

Organisation: National Maritime Museum Cornwall

Title of the Object: Pair of Cornish fishwife's pattens



Description of the object and story: These are a pair of over shoes worn by a Cornish fishwife from around 1810-1820s. They are rare survivors of work wear from a period where not many objects survive. The role of men is rightly celebrated in Cornwall's history of fishing, one of the pillars of the Cornish economy, but those of the women and children, who were essential in this industry is often overlooked or forgotten. That's why the existence and survival of these objects is so important for us.

Fishwives worked as hard as fishermen. Their role was mostly in the processing of fish once caught, the washing, the salting, the storing, the readying for sale. It was dirty hard work. Pattens, a raised wooden platform with straps, would protect an ordinary shoe from the oil of the fish and rubbish on the ground. It meant whoever wore these had another pair of shoes, which she chose to protect by wearing pattens and that she had enough money to purchase these or have them made.

We like to wonder who this woman was? Did she have a family? What were her dreams? And how different was her life from how we live today? Although her story may be a common one it is special to us. We can use these shoes as a gateway into her life. We could walk a mile in her shoes.

We can also explore the story of the patten maker, their work, their life. And a wider story of fashion and design.

