

## **St. Ives Bay's Fauna and Jumbos**

St. Ives various fisheries had in the past names and sayings that were unique only to this Port. For examples: - St. Ives seining fishery had shore based men which were named as 'Blowers'; as this harbour was tidal and frequently like a boiling pot in heavy ground sea, our Luggers and Gigs were 'flat bottomed' so to ground upright; there was a class of small gig like craft that could be worked by one man and was named 'Jumbo'. It is the latter, one wishes, to emphasise in this article.

A certain Mr. Rupert Vallentin, who was a marine biologist, came to St. Ives in 1903 to research its bay and seashores for 'Fauna' (Animals of region or epoch.) Apparently his full name was that of Rupert Eugene White Vallentin, born in 1858, who at the age of 21 years was fortunate to have been enabled to study zoology besides that of marine biologist. A 'paper' of his researches and findings on 'Fauna of St. Ives Bay', was read by him at the R.I.C. Annual Meeting of 29<sup>th</sup> November 1906.

Having come across this paper at the Morrab Library, Penzance, some years ago, it struck me then as very interesting particularly that of a line drawing of a chart depicting the Bay of St. Ives but did not read the 'paper' in full until 2023. Within Vallentin's extensive researches, one finds gems regarding to our Bay's vault of fauna and certain little boats named as 'Jumbos'. These fished in summer with their individual 15 feet wide beam trawls. Without such a paper as this calibre one would not have known the importance these Jumbos had in retrieving from the sea 'Fauna' in such great variety. Hence this is my tribute to those who had gone down to the sea in Jumbos.

Vallentin commenced his talk by giving an approach to his task of recording Fauna. Prior to his coming to St. Ives, he had in previous years studied the Fauna at the Isles of Scilly, Falmouth and Newquay. He had well monitored those coastal seas and continued comparing and adding other Fauna to his records, such as that of St. Ives Bay's.

In the penning of its fourth paragraph in his 'paper' he graciously acknowledges that:-

*"I must express my gratitude to the many fishermen of St. Ives who have aided me considerably by gifts of specimens which they have captured when fishing", before continuing with, "My thanks to the Government Grant Committee of the Royal Society for the necessary funds to enable me to hire a craft of sufficient size to dredge in these waters."*

His opening remarks to the various species make the number of different types of subjects quite considerable. It must be noticed by this particular commencing of a certain paragraph, that he introduces the learned company listening to him, a few snippets concerning his past and present researches.

*“The following observations on the tow-netting gatherings have been made since March 1901-3, at Newquay, and from 1903-6 at St. Ives. Naturally they have all been made within the three-mile limit, for however calm it may be it is never prudent to row in an open boat (boat) beyond that distance from the shore. The majority of gatherings have been made about a mile out, and always in the tide-ways.”*

By the extraordinary number of Fauna, that Vallentin mentioned in his ‘paper’, all incidentally being in Latin, one is of the mind, that he must have thought that all attending that day were those who were fully acquainted with ‘Latin’. However he did acknowledge that for those who were unacquainted by saying: - *“Whenever possible I have inserted after the Latin name the local synonym of each species in the fishermen’s vernacular.”*

As aforementioned, for the benefit of local fishermen, who knew nothing of Latin, it most certainly has assisted the writer of this particular article to learn from Latin certain species by adding their local names. One such was that of what is known locally in St. Ives as ‘Gezza crabs’, but Vallentin spelt it as ‘Gessa’. Its more universal known name is ‘spider crab’, but Cornish fishermen, in different coastal areas of our county, had other Dialect names for them. It must be remembered that Cornwall of that day still had the old school of fishermen. These would keep to that cove or harbour’s local names for certain fish and fauna etc. Here Vallentin explains about ‘gessa crabs’ in the following manner.



(1)

*“Mamaia squinado”. Migratory, end of November vanishes from inshore waters. About April - May trawlers in the bay catch small specimens 75 to 80 mm across the shell. As summer advances larger specimens appear and they swarm in the inshore waters. Sometimes local trawlers have great difficulty hauling their trawls owing to the abundance of these ‘useless’ crustaceans. In berry (breeding stage) May - June - August.*

*Sometimes during light winds the fishing fleet come into the harbour closely grouped, from which circumstances the following old St. Ives couplet probably arose, and although falling into disuse is occasionally heard from the lips of some ancient mariner: -*

*‘Coming round quay head like a fleet of ‘Gessa’ crabs.’”*

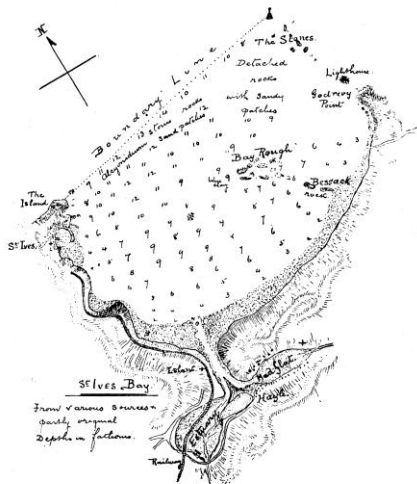
Robert Morton Nance in his book entitled ‘Cornish Sea Words’ adds a little more to this particular sea creature by spelling the name as ‘Gezza-crab’ and adds that the ‘spider crab’ was so named formally as ‘Spanish crab’. He also mentions a quote, similar to that of Vallentin with regard to the old couplet associated with Gezza’s, as coming around the quay-head, that was the ‘Old Smeaton’s Pier Head’ by adding *“it was descriptive of boats crawling in by the aid of sweeps (long oars) on a windless day.”*



**IF POSSIBLE**

**(2)**

Above you will note that the Gezza crab was not a welcome catch to local trawlers, in fact Vallentin refers to such as '*useless crustaceans*'. That however was in 1906. Since then, particularly over the past decade, 'Spider Crabs' have ceased being discarded by shell fishermen as worthless. This crustacean that had been scorned upon for hundreds of years, is today now greatly sought after and has a new name; being traded under the name of 'King Crab'. It being brought to favour is more to the increasing demand for crabmeat. The traditionally 'brown crab' is extensively caught offshore, in wire pots, not only as in former times only during the summer months, but is now sought after all the year round. Naturally this affects stocks and to enable a ready supply of crabmeat for the more affluent society of this age, the once despised 'Gezza' is also fished for by our local shell fishermen. One does not think local dialect interpretations such as to 'Gezza' crab would have been attractive to the taste buds of prospective purchasers' palates, as such that of the royal name of 'Cornish King Crab'.



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We refer now to a line drawing chart of St. Ives Bay for its informative added notes. One such is that: - *“Located almost in the middle of the bay is a reef of flat rocks, always well covered with water, and known to the fishermen as ‘Bay-rough’. This reef is not of any great size, but is large enough to accommodate two dozen lobster pots.”*

*“**“Horus gammarus.” ‘Lobster’.** When the reef known locally as ‘Bay rough’ was first discovered, I am told that numbers of lobsters could be caught there. The reef along the shore by Godrevy lighthouse was known to the fishermen by the significant name of ‘Plenty to come yet,’ which referred to the abundance of shell-fish in that place”.*

Another crustacean mentioned being fished for with pots, but in later decades mainly with tangle nets, was that of the:-

*“**“Palinurus vulgaris”.** ‘Crawfish’.* This crustacean is only occasionally caught in the Bay. The finest specimens come from deep water some ten or twelve miles in the offing”.

We come now to the means by which Fauna **was** (were) gathered from the sea. This is where we learn how a class of boat known only to St. Ives as Jumbos came to the forefront in that ‘paper’. These little craft trawled the Bays sandy bottom for principally flatfish. Vallentin terms this as:-

*“**DREDGING.** There are about nine small boats in this port, each carrying a beam trawl about fifteen feet in length. These boats usually are worked by one man, but in a few instances of three hands are carried when other fishing is slack”.*



(4)

A brief description of a Jumbo is that of being a small craft that one man can successfully sail and fish. These were of 18 to 20 feet in length and approximately 7 feet beam. Most were of Clinker build although one or two similar size craft were of Carvel construction. Most were propelled by a large foremast sail for beam-trawling, and with the man seated in the stern he would steer and sail the craft. During fine weather one man could fish with a Beam Trawl. Most would fish single handed during the day-light hours, but when dark, it was advisable to be accompanied by another hand.



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By all accounts, gathered from how the funding was made for this research, Vallentin hired a Jumbo to enable him to inspect what Fauna was trawled up after the fisherman had picked out the saleable fish. This residue was quoted by



him as ‘scruff’. In a description concerning to the trawling-grounds in the Bay of St. Ives:-

*“I have also been able, owing to the kindness of many of the smaller trawlers (Jumbos) to overhaul their ‘scruff’ before washing out their boats, and so make many interesting additions to my collections. But for this assistance, the interesting crab **Plybius Henslowi** and **Cotstes cassivelaunnus** would have quite escaped my notice.”*

The latter part of that quote adds to my assumption that all and sundry were expected to be well acquainted with Latin.

A quote from R. M. Nance book ‘Cornish Sea-Words’. Page 140:-

***scroff.** Sea-foam blown by the wind. **Scroff** or **Scrawf** is used in West Country dialects of rubbish in general. **Scruff** was formerly used in London of Thames-bank, drifted sticks and Coal. (Bailey).*

The contents of the trawl’s hour or so of fishing, provided Vallentin with specimens of ‘Fauna’, which otherwise would have been cast back into the sea as useless, for the fishermen saved only the fish of which they could put on the fish market to sell.

On occasions within Vallentin’s researches reference is mentioned of the ‘new breakwater’ as a good source for locating fauna. *“The best collecting (sea-shore) grounds are to be found inside the ‘new breakwater’, where, amid a ridge of rocks and decaying beams of timber, a fairly reprehensive gathering can be made.”* This then ‘ridge of rocks’ from the interior of a wooden constructed pier, was all that remained of a breakwater that was designed and constructed during 1864-65. Its purpose was that of to rebuff the force of sea in gales and storms to protect the rear of Smeaton’s Pier. This undertaken ‘breakwater’ later being referred to as ‘New Pier’ was built all but forty years previously to when Vallentin gives it mention in 1903-06. Owing to its timber casing, filled only with loose rocks and stones, it had a short endurance in the extreme sea conditions where the Pier was so situated. By the early 1870s it was already breached and then deteriorated rapidly with each successive gale, being then stated as ‘an engineering failure.’ By the years Vallentin was here at St. Ives, most of the wooden piles were broken off and nature had taken over its entire presence. Fauna of all sorts were subsequently being recorded there, not only by Vallentin but other notable biologists in the collecting and identifying of Fauna.

Besides the Fauna which Vallentin principally sought from Jumbo's trawls, other larger trawlers from fishing ports on the south coast of Devon visited the waters off Trevoise Head to also fish extensively for Sole.

Vallentin enlarges on this by stating:- *“During the spring-time, numbers of Brixham and Dartmouth trawlers spend three weeks or a month trawling in the main channel in the offing twelve or fifteen miles distant from St. Ives, where the water is about 30 fathoms deep. During the spring of 1905 these boats were more numerous than ever, and judging from what I was able to glean from some fragmentary conversations with some of the skippers and hands from crafts which came and anchored off the town for the week-end, their results financially were most gratifying. One result of the visit of this fishing fleet was the great scarceness of all flat-fish from the bay during the summer months. Never in living memory have the catches been so poor, not only by the trawlers, but also by the liners in St. Ives bay. It was not till the autumn had arrived that soles, turbot, and plaice began to abound; but then the visitors had departed, and there was no local demand for these high-priced fish. During the spring of the present year, 1906, these boats from Brixham and Dartmouth were more numerous than ever; but they rapidly decreased in numbers, a sure sign that fish were scarce.”*

Autumn has always been amongst the most lucrative months for the catching of flat-fish. It is then the fish having fed well during the summer months are full of spawn for the spring breeding season. Such fish are most truly in their prime and naturally find good prices on the local market. However, for our small trawling fleet there would be little, if any, demand for them, for their high price would make them unaffordable to the local population. It was the summer visitors who could afford and enjoy these fish. By the end of September the visitors had left and the town of St. Ives retreated to its other fisheries. The dredges and trawls were then not to be found aboard their respective crafts but in lofts with herring nets replacing them. In favourable weather conditions during the autumn herring season Jumbos would, with three or four nets and three hands, pursue this fishery in the inshore waters of the bay.





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Who were those fishermen who worked their respective Jumbos alone? Vallentin mentions only one name of those nine who fished with Jumbos, being that of Mr. George Quick. He was specifically mentioned when a unique specimen had been observed by him Vallentin in this Jumbo's 'scruff'. Mention is made of this incident as follows:-

***"Capros aper".** Only one specimen of this fish has ever been seen by me on this side of Cornwall. It was trawled up by Mr. G. Quick in 10 fathoms and caught during the night. This species is usually abundant in 25 - 35 fathoms in the channel."* One presumes that on that particular night Vallentin accompanied him, as Mr. Quick was born with a lame leg and only walked aided by a crutch, thus he was respectively known as 'Georgie Crutch'. Yet although with such a disability he was a fisherman, and worked and fished mostly alone with his own Jumbo.

From this 'paper' by Vallentin, one has been enabled to revere the man himself as a most notable researcher of fauna both here and abroad by the retrieving of fauna from the sea; also a mention of these small craft which were in fact the Jumbos. Lastly we learn of a person with a disability, who is duly mentioned by Vallentin when scouring through this particular crafts scruff and locating a certain gem of Fauna.

To sum the above up, we had Vallentin the marine biologist, the beam trawl, the fauna, the Jumbo and a little mention by way of one man's name who miraculously, regardless of his affliction, worked such a craft as a Jumbo.

During the opening years of this 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been a revival in Gig Rowing and this has led to a demand from specialists Boat Builders in constructing these light scantle craft. There has too occurred much interest in the recent two decades shown in the humble Jumbo of yesteryear, for since the late 1920s such small sailing craft have disappeared from our harbour. Perhaps the main reason being the advent of the marine engine to the St. Ives Lugger fleets during the Great War of 1914 -18.



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This emphasis now to Jumbos, the writer gives the credit to one Jonny M. Nance, a grandson to R. M. Nance, who has already been mentioned for his researches and subsequent publication of 'Cornish Sea Words'. Jonny, a Boat Builder, left no stone unturned during the late 1990s to locate the lines and features of the Jumbo to enable him to ultimately build such a craft. Photographs were sought and by careful inspection valuable details were discerned. Originally no two Jumbos were alike, as these boats were usually former ships lifeboats or from other coastal areas that found their passage to St. Ives harbour. It was the fisherman who saw the potential to develop these various constructed boats, to be wind powered with either lug sails or a single main sail, to be favourable for fishing by one man.



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Altogether, to date, Jonny has built two Jumbos in the traditional clinker mode. Both have lug sails to fore and aft masts. The sails, although of modern material, have been coloured brown to retain that the sails in former times, were tanned in hot bark to be preserved by the water repellent qualities of this substance from the bark of oak trees.

As this class of small craft's fishing ability developed, a then well known and much respected St. Ives Boat Builder by name of William Paynter, designed a standard Jumbo. This was of clinker construction and resulted in several being built. His design plans are now in one of our renowned nautical establishments.

Although not now used for fishing, these Jumbos are to be observed sailing in St. Ives Bay during the summer months. When both are actively engaged in this practice, one can imagine the time when our fleets of Luggers and Gigs were all of sail.

To sum up the above, although the writer had been well aware of the Jumbo craft, but if it was not for the locating of Mr. Rupert Vallentin 'paper' aforementioned, then perhaps these craft details and especially their fishing capabilities would have been lost to public eye.

Within these few antidotes we have Vallentin furthering his studies and research on Cornish seas 'Fauna', the capabilities of single fishermen who fished from Jumbos, such as the little about one who worked a craft with a disability, and lastly, that true to the Old Cornwall motto, Jonny Nance has indeed 'gathered up the fragments of the Jumbo that remain, that nothing be lost'. By the

mentioning of grandfather R. M. Nance, one of the leading founders of the Old Cornwall movement, who was a researcher of all things Cornish, it is evident that his grandson Jonny too is keeping to the aims of this Society, that although being commenced over 100 years ago, is still attaining its original aim of promoting Cornwall in its many facets. So county wide members keep learning by your gleanings and putting pen to paper to record for others, what your area has that will become of interest to future generations.

Brian Stevens  
Member of St. Ives Old Cornwall Society.  
16<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Note regarding information re R. E. W. Vallentin. 1858-1934.

At the age of 21 years Vallentin inherited 'sufficient private means to satisfy his modest requirements'. Worked firstly as a marine biologist on the Clyde, and moved in 1888 to Falmouth, established a small Laboratory to investigate the Marine Fauna of Falmouth estuary. Journeyed to the Falklands in 1889 to further studies of Fauna in the Southern hemisphere and met a widow, Mrs Eilnor Nicol, on that boat passage who had similar interests in Natural History. They were married in Cornwall March 1904. The value of Vallentin's field of work a century ago is still being recognised.

Author. © Robin W. Woods

Illustrations:-

(1) "*Mamaia squinado*" known locally as a 'Gezzas'. © B. Stevens.

(2) IF POSSIBLE Victoria extension to Smeaton's Pier with light wind Mackerel Lugger fleet gaining access to harbour "like Gezzas rounding the Quay Head". © St. Ives Museum.

(3) Chart - Line drawing of Chart of St. Ives Bay. Re 'Journal of Royal Institution of Cornwall. Volume XV11. Part 1 -1907. Pages 84 to 111'.

(4) Jumbo (one man crew) and Mackerel Lugger SS559 ( six men and one boy crew) depicting the smallest and largest classes of St. Ives fishing boats. © St Ives Archive.

(5) Jumbo in harbour. Note the beam trawl to her starboard side and the net hoisted to the mast to dry. © St. Ives Museum.

(6) Mr George Quick, Fisherman, husband and local preacher, standing with the aid of his crutch. © St. Ives Old Cornwall Society. St. Ives Museum.

(7) IF POSSIBLE Jumbo 'Celeste J.1.' newly built in 2007 by Jonny Nance, aground in St. Ives harbour. © B. Stevens.

(8) Dedication of Jumbo 'William Paynter J.2.' by Matthew Care, with Bible, and Jonny Nance holding bottle, ready to christen her in 2010. © B. Stevens.

My thanks to the Morrab Library at Penzance for enabling my gleaning of such snippets regarding, 'The Fauna of the St. Ives Bay'.