

The Longshoreman's Chart

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To many who have stood on the foreshore at Porthleven and watched the boats entering and leaving the harbour, or watched them sailing – apparently without any set plan – around the Bay, it may come as news that the laws of the sea are as fixed as the laws of the road, as are also the bounds as to where one may or may not go. It might appear to the uninitiated that with such a wide expanse to sail over one could not easily go wrong; ‘also that one would be as likely to catch fish in one part of the Bay as in any other. But such is not the case. It is vitally necessary for the fisherman – and particularly the type known as the “longshoreman,” the man who does not go out of sight of land to do his fishing – to know the rules of the sea, and to know what the bottom of the sea is like, in order to be able to decide what particular type of fish finds the particular type of ground to its liking, and consequently may be expected to frequent it. For fish are more susceptible to a set type of sea-bottom than are sheep or cattle to a set type of pasture.

The large black conger clings to the black rock, his protective colouring being made full use of accordingly; similarly the large brown pollack loves the area where the brown, ribboned seaweed languidly sways in the undertow, while its nearest relative – locally known as the “whiting pollack” from its silvery resemblance to the whiting – is a roamer not branded by any local colour: he takes the silver and grey of the great sea. The crab, the lobster, the crayfish, each possesses its “home ground,” and it is the discovering and marking of these grounds that is a great part of the business lore of the longshoreman.

The sea-bottom of Mount’s Bay is more rugged and undulating even than the land immediately on its shores; very deep are some of its areas, while in others so shallow is the water that at low tide even small boats have been known to strike the crest of those sunken hills. As a boy I have often heard the fishermen refer to the “Great Row” and “Little Row” but had no idea at that time that the shallows referred to were the crests of submerged hills

which were only a continuation of the ridges of which such headlands as Tremearne and Cudden are but the land termination. The longshoreman knows these ridges well; he knows, too, the valleys on each side of them. In the month of February he takes out his long strings of crab and lobster pots and lays them along the ridges where he knows his intended victims will be found. At the first sign of the approach of a south-west gale, with its accompanying rough sea, he hurries out and deposits his pots in the valleys below the ridges, where the tremendous swell will not be able to wreak such destruction on his frail wattles.

At the present day the deep sea fisherman has a wealth of information about the habits, breeding areas and periods, and migration of fish supplied to him by the Government Fishery Research Department but a hundred years ago, when few fishermen had had the privilege of schooling and those who could read were rare, all the information had to be gained in the hardest and most efficient of all schools – that of bitter experience. Consequently when the information was first gained it was jealously guarded. Let us imagine that Dick Body (nicknamed Barras) has discovered that a certain patch of black rock on the sea bottom is a prolific spot for conger (the sea bottom is easily to be noted on still days). After a few days of good fishing and consequently good landings, it has come to be noticed by his brothers of the line that he has fished with good results at the same spot for many days; others try the spot with success, and its position is marked in the following way.

From the boat it is noticed that a line of houses in Mullion village are exactly in line with the end of Mullion Island. In the other direction it is noted that the tower of Cury Church is lying immediately to the right of a patch of green on Gunwalloe Sand known as the "Castle". The longshoreman has thus marked it as "Barras's Mark." The position has to be taught to the younger generation by the sea patriarchs, and from them to be passed to their descendants. Each branch of the longshore fishing industry has its own particular and peculiar mark as do the trawlers, the crabber's and day hookers. Many of them are virtually copyright and are by no means revealed lightly. Nor should they be; they have been come by far from easily and ought to be jealously guarded as the rights of the inheritors. I may say here in passing that when I approached one old fisherman to obtain the names of some of the marks he said quite abruptly; "Whaffar?" I am a landsman, and consequently not above suspicion of poaching.

You will notice in the list of marks I shall be quoting presently how frequently the churches are used as marks. As my old friend said, "You see, they are sure to be there always, and don't change." Perched on the top of Wheel Mount is a long low building, now a stable but once the farm house. It is a famous "depth" mark with the fishermen. Some weeks ago one of them said to me, "Tell the man at Well Mount to gie th' old house a coot of whitewash; we shall be usen of un soon." The Cornish fishing-village abounds in "nick-names, not given out of any disrespect for the bearer, but to enable even friends to disassociate them from perhaps two or even three bearing the same Christian and surname. This accounts for some of the curious names of the marks.

Before taking the fishing marks I would like to give a list of the cliff names used by the fisherman, and given to me by an old "crabber." Beginning with Beacon Crag on the west side of Porthleven Harbour and extending to St Michael's Mount, we have Bullan, Song, Sawn or Sowan Shaggy (a long gully in' the cliffs frequented by Shags or Cormorants), Pertrammel, Perslinches, Mearne (Tremearne) Cove, White Par (bands of white granite in the cliff), Blue Par, Madgy. Leggy, Git Sawn, Jane Jump (steep cliff), The Clodges, Baagel-coulen or cowlin, Nine-wells, Perkew, The Winnocks, Streath Water, The Innes, The Mount. I have left out well-known headlands, bays, etc. The White Par is also known as "The Flakes o' Mearne."

In addition to natural phenomena, there are also marked by the fishermen the positions of Ships' Anchors that have been lost in the Bay at various times; unless the position of these is known to the trawlers serious loss of gear is likely to ensue. One of these is found "over the stile of Breage Tower, in line with the splat of sand on the east of the Bar."

Then we have:

Jimmy Read's Anchor – Breage Tower in line with Beacon Crag, trees in Gunwalloe over western chimney of the shop.

Jan Ivy's Anchor – Breage Tower with Seymour's House; short hedge with the pit (a pit in the Morrops

Harry Cuttance's – Breage Tower with Seymour's outhouse; western end of Harry Cuttance's house with eastern end of Gunwalloe Coastguard house.

Old Pembro – Old Pembro House with Penberthy's; Gate House in Degibna over the road of the Morrops.

"Antonio's" Anchor – Breage Tower with Scott's House; Umbrella Trees (behind Chyvarloe) just in sight.

Robby's Anchor – Mullion Tower clearing Gwinion Point; Breage Tower with Scott's House; short hedge with the pit.

Old Pembro anchor gets its name from Pembro Farm in Breage; "Antonio" was the name of the ship which lost the anchor; the others bear the names of those fortunate (?) enough to be the first to discover them (usually associated with the loss of a trawl).

And now for some fishing marks:

Town with Castle – (Cury Church in line with green on Gunwalloe sand. Point of Pradnack in line with the Git Ubble.) The Ubble mounds on Cudden Point, (the hollows between being known as Saddles.)

Pusser's Mark – Houses in line with Town scarfing the Castle.

Bray's Veal – Helston Tower in sight over Western Bar, and Town with Castle.

Cury with Mashie (the Marshes) and the Middle Stagg in sight.

Hocken.'s Mark – Sinny Tower over Harry Boy's (house near the Institute), Cury Tower in sight.

Head Pollack Mark – Shop with shop, and shop scarfing (Gwinion Head).

Kenella, Cairn Allocle or Cairn Ulla – Trencrom joining the east side of the Mount, Paul Tower in Mousehole, Coastguard Row. The Gob Minner Head (west of Bishop Rock) just in sight over Gwavas Head. Ship Inn, Porthleven with the end of pier.

Welloe Mark – Gonning Hill just over Minner Head, Mount in line with Minner Ubble.

Great Shoal (Git Shool) – West of Minner, Perran Church just showing out from Cudden.

Tumma Dugga, Tubble dugga, Tul-me-dug. – Mullion Tower just in sight from Gwinion Head. Baulk in line with Pier.

The Cubbards – Trequean Valley with House in sight. Waväs flakes in sight.

The Eephon or Eefon – A large sawn or song near Poldhu Cove.

Lifeboathouse scarfing the pier-head.

The Pellar – (West of Degibna Loe) Breage Tower with Gar Tul in line. Wheal Mount over Tregear.

The Iron Gates – Two Lizard Lights in sight. Godolphin Hill with Hoe Point.

In addition to these, there are The Calligan, The Mern, Jack and Benny, The Drusk (Sinny Tower with Beacon Crag, Cury in sight), The BreamMark (Breage Tower with Flakes of Tremearne, Cury out of sight), Cairn Mallas. (a very shallow area off Prussia Cove), The Stone (another shallow beyond Cairn Mallas), Mount Mowpas (shallow off Cudden point -only 6 feet of water over it), Great Row (a shallow beyond the Welloe, running in line Rinsey Head-WelloeGreat Row). On the eastern side of Porthleven are found The Clidja (Clyde.ja—The Morrops), Hog-a-dower (near Pradnack), The Booder (east side of Pengwinion), Trig-a-bellah (near Poldhu Cove), The Visses (in Mullion Bay), Growse and Growse Cliff (near Poldhu).

Most of these names, known only to fishermen, are Celtic fragments that, however corrupted they may be, are worth preserving. I am afraid the collection of them has been left somewhat late, as an old fisherman friend

aged 80, who knew most of them, tells me that he “caan’t maake it out, but he can’t run them off haaf like he used to, and the young wans have gaw new names far thum”.