

Associated document

Mevagissey - A Historical Perspective

"Mevagissey is a small market town and sea-port, in a parish of its name, in the east division of Powder hundred, situated on the western shore of St. Austell's bay, six miles from that town and 14 from Truro. It is chiefly inhabited by persons employed in the pilchard fishery, which is carried on here to a considerable extent, there being no fewer than 30 or 40 seines employed by the inhabitants. The harbour is commodious, and safe for vessels of about 300 tons burden, having a pier which almost surrounds it. The hills which form a crescent round the bay, are bold and picturesque; their exposed outlines are bleak and barren, whilst each intervening crevice is clothed with luxuriant foliage. The whole parish contained, by the population returns of 1821, 2450 inhabitants."

Pigot's Directory of Devon & Cornwall 1830

From its earliest beginnings as two small hamlets - Lamoreck (the area around the parish church) and Porthilly (a separate fishing community), Mevagissey has steadily developed its status as a working fishing village and more recently as a very popular tourist destination.

For centuries the prosperity of the village and nearby Portmellon has been closely linked to the fortunes of the local fishermen. As for many other Cornish harbours that prosperity was largely driven by the demand, from the 16th century onwards, for the Cornish pilchard. Spain, Italy and Portugal, all Catholic countries, provided a huge market for this 'inconspicuous little fish'. In one season some 60,000 hogsheads (approx. 2,500 pilchards each) could be caught in the St Austell/Mevagissey bays and these were then exported from Fowey to the Mediterranean. While on average over a number of years, when the pilchard fishing was at its height, approximately 30,000 hogsheads were exported annually representing some 75 million pilchards per annum.

The impact on Mevagissey and Portmellon was to generate a proliferation of trades centred on the fishing trade. Boatbuilders, net makers, sailmakers, rope makers, coopers, blacksmiths, fish curers, net bakers all benefited from this remarkable demand for fish. Another less documented trade to benefit from these activities was that of smuggling. The continued imposition of taxes throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries to finance unpopular foreign wars encouraged many Cornish fishermen and merchants to expand their activities into 'free trading'. In Mevagissey one of the most notorious smugglers was boat builder Captain James Dunn. Dr Helen Doe's research into his boatbuilding business at Portmellon has uncovered an elaborate money laundering enterprise aimed at hiding his profits from this lucrative illicit trade.

It was not until 1841, when Prime Minister Robert Peel eliminated tariffs on more than 600 products, that smuggling lost its economic impact across Cornwall.

The legacy of all these activities legal and illegal (tunnels and hidden chambers) can still be seen in the buildings that surround the harbour and which occupy the narrow streets that radiate outwards. Less obvious but just as significant are the dwellings, shops and places of worship which reflected the growing prosperity of the merchants who organized this industry.

While Mevagissey's fortunes could fluctuate significantly from one year to the next according to the success or failure of the fishing season, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the village endured a prolonged and significant long term decline in the earnings of the local fishermen (See appendix 2).

Nearby Portmellon shared Mevagissey's dependence on the sea and as well as Captain Dunn's boatyard also boasted a net making trade and was even home to Mevagissey's first lifeboat, The 'South Warwickshire, which could be launched into more sheltered waters from the beach.

Thankfully for both Mevagissey and Portmellon, the economic decline in fishing was to be offset by the rise of a very different industry – the arrival of the summer visitor. While many rich and famous individuals had 'discovered' Mevagissey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries thanks to the expansion of the railway to St Austell and the opening of the new road from St Austell, it was not until the end of the Second World War and the rise in car ownership that Mevagissey was to feel fully the impact of the family holidaymaker. Throughout the late 1950's and 1960's the school holidays saw a mass exodus towards the south west and its impact transformed the range of facilities to be found in the village. New car parks, shops and cafes gradually replaced many of the trades that had depended on the needs of the fishing industry. Small hotels and bed and breakfast facilities proliferated. Given the continued improvement to the country's road network it seemed that the economic landscape of the village had changed forever. It was suggested that the shoals of pilchards had been superseded by the shoals of visitors.

Interestingly however, one of the key factors attracting these visitors was the opportunity to experience and see at first hand a working Cornish fishing village. This meant that Mevagissey like many other Cornish ports needed to achieve a working balance between a sustainable fishing fleet and the demands of the holidaymaker. In addition it became evident that the numbers of visitors could fluctuate just as the fishing season could vary from one year to the next. Mevagissey needed to compete not just locally but nationally and internationally to attract a range of visitors.

All sustainable development is linked to comparative advantage. In many places this might be mineral wealth, the availability of low cost labour, the availability of a highly skilled labour force or the existence of other natural resources. For Mevagissey its major asset is its harbour. A picturesque double harbour guarded by its iconic Watch

House and filled with a fleet of fishing boats is a scene that has graced thousands of postcards and holiday snaps since the early days of photography.

Mevagissey is strategically placed to secure its economic future using the landscape and facilities on its doorstep. A recent visitor survey indicated that some 21% of visitors to the County intended to visit Mevagissey. The Lost Gardens of Heligan, located within walking distance of the village, regularly attracts over 200,000 visitors a year. The nearby Eden Project continues to welcome some 800,000 visitors a year. The 'holiday season' has now been extended to at least eight months from March to October as visitors come to enjoy the many outstanding gardens now open to the public in this area. Activity holidays continue to expand their appeal from simple walking and cycling along the many paths that radiate from the village to underwater diving and sea fishing.

The topography of the village has proved to be both a weakness and a strength in terms of the economic development of the area. For many years poor road links into the village meant that most trade with the outside world came via the hard working coastal vessels that plied their trade along the south Cornwall coast. The new road from St Austell, opened in 1922, facilitated transport links to the north side of the village. While visitors have always found Mevagissey's narrow streets particularly attractive they continue to act as a restriction to development to the south and west of the village.

Significantly, Mevagissey is strategically placed to benefit from a rise in the fortunes of St. Austell. While it may not be able to, nor need, to compete with the many business parks dotted around the town, it is ideally placed to offer those working there the opportunity to live in an attractive, lively village just a short distance from their place of employment.

Appendices:

- A Timeline for Mevagissey
- Fishermen's Earnings 1940-1993
- Sites of Historical Significance

Details of three archaeology assessments relating to the village

Details of 135 designated assets on the National Heritage List varying in size from Heligan House to the red telephone box on the corner of Market Square.

Sources:

A Cornish Harbour – H.A. Behenna

Memories Of Mevagissey - J. Dunn

A History Of Mevagissey – Mevagissey Museum

Captain James Dunn: Eighteenth Century Smuggler – Dr Helen Doe

The National Heritage List for England

Archaeology Data Service

Pigot's Directory of Devon and Cornwall 1830

Visit England Statistics

Cornwall Visitor Survey 2012 carried out by Beaufort Research on behalf of Visit Cornwall.

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