

## The Cockles of Penclawdd

A few miles west of Swansea, on the northern coast of the Gower peninsula in South Wales, you will find the coastal village of Penclawdd. In this area of rugged beauty, you can stand at the shoreline and feel the ancients calling as strongly as the pull of the unpredictable tides. Once upon a time, not so very long ago, you would have seen the cockle-women of Penclawdd bent to their arduous task. As the ebbing tide retreated they would populate these sands, each with their donkey, and their *cram*, *riddle* and *scrap*. Scraping away at the sand to expose the burrowing molluscs they would work at gathering the cockles until the tide decided to turn. The waters in these parts show no mercy and the exhausted women needed their wits about them should the tide begin to advance.

Working the sands to eke a living since losing their husbands to the pits, in one way or another, these determined and durable women were famed for their endurance on this unforgiving land. The weather could be harsh and severe, biting winds would rip through the thickest of flannel cloth and bare hands would chafe with exposure and rough sand.

First the women would scrape the sand with a *scrap*, or curved scraper, and then using a *cram*, they would rake the exposed cockles into a pile. The cockles were then collected in a *riddle*, a large mesh sieve, and those not large enough would fall through the holes. Washed in pools of seawater, the shellfish would be gathered up in large wicker baskets and taken off to market in Swansea aboard the cockle train, or sold door to door in the villages.

You won't see these women anymore, but the industry has survived against all odds and remains as loyal to the traditional methods as is permitted. The work is now mostly done by men; tractors have replaced the donkeys, and the horses with their carts. Cockles from all over the area of the Gower peninsula take the name of Penclawdd cockles; believed to be the best in the British Isles, they are famed for their flavour and sweet succulent qualities.

Found between the Gower and Carmarthenshire, the Burry Inlet is the estuary of the River Loughor. Cockles have been harvested there since Roman times and the area is still renowned as a thriving cockle bed with its rich and fertile mud flats. Laws were passed in 1965 that were intended to protect the traditional cockle trade of the area for future generations. Gatherers must be licensed to collect there, and there are only a certain number of licenses granted each year. The gathering must still be done by hand using a rake and a riddle.

Once a flourishing sea port, and bustling centre of activity for north Gower, the village of Penclawdd has always been associated with cockling. It isn't quite as thriving these days, and much of the cockling is done in other parts of the estuary, but the association still remains, and deservedly so. The area has fought against the changing times and tides in order to uphold an industry that has spanned centuries of Welsh history.

Not surprisingly, there is a strong culinary tradition of cockles amongst the people of Wales, especially those in the South. A traditional Welsh breakfast in these parts may consist of cockles, bacon and laverbread, and many of the old recipes contain simple ways to enjoy cockles. One such way was to fry

fresh breadcrumbs and spring onions in butter, add the cockles until heated through, and then serve with some fresh parsley.

But my favourite has to be Welsh Cackle Pie (pastel gocos). I won't tell a lie, I cannot stand molluscs of any description, but were anything going to tempt me it would be this. First you need to prepare the cockles. Make sure that they are suitably scrubbed and washed to remove all grit and sand then place them in a large pot with salty water to cover. Bring it the boil and cook for 2 minutes, with a lid on, then remove the cockles from the liquor. When cool enough to handle, slip them from their shells using a knife. Line a dish with short-crust pastry, keeping enough for a lid. Make alternate layers of well seasoned cockles (but tread carefully with the salt) and bacon, cover with the cooking liquor and put the pastry lid on. Make a few holes in the pastry lid and bake the pie in a hot oven for about forty five minutes. Remove from the oven and eat piping hot, although it is probably pretty good cold as well. I think it may appreciate a good handful of fresh parsley and perhaps a slight squeeze of lemon.

So next time you visit the Gower peninsula and stare in awe at the sea, perhaps with some pickled cockles speared on a toothpick, spare a thought for those cockle-women of old, downside up, doing what women have done since time began; doing what needs to be done.