

**Location & Access:**

Pentewan is a small village on the south Cornwall coast, just 4 miles from St Austell and 2 miles from Mevagissey. It is easily reached via the B3273 road, which branches off from the A390 at St Austell.

Car parking is available in the village.

The short walk through the village is over flat terrain and is accessible by wheelchairs.

The length of the extension walk can be adjusted according to desire or ability.



Pentewan harbour basin — photo: Paul Berry

**Key Geography:** Industrial heritage of the china clay industry, tourism, canal system.

**Description:** Pentewan's harbour dates back to Medieval times when it was primarily a fishing community with some quarrying, tin streaming, and agriculture, but in the early nineteenth century it was developed as a port serving the china clay industry. At its peak, Pentewan shipped one third of Cornwall's 'white gold'. However, continual problems with silting caused by tin and clay mining, and the rise of rival ports at Charlestown and Par meant that its leading status lasted for little more than a century. The last trading ship left Pentewan in 1940, and although the harbour basin remains, it is now redundant and access to the sea is no longer possible. Pentewan eventually turned to tourism, and since 1945, the village has been dominated by the five-star Pentewan Sands caravan and camping site that sits behind the excellent sandy beach to the east. The village has retained a couple of public houses, and offers cafes and shops for visitors, along with numerous bed and breakfasts, Air BnBs, and other holiday services such as water sports equipment and cycle hire. A short stroll around the village reveals clues to a fascinating social history and industrial heritage connected to its days as a major china clay port (see yellow numbers on map).

1. The walk begins in the village car park at SX 018 472.

2. Turn right, and pass the Ship Inn to reach the village square. The settlement grew up here around a small hill called 'The Round', which is visible behind the buildings. Businesses in the square now make a living from tourism, but at one time, Pentewan would have been a self-sufficient community, with carpenters, builders, a cobbler, a baker, a ship supplier, and a butcher all trading here. There were also churches of various denominations, and three pubs serving mainly sailors and dock workers. Apart from the Ship Inn which continues to trade, there was also a pub in the square called the 'Jolly Sailor' (eventually burnt down with Jubilee House built on the site), and the 'Hawkins Arms' which used

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**Curiosity Questions:**

# China clay is also known as 'kaolin'. What does this name mean?

# William Cookworthy (who discovered china clay in Cornwall) was also a minister in which branch of religion?

# What is the name of the famous tourist attraction sited in an old china clay pit close to Pentewan?

# Can you name the famous TV detective actor who was raised in nearby St Austell?

**Further information:**

# <https://devongeography.wordpress.com/2023/08/26/a-walk-around-pentewan-a-village-that-once-shipped-a-third-of-cornwalls-china-clay/>

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to operate from where the 'Piskey Cove' gift shop is currently found. Some of the older buildings in the square (along with the walls of the dock basin) have been constructed from Pentewan Stone, a variety of Cornish elvan.

3. Fishing vessels used this port from the sixteenth century, hauling up onto the beach nearby. Local newspapers reported smuggling activity in the early nineteenth century. Fronting the village square is Pentewan's impressive but now empty harbour basin. It doesn't need much imagination to vision this dock area packed with ships and its quayside bustling with people during the boom days of china clay exports. The quay area beyond the ship basin has been tastefully restored, and still offers some clear clues to the industrial heritage of the village.

4. On the hillside behind the quay can be seen a row of Georgian buildings known as 'The Terrace'. Completed in 1821, they were originally advertised as suitable homes for sea captains. At the end of the terrace is the All Saints' Church, rebuilt using Pentewan stone by local landowner Sir Charles Hawkins. There is evidence of earlier buildings on this site, possibly a monastery.

5. Retrace your steps back to the Ship Inn, and turn left just past the pub to explore the south side of the dock basin. As you walk along the path with the basin to your left, the St Austell River runs parallel behind the buildings on the right-hand side, draining the Pentewan valley into the sea. Also known as the River Vinnick or the White River (due to the discolouration by china clay waste), it has its source on the granite mass of Hensbarrow, north of St Austell. Throughout its length, the river has been heavily modified and straightened so that the lower parts now resemble a canal.



*The Ship Inn, Pentewan — photo: Paul Berry*

6. In 1744, a small harbour was built at Pentewan by the wealthy landowning Hawkins family from Trewithen, but by 1800 it had fallen into disrepair. Sir Christopher Hawkins began a rebuild programme from 1820 (at a cost of £22,000), and a new harbour was opened in 1826, partly to improve the existing pilchard fishery but also to turn the village into a major china clay port. At this time, china clay was being exported at Charlestown, and Hawkins, who owned clay bearing land, wanted his own harbour. Apart from exporting Hawkins' china clay, Pentewan also imported other heavy goods like coal, limestone and timber. The clay and coal were kept far apart in the port to prevent contamination, with clay loaded on the south side of the basin and coal on the north. By the middle part of the nineteenth century, 65,000 tons of china clay were being mined each year in the St Austell area by around 7,000 workers. China clay was transported to Pentewan initially by road wagons, then a horse-drawn tramway, and eventually a narrow-gauge railway. At one time, Pentewan handled one third of the county's production, and in 1858, an impressive 14,000 tons were shipped from this tiny village. When in full working order, 200-ton ships could enter the dock basin at Pentewan. They could also turn in the generous harbour space before departing.

Although Pentewan's viability as a port was soon to come to a close because of silting, the industry thrived for many more years in the county. By 1910, Cornwall accounted for 50% of the world's china clay extraction – around a million tons a year, 75% of which was exported. Kaolin (to give its proper name) was first discovered in the St Austell area by William Cookworthy in 1746, after he realised that people were prepared to pay extremely high prices for porcelain shipped from China. Today, the St Austell deposits (which have yielded 120 million tons of china clay and are good for a further 50 years) have been largely abandoned. Some mining still continues, but with nothing like the quantities produced in the early 1900s when Cornwall monopolised world supply. The French company IMRYS is the only remaining operator in this area, but has shifted most of its operations to Brazil. Apart from its use in the ceramics industry, china clay is used in a wide variety of household products, such as paper, toothpaste, make-up, skincare creams, and pharmaceutical products.

7. If you keep walking to the end of the dock basin, you will reach the point where ships entered and left via a single channel.

The remains of a 26 feet wide double lock gate can still be seen, which allowed vessels to be moved

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even at low tides. Sluice gates located next to the path helped to keep the basin's water level constant. One of these was removed from its original position, and can still be seen by the path today. It was taken out of use in 2012 as part of the flood risk improvements carried out by the Environment Agency following flooding in the village on November 17th, 2010. Improvements included the installation of additional twin flood relief culverts from the harbour into the channel and a new outlet into the White River.

8. Continue along the path towards the sea, where you will discover the old harbour breakwater. In his original harbour design, Hawkins constructed a 500 foot long pier to try to prevent silting of the harbour entrance and river mouth due to drifting of beach material east across Mevagissey Bay combining with material brought downstream from nearby tin and clay works. There is a history of tin streaming in the vicinity of Pentewan. The 'Happy Union' tin stream opened up in 1780 and was worked down the river valley towards the sea. A second operation called 'Wheal Virgin' worked up the valley. However, both of these ventures were short-lived, and Happy Union closing in 1837, with Wheal Virgin closing around 1874.



River St Austell — photo: Paul Berry

9. In 1831, a new pier head was built with a breakwater projecting far beyond the old structure. But the fight against nature was to no avail, and a bar of sand continued to build up and restrict access to the harbour, except at high tide. By 1871, Hawkins was resigned to his harbour choking up with sand and silt, so he cut a new deep channel and added new reservoirs upstream to store water that could be used to flush out material from time to time. By 1878, there had been a general slump in china clay exports, and just a few clay ships were now using the new deep channel. In 1910, the original wooden breakwater was replaced by a concrete and granite block pier to continue the constant war against deposition at the river mouth. The last cargo (110 tons) of china clay to leave Pentewan was carried to Runcorn by the schooner 'Duchess' on September 28th, 1929, while the last commercial ship to leave the harbour was 'Scarcity', loaded with 300 tons of sand in 1940. After the second World War, the basin was cleaned out, new lock gates fitted, and the channel cleared once more – but by now the final chapter in the port's history had been written. With no more trading vessels calling, it was left to a few pleasure craft to use the dock up to the 1960s. Today, access to the sea is no longer possible.

10. As china clay trade began to decline at the start of the 1900s, a new venture was started where the St Austell river meets the sea. In 1907, the Pentewan Brick and Stone Company made concrete blocks here, employing many local men. The enterprise ceased in the 1940s, but a sandworks took over the site, producing raw materials for the construction industry until 1965. The original building on the foreshore has since been washed away, but some remains are visible at low tide. Some of the old drying sheds still exist, and a lorry weigh bridge and office can be found in the village car park. On the south side of the basin, there used to be a raised concrete structure which enabled sand to be loaded into barges, and a number of rails from the old track can still be found there.

11. Follow the line of the ruined breakwater onto the beach which was mined for defence during World War Two. Bombs fell near Pentewan in 1941, and an air raid was carried out on the port in 1942, destroying the Methodist chapel and damaging several houses. A pill box was erected in the harbour area to add to the defences. From the shore, you can identify the area to the north of the river known as 'Little Beach', and see to the south the superb sandy shoreline of Mevagissey Bay.

12. Tourists had started to come to this area in the 1920s and 1930s to stay in caravans on local farms and in first generation bed and breakfasts, and the area is now dominated by the massive Pentewan Sands Holiday Park that occupies the bay.

13. It is now time to return to the car park, from where you can extend your walk if you wish.

It is possible to extend your visit with a short walk exploring the old tramway and Pentewan railway

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that were once vital to the success of port, bringing china clay down to the harbour. This old industrial transport lifeline now forms a public footpath and cycle path connecting the village to nearby St Austell (see pink letters on map).

The narrow roads of the time were totally inadequate for hauling wagons of china clay to the port and return with other heavy goods like coal and timber. So, in 1829, Sir Christopher Hawkins constructed a horse-drawn tramway to link Pentewan with St Austell. This meant he could more efficiently transport china clay from the quarries on St Austell Moor and tin from the Polgooth mines to his new harbour. Imported coal could then be hauled back to the mines, and (later) to the St Austell gasworks. The tramway ran almost due north from the village without need for any significant earthworks or engineering features, hugging the St Austell River for most of its 4-mile length. It used gravity to transport heavily-laden clay wagons down an incline from St Austell and then horses to pull them along the flat section to Pentewan and back again.

In 1874, the tramway was replaced by a 2' 6" narrow-gauge railway. The first steam locomotive to run on the line was called the 'Pentewan', and was succeeded by many others over the following years. Rolling stock consisted of forty-two 4-wheeled wagons, each capable of carrying 4-5 tons of china clay. However, shortly after the upgrade to the use of steam locomotives, the Great Western Railway decided to direct its china clay traffic to Fowey, and by 1877, shipments at Pentewan were dwindling. By 1880 the whole operation had become unprofitable. However, a boom followed two years later, and the line remained in operation until 1918, when the rail track and locomotives were requisitioned by the War Office, the track being the same gauge as that used to service the trenches in France in the First World War. The last load of china clay was brought down the railway on January 29th, 1918, and the last actual train ran on the line on March 2nd, 1918. Sadly, there are few remains of the old railway system visible today.

Although primarily a mineral line, the Pentewan railway line did support a limited passenger service from 1830. There was no formal timetable, and customers would have been conveyed in the wagons by request. Early accounts quote a fare of 3d. The clay wagons were also cleaned out and fitted with wooden form seats for occasional use on specially arranged excursions, the famous annual Sunday school 'tea treat trains.' The organisers brought bands, held parades, and ran games, while each child attending was given a free saffron bun weighing about 1 lb, known as a tea treat bun.

A. The walk along the old tramway and railway line begins at the cycle hire hut (SX 017 472) just around the corner to the north of the car park.

B. At Mill Garage just across the river, there was once a bone mill worked by a waterwheel that crushed bones with big metal stamps. Vitriol (a sulphate) was then mixed with the bones to make a fertiliser that was collected by farmers in horse drawn carts. Barges brought the vitriol into Pentewan's port in large glass jars.

C. The entrance to the Pentewan Trail is clearly marked, and beyond the wooden railings close to the start are some overgrown ponds. These are the remains of four reservoirs used to collect water from the river, which through a series of sluice gates could be controlled and periodically released to flush out sediments blocking the harbour and the channels approaching it.

D. The trail crosses a small bridge, and continues through a shaded woodland area with the St Austell River flowing to the left, its channel severely straightened and resembling a canal.

E. The path passes a caravan and camp site on the left, the Little Winnick Touring Park.

F. The path then passes a footbridge leading over the river to Nansladron.

G. It progresses through King's Wood, a relic of ancient woodland originally owned by the realm, hence its name. The woodland was later purchased from Charles I by Oliver Sawle of Penrice, and in more



*Remains of old industrial buildings at the river's mouth — photo: Paul Berry*

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recent times, was managed by the Forestry Commission who planted many conifers here in the 1960s. King's Wood is now managed by the Woodland Trust who bought it in 1988 after a successful appeal for public donations. The Trust has promoted public access and has slowly cleared conifers to encourage more broadleaved species.

H. The path runs through a small car park and then eventually bears right away from the river and onto a lane for a short distance.

I. It passes the River Valley Holiday Park, and a village with the unusual name of London Apprentice that comes from the London Apprentice Inn which used to stand here on the St Austell to Pentewan road, trading from 1815 to 1871 and probably longer. In 1833, a coal yard and sidings were built on the nearby railway here to supply the tin mines at Polgooth, and the village may well have grown around this. At this time, the railway line also brought coal from Pentewan for the kilns of a number of small mica works and other industries along the line, as well as the St Austell gas works. The line also carried Baltic timber to St Austell for making barrels. In the nineteenth century, most of the village was engaged in tin mining, but today the village caters mainly for tourists, with a shop and restaurant, and a nearby network of footpaths and cycle trails running through Kings Wood.

J. The trail continues to round the back of a water treatment works, and soon meets up with the B3273 road.

K. You can turn to retrace your steps to Pentewan from here, or turn right onto the pavement/cycle path, and continue on to the town of St Austell. Cyclists might want to continue on National Cycle Network route 3 along Sawles Rd and through St Austell to the Eden Project, or perhaps take the Green Corridor Trail from St Austell to Wheal Martin, before continuing to Eden.

Keen walkers could extend their time at Pentewan by following the coast path southwards to Mevagissey, or northwards to Black Head or even to Charleston.



Old lock gates, Pentewan — photo: Paul Berry



Old harbour quay, Pentewan — photo: Paul Berry

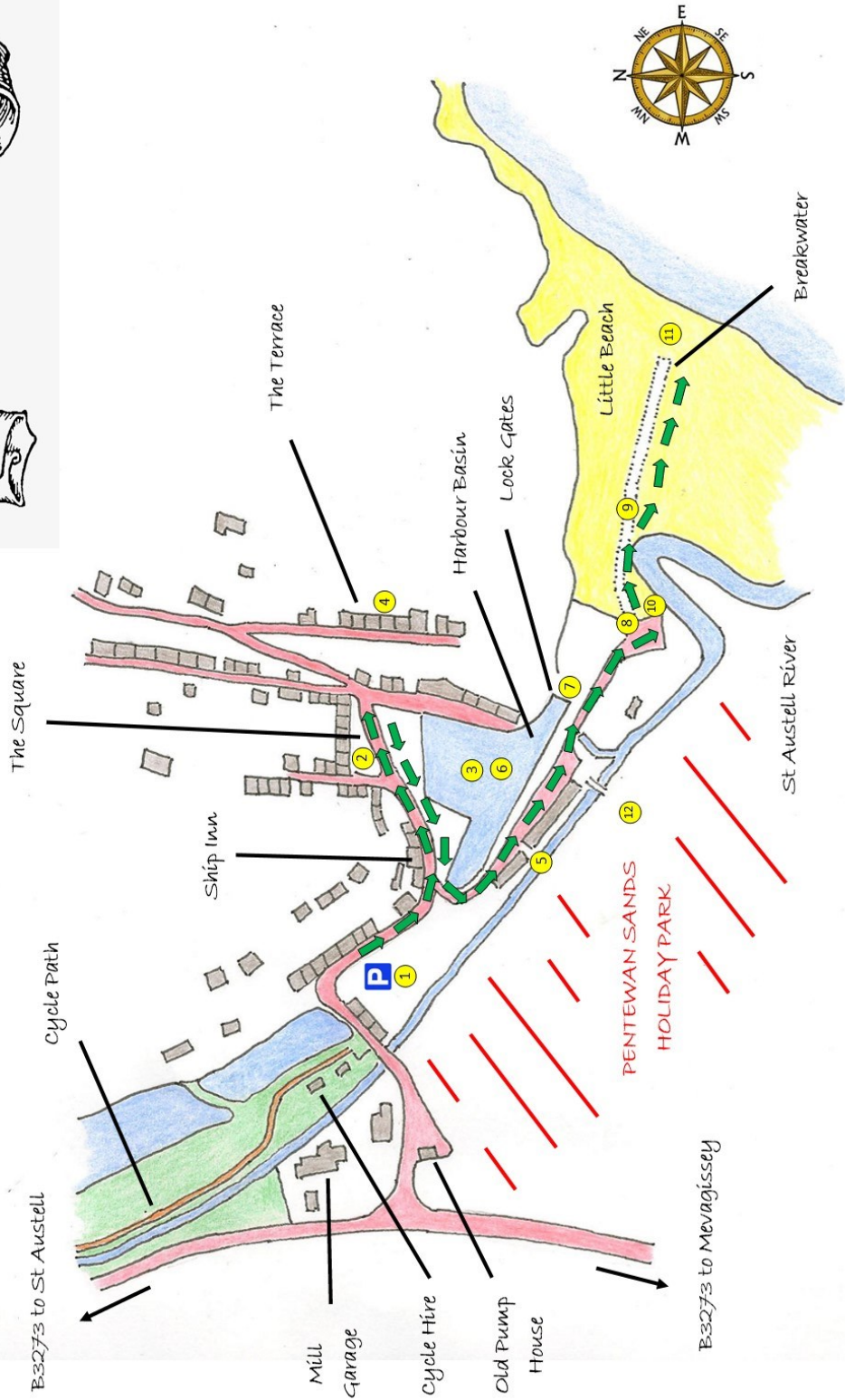
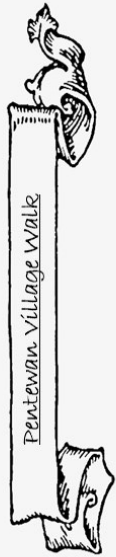
**Answers to Curiosity Questions:**

# China clay is also known as 'kaolin'. What does this name mean? *(It means 'high ridge' in Chinese, and comes from a village in south-eastern China)*

# William Cookworthy (who discovered china clay in Cornwall) was also a minister in which branch of religion? *(Quakers)*

# What is the name of the famous tourist attraction sited in an old china clay pit close to Pentewan? *(The Eden Project)*

# Can you name the famous TV detective actor who was raised in nearby St Austell? *(John Nettles of 'Bergerac' fame)*



The Square

Ship Inn

The Terrace

Harbour Basin

Lock Gates

Little Beach

Breakwater

St Austell River

PENTEWAN SANDS  
HOLIDAY PARK

B3273 to St Austell

Mill

Garage

Cycle Hire

Old Pump House

B3273 to Mevagissey

