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By the same author

ONCE ABOARD A CORNISH LUGGER

I dedicate this book to those who never returned

*What cost to us, the fishermen,
The toilers of the sea,
To dare old Mother Nature
And bring home fish to thee.*

*"The price of fish,"
"The cost of fish,"
A housewife to me discerned...*

*Well, weigh your cost with the children
Whose fathers never returned.*

[Mark Curtis, Newlyn skipper]

Introduction

Cornwall, a county officially classed as the poorest in England, especially in the winter time, with high unemployment and a very low average wage, generally makes for pretty grim reading. For years now the place has been marketed as a sort of Disneyesque theme park, a land of myth and legend, of smugglers and pirates, mining and fishing, most of it now safely locked into the past.

The industries that once earned so many people in this county a living have slipped, or are slipping away. The mines, unable to compete with foreign competition but still rich in tin, copper, lead and silver now lie silent and overgrown, and the men who once worked them relocated to hard rock mines all over the globe. While today, farmers take part time jobs to keep the wolf from the door and many have converted their barns into holiday accommodation.

Global competition has led to massive job cuts in the once mighty china clay industry, while European government policy ensures that the fishing fleet continues to shrink. All but a handful of the boatyards have closed down, their now oh so desirable waterside locations cleared to make way for luxury flats that will overlook yet another marina; their skilled workforce scattered to make a living elsewhere as car park attendants or building site chippies. The only traditional industry still thriving, though I doubt the Cornish play much of a part in it nowadays, is smuggling: cheap booze and tobacco is not hard to come by, while in the quiet coves and bays, cargoes of illegal drugs must be coming ashore by the ton.

It would seem that just to survive in their own county, many Cornish people have few options but to attend to the tourists and be thankful for their little low paid seasonal jobs. Meanwhile every quaint cottage becomes a holiday home, snapped up at prices that no local

could possibly afford. Many villages now have no communities other than a transient population of Home Counties 4+ 4 drivers, plump and pink and resplendent in their smart seaside casuals. And if funding can be secured, once the last of the smelly fishing boats have gone, many harbours have plans for marinas, complete with posh restaurants and art galleries.

Cornwall always was the poor relation of England, but what little it did have was at least real. Today it is still the poor relative but now, with the way industry is evaporating, the county will soon be trying to earn a living with little more to purvey than myths and legends and the beauty of its scenery. This seems to be the fate of Cornwall, and maybe we should be thankful that at least the place has the tourism when all else is failing. And if, by chance, a wealthy entrepreneur was to appear on the scene with a master plan that would create 3,000 jobs on the south Cornish coast throughout the winter months; one that didn't involve millions of pounds of funding, retraining, or despoiling the entire area, then that man would be hailed as a genius, a hero. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that's exactly what did happen, though without the aid of a wealthy businessman or massive grants, and in wintertime, created and run entirely on private enterprise. It was the great Cornish mackerel fishery. From a very doubtful beginning it grew and flourished beyond all expectations, and then it was allowed to fade away. I witnessed at first hand its inception and its demise, and it makes me feel at best, sad; at worst very angry at what was allowed to happen. We who were in that industry had it swept from under our feet, and we stood by helpless and unhelped as our hard-won enterprise was left to die.

I wrote my first book, *Once Aboard A Cornish Lugger*, to record the way of life in the last years that those pilchard fishing boats were operating. But after 45 years working out of the port of Looe as a fisherman, boatman and charter skipper, I now look back and realise that so much else has changed in that time, perhaps I should try and tell that story as well. Because the way of life as I knew it has gone and will never return. In the winter time we went commercial fishing, and there was usually plenty of fish to catch and the freedom to do so. Come the spring time, we painted up our sea-worn wooden boats to take the summer visitors out on pleasure trips. The seasons came and went, and I believe we thought that it would go on forever.

1

Mackerel & Pilchards

On a winter's afternoon early in 1966 the Looe lugger *Iris* entered port from an exploratory day's fishing with about a hundred stone of prime mackerel on her deck. Big beautiful fish like miniature tuna, and on Plymouth fish market the next morning they made the excellent price of £1 per stone. For the five crew members this meant the best part of a week's wage had been put together in one go, a very good day's work indeed. I remember this incident well because I was one of the crew and, like all the other drifter liners, we had been scratching about trying to earn a living with the nets and lines, and believe you me in the winter time it was usually an awful lot of hard labour for a very meagre reward.

There was rarely a profit to be made, it was purely an exercise to try and keep the wolf from the door, and he was clawing at the paintwork for most of the time. But a chance remark had given our skipper the idea that there might be a few mackerel about off Plymouth Sound. Why, we had no idea. They had never been there before, but as there was nothing to lose, a hand line consisting of 40 fathoms of cod line ending with a dozen feathered hooks and a pound lead was made up for each man, and early one morning we slipped away on the tide to investigate this rumour. A hundred stone of fish at £1 a stone was excellent money, and if we could do something like that three or four days a week, not only would the wolf be kept from the door, you wouldn't be able to catch a glimpse of him with a pair of powerful binoculars. But who knows with fishing, there may not be a fish to be caught on the next trip out.

The weather held fine for the next few days and on each of those days we found the mackerel and landed a catch, the price staying steady at a £1 a stone on Plymouth market. Of course the other skippers had kept a close eye on what the *Iris* was doing, and when

our bit of success looked to be more than a one off, the other four drifters in the port got their hand lines made up ready to have a go themselves. So now there were five boats out hunting about: joining the *Iris* were the *Our Boys*, *Our Daddy*, *Guide Me* and the *Endeavour*, each at the end of the day landing good quality fish, and what was more, the buyers continued to pay good money for it. And so we fished on like this until March when the shoals faded away and eventually there was none to be found. But what an unexpected bonus we had earned. For the first time in years the crews on the boats had earned a decent living wage in the winter months. Would the mackerel return again the following year? We sincerely hoped so.

The following March the pilchard shoals returned to the Cornish coast once more. Not, at first, in any huge numbers but enough to make a bait up for the long lines. So once again we were doing 24 to 30 hour trips out deep in the Channel shooting and hauling seven thousand hooks on seven miles of line, to catch ray, conger, ling etc. That was a nasty shock to the system after weeks of tiddling around up and down the shore with a twelve hook hand line.

By the month of May the pilchard shoals became much more prolific; the long lines could now be put ashore and in their place we hauled aboard the full summer fleet of 22 drift nets, being eleven fathoms deep and nearly two miles long. Night after night we shot and hauled them to supply fish to the cannery at Newlyn. It was all done by sheer muscle power. A big catch could mean eight or ten hours work non stop. That was what it took just to get the fleet of nets back aboard the boat, never mind steaming home, boxing up and landing. In the summer season we also took visitors out shark fishing, a daytime job to go with the night time one we already had. The money was good but sometimes you thought you were going to die on your feet from lack of sleep.

And so October came when once again the pilchard shoals thinned away from the coast and the nets were hauled ashore, dried and stowed back up in the net loft for another winter. Of course the big question then was whether the mackerel shoals would be around again or would we have to spend yet another winter working out of Brixham, living aboard the boat while trying to scratch a living with the herring nets and long lines. We hoped for the former for the latter was a rather grim prospect. So before the herring nets were made ready the hand lines were put aboard to give them a try first,

and we weren't disappointed. Up off Plymouth Sound, there they were again, lines full of great big fat mackerel, as bold as brass and as lively as dolphins. Another decent winter season looked to be in prospect.

This sort of work was a real novelty to us because, when a good week's wage was made working the nets and long lines, we were utterly shattered from the sheer physical lousier involved, working both by night and day. Rest was something that was taken when the weather turned poor or when we were all on the verge of collapse. And yet there we were, working up and down the shore jigging a little hand line around for the day, home to bed every night and money at the end of the week. It was almost too good to be true.

The boats that first went fishing for mackerel were the ageing survivors from the once mighty Cornish drifter fleet. The oldest were motorised vessels from the days of sail such as the *Guide Me* and the *Our Boys*; others like the *Iris*, *Our Daddy* and the *Eileen* had been auxiliaries, built with both motor and sail for the boom times after WW1. These boats were 38 to 45 feet long and fully decked, fine sea-kindly old craft. I say sea-kindly rather than seaworthy because at the time most of these boats were well on towards the end of their working life. They were safe enough because they were well handled by men who knew them, but after years of hard times and frugal maintenance I dread to think what a surveyor might have had to say about some of them.

The other class of boats then on the coast were what was known as quatters, mainly built for the boom in the fishing after WW2. They were 30 to 38 feet in length, with a long foredeck and a full width open-backed wheel house. The working area was a hatch board deck set about waist high down from the rail. They could be fitted out for whatever fishing was good at the time or worked by one man for the pleasure boating in the summertime. Very versatile and economical craft to work, their big disadvantage was that because they were open, every drop of water that came aboard had to be pumped out, by hand of course. And because of the way things were at the time most of these boats were used only in the summer months for pleasure angling; during the winter the skippers got a job ashore, labouring for a builder, painting and decorating or whatever would bring in a week's wage.

But not this winter. Hand lines were made up and boats that hadn't been to sea in the winter time for many years, were out joining in the bonanza. Roles were really being reversed. To make up the crews, painters and decorators, masons, chippies and shipwrights were going to sea for the winter instead of the fishermen coming ashore. The word was out: something new was happening, and coves and quays that had lain dormant for years were coming back to life as shoals of mackerel came in to winter all along the south Cornish coast. Here was a brand new fishery; from catching to marketing there was much to learn and develop, and many new ideas to try out. One of the first things that had to be improved was the hand line itself.

Hauling by hand all day long led to the twine of the back line cutting into your hands, and when shaking the fish off, the hooks nipped into your hands. It was as bad as drift netting, hands raw and sore with pus-swollen fingers. And of course the line itself was difficult to keep running clear, coiled down onto the deck or into a fish box; the wind could and did blow it about, or a fish would land in it, flapping madly, reducing a carefully flaked down line to a birds nest tangle. The leads on the end of the line weren't really heavy enough either and if you jiggged the line for just a bit too long the mackerel on the hooks would swim about with it, so when it was lifted aboard instead of a nice string of fish there was something that resembled a big bunch of bananas, the line and hooks all wound up in one tight ball. All this of course had to be cleared before the line could be dropped again. After this had happened to someone three or four times on the run, it would reduce them to a teeth-gnashing fury, ready to bite lumps out of the mast with sheer frustration. A few neatly worded jibes could prove most entertaining.

Various ideas were tried out to improve the working of the lines, but the first real break-through was made by a Tommy Paul, a Londoner who along with his merry crew worked an old Thames Bawley out of Looe called the *Onward*. They appeared at sea one Sunday morning with the peddle crank section of a bicycle frame married to a car wheel. Each man had one of these contraptions clamped to the rail of the boat; the line was wrapped around the wheel and when paid out it was retrieved again by turning the peddle. Of course everyone had a damn good snigger at the *Onward's* crew as they suffered back turns, over ride, and as many tangles as anyone working a hand line.

Tommy and his gang weren't rated very highly as fishermen and this performance only proved what a gang of cowboys they really were. That was until they ironed out the teething problems and started to work two to one against a hand line. Then it was a different story entirely. All of a sudden there was a rush to copy, or improve on Tommy's invention. Many variations were tried out and most of them worked, until by about 1969 the final form of the 'gurdy' came into being. This was a simple device, a wooden wheel made of half jointed 2x2, 18 inches in diameter with deep V's cut into the end of each of the four arms onto which the line could be wound. A central axle bolt held it to an angle iron stanchion that was clamped to the boat's rail. The wheel was turned by a handle mounted on one of the wheel arms and a fairlead guided the line into place. No more wind blowing the line about and no more fish dancing amongst it. The business end of the line went from a dozen feathered hooks on light gut to double that number with coloured plastic lures all mounted on heavy duty nylon, terminating in a three pound lead, and in those days there were mackerel around big enough to actually swallow these leads.

The fish were still hauled aboard and shaken off by hand, and by that I don't mean that we caught hold of the shank of each hook and tiddled at it until the fish fell off. No, an arm span of line was lifted up and brought down with a whop, jerking six or eight fish off at a go. But by now we protected our hands with heavy industrial plastic gloves which didn't stop all injuries but certainly prevented about 90 per cent. Hooks pricking into the hands were still an all day occurrence, but suffering the agony of having to rip a hook out that had gone in past the barb was greatly reduced. And to keep the line flowing free over the boat, lengths of four and six inch plastic drain pipe were split back and sprung onto the rails, while other lengths were hung over the side between rail and waterline. All this ensured that foul ups were kept to a minimum. We now had the right gear for the job, and catch rates shot up from 100 stone a boat to 100 stone plus per man, in many cases very much more than that.

When the big mackerel were shoaling high in the water, a catch of more than 1,000 stone was not unusual for a smart four-handed crew. Often, with the 30 foot open class of boat, the boat of choice for many of the mackerel men, it was not a question of how much you could catch, but how much you dared haul aboard and remain

seaworthy in the weather conditions prevailing on the day. I can't recall a mackerel boat ever foundering, but on fine weather days I have seen them loaded to the point where a good steep wash from a passing merchant ship would have given them serious problems. And to avoid being swamped in poor weather when steaming home, boxes of fish would sometimes have to be dumped overboard to lighten her up a bit and enable the boat to lift more readily to the seas.

Given the amount of fish available to be caught and the size of the boats used to catch them, the catching capacity was as good as it could be. Any better and I think a boat or two would have ended up paying a visit to Neptune.

2

Hand-lining

By the early 1970s the Cornish handline mackerel fishery was expanding at a fantastic rate; it was proving to be very lucrative and very easy to get in on. In those days fishermen had the freedom of the seas. You could buy a boat, any boat, register it and the rest was up to you; the rules, regulations and restrictions were very few indeed.

So, wherever boats were for sale, fishermen from Cornwall were snapping them up. Scotland and Brittany were two good sources of second hand craft, while here in Cornwall just about anything that floated was pressed into service: summer pleasure steamers and ferry boats, wartime motor launches, motor yachts and retired lifeboats. As a rule of thumb, the more motley the boat then the more motley were the men that crewed them. Farm workers, dockyardies, hippies, barmen and waiters from the hotels, everyone was out there having a go. And why not; it was much better than the dole and it cost very little to fit out a boat for the job. As you can imagine, many of these types dropped out as quickly as they dropped in, but others persevered and many of them went on to become good fishermen. We laughed at a lot of these people, but in a fishery boom you can't suddenly find hundreds of skilled fishermen; the extra manpower has to come from somewhere as boat numbers had gone from twenty or so at the start to over four hundred in a very short space of time.

It was not only second hand boats that were in demand. This boom had given the local boat yards full order books because many of the top fishermen invested in powerful new boats. One or two of these new craft were made of fibre glass, but at the time very little was known about that medium so most skippers stayed with

wood. Plus, of course, all around the Cornish coast there were still plenty of boatyards building in wood to a very high standard. On bad weather days there were always car loads of fishermen jaunting off to have a look at some one's new boat then under construction.

All these new boats had to be adaptable to work the different seasons. In Looe they were nearly all of the forward wheelhouse hatch board deck design, able to carry a small hydraulic winch for the stop gap trawling season between the end of the mackerel fishing and the start of summer pleasure angling. In other ports they preferred an aft wheelhouse and a laid deck because they went crabbing, netting or long lining in the summer. And these new boats were a very good investment. There were loans and grants available to help defray the cost, and at the time it was reckoned that a new boat could be paid off within three years.

The mackerel boats of the 1970s and the trawlers and netters that were launched in the 1980s were to be the last hurrah for the wooden boat however. Of course the marketing side of things was expanding rapidly to match the landings of this ever increasing fleet, for what had once been a purely local affair had, by the early 1970s, become very big business. In mackerel landing ports such as Newlyn, Falmouth, Mevagissey and Looe, teams of packers stood by each evening ready to box and ice the day's catch before loading up the waiting refrigeration lorries that carried this fresh Cornish produce to the fish markets of all the major cities in the UK as well as to France, Spain, Italy and Greece. When the weather was fine and the fishing heavy, these packing teams would be working right through the night. Many is the time they would still be boxing and icing the previous day's catch when we were going to sea the following morning.

The catch rate for mackerel had increased tenfold, and it was also hard physical work. Depending on where the fish were to be found it could involve some very long hours. But no fisherman worries about a fifteen or eighteen hour working day if there are fish to be caught. You can have a rest when the winter storms roll in and it's double ropes out to hold the boats to the quay.

Compared with fishermen of today we led a life of great freedom. There was no one telling you what you could or could not fish for; the boat that you went to sea in and the engine that powered it was

entirely your business. Each skipper worked the different seasons of the year as he saw fit, old men, young men, old boats and new. But they have all gone now, the boats, the men and the seasons that they worked. These were my main working years and I witnessed it all from the decks of the various boats that I worked on, fair weather and foul, good times and bad, shipwreck and tragedy. It's a tale that any fisherman from my era could tell, but I doubt that they will, so I shall try to put the story together as I saw it while working from the port of Looe.



End of a day's trawling on Ibis 1984



The author landing trawl fish from Ibis in Looe