



[Alexander Macleod and the 'Johanna' (1891)]

It is certainly true to say that the fishing was a hard and difficult calling during the era of the sail, however romantic and brave we may view that period. A glimpse of these hardships may be gained from the following episode.

Alexander Macleod, 5 Knock, Point, 'Alastair Chalum Alastair' sailed the 'Morven SY 1217' in the sail boat Coronation Race of 1902, and later on the 'Muirneag SY 486', the very best of the large Zulu fishing boats in Lewis, before it was sold for scrap and broken up for fence posts in Balallan in 1945. He experienced perhaps his worst fishing trip ever, when in December 1891 as a young skipper of 23 years of age in charge of the 49 foot keel Zulu sail boat 'Johanna SY 853', they hauled a boat full of 120 crans of herring in Loch Inchard just below Cape Wrath.

They set sail about 9am in strong south westerly wind for the market at Stornoway. Suddenly the wind rose, and by 10am they had to shorten sail to the last reef. Eventually it was blowing a howling gale that caused considerable and widespread damage including the uprooting of many trees on the mainland. They battled with the elements all day and it was 11pm when they made their first landfall at the Butt of Lewis. Skipper Macleod had been at his post at the wheel all day. Shortly after making their landfall, as they were coming about on the starboard tack the fore yard broke, and their sail was torn. In this desperate emergency the crew went to work at once and got the mizzen sail rigged up on the foremast. But after a while the yard of the mizzen sail broke and the sail was damaged by the ferocity of the wind. In the absence of both sails the boat lost all power and she was lying helplessly broadside-on in heavy seas. The crew's first and most urgent task then was to get the boat head-on into the wind as quickly as possible before they were swamped. They therefore set about immediately to prepare an improvised sheet anchor by tying made up nets at intervals to the spring rope, but before they were ready to deploy the sheet anchor a heavy sea struck the boat and everybody agreed that it was a miracle that they were not swamped. Then they re-doubled their efforts and proceeded feverishly to jettison their herring fishing catch in order to lighten the vessel.

Eventually having rigged up and streamed the sheet anchor and brought the head of the boat into the wind, they rode the storm out until 10am the next day when the wind moderated and shifted to the West. Meanwhile the crew were busy splicing the broken yard with fend-offs and repairing the sail as best they could, using corks and twine to secure the tears. After much hard work they got under way again somewhere in the open sea off the Butt of Lewis, and they crawled back to Lochinver at 4pm, not far from where they left two mornings earlier. The only other boat that was caught in the gale disappeared without trace. In 1899 Skipper Alexander Macleod, Knock, made a record breaking homecoming - a voyage at the end of the East Anglia Herring fishing season, as we are told by Donald Macdonald, in his book 'Lewis'. It was the same boat as he sailed in the Coronation Race, 'Morven SY 1217', and he covered the distance of about 500 miles from Lowestoft in East Anglia to Stornoway non-stop in 48 hours. For comparison we quote an East coast writer who states that 'in 1903 Jim Blaikie sailed the "Alexandra", a large Fifie, from Wick to Yarmouth in East Anglia, a distance of about 460 miles in 42 and a half hours', and he says, 'that time was never broken by a fishing vessel.'

When we consider the 'Morven' had to negotiate the treacherous Pentland narrows and a much longer distance than the 'Alexandra', we feel that Skipper Macleod's achievement might be even more impressive than that of Jim Blaikie.

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