



[Hazards of Winter Fishing - The 'Trust' (1934)]

The people of Lewis engaged in winter herring fishing with gill nets in the sheltered sea lochs from a very early date. Unlike the summer offshore drift net fishing, the method used for herring fishing in the confined sea lochs was to set down a limited number of nets, say 8 or 10 nets in a fixed position with an anchor at each end of the set. Very often a boat might have several sets in various parts of the sea loch.

In 1794 Rev. Hugh Munro, Parish Minister of Uig in Lewis, writing in the first statistical account states that:

Great quantities of uncommonly large size herring have been caught in Loch Roag in recent years from December to January. There are nearly 100 sail fishing boats from various parts of the Kingdom fishing in Loch Roag now.

In 1927 another unusually plentiful shoal of herring entered Loch Erisort. The local people were able to collect buckets full of herring with their bare hands among the seaweed on the foreshore. This event was known as 'Sgadain mor Loch Erisort'. The herring fishing was reasonably good in 1926, 1927 and 1928 and the Lewis fishermen felt reasonably confident that the herring fishing was taking a turn for the better, and they began to equip themselves by acquiring motor boats from the East coast of Scotland, which were really old sail boats fitted with Marine Kelvin Engines.

South Lochs, with its numerous sheltered bays and sea lochs, was eminently suitable for fishing all round the year. In the 1930s the four main anchorages in Park - Lemreway, Gravir, Marvig and Cromore were packed with off-shore fishing boats swinging at anchor. There were nine or ten large off-shore fishing boats based on the Marvig anchorage including both Marvig and Calbost boats giving employment to about 50 fishermen. A similar situation existed in all the other anchorages of Lochs.

About 1934 it was reported that large shoals of herring had entered the sea lochs of Southern Park such as Loch Shell, Loch Brollum and Loch Claidh. Among the boats that sought to get a share of the bonanza of precious 'silver darlings' (Herring) was the Marvig/Calbost motor boat 'Trust SY 478', about 33 feet long, and skippered by the resourceful Duncan Macleod, 3 Marvig. His crew was made up of his brother Donald who was the engineer, their cousin John Macleod 'Fin', 8 Calbost, and his brother Murdo 'Peter' who was standing in for the skipper's brother Angus who was the normal fourth member of the crew.

Shortly before Murdo Macleod 'Peter' died in 1994, the writer interviewed him on tape regarding their winter fishing trip in the 'Trust' to one of the sea lochs of Southern Park in 1934, and the way they went perilously near to being lost.

On the way to the fishing grounds the weather was moderate, and we arrived in Loch Brollum fairly late in the winter's evening. The loch was packed with fishing vessels, all of them having already set their nets in various fixed sets all over the sea loch. We had difficulty finding a vacant space to set our nets. Eventually we found a place to set down two sets of probably 8 or 10 nets each in a fixed position with an anchor at each end.

Being a man of great initiative and boundless energy, Skipper Duncan suggested that we should scout around the sheltered sea loch lifting the end of a net here and there to see if we might see any signs of herring anywhere. Presently we came to a set of herring nets that was fairly full of herring, and we immediately went and set our remaining nets adjacent to the set of nets that were already full of herring.

Not long after that they started hauling and the nets were full of herring. Instead of the normal method of hauling the nets into the hold they hauled them across the hold so that the herring would fall into the hold and the nets would be on the side of the boat away from the herring, by the time they hauled that set of herring nets the boat was listing badly and they had to trim it and change the nets in order to get back on an even keel. The boat was really down in the water and Donald the engineer put a plug (cork or something) into the exhaust to avoid flooding the engine, then they went across to recover their other set of fixed nets and fortunately there were no herring in that set.

There were unmistakable signs of wind and weather deterioration. There was a circle round the moon and the clouds were travelling fairly fast already. Also, that area is a treacherous area with fast currents in the narrows

between the Shiant Islands and the land of Southern Park. Their dilemma was that they had herring and the normal thing was to proceed to market at Stornoway. It was however very difficult to judge and assess the real weather conditions on the open sea, so long as they remained within the shelter of the sea loch. Naturally there was therefore a temptation to investigate what was it like outside by nosing out into the open carefully.

Lo and behold, like everyone else who plays with fire, they quickly discovered that they went too far out and they were unable to turn the boat round without the distinct possibility of foundering in the process. A decision had to be made quickly, and the skipper's verdict was that she would gain back to the shelter of the sea loch.

There was no recrimination. The alternative was to apply correct seamanship and hope for the best. It was unanimously decided to proceed on course straight off-shore into the head wind, away out to sea until they would reach a point several miles off shore where they could change course and hopefully take the wind on the beam and steer a straight course to make landfall at the north of Loch Gravir.

If they made a landfall south of the mouth of Loch Gravir they would be smashed into matchsticks on the exposed rocks of Kebbock Head without any hope of survivors. The critical thing therefore was to proceed on course off shore far enough out to make a landfall at or beyond Loch Gravir.

Emergency stations were taken up by each of the four members of the crew under the direction of the skipper. He occupied the wheelhouse with the door open. Donald was instructed to hatch himself secure down in the small engine room, presumably in order to prevent seawater gaining entry to the engine room and drowning the engine. That would be curtains.

Peter was instructed to man the pump and John Macleod 'Fin' posted himself on the windward bow, 'gualainn' with a generous supply of paraffin and petrol from the engine room, in order to pour oil on troubled waters whenever it looked dangerous, but particularly at the critical time of swinging the boat round in a change of course from a head wind to a beam wind and a course to landward.

The skipper and the oil man worked in unison. Once the skipper judged that the time was right, he indicated to John that he was going to swing her round and John poured out volumes of oil liberally to calm the surface of the sea. The speed of the boat was also controlled and they all waited with baited breath for a few seconds - that felt like days - to see if it was life or death.

Would that heavy boat survive these heavy seas on her beam, even if she came round? She remained afloat and it was the skipper's task now to dodge the angry seas as best he could and at the same time strain every nerve in his body to make sure that he kept to a course that would enable him to make a landfall at the mouth of Loch Gravir 'Othairn'.

Miraculously they made it. They escaped from the jaws of death and they were free to take shelter in Loch Gravir 'Othairn' by dropping anchor and enjoying a well earned rest.

The question was put, 'What shall we do? Shall we proceed to Stornoway to market?' They agreed unanimously to continue on their way because the lie of the land between Kebbock Head and Stornoway was much more favourable to the direction of the wind, and it was not likely that they would experience any trouble. They reached Stornoway without difficulty.

News spread quickly that the 'Trust' had come in with a heavy shot of herring. Up to that point some of the fishermen felt that if they ventured out to sea they were probably lost, considering the weather conditions they experienced. It was not a prudent thing to do, but they did not do it deliberately. Those who frequent the sea for their livelihood find themselves in dangerous situations from time to time, and sometimes the gamble does not come off.

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