

THE HISTORY OF FISHING AT CHALLABOROUGH

Fishing at Challaborough dates back many hundreds of years. The earliest references to Devon fisheries come from a few mentions in the Domesday Book for Dartington, Cornworthy and Asprington on the Dart. In the 1460s there was a fishmonger in Modbury and a Jowter (fish hawk). On a map showing fisheries and coastal settlements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Challaborough is shown as a cellar settlement. The word cellar means storage hut. In an article written by Colonel Montagu in the early 1800s he says that "there is little doubt but that the pilchard fishery on (sic) Borrough Island is of very ancient origin, for the inhabitants, when digging in their potato plotsoften come down to the debris and foundation of a cellar several centuries old" He continues "and remains of two other (cellars) and another in ruins a little further down the coast at the little hamlet of Challaborough"

On a map dated 1805 a fishery is shown (although the name Challaborough does not appear on the maps until later - Chale in old English meaning 'throat' used in a topographical sense as 'gorge' or 'ravine'). On a map dated 1825 Higher Fisherie and Lower Fisherie are shown.

Fishing on rural manors such as Ringmore was largely a by-employment among farmers; when they had finished their work on the land they would go fishing. They would be living away from the shore and out of sight of the sea, partly for reasons of security - the south Devon coast was unsafe during the 100 years war - 1337 to 1453- and there was an ever present fear of pirates; during Henry VIII's reign there was fear of invasion.

The cellars were built out of reach of the high tides. They were constructed of local materials and useful flotsam washed up on the beach, they may have been 'thatched' with water reeds growing nearby. Boats of about 20ft were designed for estuaries and inshore use and were reasonably easy to pull on to a beach.

The Rev. Hingeston-Randolf mentions 'At Challaborough and on the island are remains of old cellars, where pilchards were salted and cured. A huer* was posted on the cliffs to watch the shoreward movement of the fish. Three boats were used with a seine net'. Seine fishing was a co-operative method of fishing due to the large size of the nets. The nets were similar to a curtain with buoys on the top and weights on the bottom ; they were cast 100 yards from the shore and could be dragged on to the beach over sand or shingle.

The Rev. Hingeston-Randolf continues 'A mackeral catch required many hands and two crab pots were hoisted on poles on the highest point of the island as a signal for assistancethere would be great rejoicings in Ringmore, with a great spread given by the owners at the New Inn (now Journeys End) A procession round the village with a band was led by the Seine Master carrying for a banner a pilchard on a pole.'

Where there are histories of fish cellars it can be assumed that a great deal of fish was eaten all year by the poor. Crab fishing was called "potting" and crab fisherman "potters". Crabs and lobsters were caught in "ink-well" pots which were woven of willows by the fishermen. Mussels, cockles and winkles would have been collected. When more fish were caught than the family could eat it would be sold or salted and in

times of plenty would be used as fertiliser on the land. (Salt was imported from France and arrived at Sutton Harbour in Plymouth. It was probably shipped to Challaborough on 'take the ground' boats - these were able to go aground, they were a square shape with a flat bottom and carried high bulk, low value cargos which would be swiftly unloaded to beat the incoming tide.)

In notes added to Colonel Montagu's article on the 'Pilchard Fishery at Borrough Island' by A.S. Elliot in 1903 he mentions Simon Bardens as being 'the patriarch of the island'. There have been generations of Bardens who have been fishermen at Bigbury. Harry Bardens lives in Bigbury to the present day and his niece Flossie is related to Alice Mason.

Evie Bardens was nanny to Ann Lambell and subsequently to her daughters. Evie's father became a coastguard at Challaborough and lived at 1 Coastguard Cottages. He and his brother (who lived in the end cottage of what is now Ivy Cottage) would row to the Eddystone Rock where they would fish for up to three nights in an open boat before returning home to Challaborough. He remembered his grandmother saying that she was left with a blunderbus for her protection when his grandfather left on a fishing trip. On his retirement he and his wife moved into Inner Bohemia (a cottage which has had several name changes) and Margaret Lock (living next door at Sea View) can remember, as a small child during the 1920s, Mr Bardens kept chickens and that Mrs Bardens (Lavinia) was a kind and helpful neighbour.

Mullet shoals were expected at certain times of the year and a 'look out' would be posted to watch for the pink patches in the sea which indicated the arrival of the shoals - then Evie's father and uncle would row out and encourage the shoal into the bay. Evie and her two sisters, Kity and Winnie, would have the net strung across the bay to catch the fish. The fish were then salted in the fish cellars and taken by horse and cart to Plymouth. (Eventually Evie and her mother moved to Modbury, Winnie married a farmer at Modbury and Kity married and moved to Salcombe)

The three residences on the beach front at Challaborough are the only remaining evidence of the cellars. In the deeds of Slipway Cottage there is mention of the cellars. Beach Cottage has a garage built at the cellar level and Island View has a slope down to what was a fish cellar and the first floor was a store for pots, ropes etc. - now turned into residential accommodation..

*The word huer led to the saying 'Hue and Cry'

"The Evolution of the Fishing Village: Landscape and Society Along the South Devon Coast 1086-1550" by Harold Fox. Published by Leopards Head Press. provided some of the information that was gathered for the first couple of paragraphs of the above.

My thanks to Anne Lambell and Margaret Lock who shared their memories of the Bardens family. Also to Robert Waterhouse for information on seine nets.

Proposals for a concertship between the proprietors of the Yealm Pilchard Fishery on the one part and Mr Robert Hooppell on the other part for the season 1834.

First Each party to furnish one good Stop Sean with a Tuck Sean and all necessary gear boats and implements and the usual complement of men for managing the same

Second If any of the seans boats gear and implements of either party should be injured in fishing or shooting at fish or by means of weather or otherwise whilst fairly engaged in the joint service (except thro' wilfulness or negligence) the same to be forthwith repaired at the joint and equal expence of the parties - but each party to keep up one efficient sean with the appurtenances throughout the season (that is to say six weeks commencing on the 4th day of August 1834) on whomsoever the necessary repair shall fall

Third All fish taken by either sean to be disposed of as follows - as much as can be sold fresh at a fair price to be sold accordingly and the remainder to be sent to the yealm cellars and there cured for exportation at the point and equal expence of the parties and the said Robert Hooppell paying or allowing for moiety of the salt and therein at a fair price and a reasonable compensation for a moiety of the use of the cellars by way of rent - Provided that in case fish be sent to Mothecombe for a market it should not be all sold fresh - the surplus shall be cured for exportation in the cellar at the s'd Robert Hooppell there at the like joint of equal expence of either party paying or allowing for salt supplied for the other

Fourth The said Robert Hooppell to have the use of the Yealm Furnace for barking his seans - and in return to provide sufficient good oak bark for barking the Yealm stop and tuck seans so often as he shall bark his own

Fifth During such time as fish shall be on sale or transmitting to the cellars each party to be at liberty to send a proprietor or deputy to take an account and to receive the money and each of the parties respectively shall be answerable for so much as shall be received by such proprietor or deputy

Sixth One of the Yealm spare boats to be sent if wanted to Burrough Island or wherever else fish shall be taken to carry the same and such boat if injured to be repaired or made good at the joint and equal expence of the parties and the said Robert Hooppell paying or allowing a reasonable price for his moiety of the use of such boat

Seventh If either of the seans should be rendered unserviceable and the other at the same time engaged with fish in the water the second Yealm sean and appurtenances to be forthwith fitted out on such reasonable terms as may be previously agreed on

Eighth That one cellar man be employed in curing fish at the Yealm cellars at the joint and equal expence of the said parties (Edward Spear is recommended for a cellar man)

Ninth The net proceeds from sale of all fish both fresh and cured together with the oil to be equally divided between the Yealm Company and the said Robert Hooppell as

and when the same shall be realized or turned into money subject to such deductions and allowances as are or may be stipulated in the foregoing articles of any agreement supplementary thereto and to the usual and unavoidable expences coincidental to the marketing and sale of the fish provided that if thro' wilful omission or neglect either party should not go to sea properly equipped for fishing on any evening when the other party shall do so the defaulting party shall not be entitled to share in the fish taken on such occasion

Tenth In case the said Robert Hooppell's sean should be equipped and put on service before that of the Yealm Company and they should agree to bear a moiety of the expences of the said Robert Hooppell's seans crew during the time that shall elapse between the equipment of his sean and that of the Company - then the Company shall share in the fish taken and the concertship shall be in all respects considered as commencing from the time of the equipment of Mr Hooppell's seans

Memdum that the foregoing proposals are acceded to concluded & agreed on by and between the said parties this day of August one thousand eight hundred and thirty four - the said Robert Hooppell signing on his own account and John Kingcome on behalf of the said Company as their Agent duly authorized

A Sean is a drag net

The nautical explanation for Tuck is the afterpart of a ship immediately under the stern or counter where the bottom planks are collected and terminate by the tuck rail.

The nautical explanation for Stop is to make fast, to cease going forward, to cease from any motion.

Robert Hooppell lived in what is now known as Challaborough Cottage

There is a short note attached to the document but no explanation as to where it should be placed in the text, it reads: "or whatever else fish shall be taken to carry the same and such boat if injured to be repaired or made good at the joint and equal expense of the"

Jacqueline Patterson transcribed this document that is held in the RHS Archives
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This Ruth postcard shows fishermen loading donkeys with their catch at Wonwell beach. 'The donkeys used to go ahead of the men; they knew the way back to the village,' recalled one person interviewed for the original book. The fishermen were mainly members of Kingston families and went to the beach each day with their donkeys and tackle to fish and lay crab pots. Left, Kingston firemen outside the station in 1978: Roger Ryall, Rowland Lugger, Sebastian Bellini, John Edwards, Ivor Willcocks, Viv Freeman and Don Lugge

AN ORIGINAL ARTICLE ON THE PILCHARD
FISHERY AT BORROUGH ISLAND BY COLONEL
MONTAGU A HUNDRED YEARS AGO:

WITH SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES TO THE PRESENT TIME.

BY EDMUND A. S. BILLOT.

(Read at Bournemouth, July, 1911.)

"In the early part of the month of Augt. (about the 12th)¹ were taken about 1,000 hogsheads in one net at one enclosure on the west side of Burrow Island, these computed at 2,000 to a hogshead amount to 2,000,000 of fishes. These sold on the spot at the rate of 3 shillings a man, calculated to hold about 300 fishes, making about a shilling per hundred fishes.

"Government allows salt to be served out to the inhabitants who cure fish upon the spot at three-halfpence per pound. Seven or eight pounds is allowed for every hundred, but some persons cure their fish with six.

"The fish are decapitated, and split, eviscerated, scaled, and well washed and cleaned in salt water previous to barrelling.

"The Pilchards bought at the island for the above price in the gross, viz. a shilling per hundred, taken to Bantam by boat 2 miles sell there at fifteen pence retail.

"When Pilchards are received at the factory, they are neither beheaded nor eviscerated, but are piled in regular heaps lying upon each other with their heads outwards, being sprinkled with coarse bay salt between each layer. After a certain time they are compressed to extract the oil for use.

"The poorer people boil the entrails after cleaning the

¹ The watermark in the paper is "1810."

fish, and obtain about a quart of oil from the refuse of 300 fishes or three quarts from 1,000.

"When a large shoal of fishes are taken in the great net by surrounding, the two ends of the net are sewed together, and then the whole is towed to some convenient place not very distant, and from this enclosure they are taken out with a tuck net, or a boat load at a time.

"Amongst the Pilchards I observed a large Herring, so that I had an opportunity of examining and comparing both together. Besides the Herring having smaller and less deciduous scales, the dorsal fin is not so angulated nor placed so far forwards, for when suspended by that fin the head dips considerably, whereas the Pilchard suspends equally by that fin: the under jaw of the Pilchard is not so long as that of the Herring nor of that ruddy colour.

"I could not find a Pilchard of less than six inches in length, though the mesh of the net was not above half an inch.

"A vast number of Pilchards die in the great net, which float and feed a host of Gulls which attend. The Herring Gull and Black-backed Gull constitute the whole of a flock consisting of some thousands, the latter in greater abundance in proportion than I ever saw."

This industry, which the Colonel writes of in such glowing colours, is a thing of the past; and in seeking to find a cause for its decay, some rather interesting details have become involved.

There is little doubt but that the pilchard fishery on Borrough Island is of very ancient origin, for the inhabitants, when digging in their potato plots on the north-west side of the island, often came down to the debris and foundation of a cellar several centuries old, judging from the drift over it. Close by the solitary cottage on the island stand the walls of a more modern cellar, whilst opposite the front door the huge boiler in which the nets were harked still remains.

On the mainland a very large cellar still exists, which is now used as a coal store, and remains of two others and another in ruins a little further down the coast at the little hamlet of Challaborough: in fact, when the fishing was at its height there were no less than six seines belonging to different owners or companies working here, one being manned by fishermen as far off as Cawsand.

On seeking information from the patriarch of the island—

one Simon Barden by name (they are all Bardens, by the way, on the island and in the cottages on the mainland adjacent, except one man, who openly describes himself as an outsider)—I found it was quite an erroneous impression that the fishing collapsed because the fish did not now arrive off the island. "The shoals come now the same as ever they did," said my informant; "there may be four or five years' interval in their appearance, but it was always like that as far back as I remember." The reason why the nets and boats were given up was that there were no men left to work them; the old men died, and the young ones went off.

The nets were always shot on the west side of the island, because the tide was too strong on the other.

The very last haul that I personally can remember was made twenty-five years ago, and most of the fish were thrown over the land for manure, the explanation being that the whole curing was ruined by an incompetent manager, who failed to get his samples accepted.

Large numbers of the fish were sold fresh on the spot, and as many as forty carts have been counted on the broad isthmus of sand waiting for the big net to be towed in. The rest of the fish, after providing for home wants (the labourer in those days depending a good deal for his winter provender on his supply of pilchards), were sent abroad, much the same as they are now from Newlyn.

The labourer's wage in those days was seven shillings a week, and the fishing was eagerly looked forward to after the corn harvest as an addition to the slender store, and as the men shared, as it was termed, in exceptional cases as much as £30 per man was earned.

On asking my informant the largest haul he could remember, I got exactly the amount mentioned by the Colonel, both in fish and cash; but whether my old friend was trusting to his memory or a bygone tradition, I am not prepared to say. He knew nothing of the Government supplying salt, so we may presume that practice lapsed soon after the Colonel wrote. Common rock salt was used well broken up.

On the very top of the island are the ruins of a small building with window-openings and doors pointing four-square to the cardinal points of the compass. Miss Fox, in her account of Kingsbridge and its surroundings, says it was put up by her grandfather for the accommodation of picnic parties. On the face of it, I think this is absurd, as

the walls are of exceptional strength and solidity; besides, there is verbal testimony to the fact that the ruin was as it is now more than one hundred years ago. What the building was used for I scarcely presume to suggest, but the hucing of pilchards is and was an important occupation.

Pilchard fishing is still a flourishing industry prosecuted from Plymouth Harbour. I have counted over three hundred boats at one time drifting between the Eddystone and the Bolt Tail, and each boat would have one or more seines down—120 fathoms long, 7 fathoms at the arms, and 12 fathoms in the centre.

OLD PILCHARD INN, ON BURGH ISLAND



THE PILCHARD INN, BIGBURY-ON-SEA

The well-known Pilchard Inn, on Burgh Island, was still in its original state, with thatched roof, when the photograph reproduced above was taken, nearly fifty years ago.

Mrs. Christiana Bardsen was then the licensee of the inn. Her youngest and only surviving child, Miss Bardsen of the Warren Cottage, Bigbury-on-Sea, is now in her eighty-third year. Her elder daughter was Mrs. Farley, whose death in her ninetieth year, last April, was recorded in the "South Devon Times."

The two bungalows, seen in the left background, on the mainland, were the first to be erected at Bigbury-on-Sea, which was then quite undeveloped. (See "Plymptonian" on page 9).