

THE PENZANCE HARBOUR CHARTER OF 1512

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This is the earliest document in the possession of the Corporation of Penzance, being more than a century older than the incorporation of the Borough in 1614. It has been mentioned and quoted from by several writers on Penzance,¹ but never previously printed in full. It was granted by King Henry VIII on 16th March 1512 and bears his signature. The text is as follows:—

HENRY R by the Kyng

Henry by the Grace of God Kynge of Englonde and of Fraunce and Lorde of Irlond to our Styward Receyvour Auditor Reves and Baillyffs of our Towne of Pensans within our Countye of Cornwall and to our Admyrall and Havenar and to alle other our officers and true liegemen within our seid Countye gretynge

We for certen consideracions and causes us and our Councell especiall movyng have gyven and graunted and by thies our placard gyve and graunte unto our tennants of the seid towne of Pensance and to their heires and successours tennants of the same for and toward the reparacion of our key and bulleworks at Pensance aforseid for saufgard of all shippes resortyng to the same and of our seid towne alle manner of profits that unto us or our heirs Kyngs of Englonde shold or ought to growe by reason of the ankerage kylage and bussellage of every shippe that shall hereafter fortune to arryve and resorte at and to our seid towne or kaye to have holde and enjoye the same profits unto our seid tennants their heires and successours tennants and inhabitants within the same towne to their owne use and behooffe from the Feste of Seynt Mighell Tharchaungell last past as long as they do well and competently repayr and maynteyn the seid kaye and bullworks for the saufgard of alle suche shippes as shall lond at the same and for the saufgard and defence of our seid towne

Wherfore we wolle and commaunde you and every of you our seid officers that ye and every of you suffre our seid tennants their heires and successours inhabitants within the same towne peasibly to enjoye the seid profitts in forme aforseid and that the tenor of thies our seid letters of placard by you our seid Auditor to be entryd in your bokes of accompt of thissues and profitts of our seid towne which entre shalbe at alle tymes unto you aswell for the allowaunce of the seid profitts as to our seid Styward Admyrall Havener Receyvour Baillyffs and Reves of the same a sufficient warrant and discharge at all tymys agens us and our seid heires in that behalf

Gevyn under our Pryvy Signet and signe manuell at our Paleys of Westmyenster the xvth day of Marche in the third yere of our reign.

(Seal)

It is not known when the quay at Penzance was first built, but this was almost certainly undertaken by some lord of the Manor of Alverton, which included the whole of Penzance and large areas of countryside to the west; an inquest taken after the death in 1321 of Lord Tyes, lord of Alverton, mentions burgesses, fishing boats and a chapel at Penzance, the chapel being St. Mary's (on the site of the modern St. Mary's Church) which Tyes had founded and endowed on the headland above the quay².

1. E.g. J. S. Courtney, *Guide to Penzance* (1845), 8; R. Edmonds, *The Land's End District* (1862), 243; G. B. Millett, *Penzance Past and Present* (1876), 12.
2. G. H. Doble, *Old Penzance and St. Mary's Chapel* (1943), 2.

A later lord of Alverton obtained a grant of a market and fair for Penzance in 1332, and in 1337 it was one of the ports paying an annual rent to the newly established Duchy of Cornwall; this rent was only 12s as compared with £5 paid by Mousehole and £6 by St. Ives³. The maritime activity at Penzance was not limited to fishing, for in 1425, 1432 and 1440 Penzance ships were licensed to carry pilgrims to Spain, suggesting regular traffic to Campostella.⁴

The grant of 1512 has unusual features as regards both grantor and grantees. The lordship of Alverton was then vested in the Crown (on 4th July 1513 Henry VIII appointed receivers of the lordship and manor of Alverton and Penzance part of the lands of Alianora late Countess of Somerset but then in the King's hands),⁵ and the wording of the harbour charter of 1512 ('our tennants of the seid towne') shows clearly that Henry made it both as monarch and as manorial lord. Moreover, the grant seems to presume the existence of some formal organisation of the inhabitants of Penzance capable of receiving and administering the harbour dues and assuming responsibility for the quay and bulwarks. Possibly the situation at Penzance was similar to that at St. Ives, where from 1573 (and probably earlier) until incorporation of the Borough in 1639, town affairs were run by a body of the chief men with a head styled variously Town Warden, Head Warden and Portreeve.⁶ There is no direct evidence of the existence of such a body at Penzance prior to incorporation, but it is hard to see how the grant of harbour dues could have been effective without one.

On 9th May 1614 Penzance was granted a Charter of Incorporation by King James I, which included an *inspeximus* of the grant of 1512 and a ratification and confirmation to the newly created Corporation of the rights then granted. However, by this date the Manor of Alverton was no longer vested in the Crown, and one of the first acts of the new Corporation was to secure as much freedom as possible from manorial control. On 11th January 1615 they purchased from Richard Daniell of Truro, Lord of the Manor of Alverton and Penzance, for £34 and a perpetual annuity of £1, a three-cornered plot of land for erection of a market house (now the site of Lloyds Bank), all his rights in respect of the town markets and fairs, and also:—

“. . . the stone peere or key of Pensance aforesaide and all profits of ankeredge killedge bushelledge and wharfaiadge within the saide key of Pensance unto him the said Richarde Daniell any way rightfully belonginge or apperteyninge the placinge of a measurer and boateleave excepted”.

The rights thus acquired provided the foundation of the future corporate income, the harbour and the market being normally farmed out to individuals who paid the Corporation a fixed rent and themselves collected and retained the dues. The earliest recorded letting of the harbour was in 1629 for £13; by 1700 the figure was £40; by 1800 it was £325; and by 1839 there was a dramatic increase to £2112, following extensive reconstruction of the harbour and the passing in 1817 of an Act regulating the harbour

3. P. L. Hull, *The Caption of Seisin of the Duchy of Cornwall* (1971), 137.

4. *48th Report Deputy Keeper of Public Records* (1887), 236, 298, 355.

5. J. S. Brewer, *Letters of Henry VIII*, I 636.

6. J. H. Matthews, *History of St. Ives* (1892), Chap. XII.

dues. The total dependence of the 'Old Corporation' (1614-1834) on the harbour and market dues is shown by details of its income for 1655/6 (the first year for which the Borough Accounts are preserved) and for 1832/37:—

		1655/6	1832/3
		£ s	£ s
Harbour	...	25 5	1410 —
Market	...	67 —	530 —
Miscellaneous	...	6 10	153 13
Total	...	98 15	2093 13

Today Penzance harbour is still owned and operated by the Corporation, but normally works to an annual deficit which in 1970/1 amounted to £7267.

7. *Reports from Commissioners on Municipal Corporations* (1835), 573.

All other references are to original records in the custody of the Town Clerk of Penzance, to whom my best thanks are due for access to them.