice' [Venice] at Port Quin. The fish make about £3.10.0 [£3.50] per hogshead now in the Italian market but the Neapolitan Government at present lay an import duty of eighteen shillings per hogshead, and the Tuscan about the same." A hogshead can vary, but customarily contains around 2,500 to 3,000 fish and weighs some 4½ hundredweight (230kg).

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.

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.