Distinctiveness Assessment and Evaluation

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Date.. 23/03/2017

Asset / place.. ‘Wreckers’ – Charlestown

Step 1: Define the asset

Define the entity that you want to describe the distinctiveness of (this could be a single asset like a building or monument, or an area like a Conservation Area or town. Please include a location plan / boundary.

Identify key evidence sources / existing descriptions such as HER / NHLE entries or other pieces of text describing the asset. Highlight or annotate any sections that relate to distinctiveness themes.

Asset to be assessed is “Wreckers”, Charlestown Rd, Charlestown

NHLE ref 1379460

CSHER ref MCO35308

Within Charlestown Conservation Area

https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/3638524/Charlestown-Final.pdf

Within Cornish Mining World Heritage Site Area ‘Charlestown’ (Area A8).

https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1379460 GII Listed as ‘The Boatshed’ NHLE ref 1379460

Fish cellar building, later used as boat house. Early C19 (shown on 1843 tithe map). Killas and granite rubble with granite and brick dressings and timber lintels; painted brick outshot at
the front and some brick to left-hand gable; small size rag slate roof with cement mortar grouting sweeping lower over front outshut and at lower pitch over rear extension; brick stack central to rear of outshut. Roughly square plan plus slightly later narrower outshut central to the front and lean-to/outshut at rear. EXTERIOR: single storey; front elevation has small-paned window on either side of the outshut. Lower down on this wall are the beam sockets of a former pilchard-pressing floor. The outshut has a window and a door to the front and a window to the right-hand return. Wide doorway to each return wall of the original building. The doorway of the left-hand return is blocked in 2 phases and there is a loading hatch above. INTERIOR has its original but much-repaired roof structure with nailed collars to the principals. Included as a rare and significant example of its type in Cornwall, part of an important and little altered group in this former fishing and china clay port.

Last assessed 1999 GII

HER Number: 141152

Name: CHARLESTOWN - Post Medieval fish cellar

Monument Types

- **FISH CELLAR** (18th Century - 1701 AD to 1800 AD)

**Full description** *(this has been extracted from Berry et al 1998)*

A building west of the inner basin was first mapped in 1795 and in 1825 was recorded as the Great Warehouse. By 1882 it had become a smithy; it is now called The Boatshed. This building, like others in the vicinity has an orientation which suggests that it pre-dates the construction of Charlestown Road. There are still traces of the fish cellar, comprising granite press pole holes, in the northern part of the east wall. Fish cellars were associated with pilchard fisheries and were once commonplace; most Cornish fishing coves possessed examples. The rest of the wall in this part of the building is also mostly of granite with granite quoins. It is evident from the way the building is situated that the fish cellar structure extended towards the present Charlestown Road and may have been demolished when the harbour road was built. The warehouse/smithy building appears to occupy a former road line, backing onto the former. The southern end of the building has seen numerous rebuilds and now includes many different types of masonry; stonework, buff coloured brick, red brick in Flemish bond and concrete block. The main roof has a slightly curved profile and is covered with relatively small slates in diminishing courses, probably scantle slate. In the east wall there are two windows containing multiple fixed small panes. The northern window has granite quoins so it may be an original opening associated with the fish cellar. In the southern part of the east wall is a blocked opening with brick jambs, close to ground level. There has been some structural movement in the building and there are tie rods visible at the south eastern corner. At least two lean-to buildings were attached to the south end and traces of rooflines survive on the building and concrete floors can be seen adjoining. Attached to the eastern side of the building is a small brick outshut, containing a panelled door and four-pane sash windows.

Sections of text below taken from Charlestown Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (Cornwall Council 2013)
‘summary of special interest’ Notable aspects of its history include its role in all the main historic industries of Cornwall: mining, fishing, agriculture, engineering and china clay. Today it is a key player in tourism, Cornwall’s major industry and is a popular film location.

The underlying geology is of Lower Devonian slates, siltstones and sandstones, locally referred to as ‘killas’. Just to the north lies the Hensbarrow granite massif, surrounded by the decayed granite forming the china clay deposits of the area.

The village retained some industrial activity until recently, but now the majority of businesses within the settlement are connected with tourism. Changing economics coupled with rising house prices and the desirability of the village as a holiday or second home destination are fuelling pressure for the conversion of industrial buildings to residential uses which inevitably impacts on the character of the village.

6.2 Medieval Polmear. Charlestown as we know it today dates largely from a planned development of the late eighteenth century. However, this development overlies two medieval hamlet settlements: Higher and Lower Polmear. First recorded as Porthmeur in 1403, the place name derives from the Cornish elements of Porth meaning ‘cove’ and meur meaning ‘big or great’ and contrasts with Porthpean to the west meaning ‘small cove’.

6.3 Eighteenth Century Polmear: Little further information about the settlement exists until the eighteenth century. Thomas Martyn’s map published in 1748 shows the two small hamlets: Lower Polmear at the head of the beach and Higher Polmear further inland. A reconstruction of the pre-Charlestown landscape, based on map analysis and fieldwork, was devised by the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU) as part of its Historic and Archaeological Assessment of Charlestown in 1998. It depicts Lower Polmear as a group of buildings close to the shore, either side of a water channel which empties onto the beach (possibly an adit portal, draining the linear series of mine shafts which entered the village to the north from an extension of the mines at Holmbush and Boscoppa). There was no harbour at this point, but vessels would have been dragged onto the shore to offload fish and to export ore from the mines. On the eastern side of the water channel lie a fish cellar (1 Quay Road thought to date to c.1740 and still partially extant) and a row of cottages, which presumably housed fishermen. On the western side lie a scattering of buildings including the cottage and adjacent business premises at 21 Charlestown Road, which may have been a former inn. These buildings, set at an angle to the current road, appear to relate to an earlier road alignment.

7 Archaeological Potential In particular there is archaeological potential for:

- Remains relating to the medieval hamlets of Higher and Lower Polmear – evidence for early commercial activity, agriculture, road network and mining activity.

- The identification of surviving buildings predating Charlestown. There is potential for earlier fabric to be masked behind later refronting and remodelling.
• 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.”

“Influence of geomorphology: The nature of the physical landscape of Charlestown greatly influenced the development of the settlement. Its sheltered natural cove initially attracted early fishermen and then presented an ideal location for a harbour during the early industrial period.”
Step 2: Identify which of the distinctiveness themes relate to the asset

*Use the prompts to identify what parts or features of the asset relate to each theme and why. This might include: materials, design, associations, function, use and so on.*

**Physical distinctiveness**


**Economic distinctiveness**

This building originates as a fish cellar, a building type distinctive to the processing of fish from the post medieval pilchard seining industry. This is evidenced by the survival of pressing holes and documentary evidence. Building has evidence of later reuse by maritime industry (boat repair and smithing) following the founding of ‘Charlestown’ in the later 18\textsuperscript{th} century, in this location part of the ‘transport’ attribute of WHS OUV. This reuse is evidenced by the discord in alignment of the structure to the later Charlestown Road, in the structural evidence of rebuilding including the later addition of a smithy offshot, the evident raising of ground levels around the pressing holes, and in the appropriately retained wooden planked doors and large openings at each end (boathouse re-use).

The current use of the building as a restaurant and shop facilitates public access to the building, supports a currently distinctive and important industry (tourism), and enables continued use of the historic internal volumes of the building.

**Spiritual folkloric and artistic distinctiveness**

The current restaurant is named “Wreckers”, an allusion to the historic practice of wrecking (community salvage) around which much folklore (for instance the legendary use of ‘false lights’ for which there is no evidence) exists. There is no known evidence to authentically connect this building with either tradition.

Charlestown is thought to be amongst the most popular locations for location filming in Cornwall, particularly around the harbour area, and it is likely that this structure features in large numbers of photographs, paintings, films and television programmes.

**Linguistic distinctiveness**

The earlier settlement of ‘Lower Polmear’ for which this building and others of the same group provide legibility has a Kernowek root meaning ‘Large Cove’ – contrasted to *Porthpean* to the west, which means ‘Small Cove’. Names which
have attached to this building include ‘Great Warehouse’ and ‘The Boatshed’ relate directly to aspects of its economic distinctiveness, whilst ‘Wreckers’ relates the maritime character of the location to associated folk history and legend.

**Natural distinctiveness**

Not known to be applicable in this case

**Cultural connections and resonance beyond Cornwall**

The building’s historical and evidential connections with the pilchard industry (for which the main markets lay in Catholic Europe) and the mining industries connect this asset to the role of those wider trade networks in Cornwall’s distinctiveness.

As an established part of the visitor experience to Charlestown the building is likely to contribute positively towards the experience of repeat visitors from the UK and beyond.

**Step 3: how does the asset’s distinctiveness inform and contribute to the historic, evidential, aesthetic, and communal heritage values of the asset?**

*Please use the tables within the ‘themes’ document to identify the relationship between the cultural distinctiveness of a place and established heritage values.*

**Historic value**

*Historic value connects contemporary places to past people, events and aspects of life and can be illustrative or associative*

The building’s former and changing economic uses are well understood and legible in the building fabric, and through its association with a surrounding group of cellar buildings and relate directly to the distinctive historic value which lies in the illustration of the origins of activity here as the fishing hamlet of Lower Polmear.

As Polmear became Charlestown the role of this building illustrates the change in its function to smithing and the housing / maintenance of small boats. This phase of the site’s significance directly exhibits the ‘transport’ attributes of the Cornish Mining WHS.

**Evidential**

*The evidential value of a place lies in its potential to provide evidence of past activity.*
The low level, relative to modern surfaces, of the surviving press lever holes indicates that ground levels around the eastern side of the building have been raised considerably, and are likely to have sealed any surviving evidence of train oil\(^1\) channels, pits or caunsing\(^2\) relating to locally distinctive pilchard curing activities.

The orientation of the building does not align to the later ‘Charlestown Road’ (part of the 18\(^{th}\) century planning of the industrial port), but to a group of older buildings, including the cellar yard behind, which relate to Lower Polmear.

**Aesthetic**

*The ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place through its designed or fortuitous appearance*

The building’s, functional design (including its adaption) and use of vernacular materials (stone rubble, scantle slate, terracotta ridge tiles, contribute strongly to local distinctiveness of the architecture of Charlestown, in particular the harbour area as described in the 2013 Conservation Area Appraisal

**Communal**

*The value of a place through its social and collective meanings and place in memory – particularly where this value is expressed in terms of commemoration, symbolism, social identity or spiritual understanding.*

The distinctive communal value of the building is closely related to its locally distinctive historic and aesthetic values, and the degree to which it illustrates the time depth of economic activity in Cornwall.

**Step 4 – Record your conclusions, specifically noting how distinctiveness should inform any current expression of the site’s significance and identifying opportunities for this distinctiveness to inform place making or ongoing management of the place.**

The distinctiveness of this building is already well understood and articulated by HER and NHLE records and is set in clear context by the 2013 Conservation Area Appraisal and this document. Management of the building through the planning system and LBC process should play close attention to the conservation of the historic economic and aesthetic character of the building and those within its immediate and most important setting, which would be those buildings also relating to the earlier Lower Polmear. Opportunities to capture further distinctive evidence should be taken when it is appropriate to do so.

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\(^1\) ‘train’ was the local term for the oil which was produced by the traditional pressing of pilchards, collected for economic re-use.

\(^2\) ‘caunsing’ is the term generally applied to the convex surfacing of cellar floors with beach cobbles set in mortar which allowed train to flow into channels set into the floor to be collected in stone lined pits.
The current commercial use of the building constitutes an appropriate adaptive re-use, enabling public access to and appreciation of significance. Development in the setting of the building should play close attention to conserving, or improving the legibility of buildings relating to this one.