

Henry Heath and the Seaweed Book

The Library is fortunate to hold an incredibly beautiful, but now very fragile album, containing pressed specimens of seaweed collected from the rocks of Penzance sometime in the late 19th- early 20th century. It was presented to Herbert Thomas (editor of the Cornishman newspaper), from Henry Heath, 18th October 1917 as a token of thanks for an undescribed 'kindness'.



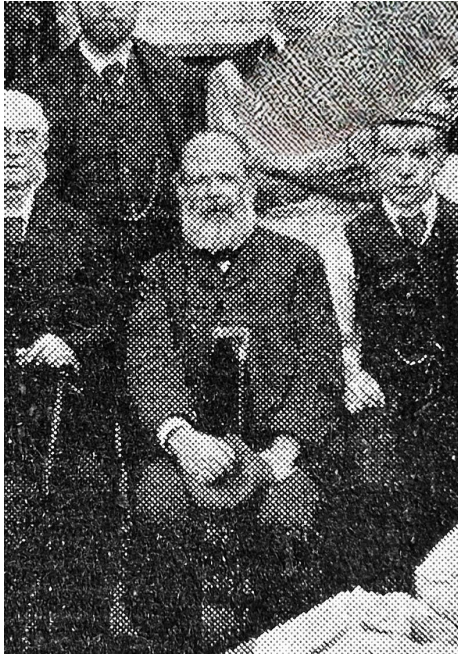
The origins of seaweed pressing date back to the Victorian era in the mid-19th century. It was a particularly popular hobby in coastal communities across the United Kingdom, combining scientific study with the decorative arts, which reflected the Victorians' fascination with both pursuits. As the study of natural history became a favoured pastime, and with the microscope becoming more accessible, the significance of seaweed within marine ecosystems became clearer. Both men and women of varying social backgrounds engaged in collecting specimens of seaweed for scientific study and personal enjoyment. However, it was the Victorian middle class, particularly women, who helped transform seaweed pressing into an aesthetic craft. [1]



This book was gifted to Herbert Thomas, editor of *The Cornishman* from 1902–1928. The inscription inside the book reads:

“Mr. Herbert Thomas, Editor of The Cornishman. Dear Mr. Thomas, This unique collection of seaweed gathered on rocks at Penzance, prepared and mounted with great care, I present to you as a small token of remembrance and my gratitude to you for your kindness to me. Yours faithfully, Henry Heath 12 St. Mary’s Terrace, Penzance 18 October 1917”

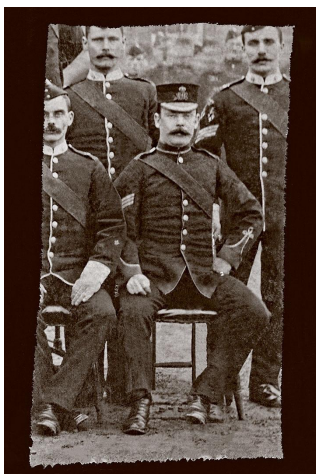
(By coincidence, this was the date of Herbert’s son’s 16th birthday.)



An indistinct image of Henry Heath, Cornishman newspaper

Henry (Richard) Heath was born in Chacewater around 1826 to Thomas and Grace Heath. At the age of 18 he joined the Army. When he married Grace Nute in Truro in 1853, he was a Sergeant in the 14th Regiment of Foot. Grace travelled with him during his military service.

Their first son, also called Henry, was born in Ireland in 1855. Daughter Caroline was born in Jamaica in 1865, Ernest William in Aldershot in 1865, and Louis in Ireland in 1867.



Ernest William Heath, born 1865.

By 1870 Henry had retired from the Army and was living at 5 Parade Street, Penzance (now the Honey Pot Café) from which he ran an ale business. His younger son Leonard was born there in 1870. The census describes Henry as an Army Pensioner and Ale Merchant.

Tragedy struck the family when Heath's son Henry died at sea on 17 November 1874. He was serving as a merchant mariner aboard the emigrant ship Cospatrick, which caught fire and was completely destroyed while sailing to New Zealand. Henry Jr. had only been married for two months to Barbara Bowles.

Another tragedy followed with the death of Henry and Barbara's son, also named Henry. He was born in June 1875 and died aged four in 1879. Barbara remarried in 1880 and later had four more children.

Another child, Henrietta Anne, was also born to Henry and Grace in June 1875.

From about 1885, Henry worked at The Cornishman office as their Collector (Treasurer), while continuing to run his ale business. A number of announcements, the last of which was in October 1890, appeared in The Cornishman stating that he was retiring from his ale business and that the business was for sale. After this he continued working for the Cornishman under the editorship of A. C. Wildman. After Wildman's death in 1902, Herbert Thomas, who had previously been deputy editor, was promoted to editor.

Henry Heath would have worked for Herbert Thomas for approximately 15 years when he presented him with the seaweed book.

In 1904 another tragedy befell the family when Henry's eldest surviving son died at the age of 39. He was a Quartermaster Sergeant in the Army Pay Corps and died suddenly of pneumonia in Winchester, where he lived with his family. He left four children, the eldest only seven years old. It was reported that one of the pallbearers collapsed and died while carrying the coffin.

Henry Sr.'s wife Grace died in June 1910 aged 82. The following year Henry was living with two of his daughters: Caroline, aged 48, and Henrietta, aged 36. Henrietta was a milliner and married in 1915.

It is unknown who compiled the seaweed book that Henry later presented to Herbert Thomas. It was most likely his wife and/or daughters, although no evidence has yet been found to confirm this.

Henry Heath can be seen in a photograph of the staff of The Cornishman. A. C. Wildman (the editor at the time) is seated in the centre (meaning the photograph must date from before 1902), with Herbert Thomas on his right and Henry Heath on his left. The photograph was taken by Gibson of Penzance and was published, together with an accompanying article, in the Cornish Post and Mining News and Redruth Advertiser on 21 July 1928. The original photograph has not been located so far, so all we have at the moment is a blurry picture of Henry.



Photo: GIBSON'S, Penzance.

AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH.

The centre figures include the late Mr. A. C. Wildman (Editor and Manager, the late Mr. Henry Heath, treasurer (on his left), Mr. Thomas, the present Managing Editor (on his right), Mr. R. H. Gillis and Mr. W. Wasley (foremen, since deceased), Mr. J. Christophers. Some of the others are dead, and others are overseas. This photo was taken by Messrs. Gibson, Market Jew-street, about 36 years ago.

Henry Heath (as per arrow), pictured with his colleagues from the Cornishman newspaper.

So the question is: what is 'the great kindness' that Herbert Thomas showed Henry Heath? Since knowing Herbert, Henry and his family had experienced a number of bereavements. Can we assume therefore that he helped him in these difficult times? Probably.

Kay Line. 4 August 2026

[1]

(<https://www.devonseaweedcompany.com/blogs/news/seaweed-pressing-an-art-form-from-the-victorian-era>)