



[Early History of the Herring Fishery]

Fish is one of the main sources of food used by mankind from a very early date. Reference is made to fishing in several places in the Bible. In Isaiah chap.19, reference is made to angling and the weaving of nets as well as sluices and ponds for fish. Fishing is therefore an ancient and honourable occupation. Ponds for fish were common enough in our own area up to the 19th century and it is possible that the ruins of some ponds may still be seen on our foreshore.

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.

Apart from shellfish, edible fish, broadly speaking is divided into two main groups, pelagic and demersal and each group requires entirely different methods of fishing. Pelagic fish are those that swim near the surface of the sea such as mackerel, herring etc. The traditional methods of fishing for these fish used to be gill nets, where the fish were caught by the head and gills in the meshes of the nets. Now-a-days trawlers are used to catch the herring.

The demersal group of fish is found in the lower depths and on the seabed. The traditional method of catching these, otherwise known as white fish, was by baited hooks or trawl nets dragged along the bottom of the sea. Both herring and white fish were very plentiful in Hebridean waters and it was natural for the local inhabitants to fish for their domestic requirements. Commercial fishing came much later.

It was the Dutch and other continental countries, but particularly the Dutch, which dominated the commercial fishing industry in the North Sea and in the Scottish coastal waters in the 17th and 18th centuries. They had a large fleet of big sailing vessels called 'Busses' fishing off the British coast.

It is recorded that by 1678 there were 3,000 Dutch fishing vessels carrying some 50,000 men plying their trade in British waters. Their fishing fleet carried their own curers and they cured their catch on board the vessels using their famous secret 'Dutch-cure', invented by the Dutchman Peter Brockels in 1636. Curing the fish on board their vessels enabled the Dutch to protect their secret method of how best to cure herring by salting and barrelling them in brine.

The Dutch fishing fleet remained at sea for months at a time and they were serviced by fast supply boats, which in turn rushed the cured herring to the continental market where the excellence of the cure enabled them to control the whole European market for salt herring. In that way the Dutch became a very rich nation and a World Maritime power.

About the middle of the 18th century the British equipped a large fleet of fishing Busses similar to the Dutch fishing vessels and they introduced a subsidy called 'bounty payments' for every barrel of herring cured and exported. Ordinary fishermen did not have the resources to participate in that form of fishing.

During the 18th century the main foreign market for Scottish herring was not the Continental market, but the West Indies where the fish was in great demand for feeding the Negro slaves on the Plantations. Despite the bounty subsidies the British Buss type of herring fishing was not very successful.

Adam Smith the renowned economist reviewed the system of state-provided 'bounty payments' from a national standpoint and among his recommendations were, 'that the imitation of the tonnage bounty to herring - busses had proved detrimental to the open boat fishing'.

He also regarded the method of fishing among the sea lochs and the Islands of the North West of Scotland by open boats as the best adapted to the peculiar situation. And because the catch was landed immediately it was by far the best adapted for the supply of the Home Market, but the buss bounty subsidy had ruined it. An attempt to meet the various points raised by Adam Smith was made in an act of 1786.

[ends]

Author: Angus Macleod

Date: 1998

Original document title: Early Period of Herring Fishing 17th-18th Century

Location in physical archive: Series G, File 4, Section 1

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

© Angus Macleod Archive