



Watch house and Dodman

Now one of the quietest stretches of Cornwall's coast. Coaches cannot reach between Portloe and Portholland, and the policies of the Caerhays estate itself are instrumental in keeping it all relatively unspoilt.

This quietness is, however, perceived from the points of view of the land and the present. Seen from the sea, we appreciate that Caerhays is fairly centrally placed on Cornwall's busy south coast, and viewed from as recently as the early modern period, we find that this was a typically busy stretch in terms of fishing, coasting, smuggling and wrecking. We see hints of this in the remains of former infrastructures.



Watch house

provided with comfortable, if cramped, quarters, warmed by a fire. At times of war, particularly with France, the objects of attention would have been obvious, even if sightings of enemy vessels might have been rare.

At other times the watchers would have been concerned with the safety of those at work on the sea: those serving in the Royal and merchant navies, fishermen, and foreigners. Sadly, a number of ships and boats have been wrecked along this stretch of coast. Perhaps most dramatic were the events of 5th and 6th December 1830.

### WATCHING FOR DANGER

The arched window openings of the Watch House on the crest of the slope above Porthluney are not just fine frames for looking along today's coast. Their early nineteenth century Gothick form also takes us back to a time when it was sufficiently important to monitor this coast for there to have been a person on permanent watch,

Tretheake cartouche, 1776, showing barrels being unloaded from ship into boat. (Cornwall Record Office, Mount Edgcumbe Estate records, ME 2417/3, with kind permission)



A hurricane drove no less than three foreign ships onto the shore at East Portholland. Danish, Russian and French sailors, in mortal danger, stranded hundreds of yards from safety in wooden vessels that were being pulled apart by enormous seas, were rescued by the remarkable bravery of five young fishermen. 'Stripped to their drawers', they grabbed a boat washed off the Russian

of the lads who had risked their lives to save the terrified sailors, and they set to their task of stealing whatever they could lay their hands on. They were eventually dispersed when the revenue cruiser the *Adder* was called up, came to, and fired shots over them.

More recently, in 1961, the *Allegrity* hit the cliffs near Greeb Point and was then driven on to the rocky

## 'Stripped to their drawers', they grabbed a boat washed off the Russian ship

ship and used it to row out and get a line onto one of the three ships, enabling ten men from the Russian ship and seven from the French to reach solid land. The Danes also managed to get to safety. As so often the case, and not just in those distant days, 'country people', now known as wreckers, heard of the loot to be had, which included wine on the French schooner. On the following day they descended on Portholland, no doubt passing the homes

foreshore below the Watch House. It was scrapped here, material being brought ashore by wire rope.

### SMUGGLING

At certain times, especially in the later 18th and early 19th centuries, an eye would also have been kept open for those who would subvert the law and undermine the country's taxed economy: smugglers. Tradition has it that all elements of local society were involved in the

'trade'. Gates of the Caerhays estate were allegedly left open at appropriate times, although this may not have been needed if the tunnel that was supposed to run from Caerhays Castle down to Porthluney actually existed. A drawing on the cartouche of a late eighteenth century estate atlas of neighbouring

Tretheake manor actually shows men unloading barrels from a ship into a waiting boat in a bay not unlike those on this coast. Most of the little coves where such boats could be hurried ashore have zigzagging paths protected by banks: covered ways with shallow, widely spaced steps ideal for lugging heavy loads on moonlit nights. Catchhole to the west of Portholland is a good example.

Top: Coast path and Dodman

Bottom: Apples harvested from former cliff orchards



### FOOD FROM CLIFFS AND SHORE

Falling away from the farmland to the sea, the coastal fringe is now entirely neglected, largely overgrown with furry, bracken, thorny and brambly scrub and patches of woodland, dominated by sycamores and willows. It is now difficult to appreciate that until the turn of the 20th century, and even later, this land was part of the coastal farms' resource. Much of the cliff would have been useful rough grazing, divided into separate holdings by stock-proof boundaries which, though redundant and overgrown can still be seen. Some parts were even enclosed as part of a farm's fields and traces of former hedges survive, as on the cliff-tops above West Portholland. Others were orchards, again with enclosing hedges, and here there are a few survivals of apple trees. Varieties include Sweet Larks, Primrose, Mannington Permain, Adam's Permain and Costard, fruits used for dessert, jamming and pickling.