

# DUCHY OF CORNWALL OYSTER FARM PORT NAVAS

## SPRING UPDATE 2008

### LOCAL CONSULTATION

Our thanks go to Jim Boote who carried out a detailed and time-consuming local consultation in December 2007 and to those who raised their issues, both positive and negative. It was extremely encouraging to be told that, in spite of the initial change and upheaval, the oyster farm has the support of 95% of local residents, for which we are very grateful. Our commitment to regular local updates about our activity, our participation in local consultations and the various steps we have taken to address local concerns all demonstrate what can be achieved through constructive local dialogue and support.

Our thanks also for the many messages of support which we have received since the ITV Westcountry feature “Row erupts over oyster farm”. I have received numerous emails, letters and phone calls not only from locals but also from Cornishmen and women near and far as well as various British holiday-makers who were all keen to express their support and were delighted to see this historic fishery under active management once more. Many of these people reminded me that Port Navas was built as a working community and that a thriving oysterage has an important role to play in keeping that tradition alive.

Since the news item, the BBC, ITV Westcountry news and an independent television production company have asked to do separate features on the regeneration of the oyster farm which we look forward to seeing soon – some positive coverage for Port Navas, the Helford and for the growing (or reviving) Cornish aquaculture industry.

### COMMUNITY ISSUES

Since December, we have been working hard behind the scenes to address the reasonable concerns that were raised. Our community-related activities include:

- Liaising with the Duchy surveyor and Land Steward about resurfacing the quay
- Surveying the access road and assessing impact on Yacht Club wall and road
- Contributing to access road repairs
- Consulting with Kerrier planning department about our developments
- Consulting with the AONB about our use of the quay
- Meeting Jim Boote and Ted Morris for update on progress since the December consultation
- Meeting with Jeff Meadows about the 2008 Regatta

This update would have been published sooner if I had not been waiting for replies from various people, including Kerrier planning department.

## ADDRESSING LOCAL CONCERNS

We share the majority of concerns raised in the consultation process and are working hard to solve them within the considerable constraints of running and funding a start-up business. Here's a quick summary:

### ➤ Permissive Access

As always, the oyster farm quay remains open to visitors and always has done. It can be muddy and busy at times and while we strive to improve our working methods, that is the reality of a working oyster farm. We take on board concerns about tidiness and seating, which are dealt with below.

### ➤ Planning Issues

As part of our restoration and building programme, we have consulted with Kerrier District council who have confirmed that, as agricultural premises, the oyster farm benefits from various permitted development rights. They have confirmed that the oyster farm is fully compliant with all relevant planning regulations.

The quay is listed as a working quay and the Kerrier planning department, as well as the Cornwall AONB, are both satisfied that this is the use to which it is now being put. In keeping with its listing as a working quay, there is no provision, restriction or covenant in past conveyances of the quay relating to community or leisure use.

### ➤ Agricultural Activity

As our name suggests, we are an agricultural business, governed by DEFRA. The activities we undertake and the equipment which we use are typical of any farm, oyster farm or other agricultural enterprise as anyone who has visited other oyster farms in the UK and abroad will know.

### ➤ Size of Operation

It almost goes without saying that there has been a dramatic increase in activity as we took over an operation which ceased any form of oyster farming over two decades ago and had all but ceased trading by Summer 2005. However, in spite of the intensity of our harvest period over a very short time, the size of our production is still significantly smaller than the fishery once was during its prime years under Len Hodges' stewardship and our sales amount to approximately a quarter of those during Len's tenure. We hope that our output will steadily increase back towards historic levels as time goes by.

➤ Weight of Oyster Farm Traffic

We have commissioned a survey into the carrying capacity of the access road and we have happily contributed to the repairs to the quayside road - which had deteriorated more due its state of disrepair than any alleged misuse. The Duchy surveyor has confirmed that they do not see any cause for concern and we will continue to monitor the situation closely.

➤ Surface of Quay

Together with the Duchy, we are assessing options for re-surfacing the quay to avoid the horrendous mud-bath during harvest which was as much fun to work in as it was to look at. Both the Duchy and the oyster farm are keen to find a practical solution which is in keeping with the quay's appearance and status. The current intention is to complete any works before the Regatta and before the harvest season begins but it is too early to give any timetables.

➤ Tidiness of the Quay

The lack of storage space and general tidiness is a problem. Whilst it is inevitable that we have to keep certain equipment on our working quay we try, where possible, to look for alternative storage solutions according to the seasons and our needs. By the Summer, we will be looking into off-site storage options for our boxes and other seasonal equipment. Our thanks go, in the meantime, to Mr Webber, who has kindly made available an area of his field for interim storage.

The amount of dead river by-catch / rubbish (old shell, slipper limpets, bottles, fishing rods, fishing line, shoes, plastic.... etc.) is inevitably very high as we start the gradual cleaning and regeneration of the oyster beds. This means we have to store boxes and boxes of it before we can relay it in specific areas as cultch (to encourage new spatfall) or to use it as a resurfacing aggregate. However, the amount of debris will slowly decrease – we hope! - over the years as the river really kicks back into life. Whilst it is not necessarily very pretty to look at, we are undertaking the intensive but rewarding job of removing the dead from the river and replacing it with the living.

Slipper limpets are a pest which was accidentally imported to the UK from America many decades ago and which pose a serious threat to fisheries such as the Helford and the Fal. If fisheries are left unmanaged, these pests can cause extensive damage (the Fal oyster fishery is currently under very real threat) so much of our work is currently devoted to removing them – by hand. We have graded out (by hand) approximately 10 tonnes of these pests (approximately 200,000 slipper limpets) but unfortunately they are as unloved by chefs as they are by oyster farmers and our only realistic option is to store them ashore until they die. This process alone takes several weeks and even then, they cannot be re-laid as cultch as they have a high ammonia content. We then have to find a use for them (for example, as a re-surfacing aggregate). It is another less appealing and somewhat unsightly side to our work but one that is

nevertheless essential for the health and long term success of the fishery and one which will decrease as we get on top of the problem.

#### ➤ Seating

We have provisionally re-sited the benches to the right hand side (West) of the quay where they afford the best view of the creek and where our equipment causes the least interference. However, now that harvest is over, working activity and equipment on the quay is significantly reduced.

### PORT NAVAS REGATTA

Dialogue is already underway with Jeff Meadows about the Regatta to ensure that the oyster farm makes every possible contribution towards another successful day. The oyster farm has approached the Duchy about making available the Boathouse garage area and will ensure that power is available to those that need it.

### MODERNISATION, RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION

We recently received confirmation of our funding award from the Objective One Fisheries programme in support of our contribution to the local economy and our development of aquaculture in the South West, on one of the UK's oldest private fisheries. At the same time, we have been awarded a grant by the Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty unit for our contribution to the conservation of the riverscape. The award of these two grants exemplifies the balance we have achieved between modernisation and restoration, between commerce and conservation.

### JOBS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The village itself used to provide the majority of the oyster farm workforce but now, sadly, we need to look a little further afield (although job application forms are available from the office...). Bruce, our South African aquaculture graduate will soon be leaving us sadly, but we have found a local Fal oysterman to replace him and to take up a position as a full-time boatman. We are also exploring opportunities to offer apprenticeships to disadvantaged local youngsters through the Cornwall Marine Network. Anyone wishing to discuss job opportunities should contact the farm manager, Mark Mercer, on 01326 340210.

### FAL NATIVE OYSTERMEN

The Fal native oyster season has now come to an end and although we struggled with our finances this year, we had 15 boats on our books, supporting their unique skills and re-establishing the traditional links between the Fal and the Helford fisheries.

## HELFDORD VOLUNTARY MARINE CONSERVATION GROUP - GUIDED OYSTER FARM TOUR

We are giving a guided tour and insight into our activities on July 20<sup>th</sup> to HVMCA members and their guests. More details available nearer the time from the HVMCA or the oyster farm.

## HELFDORD RIVER CHILDREN'S SAILING TRUST

We have also had discussions with the HRCST about giving children tours of the oyster farm to give them an insight into what we do, how we do it and the benefits which a thriving oysterage brings to the health of the river. Inviting children to learn about our activities is an important part of our long-term strategy for the future.

## RESTORATION OF SMALL QUAY AND SLIPWAY WEST OF MAIN QUAY

We are pleased to say that our restoration program continues apace. We have started to restore the old small quay west of the main quay, enabling us to load our working boat at low water. With a significant contribution from the Duchy of Cornwall, we have also restored the slipway leading down to this beach area.

These works have stopped another piece of living Helford and Port Navas history from crumbling into the water with neglect. As a result, this considerable area of foreshore is now being put to good use, both as a working foreshore and as a small dinghy parking area for licensed local residents. This overall improvement in the facility will also no doubt prove very useful for the regatta, providing much safer access to the beach for all participants.

## DINGHY PARKING WEST OF QUAY

Whilst our use of the foreshore West of the quay has limited the amount of space available, we are pleased to accommodate as many of our neighbours as possible. We regret that – regatta excepted of course - use of the foreshore and slipway is reserved exclusively for the oyster farm and billet-holders and request that non-billet-holders use the public slipway in the village or the various other local facilities.

In spite of our financial difficulties, we are maintaining this as a not-for-profit arrangement and the oysterage is very grateful to Annabelle and Carolyn who have generously agreed to contribute their time and energy to ensure that this voluntary partnership between local business and residents works effectively. All decisions have been delegated to Annabel and Carolyn in their sole discretion and their mandate covers everything from allocation of billets to the day-to-day management and supervision of the dinghy area. Application forms and Terms and Conditions are available from them.

The oystering is also very grateful to Peter at Port Navas Yacht Club, who has gone to considerable lengths to accommodate those left without a berth.

## PARKING AND VEHICULAR ACCESS

No parking, No drop-offs, No exceptions!

As a busy working oyster farm we simply cannot accommodate third-party vehicles, even temporarily - unless they are on oyster farm business of course. We have repeatedly tried asking people politely not to bring cars but for some reason, they continue to do so under an endless variety of imaginative excuses. We will therefore be operating a clamping system this year which will require a release-fee and we ask billet-holders and local residents to support us by observing this restriction and encouraging others to do likewise. Exceptions will gladly be made for those with special needs, on prior arrangement with the oyster farm.

These parking restrictions apply 7 days a week – do not be tempted to risk coming unnoticed at weekends!

## BILGES, HOLDING TANKS, REFUELLING, PAINTING AND BOAT CLEANING

Please bear in mind the sensitivity of the oyster farm to pollution and consider that the foreshore West of the Quay in particular is now used as a shellfish holding area. The use of anti-fouling had a catastrophic impact on the Fal and Helford in the 70's, 80's and 90's and diverse pollution is a serious issue on the Helford to this day.

We continue to work closely with the Port Health Authority and the Environment Agency on water quality issues. Sadly, the Helford is not designated as a "Bathing Waters" under European legislation but the oystering is a powerful lobbyist for maintaining high water quality standards under the Shellfish Waters Directive. Against a back-drop of improving water quality generally, specific investigations are being carried out into possible pollution sources in Port Navas creek.

We take this opportunity politely to ask boat-users in the area:

- to maintain septic tanks and holding tanks
- follow recommended codes of practice when using paints, anti-fouling, fuel or other chemicals
- to avoid the use of bleach altogether for boat or slipway cleaning
- not to empty holding tanks, heads or bilges into the creek
- to report any incident to the Environment Agency 24 hr pollution hotline : 0800 80 70 60

## SHORE SIGNAGE

It is our intention to erect suitable signage this year regarding access to the oyster farm, parking restrictions, use of the slipway and foreshore and additional signage at suitable access points on the river concerning the oyster beds.

## SMILE!

The oyster farm now records 24-hour CCTV surveillance with infra-red cameras and silent trip sensors so that on the rare occasions that we are not at work, we can still keep an eye on our little babies!

After what seems like a long, wet winter, we look forward to seeing you on the quay during a long, hot Summer.

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