



Charlestown Harbour

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<https://www.staustell.co.uk/discover/charlestown/>

Charlestown Harbour is located on the south Cornish coast, within the civil parish of St Austell. Aside from the National Historic Fleet vessels *Lady Daphne* and *Olga*, the harbour contains a number of historic vessels listed on the National Register of Historic Vessels, as well as various maritime skills providers and seafood retailers working on the harbourside.

The harbour is not currently undergoing any significant regeneration projects, although there has been much effort to revive its function as a regional and national tourist attraction following the COVID lockdowns, particularly in the organising of food events and sailing regattas in Summer 2022. The Charlestown Heritage Society is engaged in the conservation of 'forgotten' local heritage assets, including the World War II-era Crinnis Cliff Gun Battery, with plans to reinstate a flagpole and replica canon on the site in 2023. There is an exceptionally high degree of civic and heritage involvement and it is likely that future developments will be sympathetic to the town's historic character. Climate change is a primary threat to the historic harbour, with both the increasing risk of rising sea levels and coastal erosion. There is also concern for the potential loss of Charlestown's historic integrity if it is removed from single private ownership, as well as the threat of over-commercialisation as a popular tourist attraction.



Brief history of Charlestown Harbour

Charlestown Harbour is located on the south Cornish coast, within the civil parish of St Austell but currently owned and operated by Square Sail. The harbour today is primarily used by local fisherman and leisure sailing craft with the transportation of china clay transferring from Charlestown to Par or the deep-water port at Fowey, with the final commercial vessel leaving Charlestown in 2000. Originally the small fishing village of West Polmear, the port was constructed between 1790 and 1801 by Charles Rashleigh, on plans prepared by notable civil engineer John Smeaton. The construction of the outer breakwater in 1790 was followed by the excavation of an inner basin in 1792, and an eastern breakwater in 1793, being largely complete by 1799 when the settlement was renamed 'Charles' Town'. The port was primarily engaged in the export of local copper ore to the smelters in South Wales in exchange for coal, and china clay to the Midlands potteries for timber and limestone. As the oldest china clay port in the world, and the last working Georgian-era harbour in Britain, it expanded rapidly in the early- to mid- 19th century when local copper mines reached their height of production, necessitating the expansion of the inner dock in 1873. When the regional copper mining industry collapsed and local pilchard shoals disappeared in the 1870s, Charlestown relied on the continually growing demand for china clay, especially with the silting up of the neighbouring Pentewan harbour.

As is the case with the majority of settlements on the south coast, Charlestown saw the institution of manned defences during the French Revolutionary (1793-1802), Napoleonic (1803-14) and Second (1939-45) World Wars. The Crinnis Cliff Gun Battery was built on Crinnis Head to the west of the harbour mouth in 1793, manned until 1860 by an artillery company composed of estate volunteers, subsequently incorporated into the 1st Cornwall (Duke of Cornwall's) Artillery Volunteers, and remained in use until 1898. As the first bombs dropped in Cornwall during World War II fell on Charleston in 1940, the battery returned to active use alongside two newly constructed pill-boxes, of which there are no physical remains. A number of buildings were requisitioned, including Rashleigh's former home *Duporth* - which was used by Indian Army Services Corps and later American troops - and The Grove, which housed evacuee children. As vessels grew in size across the later 20th century, Charlestown harbour became increasingly unsuitable for its commercial function, with the last shipments of china clay leaving the harbour in 2000 and commercial fishing ceasing in 2012. Purchased by Square Sail in 1994 as a base for their sailing ships, it has been developed as a tourist destination with two public houses owned by St Austell Brewery, several eating establishments and the Shipwreck Treasure Museum. It has also been marketed as a filming location, most prominently for BBC's *Poldark*, as well as *Doctor Who* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.¹

Associations and interested parties

Governmental and sub-governmental: Charlestown Harbour, partly by virtue of its situation amongst a number of other historic harbours along the southwest coast path, has several parties and initiatives interested in the protection of its heritage settings from degradation, over-development and coastal erosion. Natural England has advised the creation of the Falmouth Bay to St Austell Special Protection Area (2016), incorporating the entirety of Charlestown harbour and its surrounding coastline, intended to protect rare wintering seabird populations by restricting activities disturbing wildlife, including motor-boating, drone use and larger boats.² Charlestown also forms part of the UNESCO Cornwall and West Devon Mining World Heritage Site (2006) inscribed for 'Outstanding Universal Value' on account of the survival of "highly distinctive cultural landscapes" evidencing the area's contribution to British industrialisation during the period 1700-1914.³ The village and harbour are also located on the Southwest Coast Path. Cornwall County Council have themselves designated the Charlestown Conservation Area (1967), which includes both village and harbour

¹ Charlestown Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan' (2020), 9-19.; <https://charlestownhistorygroup.com/charlestown-history/> (Accessed 29/07/22)

² Natural England, 'Falmouth Bay to St Austell SPA Factsheet' (2016).

³ Cornwall County Council et al, 'Charlestown Harbour Conservation Area Appraisal' (2013), 9.



area, bounded by fields and woodland to the east and west.⁴ Under its directions, additional planning controls are implemented on the grounds that:

“Change is not inevitable in most conservation areas, and it is not the intention of the designation to prevent the continued evolution of places... [rather] to manage change in a way that maintains, reinforces and enhances the special qualities of the area.”⁵

St Austell Bay Parish Strategic Group have published the ‘St Austell Bay Parish Neighbourhood Plan: 2019-30’ (2021) to guide development in relevant villages and hamlets alongside Cornwall Council’s Cornwall Local Plan (CLP) and National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).⁶ Those listed “key sustainability interests” include “climactic factors”, “landscape”, “maritime” and “historic environment”.⁷ Particular reference is made to the Charlestown harbour area as an historic environment, with stated objectives that:

“(1) Any development affecting Charlestown Harbour and its setting will be required to conserve, and where possible, enhance the heritage, conservation and amenity value of the area

(3) Promotion of educational activities and schemes will provide additional interpretation of the historical significance of the World Heritage Site

(5) A development proposal will only be supported if it is of a size, mass, and is constructed of materials appropriate to its setting and maintains the authentic character of the historic port.”⁸

Local interest groups: Much community-centred action in Charlestown is organised by the privately owned Charlestown Harbour authorities, having a wide remit including the maintenance and provision of docks and services for both visiting vessels and tourists, offering sailing days on its resident historic vessels including the *Anny* and *Mascotte*, and the organisation of the harbour as a film setting, provisor of maritime props for hire, traditional maritime rigging and advisory services. The harbour authorities are also involved in the regular calendar of events, particularly during the tourist season, including a regatta, food festival and cinema nights.⁹ It has a significant social media presence, with both Instagram and Facebook pages. The Charlestown Heritage Society, only formed in 2020, also has both Instagram and Facebook presence, a membership scheme and a quarterly historical journal. The organisation’s website has a considerable volume of historical information and photographs, as well as a brief inventory of archived materials available upon request.¹⁰ The heritage group organised a ‘Batter Recharge’ in summer 2021, working to clear vegetation from and restore the World War II-era Crinnis Cliff Gun Battery, with plans to reinstate a flagpole and replica canon in 2023.¹¹

Maritime infrastructure and businesses: Charlestown Harbour has a base of maritime skills and service providers which could both provide for visiting historic vessels, and also see further development themselves as harbour specialist skills. Square Yard Shipyard Ltd offers safe harbour, mooring and management for traditional vessels, as well as training in traditional sailing skills, galley and engineering proficiency and traditional deck skills. It also has a number of local retailers, food suppliers and restaurants working in the harbour area, all of which are involved in events including food Festivals, regattas and cinema nights. In March 2013, the ‘Charlestown Harbour Conservation Area Appraisal’ (CAA), drafted on behalf of Cornwall Council emphasised that:

⁴ ‘Conservation Area Appraisal’ (2013), 6.

⁵ ‘Conservation Area Appraisal’ (2013), 4.

⁶ St Austell Parish Strategic Group, ‘St Austell Bay Neighbourhood Plan: 2019-30’ (2021).

⁷ ‘Neighbourhood Plan’, 9.

⁸ ‘Neighbourhood Plan’, 66.

⁹ <https://charlestownharbour.com/events/> (Accessed 29/07/22)

¹⁰ <https://charlestownhistorygroup.com> (Accessed 29/07/22)

¹¹ ‘CHG Spring 2022 Update’ <https://charlestownhistorygroup.com/news/> (Accessed 29/07/22)



“The variety of historic and current uses and activities contribute greatly to the character of Charlestown... [and] the harbour remains the focus of the settlement”¹²

The report also underlined Charlestown’s associations with historic Cornish industries, including “...fishing, mining, farming, engineering and china clay...are all represented in this small village”.¹³ Evidently there is significance interest in invigorating Charlestown’s harbourside skills and trades as well as preserving its historical assets.

Condition of heritage assets

Existing protections: Charlestown village and harbour has 54 listed buildings, including 2 Grade II* and 52 Grade II listed buildings. Many of these sites are concentrated on the harbourside and include numerous examples of Georgian civil engineering and functional buildings relating to Cornish china clay and maritime industries. The entire harbour is Grade II* listed, incorporating both inner dock and quays, and outer basin and piers as well as the eastern wall and breakwater. There are a number of historic sailing vessels at Charlestown, some of which are on the National Historic Ships Registers located in Charlestown, including the *Lady Daphne*, *Mascotte* and *Olga*, all National Historic Fleet vessels.

Registered Historic Vessels currently at Charlestown Harbour:¹⁴

Registered vessel	Details
<i>Amelia</i> (registered) https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2207/amelia	36ft lifeboat built in 1964 by J.S. White of Cowes, Isle of Wight. Served as relief (1964-78), later at Scarborough from 1978. Launched 101 times and saved 19 lives. Sold out of service in 1992, and currently on display at Shipwreck and Heritage Centre, Charlestown.
<i>Anny of Charlestown</i> (Not registered on NRHV)	Flagship topsail schooner built in Denmark in 1930, and brought to Charlestown in 2019).
<i>Kajsamoor</i> ¹⁵ (Not registered on NRHV)	Topsail schooner originally registered in Tallin, Norway in 1939. Requisitioned as naval training vessel by German Navy during Second World War. Later employed as cargo ship, and transferred to Charlestown in 2017.

¹² ‘Conservation Area Appraisal’ (2013), 47.

¹³ ‘Conservation Area Appraisal’ (2013), 53.

¹⁴ https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/the-registers/find-a-vessel?search_api_fulltext=Charlestown (Accessed 28/07/22)

¹⁵ <https://charlestownharbour.com/kajsamoor-two-masted-ketch-sailing-vessel/> (Accessed 28/07/22)



<p><i>Ryder</i> (registered)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1500/ryder</p>	<p>34ft lifeboat built in 1902 by Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company of Blackwall. In service at Looe Lifeboat Station until 1930, having been launched 12 times and saved 37 lives.</p> <p>Displayed by Polperro Heritage Museum, later by Charlestown Harbour.</p>
<p><i>Lady Daphne</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/210/lady-daphne</p>	<p>90ft Sprintsail barge built in 1923 by Short Brothers of Rochester.</p> <p>Employed as coasting barge transporting cargo such as china clay and Portland stone between east and south coast until transferred to the east coast in 1947.</p> <p>Converted for use as promotional and charter barge at Maldon in 1975 until transference to Charlestown in 2022 for static event hire and ongoing restoration.</p>
<p><i>Mascotte</i> (registered)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/689/mascotte</p>	<p>60ft pilot cutter built in 1904 by Thomas Cox and Son of Newport, Monmouthshire.</p> <p>Had ten owners between 1937 and 1957, finally laid up on the Hamble during the Second World War.</p> <p>Refitted and restored in 1993, currently in the process of being established as new sail training charity 'Rich's Boat'.</p>
<p><i>I.R.I.S.</i> (registered)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2340/iris</p>	<p>44ft Looe Lugger built in 1921 by Dick Pearce of Looe.</p> <p>Relaunched in 2011 having completed a 12 year rebuild.</p>
<p><i>Pen Glas</i> (Not registered on NRHV)</p>	<p>Fishing trawler undergoing conservation back to original sailing rig.</p>
<p><i>Irene</i> (registered)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/469/irene</p>	<p>85ft Trading Ketch built in 1907 by J.F. Carver of Bridgwater.</p> <p>Employed in transporting cargo in the Bristol Channel, occasionally to London, Ireland and Rotterdam.</p> <p>Converted into yacht in 1961, later based in the Caribbean on charters.</p> <p>Returned to Cornwall in 2007.</p>
<p><i>Olga</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/615/olga</p>	<p>55ft Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter built in 1909 by J. Bowden of Porthleven.</p> <p>Purchased and restored by Swansea City Council for display at the Swansea Maritime Museum and berthed in Charlestown over winter.</p>



Successful restorations: Charlestown harbour possesses a significant volume of effectively conserved heritage assets, and provisions for the restoration of others. The Methodist Church listed on HE's Heritage at Risk register is recorded with *"Repair scheme in progress...or functionally redundant buildings with new use agreed but not yet implemented"* as of 2021. This record correlates with local press reports citing *"several attempts"* to attain planning permission for restoration, with reports in 2017 of plans to convert it for retail, offices and industrial usage, although no press reports can be found for it since that date.¹⁶ The Shipwreck Treasure Museum, including exhibits on both national maritime and local and regional histories, is housed in a restored former china clay complex. The CAA (2020) reaffirmed Charlestown's *"great historic and cultural significance"* as:

*"...one of the finest examples of a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century industrial harbour in Britain and the best-preserved china clay and copper ore port of its period in the world...[with] a quite exceptional survival of late eighteenth- and nineteenth- century domestic and industrial architecture and infrastructure."*¹⁷

Under threat or unknown: Charlestown Methodist Church is currently listed on HE's Heritage at Risk register, as are Charlestown piers and quays, including inner basin, which are described as being in *"poor"* condition undergoing *"slow decay"* with no solution agreed. Cornwall Council's CAA (2013) also drew attention to the declining condition of harbourside infrastructure and *"significant structures currently in a derelict and deteriorating condition"* where the condition of buildings in the village itself is *"generally good"*¹⁸:

*"The condition of the harbour, ephemera and lockgates is an ongoing issue, the structural condition of the harbour itself and particularly in the outer basin is of concern...To date a reactionary approach to harbour repairs has been undertaken, the asset would benefit from a conservation management plan..."*¹⁹

Charlestown's close and extensive historical associations with early Cornish industry, and the generally high potential for submerged and buried paleo-landscapes along the inter-tidal coastline makes the existence of submerged marine archaeological assets of significance highly likely. For instance, a Bronze Age cemetery has been identified in Gwallon Downs, just north of Charlestown village, once consisting of over 20 barrows.²⁰ Cornwall Council's CAA (2013) specifically considered Charlestown's archaeological potential including:

- *Evidence relating to mining and the china clay industries and processing...*
- *"Remains relating to the harbour, maritime trade, associated industries and activities including earlier phases of the harbour, the leat system and reservoirs, evidence of fish cellars, boatyard, the rope walk, ore floors, china clay floors, coal yards and timber stores"*
- *There is potential for evidence of further prehistoric activity*
- *Intertidal Archaeology – Generically around the Cornish coast there is potential for submerged and buried paleo-landscapes...We have little current evidence for how this background potential may have been modified at Charlestown, however its further assessment and evaluation should form a part of any inshore development proposals"*²¹

The 'Cornish Ports and Harbours' report issued by Cornwall Archaeological Unit on behalf of Cornwall Council and HE also drew attention to threat posed to the harbourside historic environment by climate change, particularly on the south-west coast, both submerged and terrestrial. Recent periods of extreme weather

¹⁶ <https://www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/historic-chapel-poldark-port-charlestown-1642888>

¹⁷ 'Conservation Area Character Appraisal' (2020), 1.

¹⁸ 'Conservation Area Appraisal' (2013), 50-51.

¹⁹ 'Conservation Area Appraisal' (2013), 49.

²⁰ 'Conservation Area Appraisal' (2020), 9.

²¹ 'Conservation Area Appraisal' (2013), 19.



resulted in the collapse of Charlestown harbour wall (February 2021)²² and a cliff-top landslide above the harbour (November 2019)²³, as the ‘Cornish Ports and Harbours’ report cautioned in 2017 that:

“Climate change events are already making an impact on Cornwall and Scilly’s ports and harbours and...it is likely that the pressures arising from climate change are likely to increase in the future and Charlestown harbour will be vulnerable to the effects of these.”²⁴

Threats and opportunities:

The ‘Cornish Ports and Harbours’ report considered developmental pressures to be a main issue potentially affecting Charlestown and its distinct historic character, primarily because:

“Charlestown retained its historic integrity as a result of being within single ownership for so long a period...In 2012 the harbour was offered for sale (although this did not go through); the sale of the harbour might create adverse pressures on Charlestown. Many of the historic industrial buildings are now converted to residential or commercial use”²⁵

This concern for the potential loss of Charlestown’s single private ownership and historic integrity is expressed in both Conservation Area Proposals as well as in the St Austell Parish Strategic Group’s Residents’ Questionnaire, which noted that:

“Concerns have been raised since 2018 about over-commercialisation, particularly of the harbour area...Many comments have been made about the danger of Charlestown becoming a ‘theme park”²⁶

As the ‘Cornish Ports and Harbours’ report considered climate change to be a similarly significant threat to Charlestown harbour, protective measures against the increasing threats of rising sea levels, coastal erosion and landfalls, and extreme weather should be considered whilst remaining sensitive to the waterfront’s historical environment and assets.

It appears, nonetheless, that Charlestown has been able to recover from the loss of visitors during the COVID pandemic with a number of events organised for summer 2022, including a food festival and sailing regatta. A high degree of civic cohesion and communal identity invested in the historic harbour, evidenced by the recently formed Charlestown Heritage Society interested in the harbour’s history, and a range of youth projects organised by the harbour authorities intending to engage local and visiting children with the maritime environment through its new ‘Beach School’ children’s clubs, launching in 2022.²⁷ The CAA (2020) makes specific reference to the *“highly visible presence of spectacular and picturesque historic vessels”* in its consideration of the historic harbour.²⁸

Local interests in Charlestown already display an active interest in the wider historic environment beyond the harbourside, which should be incorporated within its future conservation and development. Its incorporation into the Cornwall and West Devon Mining World Heritage Site already facilitates its integration with the wider

²² <https://www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/gallery/charlestown-harbour-wall-collapsed-sea-4999690> (Accessed 28/07/22)

²³ <https://www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/cliff-collapses-next-former-models-3560387> (Accessed 28/07/22)

²⁴ ‘Cornish ports and harbours: assessing heritage significance, threats, protection and opportunities’ (2017), 69.

²⁵ ‘Cornish ports and harbours’ (2017), 69.

²⁶ ‘Neighbourhood Plan’, 63.

²⁷ <https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/news/shipshape/charleston-harbour-launch-new-beach-school-kids-clubs> (Accessed 29/07/22)

²⁸ ‘Conservation Area Appraisal’ (2020), 23.



Cornish coast and British terrestrial, mercantile and maritime histories from the 18th century onwards. Numerous references to the Gwallon Downs Bronze Age site and standing stone by CAAsand Charlestown Heritage Society, as well as to medieval upper and lower Polmear, indicate an awareness in Charlestown's wider historical context. With exhibits in the Shipwreck Centre relating to vessels and incidents outside of the Charlestown harbour's role in early modern maritime commerce, such wider connections could be incorporated into the harbourside historic environment. This is especially so given the interest of the Mining World Heritage Site designation on Cornwall's role in British industrialization, and the necessary relation between Britain's pre-industrial overseas endeavours and diverse regional industrial developments, and its later distinctive character.

The Charlestown Heritage Society's recent interest in the Crinnis Cliff Gun Battery could be similarly incorporated into the harbourside historic environment, placing Cornish industries and maritime development in the early modern period to its later 19th and 20th century developments. It would also provide a unique view of the harbour from its defensive outpost on Crinnis Head, offering a perspective on the harbourside relating to its role in the Napoleonic (1803-15) and Second World Wars. More could be made of the harbour's connection to British naval warfare, especially given a number of its buildings date to the Georgian period, and its prominent associations with *Poldark*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Taboo*, all of which were set in the 18th and 19th centuries. This could be instituted by information boards and plaques, pamphlets or guided walks – perhaps guiding visitors toward the lesser-known Crinnis Hill Gun Battery.

Bibliography

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