

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 those children later got their own back on the boy with the cane!



Scooping pilchards from the seine into boats for transfer to shore.
St Ives c1870

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 croncs 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."

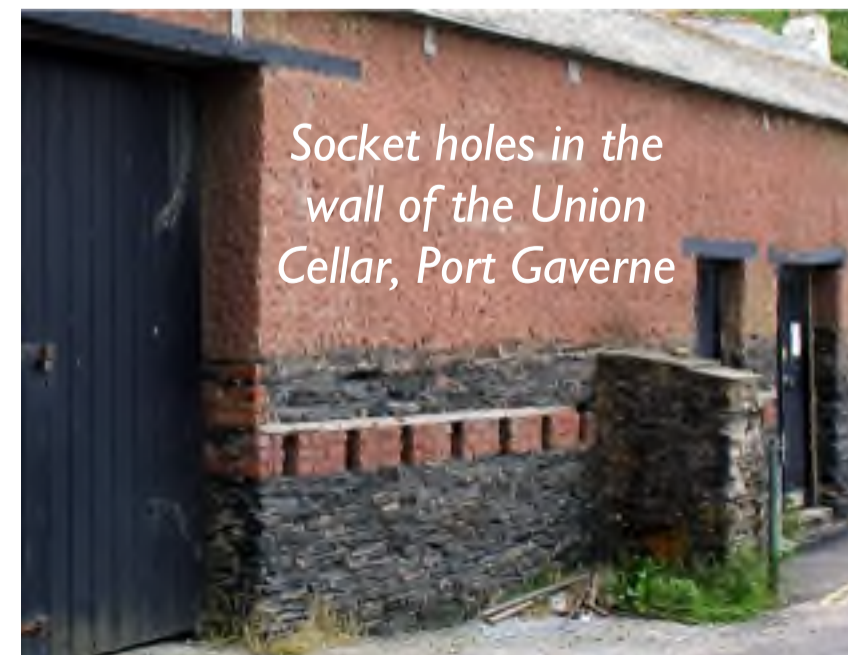
The fish was best if left in bulk for five or six weeks, although this may be shortened at times of peak throughput. Whilst in bulk the heap would exude a mixture of salt, water, offal, and fish oil, which drained into a reservoir in the middle of the cellar. The oil was scooped off for subsequent sale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

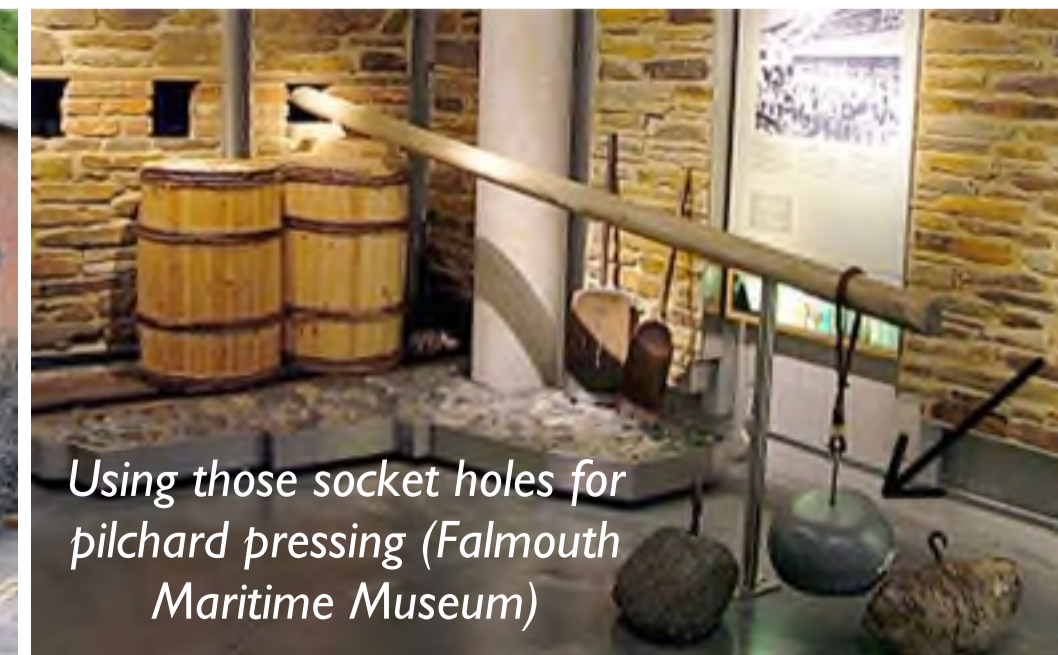
Huge quantities of salt were used in preserving the fish, with 150 kilos required for each hogshead of fish (around 230kg) produced. Bulk salt stores were required locally and the Liberty Cellar in Port Gaverne fulfilled local needs. It was owned by Philip Ball of Mevagissey, one of Cornwall's premier 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 November 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 will 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 for that few months' bounty represent almost £6 a family when a farm labourer might only receive £15 for a year's work. 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.

Malcolm Lee



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



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



A traditionally packed pilchard hogshead