

Surfing in Cornwall Began 80 Years Ago

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The far western tip of England, Cornwall, home to King Arthur, juts out between the English Channel and the rough waters of the Celtic Sea. In Cornwall lie the traditional home lands of the Duke of Cornwall (aka The Prince of Wales).

Surfing began 80 years ago in this west country with Celtic roots, lands where tin mining inspired the Poldark stories. At the village of Perranporth on the northern shore facing breakers of the Celtic Sea, surfers ventured into the chilly waters on boards made of two planks some 60 inches long by 14 inches wide and held together by cross pieces.

Hawaiians didn't go to Cornwall. No one went there to teach the sport of kings. In the Great War of 1914-1918 soldiers of Perranporth served in the trenches of France where they encountered servicemen from other nations of the empire.

When there were moments to talk about homes and hobbies, the young men from Durban, South Africa extolled their beaches and the thrill of riding waves on "boards". When the surviving

Cornishmen came home, they joined planks together, stretched out on the narrow boards and surfed in shivering seas.

The visitor industry brought travelers anxious to try the new sport—if they could find boards. Tom Tremewan ran a building and undertaking business at 38, St. Piran's Road. In the back amongst the ironmonger and decorator supplies where wooden coffins were made, Tom made "surfboards" and sold them for a price equal today to ten pence.

Tremewan manufactured "coffin lid" boards until World War II, when barricades were put up and mines laid along the northern beaches. After the war, specialized plywood originally developed for aircraft, was made into surfboards. Four boards, each 48 inches by 12 inches, could be cut from a single sheet, then steamed and bent. While modern materials and improvements have supplanted plywood, still there are surfers who buy ply boards from #38, St. Piran's Road.

This history is derived from a Cornish World article by Douglas Wilson. He interviewed a lady born in the parish of Perranzabuloe in 1914; Jennie Heath has surfed at

Perranporth with a wooden board since she was 10—and still surfs today. A surfing photographer and historian, Wilson's pictures illustrate the book, *You Should Have Been There Yesterday* (Seas Edge Publications, 1994), a history of British surfing.

Doug Wilson came to surfing in 1959. A qualified lifeguard trained in London, Doug writes: "On a cold March day I walked out to Fistral Beach to check out the surf and see what I had let myself in for. An onshore wind blowing at gale force was my introduction to the surf beaches of North Cornwall."

Doug joined the local Surf Life Saving Club. At that time the popular type of board was a four-foot ply board with a bent end. Hollow wooden surfboards, some 14 feet long, came next. Due to their length and weight, they were difficult to maneuver, especially in small surf.

Doug says hollow wooden boards probably were used on Cornish beaches between the wars although little information is available from that period. "The real breakthrough", writes Doug, "came in 1962 with the influx of Australian and American board

riders bringing with them the new polyurethane short board ... "

From that time, rapid growth hit the sport of surfing in Cornwall. Surfers from the Surf Life Saving Clubs took on the new short board technology. The body board has replaced the four foot marine ply board.

Doug notes that in the early years there was some resistance to surfers from local councils. Yet some officials recognized the economic potential of the sport. Surfing was the impetus for new business efforts.

In 1965, The Surf Centre—the first surf shop in Europe—opened in Newquay, Cornwall. Today there are more than 40 surf shops in the town of Falmouth alone; one of them is Doug's, called the Surf House. And GUL Wet Suits of Bodmin is one of the largest wet suit manufacturers in Europe.

A while back, Doug "spotted an old wooden nine-foot surfboard screwed into the ceiling of a local pub together with a framed picture circa 1910 in Hawaii". He sent me a laser print of that photo—it's one you can see in the OCC archives.

Pictured in front of the original Club are Duke and David, Keoki and Joe with their longboards and silent film star Betty Compson standing right in front of Duke. The publican gave the board to Doug. It's some nine feet long and has the name "Jock" printed on it. Doug would like to discover more about it and is photographing the board from all angles for possible verification. Do we have an old-timer who may know this board?

If you visit Cornwall and want to surf or ask for guidance about local waters, stop by Doug Wilson's Surf House at Packet Quays in Falmouth. ☺



—Photo courtesy Royal Institution of Cornwall
Surfers posed on the beach in Perranporth, Cornwall, in 1921.