

A History of St Ives



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Smeatons Pier and the Harbour

There is evidence dating back to the 16th century that St Ives was the chief port of operation for Ireland. It is known that prior to 1766 the pier ran out from Carn Glaze. It is thought to have been not much more than timber piles driven into sand with rubble filling.



Today, small fishing boats still operate in the harbour.

Then in 1770 John Smeaton built this pier. It was built of stone and you can see the stonework changes just by the lighthouse. This is where the original pier ended and the lighthouse used to guard the end. Then the next extension was built on.

Until Smeaton's pier was extended, the harbor became very congested with fishing boats.



This is a picture of the harbour in 1880 with SS 502 Prince at rest on the sand. You can see here that the harbour was very crowded before the extension was built.

The new extension to Smeaton's Pier created much more shelter and so a greater trade sprang and the fishing industry improved.

In 1837 St Ives declared itself a free port which meant it couldn't collect dues from its users so improvements slowed down. More coastal merchant vessels started using St Ives and Hayle. It was not only occupied by fishing boats, but also brigs, schooners, and barquentines that would carry copper ore to the smelters in Wales and supply coal, wood and slate



This is the General Havelock, a mackerel boat entering the harbour. It is a square rig boat that is not often seen now. There are two sails the same size but usually the mizzen is smaller.

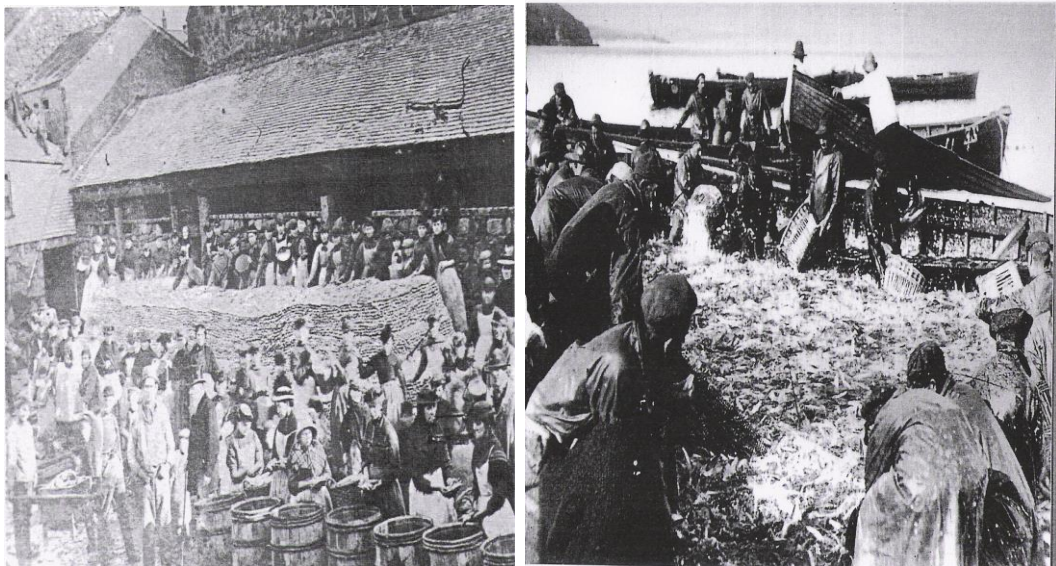
By 1844 St Ives had started to invest money in the pilchard fisheries. Excess of £150 000 was used, 400 boats and 735 men employed plus a further 100 men in other fishing activities.



The harbour is crowded with seine boats, fishing vessels, a schooner and fishing carts.

From a local-

‘The worst thing was the smell of fish in the old days, the boats came in with the night catch and they would cut and gut them into the harbour: herring, pilchards, dog fish, ray, fish market was held on the wharf and was generally a noisy cheerful occasion. Herring was prepared for the smoke house or was pressed into fish cellars, the resulting oil used for cosmetics’.



Left: 1871 in the great pilchard season these people are “bulking” pilchards in Maid Betsey’s Cellar which is now the Barnaloft Flats. Considering that there were no waterproofs to wear in those days other than leather, they must have been quite smelly and wet by the end of the day.

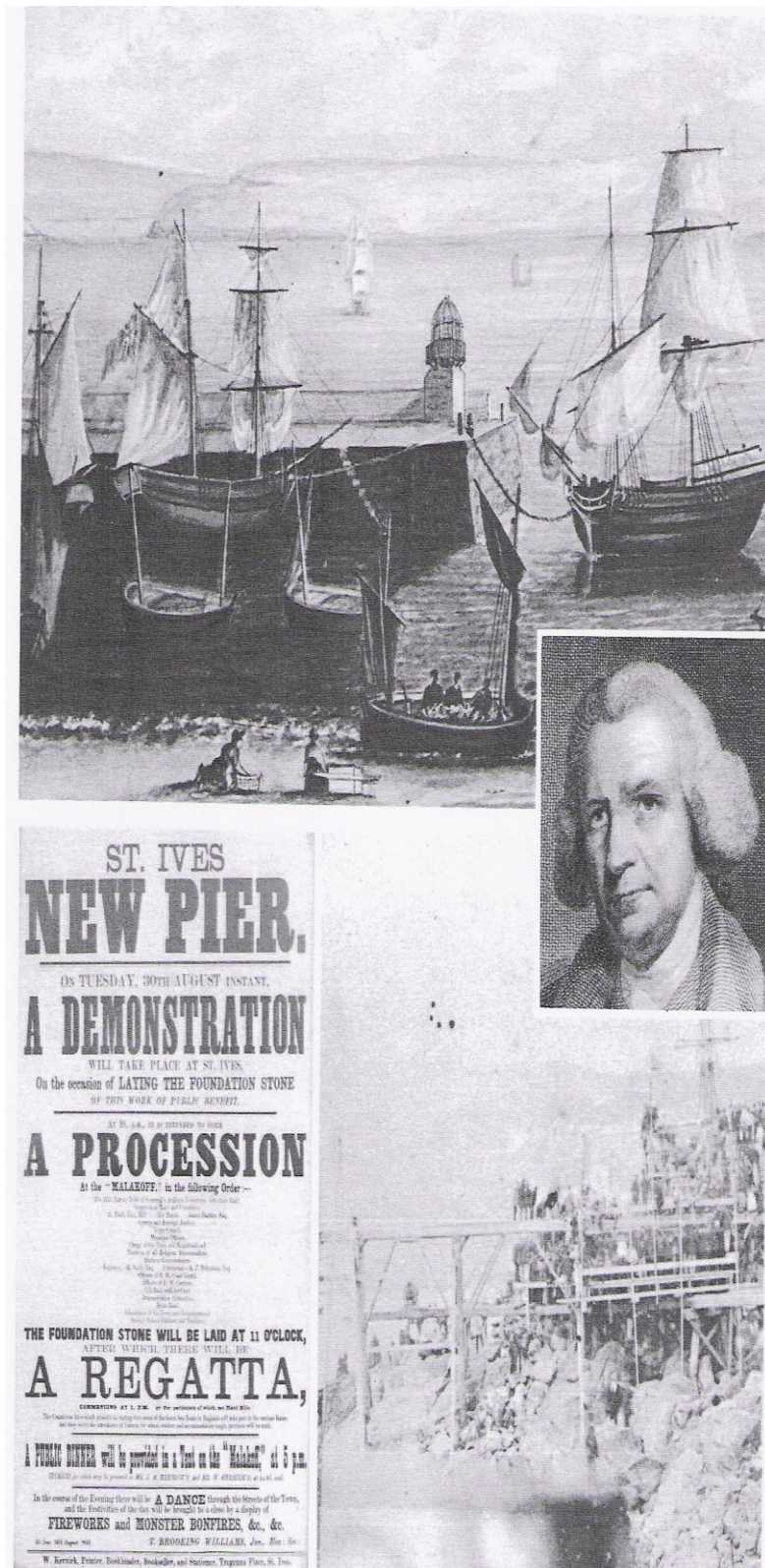
Right: 1900 these people are doing what is known as “tucking pilchards”. Note the amazing length of the boats, and the men must have got really soaked doing this job.



This is a good view of the new extension of Smeaton's pier.

John Smeaton also built Eddystone Lighthouse.

1864 Work began on the outer harbour. It was wood and called 'new' or 'wooden' pier but it didn't last long against the rolling Atlantic breakers. In less than 20 years it became almost a complete wreck and today only the stumps remain which can still be seen on a low tide.



Above: The harbour c1850. Left: announcing the foundation stone laying ceremony for the new pier 1864. Right: laying the stone for the wooden pier, August 30, 1864.
Inset: John Smeaton.

The harbour became overcrowded with fishing boats and the situation became increasingly bad until the fishermen rioted and this was called Tresidder's Riot. At last they extended the pier in 1890 to stop the sands building up, this was called the Victoria extension but it ceased to be built due to the cost. The West Pier was then built in 1894.



When the extension was built the old light house was left where the pier used to end.
Notice that it is a lot smaller than the new one.

The West Pier was built as a loading jetty for roadstone from the Carthew and Orange Lane quarries and then finally the Wharf Road was built from the lifeboat house. The photo over leaf shows the harbour before the Wharf road was built, and was taken around 1922. It has been a busy place in the past, with many changes and only a few clues to the past are visible today.



The harbour prior to the construction of the Wharf in 1922. You can see that the road was a lot smaller.

I love this photo, black & white photos make the scene look dark, but the sunshine and the quaint places must have made St Ives a lovely place to live in those days. It is interesting to see such a large ship beached in the background, and to find the buildings that are pictured in front of it.

Another boat that was commonly used was gigs. The gigs were used to take pilots out to the ships as they approached the Isles of Scilly or the coast of Cornwall. The first pilot to reach and board the ship would get the job so the gigs needed to be fast. To-day gigs have made a huge come-back and racing is now a popular event.

St Ives Lifeboat

A lifeboat has been needed in St Ives since fishermen started using the area. It was established officially in 1840, and has saved thousands of lives since.



The lifeboat house is now open to the public so visitor can come in and see the lifeboat and learn about the history of it.

The Lifeboat was stationed in the harbour, but before the lifeboat house was built the lifeboat had to be towed along the wharf and launched down the slip way. The lifeboats were propelled by oar and sail and launched by the town people.



The Lifeboat crew in 1934. Notice that the lifeboat is a lot smaller than the present day one.

Since 1840 local volunteers have manned the lifeboat and until 1861 the lifeboat was locally built. Then the Royal National Lifeboat Institution supplied both lifeboat and facilities. When the lifeboat station was being built, the constructors found a peat bog which was surprising since it was in the harbour.



The first motor lifeboat came in 1933, and was named the Caroline Parsons. She saved 73 lives before she wrecked off the Island in 1938 going to the aid of SS Alba.

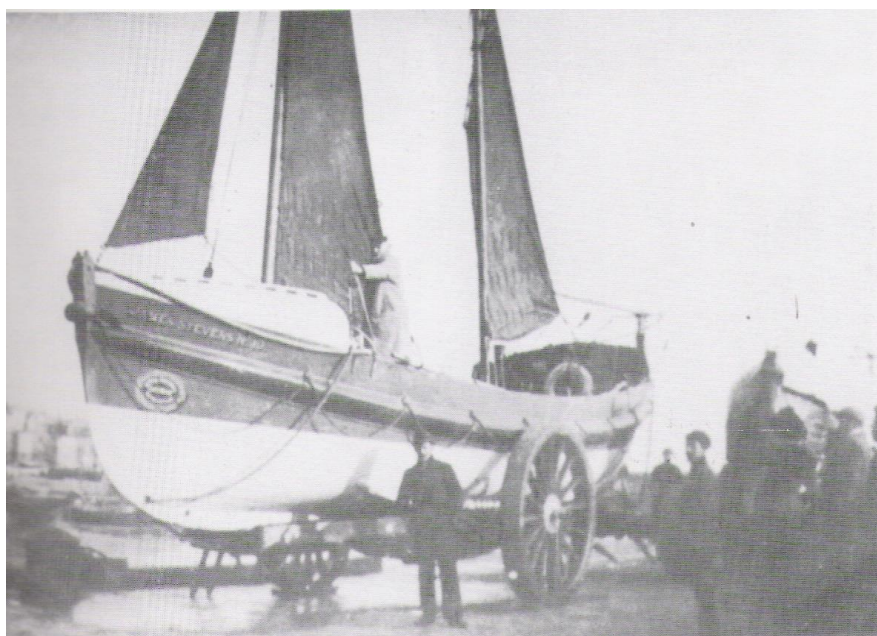


The Caroline Parsons, the first motor boat in St Ives, being launched. Before the slipway was built the lifeboat had to be towed along the Wharf and down the slipway next to the Sloop Inn.

She was replaced by the John and Sarah Eliza Stych, but a year later she was wrecked in a terrible disaster as she tried to help an unknown steamer off Pendeen. There was a fierce gale that night and after it had been launched no one saw her again until two hours later when flares and red lights were seen two miles off St Ives head. She capsized three times before being washed up at Godrevy. Only one lifeboatman survived.



The second Exeter lifeboat in harbour with her crew.



The Exeter lifeboat stationed here. Notice that it is not motored but powered by sails which can be dangerous in strong winds and more time consuming.

The engine from the wreck was then put in the replacement boat that was being trialed at the time of the evacuation of Dunkirk. She was bought through contributions from the Girl Guides and Named the Girl Guides of Dunkirk.

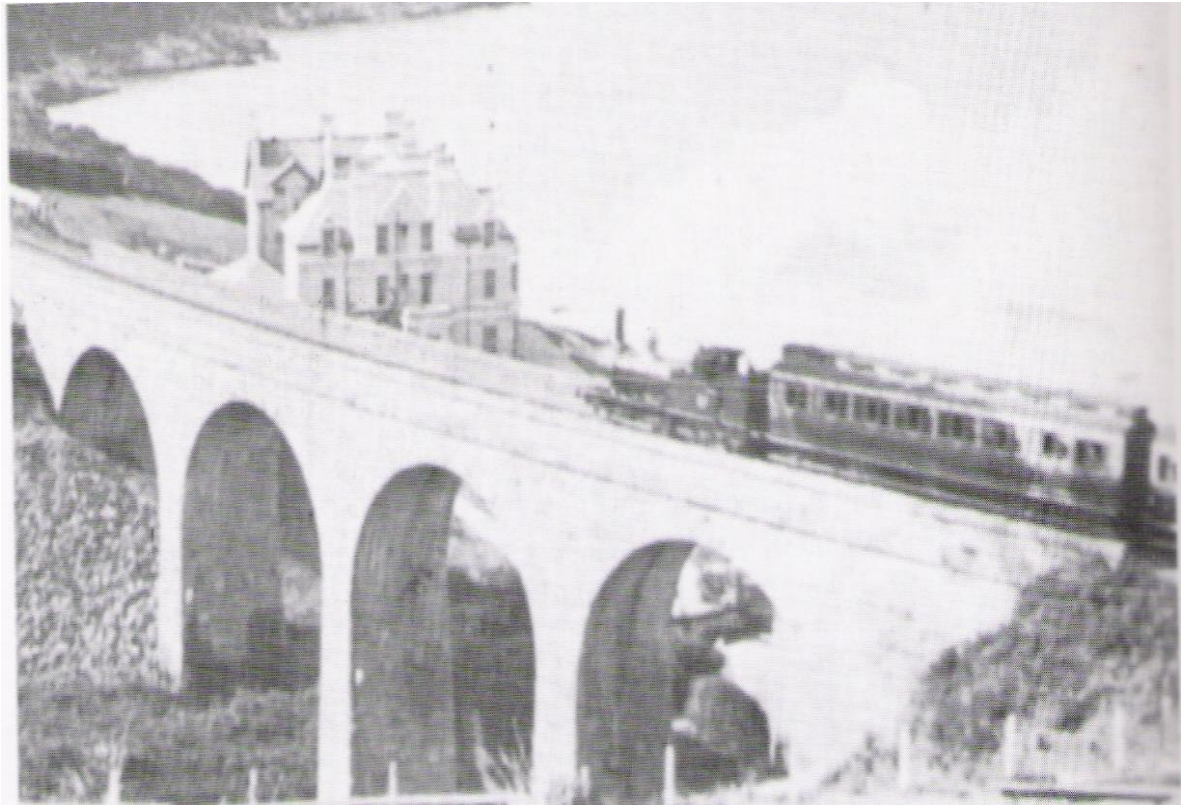
The Railway

After a great deal of discussion about land for the railway, it was finally completed and opened on May 24th 1877. The attempts to build it started in 1844 then again in 1846, 1853 and then again in 1862. The land needed was owned by Squire Praed of Trevetho and T S Bolitho of Penzance and Mr Magniac the local MP.



St Ives station and Warren Gate left of the signal. Notice that it is very busy with tourists.

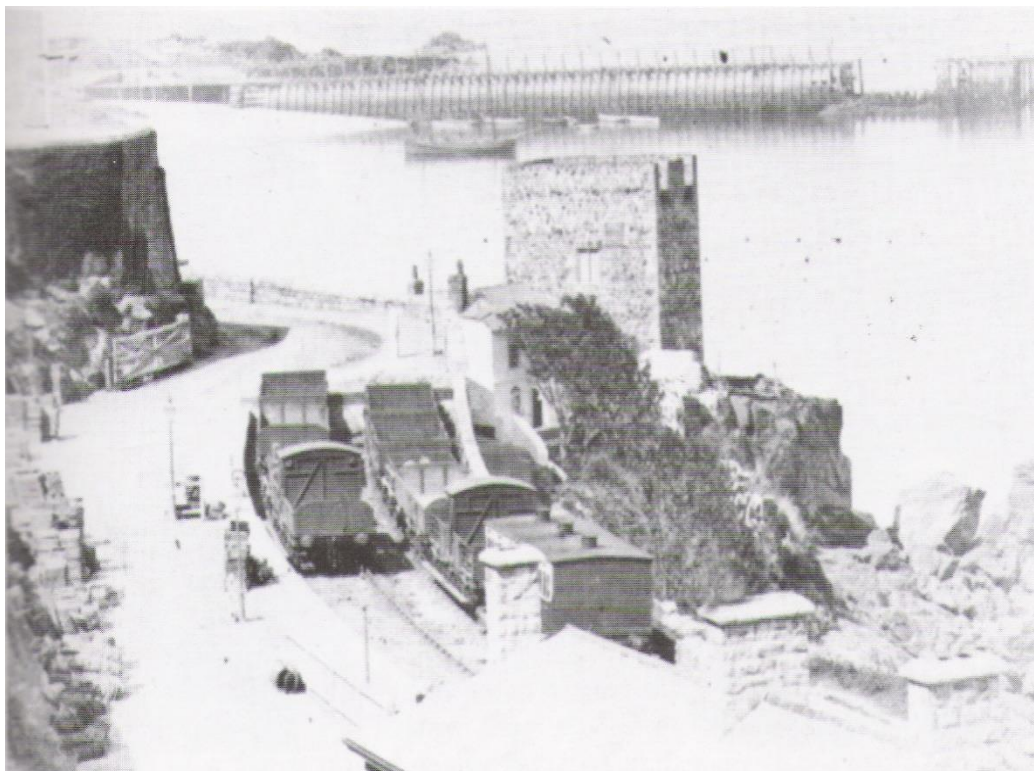
The area was seen to be failing in its industry, fishing was depleting and mining was uncertain. So finding a contractor to build the railway was difficult. It was the potential of St Ives as a holiday resort that they finally agreed to build it.



Carbis Valley viaduct

The route is short but varied in its views, from sand dunes to cliffs to land. The contract was obtained by Thomas Lang of Liskeard and by September 1874 250 workers were busy on the line.

The workers were called “navvies” and they were said to make quite a nuisance of themselves, drinking and rambling through the village on Sundays.



St Ives station in broad gauge and the wooden pier in the background.

The building of the railway caused some picturesque cottages to be pulled down in Primrose Valley. A man was killed two years into the construction by falling ground, and another workman fell 50' in Carrack Gladden and was badly bruised.

The first steam engine used was called the Elephant and left Penzance at 11am and ran the full length of the line on 1st June 1877. An extensive advertising campaign followed, promoting St Ives as "A Great Playground for the South West" which resulted in St Ives being turned into one of the best holiday places. The opening of the railway was going to be a day of holiday for the people, and nearly a thousand had a free ride on the train all the way to St Erth and back, but as is always with Cornwall, it was not to be and the fishing boats landed a larger than normal catch and many people had to go and pack the fish.



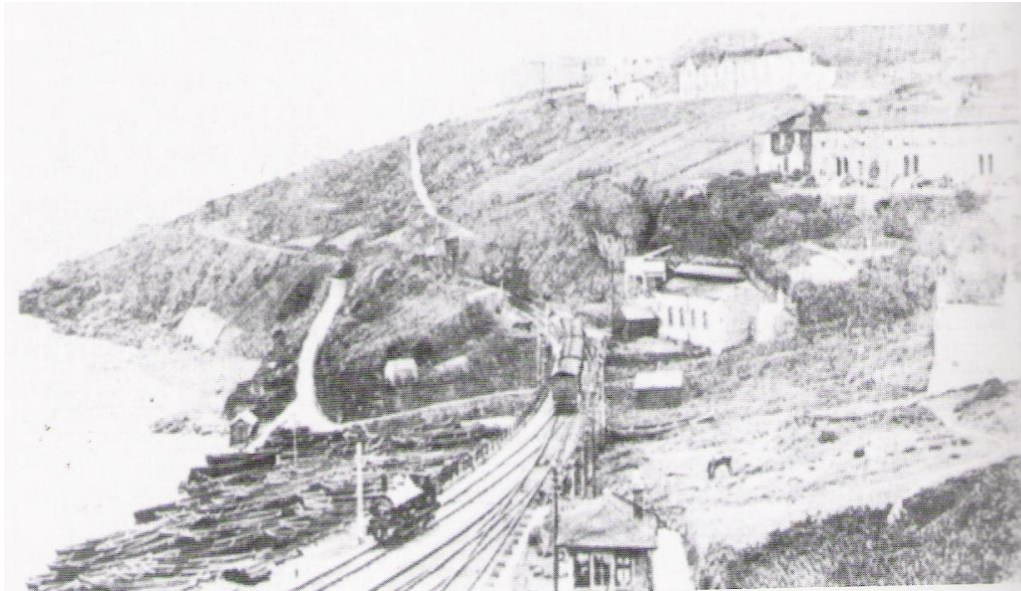
Broad gauge engine Heron at St Ives. She drew the last broad gauge train to St Erth in 1892.

Railway tracks run on different gauge sizes and the St Ives track was the last one built that ran on the Brunnel's broad gauge. The whole line was converted to narrow gauge when the Penzance to Paddington line was converted in May 1892.

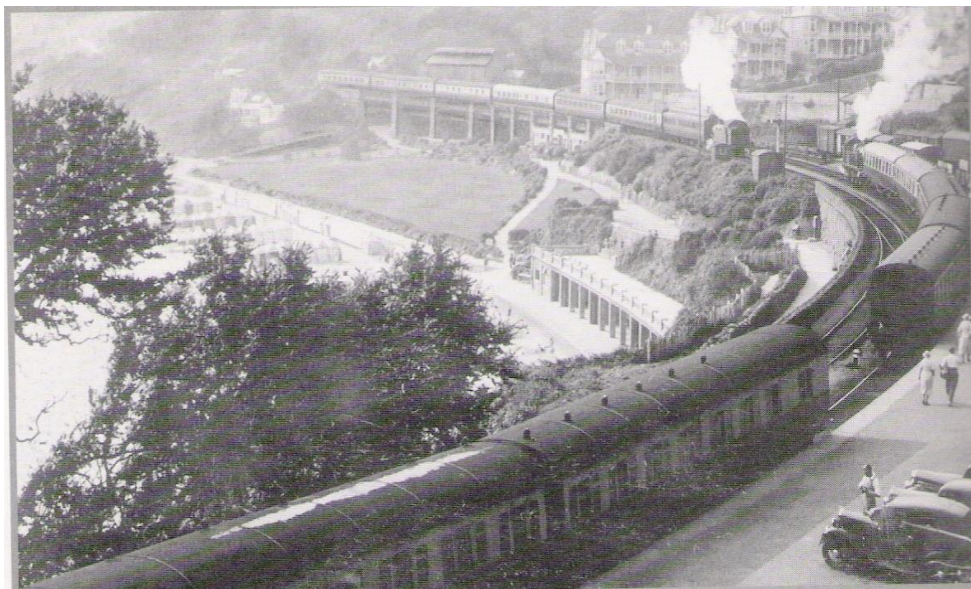
A heavy traffic of fish was transported by the railway before the Wars broke out, and then once the fish industry had declined summer visitors packed the train to almost over capacity.

Carbis Bay once had a little booking office built on the platform which is high above the cliff and the beach. This is now unmanned.

The increase of cars became a problem to the railway, and then Beeching had a go at closing the line. It was kept going by local support groups.



St Ives station. There are hardly any houses in this picture compared to what it is like now. Blue Hayes is situated somewhere on the hillside of this photo.



St Ives station before parts of it was sacrificed to accommodate the present station car park. The railway is so busy there are three trains on at the same time.

The original St Ives railway station was demolished in 1971 to make way for a car park, the line was shortened and a new single bare platform was built which local people felt was really ugly for a pretty holiday railway. The popular Park and Ride scheme has kept the railway busy as ever. It is the only true park and ride scheme in the country.

The Church

St Ives Parish Church was built in 1434 on the foundations of an earlier church which was founded by St Ia.



St Ives parish church.

There is a statue of St Ia, a princess who came to St Ives in the 5th or 6th century. She brought Christianity and gave her name to the town. The legend states she came from Ireland. Destined to sail to Cornwall she missed the fleet leaving, and knelt down to pray. A leaf appeared and grew to a size she could step on which she then sailed over to Cornwall.



The tower of the church is the dominating feature. It is 115 feet high. The church is surrounded by gargoyles that are meant to ward off evil spirits. Inside the church there is a carving of Madonna and Child given by Dame Barbra Hepworth in memory of her son who died in the RAF in Thailand in 1953. There are also carvings on the pew ends done by the master smith Ralph Clies where he portrays himself and his wife and the tools of his trade. The granite for the church was brought to St Ives by sea from Zennor but the weather often hampered them. An aisle was added in 1450 and is called the Trenwith Isle.



St Ives United Methodist Church

Methodists who broke from the parent society in St Ives in 1838 to form a Teetotal Society later joined the “New Connexion” Methodists at the end of the 19th century, and moved to this neo-Gothic building.

During the making of the railway line, several skeletons were dug up a foot below the earth surface. One skeleton measured 6’4”. In the same area workmen uncovered what they think is the original church of St Uny Lelant. As the main church was in Lelant in the 12th and 13th centuries, this is likely as Lelant was far more prosperous then. The people of St Ives would have had to walk three miles for weddings, services, funerals and baptisms.

The Town

During the 5th and 6th centuries, trade was coming from Ireland into the West of Britain. A number of Irish saints are said to have sailed to Britain in baskets, sea shells and even on floating millstones. St Ia is said to have been a holy woman, a princess or a daughter of an Irish chieftain, and is thought to have sailed on a leaf, but her voyage is more likely to have been done in a seaworthy coracle-type constructed from leaves and layered hides. The town is named after St Ia and now the ivy leaf is a feature of the St Ives coat of arms. The leaf might also have come from the name Ives - ivy.



Notice that this house is three stories high. The reason for this is that the bottom floor was used as a shop and the other two floors was where the family lived.

St Ia is thought to have landed on the Island. The chapel of St Nicholas is on the island and was medieval. It has been used as a seaman's chapel, as a type of lighthouse, a customs lookout and a pilot's watch house.

St Ives grew from just a settlement into a thriving town during the late 14th century after Lelant and Hayle Estuary lost business because of the heavy silt, sand and mud that was washed down from the mines. By 1488 the town had a market and two annual fairs, then in 1588 St Ives became a parliamentary borough.



On the right of this picture there is a gas lamp and on the left of the picture you can see spur stones that were placed at street corners to stop wagon wheels from scraping the walls.

The streets were narrow, uneven, rarely maintained and badly lit. At the corners of shops there are granite curb stones that stopped the carts from running into buildings.

All the way through the town there are open drains that were used to drain away fish guts when this was a busy fishing town.



This is a photo of the drains that took the fish waste down the streets.

Originally St Ives was divided into two main areas called Upalong and Downalong, with the Market House forming the divide. The two parts did not get along with each other and the rivalry was intense.

Downalong was the older part of St Ives and also the fishing community where the people lived with their trade, boats, nets and drying fish on the cottages. A large part of Downalong is built on sandbank lying between the harbour and Porthmeor and connecting the grass covered headland called the Island. This is a maze of little streets passages and courtyards which is the lovely bit that the summer visitors come to see today.



This is a photo of fish being dried on the side of a cottage while the horse has lunch.

These fish are skate. It would be possible to find this cottage because the stone work would still be there today, but it would take some looking for.

Upalong was where the professional classes lived like the sea captains, tradesmen and politicians etc. and was also the mining district. Throughout the late 19th century the upper parts of St Ives grew as with the industries. The Middle class people built more bigger and more comfortable homes along the higher ground looking out over the bay. By the end of the Victorian era, substantial houses such as Draycott Terrace and Albany Terrace were established.



You can tell that this street is narrow and not looked after.

In Fore Street you will find John Knill's house. John Knill was a collector of customs and St Ives mayor in 1767, and he built the Knill's Steeple. He lived there from 1762 to 1782.

The Sloop Inn



The Sloop is the second oldest pub site in Cornwall dating back to 1312. It has been the headquarters of the marine commands and during World War 2 it was involved in the plotting of the disastrous Dieppe raid. At the back of the Sloop Inn there is an old pub store with a lift in it.

By the Inn there used to be a road called Pudding Bag Lane with an old house pictured here, and next to that there was the entrance to Fish Lane. It was demolished in 1936 because it was old and broken down. It is now gone and there is now a larger lane and a car park.



Pudding Bag Lane, sadly was demolished.

The Warf road was built in 1922 for the increasing traffic due to the tourist industry. All the building along the Warf used to be for boats and shelters for fisherman in bad weather. They are now shops and restaurants.

Tourism

The Great Western Railway was the first to see that St Ives could be a good holiday destination. It bought Tregenna Castle in 1877, renovated it and turned it into a hotel. After that, many improvements followed. In the 1880's to 90's a new drainage system was installed. The beaches were neglected and old boats were left to rot there, so in the 1880's the beaches were cleared up and bathing tents were put in as well as the putting green, sea wall and other features. In 1896 Mr Bolitho gave land at Porthminster point to be landscaped with flowers and shrubs.



You can see that the beach is very busy during the holiday but the boats are still there.

Malakoff is a view point by the bus station and is named after a fortress that the French/English forces came up against the Russians in the Crimean War. It was built in the mid-nineteenth century as a granite wall in front of the terrace with flowerbeds and seats and was used as a meeting place. The Round Table, English Tourist Board, and Barbra Hepworth contributed to an opening on the 8th May 1972 by Princess Anne. One of Barbra Hepworth's sculptures is there now.



You can see in this picture that there are bathing tents put out on the beach for tourists.

St Ives is also known as an art centre. Artists from all over the world have come to live in St Ives and converted sail lofts and cottages into studios. There have also been many galleries opened for the artists to show and sell their work. Cornwall is said to have a special light which inspires many works. Light is reflected from the clean yellow sand and in shallow waters is refracted giving light a unique quality.

The gas works at Porthmeor were torn down to make space for the Tate of the West art gallery which was opened by Prince Charles in 1993.

Fishing

Fishing sustained St Ives throughout the Middle Ages and into the early part of the 20th century and there is still fishing here today. St Ives has been an important trading port ever since the 15th century and fishing has been the main industry here for much longer. Most of the town's trades were affected by it. For instance there were shipwrights, carpenters, blacksmiths and many more.



This is a photo from 1908, of pilchard boats in St Ives Harbour

The most common type of fishing was seine fishing. During late summer and early autumn pilchard shoals would come into the bay and men called “Huers” who would sit on the cliff tops in a special house called a “Huer’s Hut” and when the shoals came into view, they would alert the town’s people. They also used semaphore to direct the fishing fleet towards the shoals.

Once the fish had been brought in they were salted and put into hogshead barrels to be shipped to Mediterranean countries, Italy especially. Their oils were then used for burning. St Ives was also known for its smoked herring or kippers, whose preparation in smoking houses added to the other smells.

Fishing continued until World War II. Then the fishing industry declined: firstly due to over fishing the area with the technology improving between the wars and: secondly because of the arrival of tourism in St Ives.

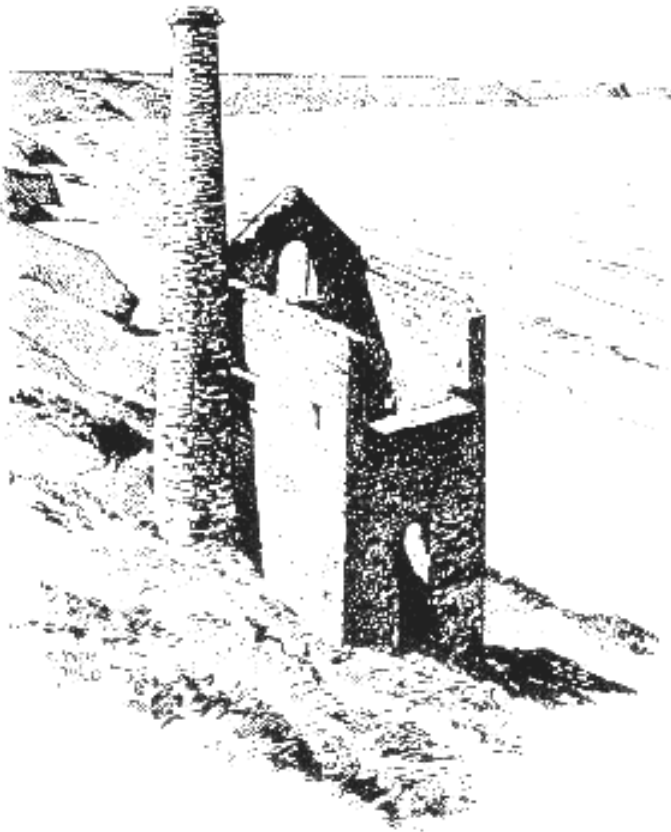


This is a photo of Smeaton's pier with a jetty going out towards the town, laden with fishing boats. This was taken around 1890. The extension had not been built and so Smeaton's Pier looks quite small. The lighthouse appears to look different too.



In 1908 horse and cart were still the best way to transport the heavy loads of fish

MINING



This is a sketch of Wheal Providence.

The history of mining in St Ives began with streaming for alluvial tin deposits in the valleys and moors. Probably the best known of the ancient stream workings from which the local mining industry evolved lay along the valley which runs into St Ives from the west. Its name, Stennack, means tin bearing ground, the earliest spelling is “*Steynek*” which dates back from as early as 1334.

Around the coast lodes were discovered by their outcrops in the cliffs on which adits were driven. The earliest of these is “Western Worke” a St Ives copper mine dating 1585. A company called “Mines Royal” took a lot of Cornish copper from St Ives and St Just, and shipped it off for smelting from St Ives.

Around 1687 Sir Thomas Clarke worked copper mines in the St Ives area. Blasting was brought to the area by a German expert around 1700 and smelting was carried on here too.

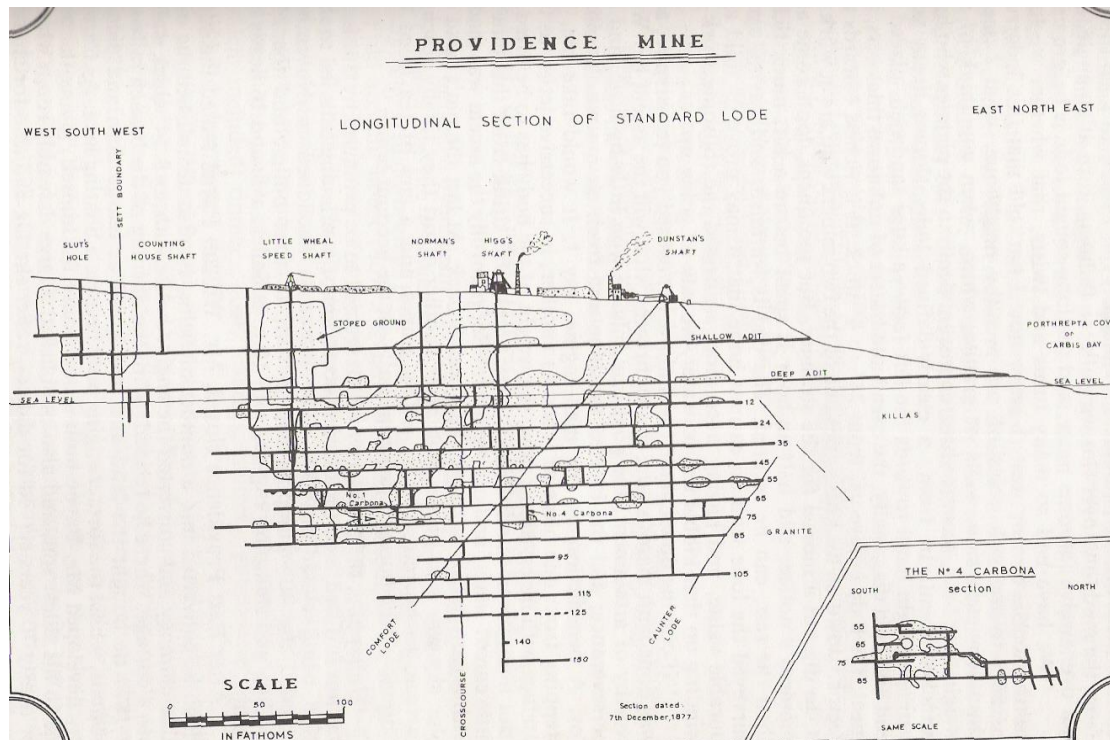
The earliest mines are recorded as far back as 1500. Although the town itself never became mined, it acted as a centre for the mine owners due to the harbour and the community that thrived in the area.



Wheal Providence mines in 1880 after they had closed down. Notice that there are still workers on the left even after the mine had closed down.

The actual mines were situated in and around the very local areas, and tunnels ran everywhere, many of them unrecorded.

The map on the next page shows the area as undivided parishes of Lelant, St Ives, Towednack, Zennor and Morvah. Nearly the whole area consists of granite, but along its shore runs a narrow band of killas and greenstone. Killas is a Cornish mining term for metamorphic rock strata.



This is a diagram of Wheal Providence Mine. Notice that it went 80 fathoms down.

Around St Ives heavily mineralized lodes cross the killas and when eroded by fast streams, provided the earliest “tinnerns” with the alluvial or “stream” tin which they dug from shallow workings.

The information about the mining is very complicated, and involves a lot about the different types of rock in the area. Wheal Providence and Wheal Sisters produced huge amounts of copper. Tin was largely mined also.

Open cast mining was practiced too, especially in the Rosewall hill area and this was called “Coffen” mining.

Between 1712 and the first official records written, a copper house was started by a man named Pollard. In those times St Ives was connected to St Just by a packhorse track way which ran more or less in a straight line over the moors and hills and it seems probable that these smelting works received ore from the far west as well as local mines.

From this time mining became deeper and more intense. Miners were put through terrible conditions to achieve their purpose, and many mines were dug all over the area.

By 1870 the mining industry was starting to collapse due to cheap imported tin from Australia and Malaysian. In 1879 an observer wrote that

“nothing is plainer than we are passing through a period of transition at St Ives. Why a miner going over the road now is almost as rare a sight as a kilted Highlander, though we used to meet them every day, going to and coming from the Bal, in droves. The mines in full work and paying dividends a few years ago are in ruins everywhere and meet the eye looking not as picturesquely but quite as forlorn as the ruins of ancient cities. The old stamps, whose rattling sound was always dinning in your ears, morning noon and dusk, are now silent as the grave. Mines and miners have passed away like a dream, and the next generation will be asking the meaning of all those ruined houses and those monster piles of rubbish.”



This is Giew mine, Crippleasease today. It was the last mine to close down in 1922.

By 1890 the industry was nearly over. Around 1905 the price for tin improved and electronic pumping equipment kept several mines going. Only three restarted, Trenwith, and St Ives Consols, also Giew Mine in Crippleasease. The public house there was originally called the Fire Engine after the engines that were run on fire, but it is now called The Engine Inn.

In 1922 the whole mining scene came to an end due to economic and labour problems, and mining in St Ives came to a halt.

References

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