

Newlyn Unwrapped



Ice plant at Newlyn.

By Mike Warner

Having been fortunate enough, to have had guided tours of some of the UK's most prestigious and vibrant fishing ports over the last year, it was with unshamed delight, that I recently found myself at the most Westerly of our harbours to witness a snapshot of the fishing industry that inhabits the Celtic Sea and Western Approaches. Here to learn more about the diverse and mixed fisheries that define the industry along the Cornish coast, I found Newlyn affords a distinct appreciation of just that, reflected in not just the different species caught and landed but the types of vessels and gear employed.

Alan Dwan, the charismatic and larger than life skipper of the hake netter Ajax (PZ36) was keen that we should meet, prior to him sailing on another scheduled trip to target this now increasingly popular species that affords such a flavoursome alternative amongst the regular white fish staples.

We greet each other on the quay and straight away, I'm ushered aboard Ajax on a technical tour of the vessel. I'm always intrigued to learn more and understand exactly what processes make a trip, aboard any vessel. I'm shown the layout, the gear and the routines involved in the preservation of the catch to ensure its enduring quality when it hits the auctions, all of which remain unknown to the average consumer. Alan informs me that instead of heading out west of the Scillies to the traditional hake grounds this trip, a seasonal dearth of fish have

prompted him to take the decision to steam north into the Irish Sea and head ultimately for Manx waters to try their luck.

The vessel's co-owner Andrew Pascoe appears with the requisite DEFRA paperwork that details the entitlement to days at sea in those waters, which Alan studies with an experienced eye. Originally from Co Waterford, he's been fishing out of Newlyn for 20 years, but I'm sensing from him a palpable excitement, that he'll shortly be returning to his home seas.

Another morning, another tour. I next find myself in the esteemed company of fisherman, lecturer, blogger and all round fount of Newlyn knowledge, Laurence (Larry) Hartwell, whose depth of experience and profound understanding of the port and its foibles will give me an insight into the life and characters here like no other.

We meet at the Monday morning market and although landings aren't huge, there's a fantastic array of species lying resplendently iced and arranged on the market floor. The auction is in full swing and as we discuss everything from Brexit to brill, merchants and porters move boxes from place to place with purpose and alacrity.

Laurence is keen for me to build up an accurate picture of the goings on here and over the course of my stay, introduces me to many of the characters that colour the scene. I slowly capture an image of a fishing port striving for success, hungry for the economies and efficiencies that other harbours enjoy, but sadly hampered by tradition, dogma and

underinvestment. The Stevenson family have shaped the landscape in Newlyn for many years now and still run the fish auction and its facilities, landing their own fish too, from their, now ageing, fleet of beamers. The new Harbourmaster working with the Harbour Commissioners seeks to balance the politics with representation from skippers, owners and merchants, but I sense that progress is not fast enough and any innovation and advancement made difficult by conflicting opinions.

Notwithstanding the local differences, there is the undoubtedly the quality of fish to focus on. We gaze upon boxes of stunningly bright red gurnard, the ubiquitous cod, prime plaice witch and megrim from the beamers, netted hake and many boxes of haddock, a species with cause for concern here in terms of the Landing Obligation, of which I subsequently learn more.

From the day boats, the mackerel haven't yet put in their inshore appearance, with only the odd box evident. Soon though, the hand liners will put to sea in fleets, as will the ring-netters of the pilchard (sardine) harvest, with shoals already showing up on sounders in Mounts Bay.

At the end of the Mary Williams pier, I spy a very different type of vessel and one I'm more used to seeing tied up in the Buchan ports of the NE Scottish coast. This twin-rigger, belonging to the Stevens family, has only graced the port relatively recently, having been transformed at the renowned Macduff shipyards from the Scots vessel "Rebecca" to the new "Crystal Sea" (SS118) and steamed south to her new home in



Alan Dwan.

Newlyn, to fish the SW approaches for a premium mix of white fish, including, Lemon sole, John Dory, brill and haddock.

David Stevens (one of the skipper brothers) is aboard managing the turnaround prior to another trip and I clamber on deck, making my way to the wheelhouse for a fascinating and enlightening conversation with him and his father, David Snr, which instantly centres on Brexit and its implications for the fishing industry. We move on to discuss current fish stocks in the ICES Area VIIe (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea), where Crystal Sea carries out most of her fishing.

The Davids are clearly frustrated men. Driven by a desire to improve their industry, see fair play for fishermen and achieve scientific and consumer recognition of current fish stocks, I ask them to elaborate on what the predominant issue is with regards to their catch. Having spoken with David Jnr in the past, it comes as no surprise when I'm told that lack of scientific appreciation of real-time fish stocks, is the underlying concern and especially when coupled with the constraints of the hastily conceived Landing Obligation (LO).

As I listen to David recount in detail, the by now familiar tale of the vast numbers of haddock they encounter and the lack of quota to be able to land them, its depressingly clear that the the scientific advice is well out of step with real-time findings.

"About two years," he announces, "is the lag we have between the science applied to quota management and

the true reflection of fish stocks on the ground. For the past two years we have been involved in the Catch Quota Trials used electronic data monitoring, on board CCTV and real-time reporting to ensure an accurate picture of stock biomass is built up. We're seeing more haddock on these grounds than ever before and its not just offshore either. They're right here in Mounts Bay and other inshore waters too." A fact that wasn't lost on me in my article on St Mawes fisherman Peter Green earlier this year- Backs to the Wall

What this means of course for fishermen operating a mixed fishery, is that under the rules of the LO, the haddock potentially become "choke species" effectively preventing the fishing of other species though lack of quota to sustain the haddock volume, where they swim alongside the plethora of other commercial target fish. With our evidence though, we are now able to reverse the burden of proof and help to create a more reactive fishery. We're still catching more haddock than we have quota for and that's after having reduced our selectivity for juveniles down to 2%. Policy is the inhibitor here and until that's fully recognised, we will continue to experience these issues."

An all too-common theme amongst many fishermen I've encountered over the last couple of years and undoubtedly the driver behind their well-supported supported "Fishing for Leave" Brexit campaign.

My Under 10 metre mates at Dreckly Fish, were also keen to catch up during my stay and ensure that my visit was balanced with an update from the inshore sector. Having hand lined with them last year for pollack they once again saw to it that I didn't miss out and once again I soon found myself on the pontoon and boarding one of their vessels, this time at the invitation of their newest member, veteran Cadgwith beach fisherman Louis Mitchell, one of the stars of Monty Hall's 2012 documentary "The Fisherman's Apprentice" who having had many years of often challenging conditions launching and retrieving from the cove, now operates with comparative ease from the harbour.

As we steam through the gaps aboard Louis's boat "Victoria Anne" FH706 I find myself bound on another lobstering trip. On a heading across Mounts Bay towards Portleven, we pick up the first of the orange marker buffs and finding a decent specimen in the first pot we embark on a morning dedicated to discussing a very different form of fishing, whilst accumulating a worthwhile catch of Cornish beauties.

A former 2nd Coxswain of the Lizard lifeboat, Louis has probably forgotten more about fishing and seamanship than most will be able to recall. A mine of knowledge and experience he exudes an air of quiet authority on every aspect of his trade. I ask what probably seem to be the most inane of questions as we motor eastwards towards Poldhu cove and Mullion Island, but Louis keenly answers and whilst hauling rebating and shooting his single parlour pots, also points out to me aspects of the coast's geography and history as we fish right under the cliffs within hailing distance of tin mines and the elusive haunts of fishermen, smugglers and wreckers in Cornish yesteryear.

The fishing is not bountiful, but by the end of the morning we have a worthwhile haul and have returned many more, undersized fish, that Louis assures me will make the grade in twelve months time, have moulted or "shed" and accrued up to a further 40% bodyweight. As back at home in Suffolk, salted herring are the preferred bait and although lobsters destined for the fishmongers and restaurants countrywide are the main target, crabs (Brown & Spider) from the pots coupled with prime hand-lined pollack, cod, mackerel and bass assure the gold-plated Dreckly quality standard that, through the targeted use of social media, sees their produce sold before the boats have even entered the harbour.

At Mullion, just below its landmark cliff-top hotel, we haul the last pot. Louis's skilful handling of the extremely seaworthy Buccaneer, ensures that an untimely clash with the weed fringed granite is not an option. As the creel leaves the seabed, he goes astern and then manoeuvres Victoria Anne in to a position where he can rebait and reshoot the gear out of danger. A deft demonstration of his craft using local knowledge and experience to place the gear in specific areas and onto the right ground.

With a freshening breeze, we commence the two hour steam back to Newlyn. Autopilot engaged, Louis bands the claws of the rest of the catch and as we continue our conversation, the boat is washed down and prepared for the next outing. Back on the pontoon the morning's catch are duly decanted into the keep pot and another exciting and satisfying morning, emphatically rounds off my time, at this diverse and industrious port, the very symbol of the Cornish fishing industry.

Three important days then, spent once more in the company of experts, who have enlightened me further, to the intricacies of this unique and very often misunderstood industry.



Hauling close inshore.



Newlyn Market.



Louis Mitchell.



Laurence (Larry) Hartwell recording Newlyn's daily activities.