



Industry Cellar today

The Pilchard Palaces

When the pilchard industry was at its height in the first decade of the 19th century, we had ten fish cellars or 'Pilchard Palaces' busy processing the millions of fish caught off the local coast. They are our largest buildings, and 9 of them still survive, at least in part. A typical cellar was built to a rectangular plan about 36 metres (120ft) long by 27 metres (90ft) wide, although restricted space meant that some were of a triangular design. Each cellar was the commercial premises of a separate fishing company and comprised an open central courtyard with covered side arms some 6 metres (20ft) wide. There may also be accommodation, a salt store, and sail/net lofts to store the equipment. The perimeter walls were usually a metre (3ft) thick with the bottom 1½ metres (4ft) constructed from slate, and the upper part from Cornish cob (a mix of mud, straw, slate fragments, and lime which sets into a type of concrete). Within the slate section, usually on both the inside and outside faces, were inset three courses of bricks forming a row of holes, the bricks being topped with a wooden beam. The holes were an important component in pressing the fish. They were 65cm (26in) apart, so that a 60cm (24in) wide barrel/hogshead could be placed immediately in front of each hole, with a 3 metre (10ft) beam, weighted at the end, slotted in each hole to press down on the barrel lid and squeeze out the fish oil.

Port Isaac

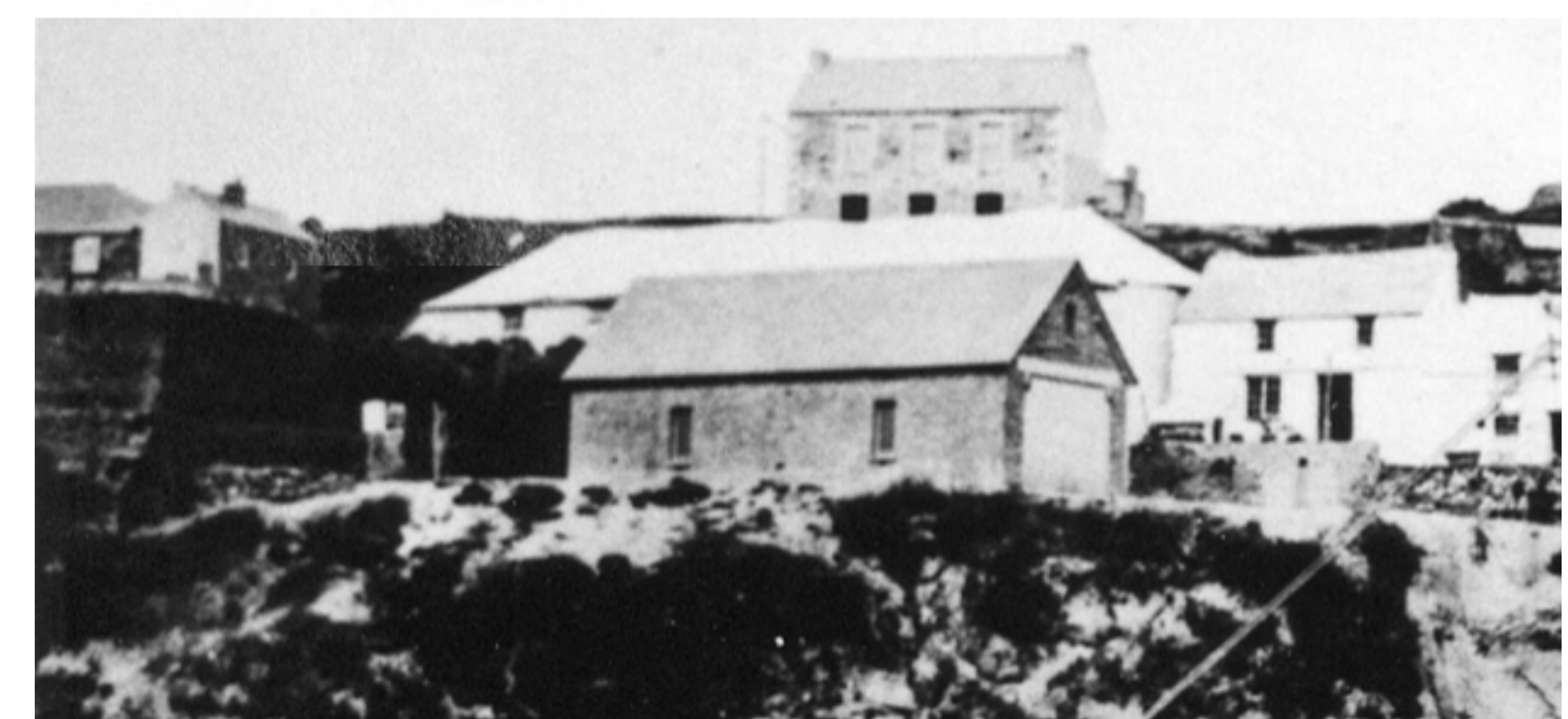
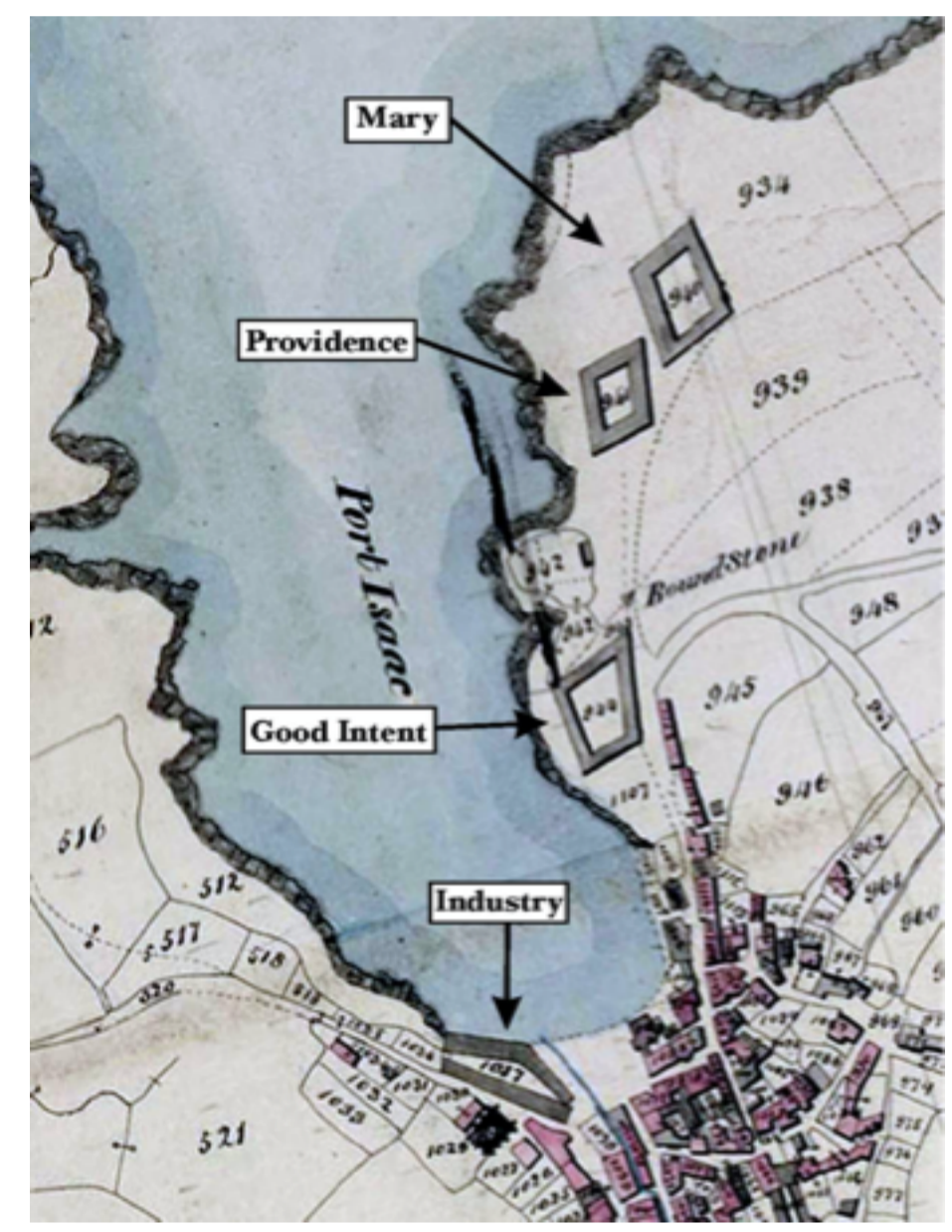
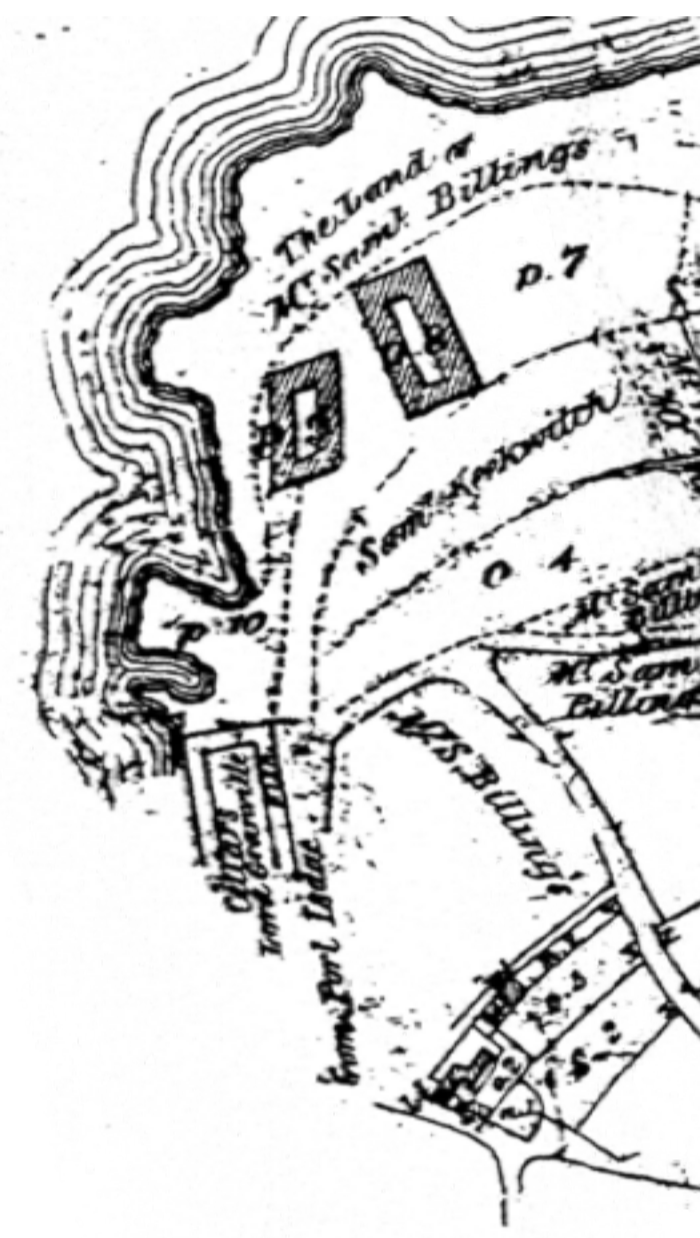
Industry Cellar: This cellar is undoubtedly on the site of an original Tudor fishing building, as John Norden wrote in 1584 that Port Isaac was "wonderfully increased also in buyldinges of late yeares by fishing". It has a triangular plan to fit into the restricted space. The exterior wall shows evidence of substantial repair/rebuilding, likely from the late 18th century when the pilchards first arrived in large numbers. The building sits on foundations comprising vertical slates rather than solid blocks, which is identical to the construction of the old Tudor pier, adding support to them predating the current 18th century cellar by 200 years or more. There is no evidence of brick courses on the outside of this exterior wall. Perhaps the exposed position would risk an autumn storm washing away any barrels being pressed here. It would thus have had a smaller capacity than other cellars, and its dimensions suggest it could press around 160 hogsheads (36 tonnes) on the inside of the wall. In the 1802 season it was reported the Industry seine processed 650 hogsheads (146 tonnes), which would have been in four separate pressings. In January 1815, O Gregory offered his sixteenth share in the Industry seine boats, salt and cellar by private contract. Trevan reported that a joint venture with the Union seine in Port Gaverne and the Venice seine in Port Quin caught just 20 hogsheads (4.5 tonnes) between them in the 1834 season. The whole seine company was sold at the Golden Lion in April 1840, where the cellar was described as "Substantially-erected". The cellar measured, east by west, 54' wide; "the side towards the lake [harbour], bearing north-west, 106ft long; the side towards the Clift, 120ft in length, and the inner end, bearing east-north-east, 30ft in breadth." Included in the sale were the stop and tuck seines, seine boat, follower, lurker, "Car boat" (dipper), and a copper-fastened six-oared gig. The 1841 tithe apportionment recorded it as owned by Francis Brown Hambly and occupied by the Industry Seine Company who presumably rented it. It is still in use by our fishermen and is a Grade II listed building.

The original houses of old Port Isaac would already have filled the valley bottom, so the Good Intent, Providence and Mary Cellars had to be built much higher up on what would have been empty cliff-top fields.

Good Intent Cellar: Originally built by Lord Grenville, probably in the late 18th century. This is the only cellar which is completely gone, having been demolished in the mid-1870s to make way for our first public school built in 1877. The tithe map shows a trapezium shaped building, and, by estimating its dimensions, the pressing capacity would be around 380 hogsheads (85 tonnes). Trevan reported that it preserved nearly 1,200 hogsheads (270 tonnes) in its first year, and in 1802 it produced 700 hogsheads (157 tonnes). The company was put up for sale on 14th April 1841, described as "two stop seines, one tuck seine, several cwt. of old netting, seine boat, follower, two lurkers, one jolly boat, oars, masts spars, sails, mooring ropes, "grapers", bucklers, press poles, maunds, flasks, and 3,000 bushels of salt at 84 pounds each". The tithe apportionment from 1839 shows the cellar was owned by the Hon. Anna Maria Agar of Lanhydrock House and occupied by the Good Intent Seine Company. The landward end of the cellar is visible in the background of a photo taken c1875, where it has no roof, and the arm adjacent the road has been demolished. The photo may have captured the site during clearance for building the school. Anna Maria Agar's son, Thomas Agar-Robartes, the 1st Baron Robartes, gave the land in front of the cellar for our first lifeboat house (now Boathouse Stores).

Providence Cellar: Both this and the Mary Cellar were built by Earl Fortescue, probably in the late 18th century. They both appear on his estate map c1800. This is slightly smaller than a typical cellar being around 27 metres square, which suggests a capacity of some 340 hogsheads. In the 1802 season it pressed 300 hogsheads. The 1841 tithe apportionment lists both the owner and occupier as Earl Fortescue, so the seine must have ceased by this time. The northerly arm still survives as accommodation, the cottage nearest the harbour being named 'Providence', and part of the wall facing the harbour is incorporated in Atlantic House.

Mary Cellar: A typical cellar, whose dimensions suggest a pressing capacity of about 400 hogsheads (90 tonnes). This may have been originally used by the Fox seine, who handled 300 hogsheads in 1802. The following year, Edward Fox and the Rashleigh Seine Company leased land to build the Rashleigh Cellar in Port Gaverne, which was also known as the Fox seine. The Mary seine was sold at Mevagsissey in May 1816, consisting of 'one stop and tuck seine, four boats, 1,400 bushels of salt, and cellars capable of curing more than 1,800 hds'. It was sold again on 19th April 1831 as separate lots, comprising stop and tuck seines, with boats, salt, and materials. "The net, which is of excellent quality, and well calculated for repairing other seans will be sold in lots of five cloths each, and the salt in lots of 50 Bushels each". In 1841, as with the Providence cellar, no seine was in occupation. From the coast path at Overcliff can be seen an old wall by the Mary cellar, but this appears to be a small lean-to extension to the north-western corner of the main cellar footprint. It is not on the estate map c1800, or the 1841 tithe map, so is likely a Victorian addition. The Mary cellar has long been converted to accommodation, a role it still fulfils.



A roofless Good intent Cellar awaiting demolition behind the newly erected Lifeboat House. Looking through the entrance you can see that the roadside arm has already gone, c1875



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