In Cornwall it always works well to have a legendary past. None is better than St Ia: drifting from Ireland on a giant leaf to minister to a scatter of hamlets, hovels and porths, where fishermen pulled up their flimsy boats, dried their nets, and sent their dues to the mother church at Lelant.

St Ia lies buried in her church overlooking the harbour which gives the place its name - Porthia, or St Ives - but her Holy Well lies on Porthmeor, the Great Porth facing the Atlantic and Ireland, where surely she first landed.

For all the legend, the real history of the town starts only in the 14th century as the mediaeval port at Lelant fell victim to ‘the northwest wind that playes the tyrant in this coast by drifts of sand ...’ (Carew, Survey of Cornwall 1602)

St Ives took over the functions of port, market and principal place on the long barren north-west coast of Cornwall, like Aphrodite emerging fully formed from the shifting sands into history. The first certain references to a church are in 1327, the harbour in 1342-43, and the Stennack (tin-ground) in 1334.

So successful was St Ives by the 15th century that a grand new church was built between 1409 and 1428, although legally it was only a chapelry to Lelant until 1869. A new market house, artillery blockhouse (the Castle), and possibly an entire new planned town along Fore Street followed, and were all completed by 1487-90.

This was a cosmopolitan place in both visitors and residents. The Bretons and Irish were particularly well represented, and even the dominant Stephens family of Tregenna came originally from Dungarven in 1470.

Some visitors were not so welcome. The French raided in the 15th century, the Spanish threatened in the 16th century, and St Ives was caught between both sides in the English Civil Wars of the 1640s. Each time the borough organised its defences: at the Castle, on the Island, in the churchyard, and at Porthmeor:

‘... ytt was agreed ... to macke uppe the ballworckes at pormeare ... for to resyst the Spanyards ...’

(Borough Accounts 1596)

But the real need for defence was always against the sand. Borough records and visiting topographers describe the endless, fruitless battle against the sands blown into the harbour off Porthmeor, still then an empty expanse of beach, grazing land, fishers and drying nets: ‘... the peere is sore choked with sand, as is the whole shore ... this calamitie hath indured little aboue fiftie yeares, as the inhabitants doo affirme.’

(Holinshed 1586)
The 18th century saw growing prosperity in St Ives. The pilchard fishery was booming and the town and surrounding area developed into one of Cornwall’s richest, most innovative mining districts. It was unusually early in exploiting copper (c1687), gunpowder (c1700) and steam (Wheal Margaret mid 18th century).

Shipbuilding, rope and sailmaking flourished, as did trade. Imports were almost wholly in support of the mines and fisheries, exports were their produce, and fine merchants’ houses lined the streets.

But this all lay in what contemporaries saw as mediaeval squalor: ‘... the streets are narrow and uneven; they are not lighted, nor regularly paved ... The general appearance is mean ...’ (Topographical Dictionary of England, 1831)

Smuggling, drunkenness, cockfighting, wrestling, hurling and godless riot were, according to John Wesley, the favourite amusements of the people. For the boom to continue, the town needed improved governance, improved roads, and above all an improved harbour.

A remarkable group of individuals came together in St Ives to achieve all this. John Wesley’s twenty-seven challenging visits between 1743-1789 ensured its future reputation as a bastion of Morality and Methodism, although perhaps a little dour with it.

The more secular improvements in public works and new institutions were due to incomers like John Knill, mayor from 1767, who achieved everything single handedly if one believes his own account, and local men such as Samuel Stephens who was also mayor in the 1760s. Stephens embodied much of the change in character and wealth in St Ives, turning during the 1750s and 1760s from merchant to gentleman, from political agent to MP from dissent to Anglican. Rivals and partners, Knill and Stephens recast St Ives much to their own vision.

Stephens employed John Wood the Younger of Bath to design his house at Tregenna, a new alms-house for the Borough in Dove Street, and perhaps also to lay out new streets like Tregenna Place.

Knill engaged the great John Smeaton, whose 1766 plans and reports explain why the pier was built as it was, and how a great wall along Porthmeor would stave off the sands from the harbour. Because of these great works, St Ives was able to exploit its natural fortunes, reaching the height of its prosperity during the first quarter of the 19th century. At that happy time Saint Ives was the metropolis of West Cornwall, and its inhabitants were noted for the polished gaiety of their mode of life; balls, concerts and dinner-parties ...

(Matthews, A guide to St. Ives, 1884)

But the boom would not last. A population of 9,346 in 1861 fell to 7,500 by the end of the century.
The long centuries of modest prosperity in St Ives crashed into a perfect storm in the mid 19th century. Mining had been so prosperous that a whole new town developed at Halsetown (1832-66), and fishing so successful that a new breakwater and pier were constructed to protect the growing fleet in 1864.

From 1810 an industrial quarter of huge fish cellars, ropeworks, cooperages and tight rows of fishermen’s cottages developed behind the great Porthmeor wall. But it was illusory. The 1860s and 1870s saw a rapid collapse: ‘One after the other her industries decayed ... steam navigation was the death-blow to her numerous fleet of sailing-vessels and ... shipbuilding ... Next, mining, and then the fisheries began to fail ... followed by a heavy and long-continued emigration ...’ (Matthews, 1884)

St Ives had to reinvent itself. It had already gained some reputation as a resort: ‘... St. Ives is pleasant and most salubrious; and the spirit of improvement has shown itself ... a better class of houses has been built tastefully designed and well-situated ... an agreeable watering place.’ (Lake’s Parochial History, 1866)

The railway arrived in 1877. This investment was largely as a venture by a consortium of hoteliers and railway operators keen to grasp an opportunity, and the Great Western Railway converted the Stephens’ mansion at Tregenna Castle into a hotel in 1878.

With the holidaymakers came artists. Although they had long been visitors, the creation of a permanent colony only came in the later 1880s. The stunning light, land- and sea-scapes had obviously not been enough: ‘one of the least frequented towns of this district, partly because of a bad reputation as a dirty fishing town, and partly because it has been a little out of the main line of travel.’ (William Trost Richards, 1878)

The artists had an incalculable impact, effectively advertising the attractions of the area through their art, and helping to draw ever increasing visitors. Meanwhile the local community set about transforming the character and attractiveness of their town, with new roads, water, sewerage, schools, grand hotels, and public parks, such as at Porthminster. The town centre was largely rebuilt in 1887, pier construction undertaken in 1890 and 1893, and new, quality housing developed on the hills.

Local entrepreneurs such as George Williams, cooper, mayor five times in the 1870s and landlord of Porthmeor Cellars and Studios, and builder Robert Toy, embodied much of the spirit of St Ives in this period of rapid change. By the 1890s the demand was so great that purpose-built studio complexes appeared: Porthmeor in 1895 and William Paynter’s Piazza Studios in 1896.

Appropriately these were in the old industrial quarter off Back Road, which shared in the modest revival in fortunes in St Ives in the early 20th century. Coastal shipping recovered somewhat, as did mining when St Ives Consoles re-opened for a few brief years after 1905. Herring and mackerel fishing flourished alongside the new staple industries of art and tourism.

A dynamic period of St Ives’ history had set the scene which continues virtually to our own day.
How do you measure a place’s significance? By understanding its history and context, its value for the community and for posterity. So what places Porthmeor, at first sight perhaps unprepossessing, amongst the top 5% of all listed buildings in the country?

Perhaps consider its intrinsic historic interest - a mere pile of concrete and timber lean-tos on top of an old sea-wall, but uniquely associated with one of the world’s great artist colonies.

In the 1880s to 1900s, this attracted cosmopolitan artists like Julius Olsson, who was responsible in part for the form and scale of the Porthmeor studio complex of 1895, and later figures like New Zealand’s Frances Hodgkins. Perhaps the greater significance lies with the rebels from the St Ives Society of Artists, whose home had been at Porthmeor from 1928, and who had collected round Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. These St Ives Modernists who worked at Porthmeor included Nicholson, Patrick Heron, Terry Frost, Roger Hilton, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Peter Lanyon, Sandra Blow, Trevor Bell and Karl Weschke.

But concentrating on the artists reveals a narrow view of St Ives’ history, and this draws us into the wider question of what this place says about St Ives’s history as a whole. Porthmeor retains evidence in its very topography of the old back land of sand and grass, where perhaps the least celebrated building is the great Wall itself, testament to the great 18th century Improvers.

As a fish cellar and cooperage Porthmeor was at the heart of what sustained St Ives for most of its history; remember, barrels were used for storing and transporting everything, including pilchards, dry goods and ore from the mines. Coopers were significant figures, and George Williams, owner and developer of Porthmeor, was mayor of St Ives between 1873 and 1879.

Significant too is the archaeological evidence of thirty-odd phases of change in the building in the 100 years from 1810, a reflection of the shock of change in that period and the response of George Williams and his contemporaries. Porthmeor is a microcosm of that dynamic period, when materials originally destined for the failed mines, or the remains of broken ships, lay unwanted on the quays, and they were re-used to create a home for the new industries at Porthmeor.

In the very fabric of Porthmeor is written much of the history of St Ives. That is significant indeed.