

The Great Cornish • Tsunami

IT CAME IN 1755 – COULD IT OCCUR AGAIN?

Words by **Stephen Roberts**

On Saturday, November 1, 1755 at approximately 09:40, a natural disaster occurred. The Lisbon Earthquake destroyed the city of that name and resulted in the deaths of anything between 10,000 and 100,000 citizens. One of the deadliest earthquakes in history, approaching nine on the Richter scale, it lasted between three and six minutes and left 15 foot cracks in the city's streets. According to some sources, shocks from the earthquake were felt throughout Europe and possibly as far as Greenland, Barbados and North Africa.

As if that wasn't enough, its effects unleashed a tsunami on the Cornish coast, which hit about four and a quarter hours later, at around 14:00. The Galway coast in Ireland was also hit, and the south coast of England and the River Thames in London also reported raised sea levels.

The earthquake's epicentre had been roughly 250 miles off Cape St Vincent on the Portuguese coast, which is over 1,000 miles south west of the Lizard.

Yet that distance was no protector as far as Cornwall was concerned. The worse effects were felt in Mount's Bay, where it is known that at least one person died. The sea level rose rapidly at St Michael's Mount, receded and then returned six feet higher ten minutes later, before continuing to rise and fall for the next five hours.

In Penzance, the sea rose eight feet; worse still at Newlyn, a ten-foot rise was reported. St Ives and Hayle experienced similar sudden rises in sea level. Contemporary reports claimed that there were three tsunami waves, and that the sea receded very quickly before rising up again.

The 18th-century French writer Arnold Boscowitz claimed that a great loss of life and property occurred on the Cornish coast that afternoon, although there is no record of the overall death toll. Boscowitz devoted a whole book to his study of earthquakes, including Lisbon, yet is curiously best remembered for his comment about the Cornish coast.

There are, however, conflicting versions of events, with some reports documenting only destruction on a small scale, contrasting with at least one 'eye-witness' account of six and eight-tonne blocks of granite being swept along by the force of the water. What is undeniable is that a tsunami occurred and people lost their lives.

This is not just a fragmented piece of history from more than 250 years ago, which bears no relevance to today. Experts warn that an earthquake off the Portuguese coast could still devastate the Cornish shore as it did all those years ago, with the tip of Cornwall being swamped in a few hours and the Isles of Scilly being wiped off the map. These grim predictions connect the past with the present in a very real way.

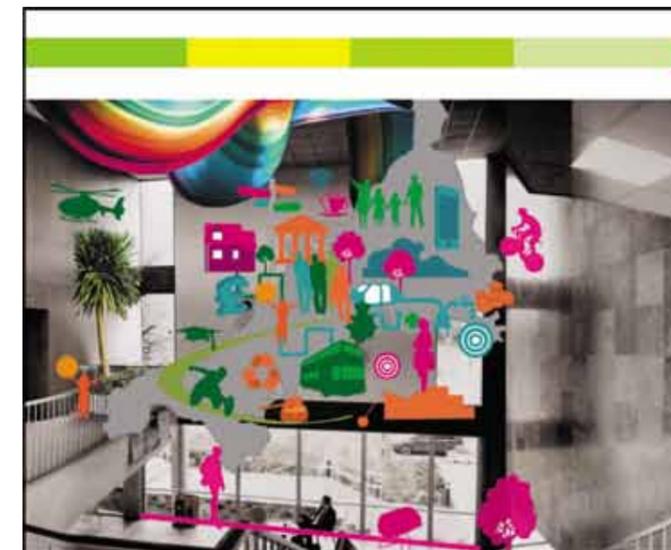
Scientists believe that a Cornish tsunami of the future is likely to be caused by one of two events: volcanic eruption in the Canary Islands, or a repetition of the Portuguese earthquake. Worryingly, after a gap of more than 250 years, disaster planners feel that another earthquake and tsunami is probably overdue. Recent studies have claimed that a similar event would result in sea levels rising suddenly by around four metres (13 feet) in Mount's Bay.

There were reports of a smaller tsunami hitting the Cornish coast as recently as mid-morning on Monday, June 27, 2011; wave height was estimated at around one metre, with the effects being felt as far east as Hampshire. The wave was actually two metres higher in Newlyn than the forecast tide for the time of day.

At St Michael's Mount, day-trippers were caught out as they walked across the causeway to the island, suddenly finding themselves knee deep in water, as the tide came in at a rate of knots. Some very strange occurrences were reported, including the sea retreating up to 50 yards at speed, in an echo of 1755, before coming back with force and people's hair standing on end due to static electricity in the air. Within 15 minutes, it was all over.

This most recent event may have been caused by either a 'submarine slide' 200 miles or so out at sea, or it may have been a 'meteorological tsunami' as there were thunderstorms around at the time. A similar event may have occurred in August 1892, suggesting that these strange freaks of nature occur more often than some people think.

The big question, of course, is: could another major tsunami of the 1755 magnitude hit these shores, one capable of harming life, limb and property? The fact that the relevant authorities in the South West are already discussing this possibility should alert us to the fact that it could happen. If it is true that another 'Lisbon' is overdue, perhaps it is a question of when, rather than if. 



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