

# A Fish Sale on a

# Cornish Beach

STANHOPE A. FORBES.  
1855

KS2/3 Art and History Resource



Museum  
Gallery  
Archive

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# About this resource

This resource explores the painting 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' by Stanhope A. Forbes in the collections of The Box, Plymouth. As a resource for teachers, the document can be used to help teach elements of the art and design, history and science curriculum.

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## The Box

The Box is Plymouth's new multi-million pound museum, gallery and archive. With brand new exhibition spaces alongside state-of-the-art facilities for research and learning, it's the perfect place to teach, inspire and engage students of all ages.

**“Boats are bringing in as many as 12,000 mackerel and the great difficulty is to find means of packing these large quantities. The salesman's bell is heard each minute, and the beach is always crowded with buyers.”**

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## Who was Stanhope Forbes?

Stanhope Forbes was an artist, born in Dublin in 1857. He began his art studies in London at the Lambeth School of Art, followed by a period at the Royal Academy Schools. In 1880 he travelled to Paris to work in the studio of Léon Bonnat, a celebrated Spanish portrait painter and mentor to artists such as George Braque and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

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Forbes' painting became increasingly French in its appearance, at a time when French painting was at its most 'avant-garde', or boundary pushing. An important aspect of this was 'plein-air', or out of doors, painting.

The impressionist painters such as Pierre Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet became more interested in painting scenes from nature, rather than the portraits and historic subjects painted by their contemporaries. The only way they felt they could capture the ever-changing effects of light on the landscape was to create their paintings outside. These painters used short brushstrokes to convey an overall effect on the surface of their canvas.

Forbes' interest in plein-air painting began with Jules Bastien Lepage, a more traditional painter who was quite influential at the time. Bastien Lepage painted sentimental views of French peasants and idyllic views of the landscape. Despite never meeting Bastien Lepage, Forbes felt his influence strongly, calling him "the greatest artist of our age".

Forbes travelled to work in the villages of Brittany, such as Pont Aven, Cancale and Quimperlé, where many artists had already settled. These 'artists colonies' were situated in areas of picturesque beauty, and were busy with working artists capturing this on canvas. He met many artists in France that were to later settle around the Cornish fishing village of Newlyn, where Forbes was to settle himself in 1884. It was in Newlyn that Forbes painted his plein-air masterpiece - 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' in 1885.



Stanhope Forbes at his easel painting 'Off to the Fishing Grounds', circa 1886. Newlyn Artists Photograph Album, 1880s, Penlee House Gallery & Museum & Cornwall Studies Centre, Redruth

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## Background to the 'Fish Sale'

Forbes had begun to develop ideas for this painting in February 1884, immediately after his arrival in Newlyn. He had recently had success at the Royal Academy with paintings from his French travels, such as another noted masterpiece 'A Street in Brittany'.

This fuelled his confidence as a painter, and he began to work on a 9 x 5 1/2 foot canvas (around 275 x 165 cm), at this point called 'The Arrival of the Boats with the Fish and the People Crowding Round on the Wet Sands'.

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His enthusiasm for his chosen subject clearly comes across when writing to his mother in 1884:

**“Anything more beautiful than this beach at low water I never saw and if I can only paint figures against such a background as this shining mirror-like shore makes, the result should be effective.”**

Forbes furiously worked on extensive sketches for the painting, many using oil paints on canvas. In these small oil paintings, aspects that would later appear were quickly worked out, changed, or modified. Sometimes the ideas in these sketches were left out of the finished painting altogether. This large canvas eventually got the better of Forbes. He found it difficult to work outside in the elements on such a large canvas, and he abandoned it for a smaller 5 x 4 foot canvas (around 150 x 120 cm). This was started in June 1884. A canvas this size would have still been a difficult prospect to work on exposed as he was on the beach.

Forbes worked on this smaller canvas for just under a year, finally finishing 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' in the spring of 1885.

At the 1885 Royal Academy exhibition the British public first saw 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach'. The exhibition drew submissions from artists across the country who hoped their paintings would be chosen during the rigorous judging process. To be selected for the Royal Academy meant instant acclaim for artists, and a rise in the value of their work.

The painting proved to be a major success, and was praised by many critics. It highlighted the quality of the art being produced in Newlyn at the time. The Newlyn artists were at the cutting edge of painting in Britain, taking influences from French art and combining them with a very British sense of realism and romanticism.

It is said that so many artists were sending their paintings from Newlyn to the Royal Academy in the 1880s, that an extra carriage had to be added to the Flying Dutchman by the Great Western Railway Company.





# Explore 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach'

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## Explore

### 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' Mounts Bay lugger

At the 1883 International Fisheries Exhibition in London, the Committee considered the Mounts Bay fleet to be the finest in the world.

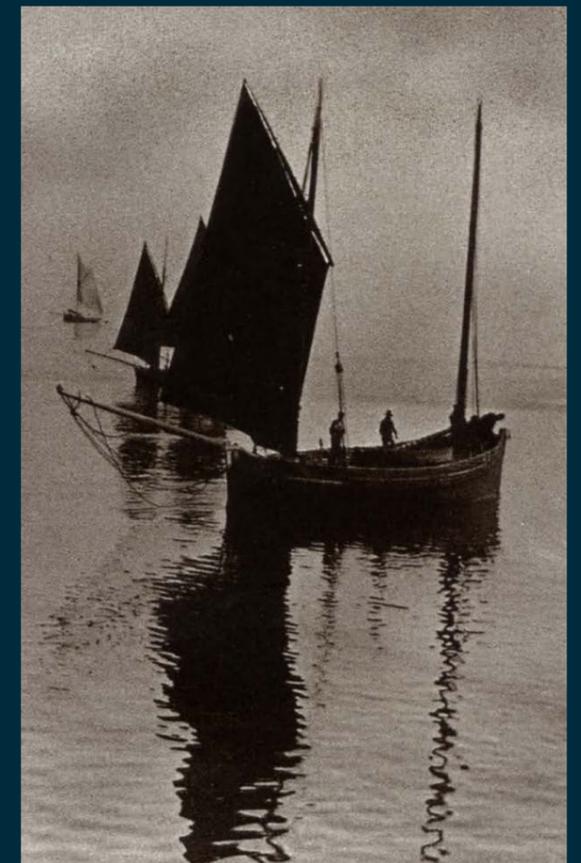
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**"The brown-sailed luggers would in those days lie at their moorings out in the bay."** The distinctive red/brown colour of lugger sails was due to the tanning process, where sails had to be soaked in preservative solutions before they could be used. This was usually something called 'cutch', made from soaking pieces of tree bark in water for many hours.

When owners came to 'repaint' their boats they used tar, which provided a waterproof barrier to the hulls. This job would involve one person melting the last coat of tar with a pitchfork and a bundle of burning tar-soaked rags or nets. Another person would follow with a fresh coat of tar which sealed any cracks and killed off any marine life that was still attached to the hull.

You can see the Newlyn fleet in the top corner of the painting (see page 8 and 9).

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## Explore 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' Fishing

The fishermen of Newlyn were very hard working. The mackerel season lasted from January until July. The summer herring fishing started around July until September, often sailing as far north as the Shetlands to secure a catch. After September the fishing was for pilchard. When the pilchard season was over, herring or mackerel nets were put on board and they fished from Plymouth.

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Back in Newlyn the women would have been busy repairing nets, replacing worn out baskets and patching up clothing and boots. When the men returned the boats would need to be scrubbed down ready for repairing or repainting.

**“Never has there been such fishing known, and were it not that fish are so cheap the people would be rolling in money.”**



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## Explore 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' Fishermen

A typical outfit for a fisherman in Newlyn would include a sou'wester hat, an oilskin smock, oilskin cotton trousers and knee-length heavy leather boots. Smocks were made weatherproof by rubbing linseed oil onto the cotton and allowing it to dry - literally adding a skin of oil. Staying weatherproof was essential.

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**“Of almost equal importance, too, is the costume worn...on the whole fishermen in their working dress, clad in jerseys... and wearing their great sea-going boots.”**

The fishermen of Newlyn were known by their nicknames, as many shared the same surname and were often given the same forenames too. Swell, Curly, Lash Up, Envelopes, Cabbage, Pilchards and Duckie are all recorded Newlyn nicknames for the time.

The decline of Newlyn's pilchard processing industry over the last few years has led to the closure of the historic Pilchard Works. This factory cured pilchards for around 100 years, and exported its produce to a single family in Genoa, Italy. Italian tastes have changed over the years, leading to smaller and smaller orders for pilchards.

Recently, the pilchard was given a make-over, re-named 'the Cornish Sardine' and sold fresh as opposed to salted and cured. This fresh product has been a success with the public. This upturn in the pilchard's fortunes has meant a change in the fishing fleet has been necessary. Boats now carry equipment for locating the fish, and have better suited nets such as the Breton-style ring, which force the fish into drawstring-like nets.



## Explore 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' Fisherwomen

Working clothes changed very little in Cornwall during the 1800s. Despite improvements to communications and transport, changes in fashion were slow to reach the area, meaning traditional clothes were still worn well into the 1900s.

All of Forbes' women in the painting are wearing aprons. Locally known as 'towsers', they were made from heavyweight cotton, canvas or hessian sacking. They were usually worn for dirtier jobs.

Most of the women are also wearing shawls. These were made from wool, and would have been tied around the neck with a pin to hold them in place, or worn over the shoulders.

**"The women...have a charming instinct of dress...I must confess to admiring the neat blouses and cotton aprons of everyday wear..."**

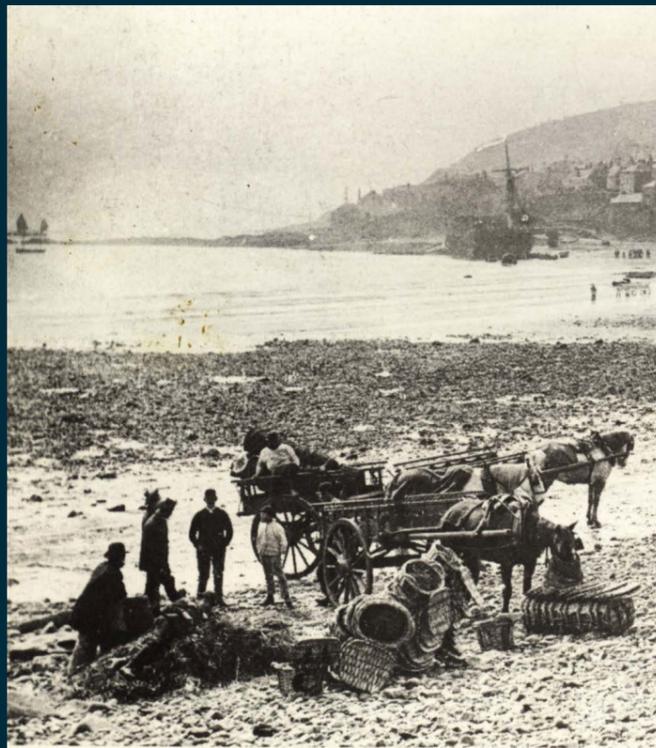


## Explore 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' Beach auction

Beach auctions such as the one pictured below were a common sight in Newlyn during the 1880s. Before the new harbour walls and covered fish market were built, the catch was landed on the beach near to the old harbour, under the Red Lion pub.

The men brought the fish ashore using rowing boats, or donkey carts if the tide was far enough out. The auctioneer, or 'jowster', would then sell their catch to the highest bidder.

**"...that old crab-pot, those fishing nets, and other gear are in reality valuable properties..."**

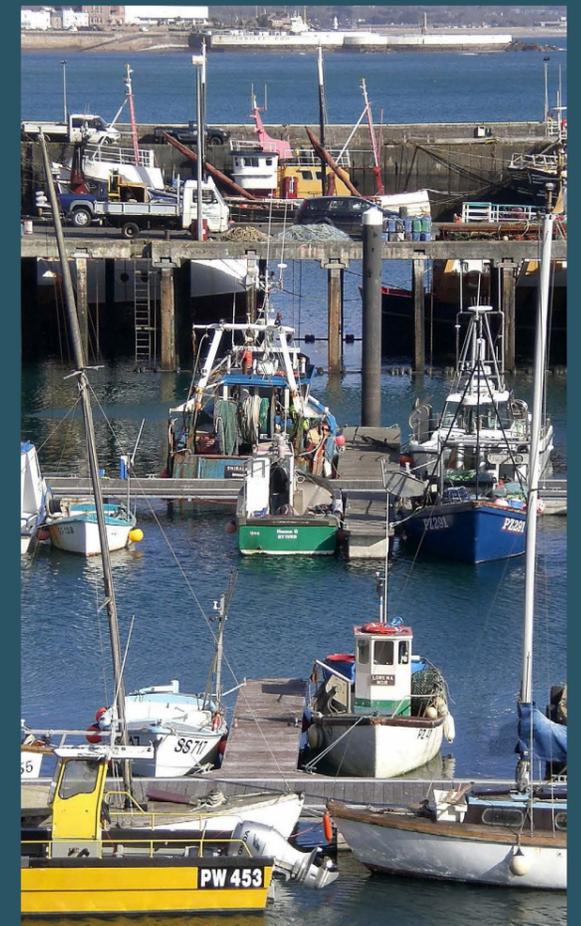


## Then and now

When Stanhope Forbes was painting 'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach', he probably stood on a beach near to the ancient 'Old Quay', a medieval harbour wall. In 1885 the new 'South Pier' was built at a cost of £20,000. This new pier was 700 feet (around 213m) long. It also served as a platform for a new lighthouse. In 1888 the 'North Pier' was added for £12,000 and extended in 1893 for a further £8,000.

There are obvious differences to the view shown by Forbes with the view of today. The building of the pier's in the late 1800s meant that the Newlyn fleet could finally anchor safely closer to shore.

In the painting the fleet is shown at anchor in Gwavas Lake, a deep water pool. Another obvious difference is the lack of sand. When building the two harbour walls much of this sand would have been dredged.





## Fishy facts

- There are three main types of fish:

### **Jawless fish**

like hagfish and lampreys

### **Cartilage fish**

like sharks and rays

### **Bony fish**

like haddock and pilchard

- All fish are cold blooded.
- Fish were well established long before dinosaurs roamed the Earth. They have been around for about 500 million years.
- There are around 25,000 known species of fish alive today.
- There are more species of fish than all the species of amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals combined.
- Plymouth currently has the fastest growing fishing fleet in England. In 2015, Plymouth landed more fish than any other port in England - 13,378 tonnes of fish and shellfish worth £15.461 million. Brixham was second in terms of weight - 12,373 tonnes, but the value was much higher - £23.444 million.

- According to [www.seafish.org](http://www.seafish.org) the overall UK seafood market, including restaurants, fish and chip shops etc. was worth £8.67 billion in 2019, and is steadily growing.

Seafood can be divided into three separate categories:

### **Demersal**

Whitefish including cod, haddock, plaice, pollack, dover sole, turbot, halibut, dogfish, skates, rays, John Dory, bass and ling.

### **Pelagic**

Oil-rich fish including herring, mackerel, pilchard, sprat, horse mackerel, whitebait and tuna.

### **Shellfish**

Molluscs including scallops, oysters, cockles, mussels and winkles. Crustacea including nephrops (scampi and langoustines), crabs, lobsters, crawfish and shrimps. Cephalopods including octopus, squid and cuttlefish.





# Ideas for activities

## Art and design

Ask your pupils to evaluate and analyse the painting to explore if it could have been painted in the artist's studio or on the beach.

Ask the pupils to find comparable paintings by the other Newlyn School artists of the period. How have these artists tackled similar subjects? Imagine Forbes is working as an artist today. How might he approach the subject in a different way? Could your pupils reimagine the painting today?

## Music

Using instruments, voices and sound recording software, soundtrack the environment that surrounds the painting, thinking in particular about the sound of the waves, wind and groups of people. This could be performed in an assembly or school performance. If you don't have a digital audio workstation on your school computers, why not try Soundtrap, a free online music studio?

Head to [www.soundtrap.com](http://www.soundtrap.com)

## History

Ask your pupils to investigate how changes in transportation following the industrial revolution affected the way of life of the Newlyn fishing community.

Whats effects did this have on the community?  
Were there changes to clothing or working methods?

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