

Pilchard Fishing in Cornwall

Michael Gichard March 2005

As all of us know Cornwall was known for fish, tin and copper. In the last 50 years of the 20th century fish stocks throughout the world's seas and oceans have been threatened by overfishing and the industry in Cornwall has not escaped. Most of the villages and towns around the Cornish coast have developed because of the fishing industry ; while many of these no longer depend on fish as the primary economic driver a few still do, most notably Newlyn which is one of the most important fishing port in the UK in terms of total catch landed . So unlike tin and copper which are no longer viable industries, fishing is still very much with us. I can strongly recommend that anyone who has the opportunity to visit Cornwall should spend a little time in Newlyn to catch the flavour and the aroma of today's fishing industry.

This is a brief and by no means exhaustive account of the historical importance of fishing in Cornwall Although other species were important, the pilchard was king. This becomes very obvious if you scan historical newspaper articles on fishing, they are nearly all about pilchards! If you have fishermen ancestors chances are they were catching pilchards.

The Gichard family were for many years resident in the village of Trenarren, now a very quiet little place but much busier in former times and a centre for pilchard fishing with it's small harbour at Ropehaven. Among the items listed in the inventory of William Gichard (1598 -1650) are: two sellers, sake in the seller and the halfe and deale of one sayne and two boates with men and all.

William Gichard (1747 - 1831) requests in his will " I desire to be interred in the burial ground of St Austell aforesaid and to be borne thither by Fishermen residing in Trenarren and Parish aforesaid." In 1839 William Michael. Gichard owned Ropehaven Fish Cellars; they are still exist in the garden of the house which has since been built there.

The pilchard is a small food fish related to the herring and found: in large numbers of the western coast of Europe and in the Mediterranean (Latin name *Sardinia Pilchardus*). The difference between the terms pilchard and sardine is that first "pilchard" refers to the species and, although "sardine" applies principally to *Sardinia Pilchardus* it can include other species and second that the term sardine implies smaller fish. Such is the precision of the English Language!

Pilchards used to be caught in huge shoals off both the North and South coasts of Cornwall, the South Coast of Devon and the South Coast of Ireland. Although the huge shoals have now disappeared there is still a small thriving pilchard fishery. Having said this, the last major catch in Cornwall was in 1907. In previous times the fish started to form shoals as early as February but did not appear en masse until July. The shoals came into shallower waters in August that was the traditional start of the pilchard season. This continued into November or even into December. The reason for the change in behaviour is imperfectly understood but it does seem that the most South Westerly parts of the British Isles were the limit of the large shoals.

The principle method of catching pilchards was the seine and the earliest surviving account is given in Richard Carew's Survey of Cornwall (1602):

But the least fish in bignes, greatest for gaine, and most in number, is the Pilchard: they come to take their kind of the fresh (as the rest) between harvest and Allhallon – tyde, and were wont to pursue the Brit, upon which they feede, into the havens, but are now forestalled on the coast by the Drouers and Sayners. The Drouers hang certain square nets athwart the tyde, thorow which the schoell of Pilchards passing, leave many behind intangled in the meashes. When the nets are so filled, the Drouers take them up, clense them, and let them fall againe.

The Sayners complayne with open mouth, that these drouers worke much prejudice to the Commonwealth of fishermen, and reape thereby small gaine for themselves; for (say they) the taking of some few, breaketh and scattereth the whole schools, and frayeth them from approaching the shore; neither are they thus taken, merchantable, by reason of their bruising in the meash. Let the crafts-masters decide the controversie_

The Sayne, is in fashion, like that within harbour, but of a farre larger proportion. To each of these, there commonly being three or foure boates, carrying size men apeece; with which, when the season of the yeere and weather serveth, they lie hovering upon the coast, and are directed in their worke by a Bulker, or Huer, who standeth on the Cliffe side, and from thence, best discerneth the quantitie and course of the Pilchard: according whereunto, he cundeth (as they call it) the Master of each boate (who hath his eye still fixed upon him) by crying with a loud voice, whistling through his fingers, and wheezing certing diversified and signify signes, with a bush,

which hee holdeth in his hand. At his appointment they cast out their Net, draw it to either lend, as the Schoell lyeth, or fareth, beate with their Oares to keepe in the Fish, and at last, either close and tucke it up in the Sea, or draw the same on land, with more certaine profit, if the ground be not rough of rockes.

After one commie have thus shot their Net, another beginneth behind them, and so a third, as opportunitie serveth. Being so taken, some, the Countrie people who attendeth with their horses and panthers at the Cliffe side, in great numbers, doe buy and carrie home, the larger remainder, is by the Merchant, greedily and speedily seized upon. They are saved three maner of wayes: by fuming, pressing, or pickelling. For every of which, they are first salted and piled up by row in square heapes on the ground in some celler, which they tame, Bulking, where they so remaine for some ten daies, until the superfluous moisture of the bloud and salt be soaked from them; which accomplished, they rip the bulk, and save the residue of the salt for another like service. Then those which are to be ventred for Fraunce, they pack in staunch hogsheads, so to keepe them in their pickle. Those that serve for the hotter Countries of Spaine and Italie, they used to at first fume, by hanging them up on long sticks one by one, in a house built for the nonce, and there drying them with the smoake of a soft and continuall fire, whence they purchased the name of Fumadoes; but now, though the terms still remaine, that trade is given over; and after they have been ripped out of the bulk, reffed upon sticks and washed, they pack them orderly in hogsheads made purposely leake, which afterward they presse with great weights, to the end the traine may soke from them into a vessel placed into the ground to receive it.

In packing, they keepe a just tale of the number every hogshead containeth, which may otherwise may turne to the Marchants prejudice; for I have heard, that when they are brought to the place of sale, the buyer openeth one hogs-head at adventures; and if he finde the same not answered the number figured on the outside, he abateth a like proportion on every other, as there wanted in that. The traine is well solde, as employed to diverse uses, and welneere acquiteth the cost in saving, and the saving setteth almost an infinite number of women and children on worke, to their great advantage: for they are allowed a penny for every lasts carriage (a last is ten thousand) and as much for bulking, washing, and packing them, whereby a lusty housewife maye earne three shillings in a night; for towards the evening they are mostly killed.

This commoditie at first carried a very lowe price, and served for the inhabitants cheapest provision: but of late times, the deare sale beyond the seas path so encreased the number of takers, and the takers jarring and brawling one with another, and foreclosing the fishes taking their kind within harbour, so decreased the number of the taken, as the price daily extendeth to an higher rate, equaling the proportion of other fish: a matter which yet I reckon not prejudiciall to the Commonwealth, seeing there is store sufficient of other victuals, and that of these a twentieth part will serve the Countries need, and the other nineteene passe into forraine Realmes with a gainefull utterance.

The Sayners profit in this trade is uncertayne, as depending upon the seas fortune, which he long attendeth, and often with a bootlesse travaile: but the Pilchard Marchant may reape a speedy, large, and assured benefit, by dispatching the buying, saving and selling to the transporters, within little more than three moneths space. Howbeit, divers of them, snatching at wealth over-hastily, take mony beforehand, alai bind themselves for the same, to deliver Pilcherd ready saved to the transporter, at an under rate, and so cut their fingers. The venting of Pilcherd enhaunced greatly the price of cask, whom all other sorts of wood were converted to that use; and yet this scantly supplying a remedie there was a statute made 35. Eliz. that from the last of June 1594, no stranger should transport beyond the seas any Pilcherd or other fish in cask, unless hee did bring into the Realme, for every six tunnes, two hundred of clapboard to make cask, and so rateably, upon payne of forfeyting the sayd Pilcherd or fish. This Act continue before the next Parliament, which bath reissued the same, until his (not yet known) succeder.

At the beginning of the season in late July or early August the seine boats would be launched to be ready for the shoals. The largest boat was the seine boat that might typically be 33 ft long with a beam of 12 ft that carried the seine net that weighed about three tons. One or two smaller boats of similar design were called followers and one carried the stop or thwart seine. There was also a smaller boat called the lurker or follower from which the master seiner directed seining operations; in Western Cornwall the Huer located on shore performed this function. The seine net was a long net that was used to encircle the shoals. Cork floats attached to a head line floated the top edge of the net. The other edge had lead weights attached to a foot line that made the net hang vertically. Typical measurements for the net would be 1000 ft x 50 ft. The stop seine was about a third

of this length but the same depth. The area of sea assigned to each seine was called the stem. The huers would be located on the cliff top, frequently with a hut or cottage for shelter from the elements. Word of the arrival of the shoals would be received from neighbouring communities and from ships so the huers would have a general idea when to expect the fish. When they arrived, they could be recognized by a purplish tinge of the water or by ripples on the surface. The huers would utter the famous cry of "Hevva" which is understood to mean, "here they are". The senior huer would direct the shooting of the great seine while his assistant would attend to the operation of the stop seine. The huers directed the seine through a form of semaphore signal with two bushes, one in either hand. Originally these really were furze bushes, but later each consisted of two small hoops at right angles to each other covered in calico and attached to a handle.

As soon as the signal was given, a stout rope some 4000 ft long and called the warp was taken ashore to a capstan, operated by men called blowers. The warp was attached to one end of the seine, while a second line called the tow rope was attached to the other end. For seines operating farther from shore, two large boats warped the net.

The seine was shot ("Cowl Rooz!" - cast net) and then maneuvered to encircle a shoal of pilchards with the seine boat at one end and the tow boat at the other end. The huers directed operations by signaling with the bushes. As the ends were drawn together the stop seine was moved into place to prevent the fish escaping. The seine was then drawn towards the shore so that the foot of the seine touched bottom and the pilchards were completely trapped. At low water the seine boat moved inside the seine and using a tuck net raised a portion of the pilchards to the surface where they could be scooped into boats called dippers with wicker baskets. When the dippers landed the fish, they were loaded onto carts to take them to curing in the fish cellars. It may have taken several tides to land the catch, raking only the amount that could be 'walled in the cellars at each tide.

Here is an account of the pilchard catch from the West Briton July 31 1818:-

"After being thus enclosed (by the stop seine), the fish are taken from the seine by the tuck net, and hoisted into boats which convey them to the cellars to be cured. Tucking is effected by placing the follower within the ropes, and stationing other boats on the outside, to receive the fish which are taken from the stop seine by the tuck net, and to carry them to the shore. The operation is always carried out at low water; and when it takes place on a fine calm moon-light evening, the scene is interesting beyond expression. The number of boats sailing or rowing in all directions around the seine; the

quantity of persons involved in baling up the fish with baskets; the refulgent appearance of the scaly tribe, struggling, winging, and gleaming to the moon in every direction; the busy and contented hum of the fishermen, together with the plashing of the frequently plied oar, altogether form a picture to which language is incapable of doing justice."

Because so much fish might be caught in a relatively short time and also because the amount of the catch was such that it far exceeded local needs and therefore had to be exported, there was a need to preserve the catch. When Carew described pilchard fishing in his survey there had been three methods, smoking (hence "fumadoes" later transformed by local usage to "fairmaids" and no longer applied to smoked fish), pickling in brine and dry salting. Dry salting became the most popular method and was carried out in fish cellars or "pilchard palaces" which are ubiquitous in Cornwall to this day. The cellars were usually rectangular buildings with a central open courtyard. The roofs normally slope inwards to the central courtyard and were often supported by columns rather than walls to facilitate the free circulation of air. The cellar floor was made of sea rounded pebbles set in cement and sloped inwards to a gutter that led into a drain pit. A cask placed in the drain pit collected the dregs – dregs, salt and blood, and the drain oil that was separated by skimming.

The fish were transferred to the cellar in open boxes called guries with carrying handles at each end which each held 1000 to 1200 pilchards. The fish were layered with alternate layers of salt into rectangular blocks about 5 ft high around the walls of the cellar, this process being called bulking. This was a labour intensive activity carried out by women who laid the fish down and assisted by children who handled the salt. The fish would remain in bulk for up to 5 weeks (note:- Carew says 10 days, but this was not really long enough for an effective cure). During bulking a considerable amount of dregs and drain oil was expressed and collected. When the fish had been cured, they were broken out of bulk, washed clean in troughs and placed in hogsheads for pressing. The hogsheads were specially constructed casks with straighter sides than regular barrels and gaps between the staves to allow further drain oil to be extracted during the pressing process. The fish were carefully laid in circular layers in the hogsheads, a circular wooden cover called a buckler was placed on top of the fish and the pressing was accomplished by means of a wooden lever known as a pressing pole with its fulcrum provided by a slot in the cellar wall and weighted with a pressing stone. The pressing stone was a rounded boulder weighing about one hundred weight, drilled to receive an iron hook by which it was suspended from the pressing pole. During pressing the volume of fish was diminished so the hogshead would be

topped up with more pilchards several dates during the process. This took about a week. The hogsheads were made with a capacity of 52 gallons and held 2950 pilchards. Each hogshead was sealed and on the upper head was stenciled the curer's name, the year, the place where it was cured and the port of destination.

Screw presses were introduced in the later nineteenth century, which consisted of a massive fixed beam and below it attached by guides, a similar moveable beam. Several screws connected the beams. Blocks of wood placed between the lower beam and the bucklers on a number of hogsheads that could thus be pressed simultaneously. It is interesting that the preferred salt for curing pilchards was French Bay salt, despite efforts to substitute English salt. In an advertisement from August 1815:-

" Le Barbier Pradun (of Croisie, Brittany), most respectfully informs his Cornish friends, concerned in the fishery, that as the causes which lately interrupted their commercial relations with France are now happily removed....The present price for last year's best salt is 58 francs per maid FOB... NB No vessel whatever, laden with salt, can clear out of a French port, unless she admeasures full 70 tons."

During the seventeenth century the pilchard merchants who supplied capital and arranged to market the fish overseas monopolized industry. France and the West Indies were at one time markets for Cornish pilchards, but the primary and eventually only foreign market was Italy. Much of the trade was carried on in Dutch ships. In 1662 60 ships of 250 tons each sailed to Marseille and along the coast to Venice while an equal number landed fish in Spain, Portugal, the South of France and Biscay. The pilchards were particularly useful during lent when the Catholic Church forbade meat. One popular rhyme was:

Here's a health to the Pope,
And may he repente,
And lengthen by six months
The term of his Lent.
It's always declared
Betwixt the two poles,
There's nothing like pilchards
For saving of souls

By the nineteenth century pilchard shipping was largely done in British and to a great extent Cornish ships. An average cargo was 500 to 600 hogsheads equivalent to 100 to 120 tons and the main destination was Naples. The first

shipment by steamer was made in 1864 to Italy. Soon the steamers had taken over the trade. In 1878 the SS Richard Trevithick loaded 1000 hogs-heads at St Ives for Messers Bolitho, a few days later SS Rosebud loaded 1460 hogsheads for Messers Jenkyn and Sons bound for Genoa, the hugest shipment of pilchards ever made.

Some statistics for the fishery in 1827 were given in *The West Briton*, Mar 7 1828:

“Number of scans employed, 186; not eniemployed 130, total number of scans 316. Number of drift boats 368. Number of men employed on board drill boats, 1599. Number of men employed at sea on scans, 2672. Number of persons on shore to whom the fishery affords direct employment, 6350. Total number of persons employed in the fishery, 10521. Cost of scans, boats etc used in the fishery, £209,840. Cost of drift boats and nets £61,400. Cost of cellars and other establishments on shore, for carrying on the fishery, £169,975. Total capital invested directly in the pilchard fishery, £441,215.

"It may be proper to observe that in addition to the number of persons employed in the catching and curing of pilchards, the fishery furnishes employment to numerous others, and to nearly the whole population of particular places, in proportion to the success which attends it, in the building and repairing of sear boats and small vessels, the manufacture of netting, cordage and canvass, the making of casks, and in a number of other branches connected therewith; and that on the raw materials required for such purposes, as well as the malt and spirituous liquors consumed by the fishermen, a considerable sum is paid to the government in the shape of duties."

An alternate method of catching pilchards was by driving or drifting. The drift boats were luggers and were able to operate further from shore. Each boat carried 10 to 20 sections of net 108 to 360 ft long, by 42 feet deep. These sections were fastened to each other and suspended vertically in the water and to a head rope which carried cork floats. The bottom edge was weighted. Originally these nets were suspended from the surface but in the nineteenth century, cork buoys might be attached by lines to the head rope such that the top of the net might be some distance below the water's surface. Drift nets catch the fish within the mesh whereas seine nets contain the fish to be retrieved by tucking or when the net is pursed. A 1662 Act of Parliament restrained drift fishermen from operating less than 4 ½ miles from shore, presumably to protect the inshore seine fisheries and there were numerous complaints and examples of litigation. Drift fishing became more popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and on into the twentieth.

As early as 1810 there were poor pilchard seasons:

"We are concerned to the state that the pilchard season is passing away, without affording the quantity of nutriment for the winter, so requisite for the poor, that if the equinox should be settled in before many are taken the distressing the poor will be very serious. Since our last, not more than 100 hogsheads have been taken at Mevagissey, and but 70 in Mount's Bay."

By 1836 a decline set in first in the original centre of the industry in South East Cornwall and by 1872 the seans had disappeared between Cawsand and Mevagissey and at the latter only 2 large and 3 small seans remained, but the industry was active further west and especially around Mount's Bay. The final demise of seining came with the introduction of motorized drifters just before WW1. it is said that the long drift nets deployed far off the coast dispersed the pilchard shoals and prevented them coming inshore.

Pilchards are still caught off the Cornish Coast and many of the fish cellars remain, but the days of seining for huge shoals are long past.