



[The Rise and Fall of the Herring Fishery]

Early statements indicate that the inhabitants of the Scottish Islands and the coastal regions round about the North of Scotland practised both agriculture and inshore fishing in small open boats from a very early date, hence the eventual development of our present crofting lifestyle. As the Gaelic proverb indicates, 'Dh'iarr am muir a thadhal', and it was quite natural for the local inhabitants of the Islands and the coastal regions of Scotland to fish for their domestic requirements, commercial fishing came much later.

It was the continental countries, particularly the Dutch that dominated the commercial herring fishing industry in Scottish coastal waters in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Dutch fishing fleet were highly organised. It comprised of thousands of large vessels known as "busses". These large fishing vessels remained at sea for months at a time and they were serviced by a fleet of fast supply boats, which in turn rushed the herring, catch to the continental market.

The Dutch cured their herring at sea using their own famous secret 'Dutch Cure', which was invented by the Dutchman, Peter Brockels in 1736. The excellence of their salting cure enabled the Dutch to control the whole European market for salt herring.

The self-employed Scottish crofter/fishermen did not have the resources to participate in the highly organised fishing methods of the Dutch and in any case probably felt it was more practical for them to operate in small boats, share owned by crews of independent people and working off shore and among the islands and sea lochs of Scotland and landing their catch immediately in a fresh condition every morning. Fresh fish was by far the best way to supply the home market.

By the beginning of the 19th century the long years of neglect and mismanagement of the British fisheries was at last coming to an end. It was then that the herring industry in Scotland caught on following the activities of a number of farsighted people as well as the incorporation of the British Fishery Society in 1786.

The British Fishery Society helped greatly to lay the foundation of a very successful herring fishery. They set to work to develop fishing ports on the west of Scotland, beginning at Tobermory in 1787 and at Ullapool in 1788. However, shortly after that the hitherto plentiful shoals of herring suddenly deserted the west coast of Scotland and the fisheries society decided to concentrate their attention on developing Wick harbour where fishing boats operated from suitable rock faces and beaches.

The construction of Wick harbour began in 1803 and by 1811 the original harbour was completed and very soon it was packed to overflowing and quite inadequate for the number of fishing boats frequenting it, some from as far away as Wales, Isle of Man, Shetland and all round the coast of Scotland and the Islands.

In Lewis the Seaforth proprietor and his tacksman launched an inshore Great-Line white fishing industry towards the end of the 18th century. Small fishing stations and salt houses were set up in almost every cove and sheltered creek round the coast. There the newly caught fish, mainly cod and ling, was salted and dried in the sun and wind on the pebbly beaches and rocks and exported to Ireland etc.

The industrial revolution raised the standard of curing in the 18th and 19th centuries and created a demand for fish. By 1800 the population of Scotland had risen to 1,600,000 and both Glasgow and Edinburgh had 80,000 inhabitants each. The population of Lewis in 1755 was only 6,386 persons, but by 1821 it had doubled to 12,231 people and it went on increasing until it peaked at nearly 30,000 people at the beginning of the 20th century.

It is said that the Hebrides were self-supporting in the 16th century and even much later when the Napier Commission were taking evidence from the crofters in 1883. John Smith, crofter from Balallan, testified that when his father was evicted from Southern Pairc to make room for the commercial Park Sheep Farm early in the 19th century, he was comfortable. He said at question 17327: 'Nobody needed to leave the place from one years end to another for anything the family required.'

No wonder that King James VI and his Fife adventurers thought of exploiting the natural resources of Lewis earlier on with headquarters at Stornoway, but they encountered the justifiable hostility of the Islanders, and mercifully were ignominiously ejected.

The second half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries were prosperous times in the Hebrides when cattle, herring, dried salted fish, dogfish oil, blanketing, kelp etc. and even whisky were exported to the European continent. However that was also the period that private landownership was forcibly imposed on the Highland clansmen and they suffered grievously under that system.

Several things combined together to develop the herring fishing in Scotland. The building of Pultney Harbour in Wick in 1811 gave a tremendous impetus to the whole Scottish herring fishing. Then there was the discovery of the new 'Scotch-cure' in 1819. That came about as a result of a competition sponsored by the Arts Society of London when they offered a reward for the best method of curing quality herring to a standard equal to or higher than the secret 'Dutch-cure'. J.F. Donovan of Leith claimed the reward and he was paid fifty guineas. The 'Scotch-cure' provided a breakthrough to successful large-scale herring fishing in Scotland.

The state recognised the value of the British fishing industry, not only for the considerable wealth it was capable of generating, but more particularly as a training ground for large numbers of recruits for the Merchant Marine as well as the Merchant Navy.

Then there was the invention of the loom that was capable of weaving cotton gill nets in 1850 by James Patterson of Musselburgh. The new nets were less bulky and the boats could carry more of them, thereby increasing their catching power. Before that nets were hand made in the homes of the people from hemp yarn. Rev. Hugh Munro Parish Minister of Uig, Lewis, states that in the first statistical account about 1795 that there were 275 net makers in the Uig Parish at that time. Our Calbost ceilidh-house host, Angus Morrison related to us how his contemporary Kenneth Nicolson, 11 Calbost, (our grandfather), was assisting his father in the making of new hemp nets at home, when he was asked to assist the civil engineers to measure the crofts at the time of the second lotting about 1850/1852.

One fundamental difference between the 'Dutch-cure' and the 'Scotch-cure' was that, whereas the Dutch cured the herring at sea after first dousing it in salt, the British insisted on the herring submitted for curing being newly caught and absolutely fresh. Salt was not allowed near the fish before it was landed because it tended to soften the fish. Also, fishery officers were appointed by the British to monitor the quality of the product. A system of applying a crown brand to the barrels of cured herring by the fisheries officers was adopted. All barrels had to be uniform in size and each barrel was marked with the date that the fish was cured, the name and address of the curer and the name of the Fishery Officer that applied the 'Crown Brand'.

The Crown Brand also selected the British herring into various categories as follows; 'large full', 'full', 'maties full', 'spent' and 'mixed'. Large full were herring with roe or milt not less than 11.25 inches long. Full were herring with roe or milt not less than 10.25 inches long. Mattie's full were herring with roe or milt clearly seen at the throat and not less than 9.25 inches long. Spent were not less than 10.25 inches long. The 'Scotch cure' and the 'Crown Brand' set a quality standard for herring cured in Scotland and that generated confidence and satisfaction among the buyers. Very soon the British cured herring gained a reputation for being the best in the world.

Fishing boats were being improved during the whole of the 19th century but in the 1840s the fleet still consisted of open boats of the Fifie and Scaffie design. By 1848 there were some half decked but very few fully decked boats in use. Then the big drowning disaster occurred at Wick, 'Bàthadh mor Wick' when 41 boats and 37 men were lost while they were trying to enter the harbour during a severe storm that caught the fishing fleet at sea.

Following the Wick drowning disaster the Government set up a board of enquiry and one of the most important recommendations was that more fully decked boats should be built. However, like most other innovations the idea of fully decked boats was received with scepticism at first by many fishermen who felt that such boats would be clumsy and unworkable.

Experiments were taking place to find a more suitable fishing boat for the conditions that existed round the North of Scotland. It was in 1879 that Asher's Boatyard in Burghead achieved a breakthrough with a new design which was dubbed 'Zulu' because the Zulu war in South Africa was raging then. The newly designed boat incorporated the best features of the old and tried Scaffie and Fifie boats. It retained the straight stem of the Fifie and the raking stern of the Scaffie.

Best of all, these powerful Zulu boats of an average length of 75 to 80 feet and a draught of 7 to 9 feet, had a powerful steam capstan which was operated by an upright steam boiler installed in the crews' cabin directly below the steam capstan.

These boats carried a lot of canvas and the least puff of wind gave them steerageway. The fishermen felt that the Zulu design of fishing boat was the answer to their prayer. The last of the Zulu class of fishing boats was the 'Muirneag' SY 486 which was scrapped in Lewis in the mid 1940s.

The transition from the age of the sail to mechanical power in fishing boats in Lewis came in gradually over the first 30 years of the 20th century. First came the steam drifter about the end of the 19th century some 20 years after the Zulu sailboat. Nearly all the steam drifters were built between 1900 and 1914. They were expensive to run on coal, where as sail boats incurred no expense while at sea. Also, a steam drifter cost £2,500 to but

whereas a large 80 feet Zulu sail boat only cost about £700 to buy new. The steam drifter was however a more comfortable boat and eventually there were quite a number of them in Lewis. There were two of them in Cromore.

During the First World War the Government took control of the fishing fleet and many used the larger boats as naval auxiliary vessels. The steam drifter 'Herring Fisher', owned by the fish curers Duncan MacIver Ltd. Stornoway, was enlisted in the Pairc Service Section of the R.N.R.T. including her skipper Dhomhnuill Ruadh Smith, 7 Aird Point. Alistair Macfarlane, Marvig, served as her mate although he was nearly 60 years of age then. They were based in Scapa Flow but ranged as far as the Mediterranean.

In the 1920s the sail fishing fleet in Lewis were converted to motor by installing small marine engines in them. The peak of the herring fishing in Scotland was 1907 when 2.5 million barrels of cured herring were processed. In 1913 there were 3,500 fisher girls from the Western Isles at the East Anglia winter herring-fishing season which lasted from September to December.

It was in the early 1900s that this movement of herring gutters and hired crew hands reached their height. However, as late as 1936 there were still 1,000 Western Isles fisher girls at the East Anglia fishing as well as many hired boat-hands.

For over 100 years hired hands and fisher girls from the Hebrides went to the Scottish and English herring fishing until the Second World War which put an end to all that forever, because tastes and markets changed.

Boats from the Western Isles went to the East Anglia herring fishing as well, and skipper Alexander Macleod, Knock, Point, made a record breaking homecoming voyage from East Anglia in 1899 in the Zulu sail boat 'Morven' SY1217 the boat he had before the 'Muirneag'. He covered the distance of about 500 miles from Lowestoft to Stornoway non-stop in 48 hours.

When Martin Martin visited Stornoway about 1700 he said there were only 60 families there at that time. Some 80 years later when John Knox visited Stornoway in 1786 he commented that they were sorry to see that noble port without a quay. The vessels had to load and unload upon the beach or in the bay by means of small boats. Local oral tradition in our village ceilidh-house still spoke of the time when there were few quays in Stornoway and fish was landed on the beach or carried in baskets over a row of boats.

An old map dated about 1785 shows a number of small loose stone jetties in the inner harbour, similar to that which may still be seen in many Lewis villages. The only pier on that map that was suitable for fairly large vessels was situated at the corner of North Beach and Esplanade Road. It was known as the big quay.

Seaforth Mackenzie the Lewis proprietor encouraged the people of Stornoway to build small private stone quays by including a condition in their feu-charters obliging crofters to build such stone quays on their land.

The present town of Stornoway evolved by combining three or four small villages. The original village of Stornoway lay in the peninsula area between north and south beach. The village of Bayhead was in the present Bayhead area and the village of Newton with land holdings stretching backwards from the Newton foreshore. A fourth village called Ranol, where the castle grounds are at present, was cleared by Sir James Matheson in order to make way for the castle and castle policies.

After Sir James Matheson acquired the Island in 1844 he introduced the first steam-boat regular service to the mainland and he built what was then known as, 'The Steamer Quay' not far from where the previous roll on/ roll off car ferry ramp stood near these two quays. The rest of the Stornoway foreshore was substantially in its natural underdeveloped state in the middle of the 19th century. An old Barque called 'Amity' was beached on the west beach by Sir James Matheson opposite the old Customhouse, which is now the building known as 'Amity House'. That wreck was also used as a quay.

Early in the 1860s the people of Stornoway felt that the port and the whole Lewis community were not able to take full advantage of the excellent opportunities then available in the herring fishing industry in Scotland because of the lack of proper harbour facilities in Stornoway - the main market town of the Island. Accordingly they appealed to their Member of Parliament, who was none other than the Lewis Proprietor Sir James Matheson to promote Parliamentary Legislation that would enable them to establish a public harbour authority in the town.

It transpired that Sir James himself had personal ambitions to acquire the whole foreshore of Stornoway Bay from Arnish point right round to Holm point and he secured the ownership of the whole foreshore of Stornoway in 1863. True to type Sir James took steps through his despotic estate factor Donald Munro as soon as he secured effective power, to harass and deprive townfolk of their private piers and prevent them from exercising their rights to use their piers for fish curing and as a source of income.

If he had been successful it is reasonable to assume that the history of the fishing industry in Lewis might have been very different and so would the history of the whole Lewis community.

There were however public-spirited men in Stornoway at that time and they stood up to Sir James and called public meetings and set up a provisional committee in order to promote the best interests of the fishing community and the development the fishing industry. A heated dispute followed which became known at the time as the 'foreshore question'. Presently Sir James asked the Court of Session to declare that he had sole and exclusive rights in the foreshore and piers without interference by other parties that claimed rights in the quays and these parties should hand over to him any duties levied and the substantial balance that had accumulated in the quay account. The Town's people organised a petition and mandate from the people to carry their case to Parliament. Among those who signed the petition were 16 fish curers, 13 coopers and 36 fishermen which indicates the extent of fishing activity in Stornoway in the 1860s,

In 1864 the Court of Session case was withdrawn and Sir James Matheson co-operated with the Stornoway people. In 1865 the 'Pier and Harbour Commission' was incorporated by an Act of Parliament and undoubtedly it was the development of harbour facilities in Stornoway that was the most important single factor in the growth of the town as well as the ensuing prosperity of the fishing industry in Lewis.

Stornoway was late in the harbour and herring fishing development race, but from 1865 onwards the development of Stornoway harbour was dramatic, no time was lost by the newly constituted Harbour Commission to procure a harbour order and commence development of the foreshore. A 150 foot timber wharf, known later as No.1 wharf and a 350 feet masonry quay wall to the west, replaced the wreck of the 'Amity' at Esplanade Road etc., as well as the reclamation and infilling of the space behind 'Quay-asc-Amity' making that area available for fish curing. Also the provision of buildings sheds and warehouses for the improvement of the harbour.

All that was in the 1860s programme and by 1881 and 1892 further harbour development works were put in hand. Again in the late 1920s a new harbour order was confirmed authorising works carried out from 1930 to 1934. During all that time the Stornoway Pier and Harbour Commission provided the rapidly expanding herring fishing industry with suitable harbour facilities even ahead of their requirements and they are still developing harbour facilities.

In the late 19th century Stornoway owned a considerable fleet of trading vessels as well as a fishing fleet. Her ships sailed the seven seas. Also shipbuilding and repair with ancillary trades were important. The population of Lewis rose steadily during the whole of the 19th century as follows:

Census	Population	Increase	Percentage
1801	9,168		
1811	10,092	+924	+10.1%
1821	12,231	+2,139	+21.2%
1831	14,541	+2,310	+18.9%
1841	17,037	+2,496	+17.2%
1851	19,711	+2,674	+15.7%
1861	21,056	+1,345	+6.8%
1871	23,483	+2,427	+11.5%
1881	25,487	+2,004	+8.5%
1891	27,590	+2,103	+8.3%
1901	28,949	+1,359	+4.9%
1911	29,603	+654	+2.3%

Thereafter, decline during the whole of the 20th century.

From the fisherman's point of view fishing was profitable during the early years of the 20th century 1900/1914. The First World War destroyed our continental markets for cured herring in Germany, the Baltic States and Russia and, with the exception of 1927/28 when there was an unusual glut of herring to the extent that one could gather the herring in buckets on the foreshore all round the loch. The years between the world wars were a failure as far as fishing was concerned.

Most of the Hebridean fishermen were Naval reservists and they had to abandon their boats during the 1st and 2nd World Wars and by the time they returned their boats were derelict and in the late 1940s and 50s the whole fishing fleet were replaced by purpose built boats and then came new methods of fishing. Gill nets were abandoned and ring nets, trawl nets etc. were adopted, resulting eventually in over fishing of herring and a total ban on any form of fishing for herring in 1977.

After waiting for nearly two years for the uplifting of the herring fishing ban, the MacIennan brothers of Marvig, who had the distinction of being the last crew who fished with the environmentally friendly gill-nets with their purpose built motor boat 'Seafarer' SY210 had to give up and sell out. That marked the end of the gill-net herring fishing.

The ban on herring fishing was not lifted until 1983 and from then on it was the trawling method that was used for catching fish. By that time the younger generation were no longer accustomed to herring on the menu and the market demand dropped considerably.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date: 1998

Original document title: Herring Fishing

Location in physical archive: Series G, File 4, Section 30

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/7/x (additional file)

© Angus Macleod Archive