

# GONE FISHING

When the Holmans built their own lugger and set up a small-scale fish business in Cornwall, they revived a way of life that had all but disappeared

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**S**etting sail from Portscatho at first light, fishing lugger *Kensa* slips silently through the water as owners Cat and Simon Holman head out to sea in search of mackerel. On a still summer's morning there's barely a sound to disturb the peace. 'We get lovely mornings,' says Cat. 'There's nobody else around and without an engine there's no other noise at all. We often see seabirds – they're less scared of us because we're so quiet.' Cat and Simon watch the birds closely – if they're diving it's a sign mackerel are near. Once they find a shoal, adrenaline kicks in as they work together to haul in the fish.

'There's excitement when we've got a shoal of mackerel. It's hectic, there's not a lot of talking. We're just trying to get the fish off the line and into ice as quickly as possible so we can get the lines back in the water,' says Cat. 'When we're on a big shoal then we're usually grinning at each other – we know that we're going to have good fish to sell.'

The couple settled in Portscatho in 2005, after spending happy holidays there during their university years. Cat worked as a teaching assistant in Truro while Simon taught small craft design at Falmouth Marine School, but in 2009 they took two years off to sail around Greece and started dreaming of working from the village and coastline they loved, rather than enduring long

daily commutes and days indoors. Gradually, the idea for Portscatho Fish was formed.

'We saw lots of little fishing villages around the Mediterranean and the people we ended up talking to were fishermen,' recalls Cat. It reminded them that fishing villages once thrived in Cornwall too. Portscatho was famous for large fleets that set sail from its harbour in search of pilchards. Tucked into a sheltered cove, it was an ideal base for fishermen. But as pilchard stocks declined the industry dwindled and these days the village is better known as a holiday destination, boasting spectacular coastal views as the land descends down to the sea.

Cat and Simon had no experience of fishing, but were frustrated by 'ridiculous food miles' surrounding food supply and production, and were interested in ways communities could become more self-sufficient. Combining their love of sailing with Cornwall's natural resources to create a sustainable fishing business seemed a perfect fit.

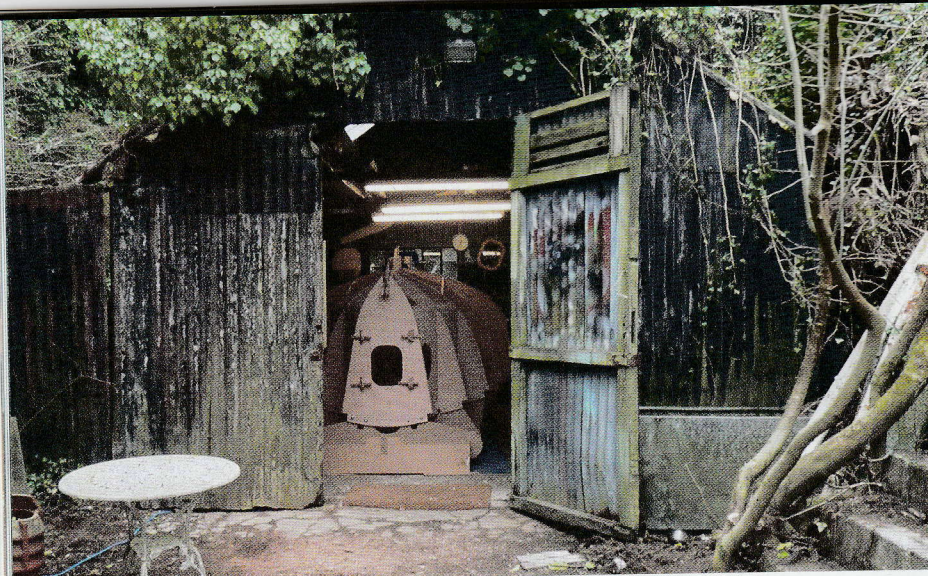
## A BOAT IS BORN

During their trip around the Med, Simon entered a competition to design an eco-fishing boat, and once back home in 2011 the couple decided to turn his design into reality, spurred on by the encouragement of locals. 'We had a really positive



OPPOSITE Cat and Simon Holman on their lugger *Kensa*, which they built themselves despite having never built a boat before FROM TOP DOWN The pair head out to sea; *Kensa* sailing close to the Roseland Peninsula; Simon and Cat check the sizes of the catch



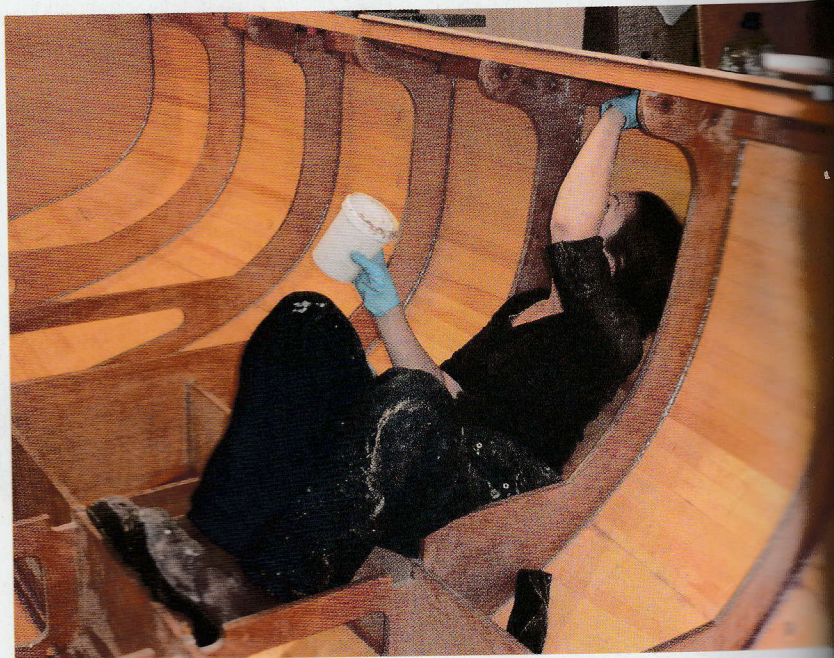


response from everyone we spoke to,' says Cat. 'The feeling was there would be a good market for fish caught locally, using low-impact methods.'

So in March 2012, in a borrowed workshop, they started building *Kensa*, a 5.6m engineless lugger, designed to avoid the red tape associated with the fishing industry. 'If your boat is less than 10m long and has no engine then you're not obliged to get registered, which means you don't need a licence or a quota,' explains Simon.

Simon created his own boat kit – a collection of shaped plywood parts which fit together, reducing the need for specialist equipment and expertise. Neither had ever built a boat before but they spent four months constructing *Kensa*, spending long days in their workshop assembling the plywood framework before fitting cedar planking over the top followed by a protective coating. They made as many fittings as possible with support from local friends – a carpenter would pop in to give advice and a sailmaker lent his loft and assistance to make the sails.

By July 2012 *Kensa* was seaworthy. Cat recalls the moment of turning the finished hull right-way up and the thrill of realising they'd built a boat. 'When we launched her it was so amazing seeing something that we made, float.' And the project has given the couple a new connection with the village. 'It's brought us conversations with older people in the village who remember fishing under sail – they tell us their stories and reveal the local names for coves and beaches.'







The couple took advantage of free business courses that were available in Cornwall, covering skills such as food hygiene and sea survival. The steepest learning curve has been the fishing itself. 'The thing I keep learning is that you never really figure it out – there are lots of variables,' says Simon. They have discovered certain spots where fish gather because of the nature of the seabed and watch for other markers, like the feeding seabirds.

They aim to fish Monday to Saturday throughout June, July and August, focusing on mackerel. They use traditional wooden hand lines which allow them to be very targeted about what they fish for and also means the by-catch is small and can be returned to the sea alive, making it a particularly sustainable way of fishing. 'An ideal day would be an early start to get mackerel at first light and then coming in to sell fresh to pubs and restaurants – we aim to be on the specials board,' says Cat. On an average day they cover about 10 miles at sea.

Pubs and restaurants on the Roseland Peninsula are their main clients, and chefs are delighted to put mackerel with such local credentials on their menus. 'They get what we're doing and they're really keen on that,' says Cat. 'Chefs have given us really good feedback on how fresh the fish is.' Guests at venues like The Hidden

Hut, a popular outdoor beach café perched above nearby Porthcurnick Beach, enjoy eating their fish while looking out at where it was caught, and possibly glimpsing *Kensa* at work.

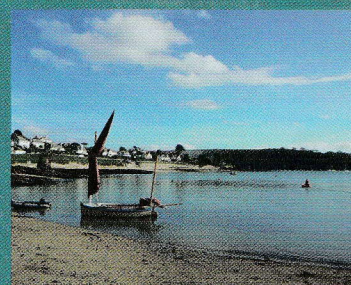
## SEASONAL LIVING

While their business grows each season, the couple have accepted that seasonal fishing means they'll always need alternative sources of income. Freelance work has come from their venture – both write for boatbuilding magazine *Water Craft* and Simon has been offered boat design projects. He's also found winter building work, while Cat, who studied languages, does translation and Spanish tuition.

Simon has also started making and selling what he describes as 'salty stuff' such as rope mats, canvas buckets and traditional wooden hand lines. They are learning how to make traditional lobster pots. 'We're looking for anything that can add value to what we're already doing, especially something you can do on a rainy, windy day,' says Cat.

It's an echo of how Portscatho's fishermen used to work, and Cat and Simon are happy to follow the same rhythm. 'We've achieved our aim of escaping the office and the commute,' reflects Cat. 'Sometimes it's a bit "feast or famine" but I'd pick this lifestyle every time. And we never go hungry – there's always mackerel in the freezer.'

## NEED to KNOW



### A TASTE OF CORNWALL

To buy direct from Cat and Simon, contact Portscatho Fish on 01872 580632/07790 686959/07968 683306. Or email [portscathofish@gmail.com](mailto:portscathofish@gmail.com) ([portscathofish.co.uk](http://portscathofish.co.uk)).



A number of local pubs and restaurants have Portscatho Fish mackerel on the menu in season. Try The Watch House in St Mawes ([watchhousestmawes.co.uk](http://watchhousestmawes.co.uk)); The Royal Standard in Gerrans ([royalstandard-gerrans.co.uk](http://royalstandard-gerrans.co.uk)) or The Hidden Hut at Porthcurnick Beach ([hiddenhut.co.uk](http://hiddenhut.co.uk)).



If you want to try your hand at catching your own mackerel, Fish and Trips of St Mawes offers two- and three-hour mackerel fishing trips, as well as half-day and day charters (07891 300078, [fishandtripstmawes.co.uk](http://fishandtripstmawes.co.uk)).

TOP, FROM LEFT *Kensa* was built by Simon and Cat in a borrowed workshop; the plywood frame takes shape; *Kensa* was launched in summer 2012 amid local celebrations; Portscatho Mackerel on ice is sold locally LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP A traditional handline made by Simon; the plywood frame boat is then clad with cedar planks; Cat makes sure that the boat is watertight