

Bude Harbour and Canal – The Early Days

In 2017 the Heritage Centre asked BHCS to undertake another exhibition in the Willoughby Gallery for the next year during 2018.

After consideration the BCHS agreed to develop a new exhibition for 2019 which would coincide with the bi-centenary of the commencement of construction of the Bude Canal in 1819.

The theme being as above to tell the importance of the area we now know as Summerleaze where the River Neet enters the sea and is the point where early trading occurred for the benefit of the ancient 'mother town', Stratton.

There is a wide range of material available covering trading and the development of this coastal area from the 1500s to the building of the canal in 1819 written by many people and published between 1609 and the 1990s, as well as documents held in Bude-Stratton Town Council's Archive Centre. It is difficult to access all of these facts so it occurred to BCHS that a careful selection of these documents, stories and pictures from this wide source displayed together in one place would be quite beneficial to locals and visitors alike. Some of the text is verbatim whilst others are precise extracts written to cover the main points. Where known, credit is given to the source or author.

In the planning of this exhibition some interesting facts and quirky stories came to light and are included as 'tangents' to the main purpose and story of this exhibition.

The BCHS Trustees hope you will find this exhibition enjoyable, interesting and informative.

So, where to begin? As mentioned in the Introduction, the coastal area, later to be known as Bude, offered the best access to the sea and limited trading for the ancient 'mother town' of Stratton.



As the saying goes: Stratton was a town when Bude was a 'furzy down' and thus, very little development had taken place on this coastal area. The picture above of modern-day Bude Bay, looking inland, shows many recognizable landmarks.

Try to imagine what the view would have been like if this photograph had been taken in the mid-1500s. The most striking impression would be the lack of habitation and other buildings, probably 98% of what is shown **did not exist** and the actual topography at that time was physically different. This coastal area was skirted by large rock formations and vast sand dunes.

The River Neet took a much straighter direct route to the sea, cutting across the beach, being much closer to the Summerleaze cliffs. As you can imagine there are no maps giving accurate details of this area although there are verbal accounts which help to give descriptions in general.



One of the earliest was by Richard Carew in his Survey of Cornwall, circa 1602, which is quoted as follows: "Returning to the Westwards we meet with Bude, an open sandy bay, in whose mouth riseth a little hill, by every sea flood made an island, and thereon a decayed chapel, it spareth road only to such small shipping as to bring their tide with them, and leave them dry when the ebb hath carried away the salt water."

By the 1500s some development had started by the main landowners. The River Neet divided two such land holdings. To the north, land owned by the Grenvilles of Stow, near Kilkhampton and to the south by the Arundel's of Ebbingford and Trerice. Both families of immense standing.

The Grenvilles established a quay – Grenville Quay (below the now Nanny Moores Bridge) and in 1535 appointed Simon Symmons as 'Master of the Port of Bude'. He lived in Quay House which had been built in 1485 by Sir Thomas Grenville. This was built in a position further up the river, almost opposite Nanny Moores Bridge.

The Grenvilles were exporting large amounts of oak bark from their woodlands to Ireland for use in the tanning of leather – oak bark has high levels of tannic acid which softens the hides of cattle.

In 1577 the Stratton Town and Church Lands Charity – now the Blanchminster Trust - made a contribution to the maintenance of this quay confirming the use for

important trading activities such as the imports of coals and salt from Wales and Bristol.

In 1589 Anne and John Arundel built a tide mill with a bridge and causeway to assist in crossing the River Neet. Again this relates to the Nanny Moores Bridge and indicates a possibly healthy relationship between the two families of landowners.

There is some debate that the bridge was a later addition, possibly in the early 1700s and was later rebuilt to a more substantial design.

It is not known where the exact location of the tide mill was but most probably was in the area of the still standing 'Leven Cottages'. The tide mill would have had a mill pond which the incoming tide filled and before the tide ebbed a gate would have been closed to force the water to be released via the tide mill, therefore driving the mill's waterwheel and machinery.

This tide mill is mentioned by Carew in his Survey of Cornwall 1602. "Amongst other commodities offered by the sea, the inhabitants make use of diverse creeks for grist mills thwarting a bank from side to side, in which a flood gate is placed with the two leaves, these the flowing tide openeth, and after full sea, the weight of the ebb closeth fast, which no other force can do, and so the imprisoned water payeth the ransom of driving an under shot wheel for his enlargement."

"Upon one side here Master Arundel of Trerice possesseth a pleasant seated house and domain called Efford, alias Ebbingford, and that not improperly, because every low water there affordeth passage to the other shore, but now it may take a new name for his better plight, for this gentleman hath to his great charges, builded a salt water mill athwart this bay whose causeway serveth as a very convenient bridge to save the wayfarers former trouble, let and danger."

With reference to the meaning of 'bridge' I believe the meaning of this in context with what had been built is a safe passage to 'bridge the river section' rather than a 'bridge' over the river. When the tide was in flood the area was not passable, but at low tide the causeway allowed foot passage on a safe footing. You used to be able to see in the river bed below Nanny Moores Bridge a large stone paved area for about half the width of the river but centrally placed which could have been the 'causeway' crossing the river from Arundel land to Grenville land as a 'bridge' from one side to the other. Just a thought.



The Arundel coat of arms



The Grenville coat of arms

During the Civil War period there was very little trade - the Grenville's and Arundel's were Royalists.

By the early 1700s trading had started to improve although access to the Grenville Quay had started to decline due to silting up of the River Neet. A 1791 directory reports that considerable trade is coined on exporting oats to the Kingdom and still large quantities of oak bark to Ireland. Imports continued to be of coal and salt but also notably, in the 1760s Capt. Robert Moyse was trading between Bude and Bristol importing chinaware and provisions which became known as 'Bristol Goods'.

The increase in trade was such that in 1792 a request was made to the Commissioners of Customs for a Port Office at Bude.