

Fishing the Wild West

Our fishing industry is floundering in the face of falling fish stocks. So how come Cornwall—with the rockiest coast, biggest waves and worst weather—is doing so well?

The Pride of Cornwall circles stealthily on the sea just off Penzance, Cornwall. Skipper Stefan Glinski, 41, is stalking the wall of red on the sonar screen in his tiny wheelhouse—a shoal of sardines one-and-a-half miles long. “Go!” he shouts. He rams the throttle to

BY JOHN DYSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM WOOLFITT



Fisherman Stefan Glinski on board the *Pride of Cornwall*; (left) a 720-foot ring net in Mount's Bay

"Full Ahead". Two crewmen throw out the drogue that drags the net into the sea. The boat makes a 250-yard circle and picks up the net-end.

Floodlights snap on, bringing scores of screaming gulls: they know what's coming. A rope threaded along the bottom of the net is hauled in, pursing it into the shape of a cup. Darting silver fish are carried away by the gulls.

The nets shrink to a bag stuffed with 20 tonnes of sardines. The boat can't carry them all so the crew let half go to catch another day. The rest are dropped into a tank of icy water. In a day's time they'll be in supermarkets.

Meanwhile, a small blue open boat called Cynthia weaves through the backwash of surf breaking over rocks under Gwennap Head, the last knob of land before Land's End. Now and then the wind-blown figure in yellow driving the boat stoops to haul in one of the three fishing lines. Andrew Pascoe, 38, shakes off a gleaming sea bass. He's been fishing since before dawn and won't stop until after sunset. On a good day he gets 100 fish.

While Britain's once-great fishing industry is dying on its feet, with fish stocks wiped out and fleets dwindling in ghost-town ports [see "A Message from the Deep", RD June], the fishermen of Cornwall are catching better fish, making more money and breaking into new markets. Says celebrity chef Rick Stein: "The supply of fresh fish



It was *this* big: Andrew Pascoe shows off his latest catch

'Cornish fish are acquiring a magic—fresh and caught by real people'

from Cornwall is getting better and better."

Top chefs are lining up to buy them for premium prices. Newlyn Fish Market now lands the most valuable catch in the country. "There's optimism here because we're bucking the trend," says Newlyn Fisheries project officer Tony Woodhams.

To achieve this, Cornish fishermen have gone back to basics. With smaller crews in smaller boats, catches are smaller but costs are lower and fish are bigger and better. Turning their backs on EU subsidies and regulations, the men are fighting to protect Cornish waters out to six miles. Cornwall even has its own high-speed fishery-protection vessel.

When the EU removed minimum size limits on most fish, Cornish fishermen reinstated them and made some

of them tougher. Sea bass must be at least 37.5cm long to be sold in the UK, for instance, but 38cm in Cornwall. The difference is small but allows another breeding season. Tougher rules are also imposed on lobsters and scallops.

In 2005 five Cornish skippers proposed a 3,600-square-mile no-fishing zone on one of the most important spawning grounds in Europe for cod, plaice and sole. The UK Government did not agree, so the fishermen persuaded French and Belgian fishermen to back them and approached the EU. Now the "Trevose Box" off Cornwall's north coast is Europe's most successful protection area. More special conservation areas are planned for 2012.

Fishing in Cornwall is greener too. No damage to stocks or the seabed. No by-catch, so few fish are thrown away. And the fishing boats use little fuel.

Sam Lambourn, who's invested about £400,000 in a new sardine boat, adds: "Cornish fish are acquiring a magic—fresh, sustainable, caught by real people rather than floating factories; and we don't kill fish nobody wants."

Much of this magic is in the marketing. Take the pilchard story: immense shoals of pilchard were netted from coves round the Cornish coast throughout the 19th century. Salted in barrels, they were hawked all over Catholic Europe but were overfished and ultimately vanished. For the UK, imported pilchards canned in tomato sauce were a cheap food associated with wartime and boarding schools.

In 1997, Newlyn fish merchant Nick



Howell was asked by Marks & Spencer to supply fresh pilchards from France. Instead, he sent sardines caught at the village of Mousehole in Cornwall. “These are terrific,” the buyer said. “Can you get more?”

“Yes, but they’re Cornish sardines,” Howell admitted. Pilchards and sardines are the same fish.

Labelled with picturesque images of Cornwall, the new product was a hit. Howell’s brainwave was to exploit a market created by holidaymakers raving about barbecued sardines they had eaten on holiday in Spain and Greece. Landings increased from two tonnes in 1997 to 2,000 tonnes last year. “Cornish sardines” is now a brand name protected by EU law.

The fisherman who pioneered the trade in sardines was Stefan Glinski. He had bought his first fishing boat at 17, paid for it in two years and worked up to a 56-foot gill-netter. But in 1997 he traded down to a smaller new boat, made his own ring net and went after sardines. He’d never seen it done and never tried it, but he caught two tonnes in his first week, rising to 650 tonnes last year.

Now a fleet of boats in Newlyn and Mevagissey is doing the same. Last winter they struck a bonanza. Hunting for sardines, they found a massive school of anchovy. Prices were sky-high at £2,500 a tonne and some landed up



Nick Howell and a tin of the Cornish sardines he markets



to 11 tonnes a night for several weeks. For some fishermen it was like winning the lottery. But fishing is a “magnificent uncertainty”—nobody is sure if the anchovy will come back again.

Hand-lining from a small open boat for sea bass, pollack and mackerel is the mainstay of many coves and villages. The nearest thing to a small-holding on the sea, hand-lining is often hit by bad weather—and economic storms.

In 1976 a small fleet of big fishing boats from the North Sea and Scottish ports swooped on Cornwall to attack a vast shoal of mackerel that appeared off the coast. Many got round quota restrictions by supplying up to 30 Russian factory ships stationed outside the 12-mile limit. Controls imposed by

‘I didn’t think there’d be any fish left today’

the Government came too late and by the early 1980s it was all over—the mackerel were gone and are only now coming back.

Next to hit was a boycott of sea bass. When dolphins washed up on West Country beaches in 2003, green organisations blamed trawlers fishing for sea bass and urged shoppers not to buy them. Though their fishing had no impact on dolphins, hand-liners lost their market overnight.

To distinguish their fish and show they were caught by hand, fishermen inserted tags in the gills of their fish. Customers can go to a website, enter the number on the tag and find out who caught the fish. Number 3, for instance, points to Andrew Pascoe. Prices have increased dramatically and so have the fish. “I’ve never seen so much bass,” Pascoe says.

Outside Cornwall, however, some of the practices continue to be horrific. In Barcelona for a conference, Cornish fisherman Dave Stevens visited the market and saw large heaps of Atlantic fish smaller than his finger. “It’s a bloody disgrace,” he rages. “Fishing can have no future as long as boats scoop up fish that small.”

But is there a future in Cornwall? The port used to be alive with small boys fishing and climbing over boats but now there are few. Two of them are Thomas, ten, and Archie, six, who set prawn pots from an old rowing boat and sell their catch to local shops. Their father is Andrew Pascoe.

“I never thought there would be fish in the sea when they grew up,” he says. “But now I think there will be as long as people buy more fish—Cornish fish.”

FACT OR FIB? FOUR OF THESE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE AND ONE IS A FIB—BUT WHICH ONE? ANSWER BELOW

A Monopoly was a popular game in Cuba until Castro destroyed all sets.

B The tallest man who ever lived was eight foot 11 inches.

C A swift will spend all its life in the air, only landing to build its nest.

D The River Amazon is nearly 2,000 miles in length.

E The pyramids were originally smooth and white.

FACT OR FIB BY DANIEL MITCHELL