Cod Tales And Military History At Castle Hill National Historic Site

By Jennifer Bain
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The sun sets on Castle Hill National Historic Site in Placentia, Newfoundland's Petite Canada.

Christopher Newhook pulls out a pair of adorable cloth cod and ties fabric knives at Castle Hill National Historic Site and gets to work showing why this humble fish changed the world.

He deftly cuts off their heads with a thrusting knife, noting how people once used every bit, eating the eyes, tongues, jowls and cheeks and using the heart for soup. Then he slices open the bellies, removing the innards for fertilizer but saving the livers to render down for oil that once lit the streets of Europe and then became a medicine to treat rheumatism and prevent rickets.

Finally, he switches to a flat splitting knife and removes the backbone to be saved with the intestines. Then he sweeps double-sided fish tails that would have been used to be salted, dried on a rocky beach and then shipped around the world in the days before refrigeration.



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Stuffed cod that can be guided and prepared for selling help Castle Hill National Historic Site tell its story (Jennifer Bain)

"A lady in Bonavista made these cod," says Newhook, who was a long-time interpreter here at this site in Placentia, Newfoundland and Labrador before taking a media officer role with Parks Canada that covers all 200 and 30 installations, private virtual tour building, photography, interpretive panels and signage. "This is for kids but I'm going to tell you, the adults love this. The pure cuteness of it, but also it really does tell the story."

Why were European fishermen once drawn to the Grand Banks off the coast of Newfoundland to spend a seemingly unlimited supply?

In those days, Codroids weren't supposed to eat meat on Fridays and so many turned to fish. "Any fish will do," Newhook says, "but what's the cheapest, most successful fish that travels the world, that can go to the top of mountains and the bottom of pits without it going rancid a day or two later because it's salted? Cod, right?"



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A Castle Hill's visitor centre, there's now satellite in this display showing French and Basque fishermen on the beach in what is now Placentia (Jennifer Bain)

Around the corner in the visitor center, there's a life-size scene with salted cod drying on a stone beach that represents Placentia around 1790. It shows a well-equipped Basque fisherman wearing sheet metal breastplate and arguing with a poorly equipped French fisherman wearing cloth. More importantly, it shows the mannequins standing over several dozen pieces of saltfish drying in the sun.

"Because we can see it and it will stay preserved, this fish over here it's probably 20 years old," says Newhook. "We could eat that. That's how fish. When it's warm in the here in the summer you can smell it and the seals will walk in through the door."

After years of hearing about how important the cod fishery was to this Canadian province — until the moratorium was announced in 1992 and suddenly it wasn't important at all — and visited a way of life — finally understand thanks to this short but vivid demonstration.

In Europe dried cod nourished the hungry employed thousands of fishermen. Read the coffers of many a merchant and spurred the shipbuilding industry' interpretive signage explains. "The kings of Britain and France also valued the fishery as a training ground for sailors to man the battle fleets in time of war."



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A view of modern-day Placentia through cannons at Castle Hill National Historic Site (Jennifer Bain)

Castle Hill is a 17th-century fortress that overlooks Placentia, the original French capital of Newfoundland from 1662 to 1713 and from 1811 to 1815. It was the site of a garrison established for control of Newfoundland, and why the early rivalry here would have been perfect for drying cod.

No one knows when the first European fishermen visited Placentia, which was come to rich fishing grounds. Basque fisher visited for more than a century before the French colony was founded in 1662.

Men fished from small, open boats called chaloupes, which were one of the few vessels small enough to hold down by a boat weight. The catch was landed on the shelf or stage and pushed into the dried on flakes made of spruce boughs. Then it was transported to the "stage head" where it was split, boned and laid flat. The header saved the liver for its oil and discarded the head and guts. The splitter cut out the backbone so the fish would lie flat.

Then the salter stacked the fish, covering each layer with the right amount of salt. After a day or two, the salt became a preservative by working its way into the flesh. Excess salt was washed off the fish before laying the fish to the sun. So when partially dried they were stacked to press out the moisture. Drying and stacking were repeated until the fish were completely dried. Finally, the fish were graded for size and quality and shipped to market.



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The Castle Hill visitor center is tucked into a hill (Jennifer Bain

The French fortified the hill and sheltered harbor to protect their extensive cod fishery. France successfully defended the site in war, but the colony was ceded to Great Britain by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The colonists were moved to Île Royale now Cape Breton Island to what's now Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site. Though the English won control of Newfoundland, they maintained a garrison here until 1811 and changed the name to Placentia.

This fort fell into ruins before Parks Canada made it a national historic site in 1966.

It's easy when I get a private tour before the 2023 season starts, and we head outside to explore the trails. Newhook leads me down part of the original path soldiers took to Placentia, through a cliffside spruce forest and past the remains of fortifications.

It was a wet-worn pathway for the port's poorly paid and beefy fort soldiers, who spent much of their time working as fishermen. We try to imagine how hard it would have been to carry munitions and supplies up the path. Mortar shells weighed up to 200 pounds each while one of the forts 180-pounder guns was about 4,700 pounds (over two tons).



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Parks Canada's Christopher Newhook created a book on Castle Hill's plants while he was an interpreter (Jennifer Bain

Castle Hill, as the name suggests, is set on a seaside bluff overlooking the town that's near the Argentia ferry to North Sydney on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. It's a well-guided site with the option for an audio tour, indoor scavenger hunt and outdoor hunt for 10 commentals.

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Parks Canada's Christopher Newhook walks down the original French road at Castle Hill National Historic Site (Jennifer Bain

"It's amazing that we take the fort's geography," says Newhook, motioning to the landscape and views, and explaining why Castle Hill is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Placentia, as well as Basque headstones at a separate cemetery outside Castle Hill's National Historic Site.

As we walk, we see a pirate ladder in the woods that visitors don't die because of the bugs, and more popular point where we go to the gunnery site. We see how wind and storms have ticked trees are growing, and how Castle Hill's Interpretive Centre is the only place each year that there is lots of cutting back some of the forest to allow for better views of town.

"There's still work to be done," acknowledges Newhook. "There's always work to be done".

While You're in Newfoundland:



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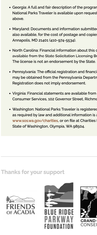
At Ryan Premises National Historic Site, you can see how the French once fished for cod with handlines and baited hooks when you're not on a wooden barrens to stop dry (Jennifer Bain

To learn more about the province's cod fishery, drive three hours to Bonavista to the Ryan Premises National Historic Site. The site take open June 1 to Oct. 8 this year) is a collection of 19th and early 20th century heritage buildings in what was once one of Newfoundland's oldest and biggest inshore fishing communities (outports). Five main white-clapboard buildings were the headquarters of merchant John Ryan and his family from 1870 to 1929. Ryan's fish flakes, sheds and factories" exhibit a the renovation center an exhibit on traditional support functions, the Bonavista Museum, and a Historic Sites Association gift shop. It's next to Bonavista Harbour.



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Parks Canada's Jonathan Harrison stands by the white clapboard buildings at Ryan Premises National Historic Site. It may before the site opened for the season (Jennifer Bain

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