



[Scottish Fishing Stations]

The joint secretary of both the new British Fisheries Society and The Highland Society of London was held by a very energetic Ross-shire legal man named John Mackenzie. As the London Society was involved in the setting up of the new British Fisheries Society they decided to invest a substantial sum of money that had by then accumulated in the funds of the London Highland Society in the Highland Fishery. The Highland Society of Edinburgh also contributed a sum of money, as did many other people, at home and abroad.

The newly formed British Fisheries Society set to work at once. To begin with their policy was to develop fishing ports on the west coast of Scotland. They began with Tobermory in 1787 and Ullapool in 1788, and Lochbay in Skye in 1795. They also surveyed a large number of other prospective fishing stations on the west coast and in the Islands as well as round the north and north east coast of Scotland.

The Long Island was already served by a custom house at Stornoway since 1765 as well as a small fishery, although harbours were not developed then to any great extent. Seaforth Mackenzie, the Lewis Proprietor who was associated with the British Fishery Society, was keen on the Society developing a fishery station in Lewis. He offered the Society 500 acres of land anywhere round the shores of Loch Roag or Loch Carloway, but the Society did not take up his offer.

Captain Macleod, Proprietor of Harris, also offered the Society all the land, which lies between east and west Loch Tarbert and Bunavonedar harbour. Also various other people offered the Society land in order to develop fishing stations on the north and east coast of Scotland as well, and their resources were limited.

At that time private people were beginning to take an interest in the development of fishing stations in the Islands and on the west coast of Scotland. This included an attempt by Seaforth Mackenzie in partnership with a Mr Alex Maciver of Stornoway to develop a fishing station at Loch Roag where it was reported there were 70 or 80 small boats in 1795.

Rev. Hugh Munro of Uig writing in the first statistical account in 1794 commented on the fishing in Loch Roag:

Great quantities of herring of uncommonly large size have begun to be caught in this loch within the last few years. This year upwards of 90 sail came from the different parts of the kingdom. They both fished, and bought the herring fresh from the country people at the great price of from 9 to 12 shillings (45p to 60p) per cran (which is the full barrel of green fish as taken out of the net), (presumably a large barrel is meant here which is twice the half barrel we are accustomed with). Forty years back and long before there was immense fishing in Loch Roag, Sweden was the only market for fish and the abundance was such that the country people sold them for one shilling (5p) for aforesaid cran.

Rev. Munro also stated that there were 275 net-makers in the Parish of Uig at that time.

About the end of the 18th century the hitherto plentiful shoals of herring suddenly deserted Loch Roag and the west coast of Scotland and because of the departure of the herring shoals the British Fisheries Society and the various private enterprise projects along the west coast were not very successful at that time. As the Fisheries Society was under pressure to develop the fishing ports on the north east coast, they turned their attention to the Caithness coast.

The fisheries society had already asked their engineer Thomas Telford to report on the development possibilities of the small harbours in the Scottish north east coast, as far South as Portmahomack, where there were a number of places that small open-boat fisheries were conducted. Although there were no satisfactory harbours from which to pursue large scale commercial fishing, unlike the west coast of Scotland where every loch is a harbour. There was no place from Scrabster to the Bay of Cromarty where a vessel could run into or lie with safety. Caithness was mainly a farming and crofting area.

The British Fisheries Society decided to concentrate their attention on developing Wick harbour where the boats operated from suitable rock faces and beaches. In 1801 Thomas Telford prepared plans for harbour facilities to accommodate 400 vessels and create a new fishing village across from Wick on the southern bank of the river where only half a dozen crofters lived. There were several hundred inhabitants in Wick itself at that time and it is

said that prior to 1767, some thirty years earlier, Wick fishermen only used herring as bait for white fish lines. The new fishing village was to be called Pulteneytown in honour of a former Chairman of the British Fisheries Society.

Before the harbour works at Wick could be started a bridge had to be built across the river. Construction of the bridge began in 1803 and at that time there were no roads in Caithness and all movement was by sea or on horseback. By 1811 the original harbour was completed at a cost of £16,000 and very soon it was packed to overflowing and quite inadequate for the number of fishing boats frequenting it, some from as far as Wales, Isle of Man, and Shetland and round the coast of the west of Scotland. It was therefore necessary to carry out further comprehensive harbour extensions and by 1831 an outer harbour was completed at a cost of £22,000.

The building of Pulteneytown harbour gave a tremendous impetus to the Scottish herring fishing. By the early 1800s sixteen curing stations were established at Wick and many more were to follow. Most of the increasing catch went for export, mainly to Ireland and the West Indies, but when slavery was abolished in 1807 the West Indies market declined and ceased altogether in 1840. New outlets had therefore to be sought, mainly on the European Continent, which was growing steadily in value since the beginning of the 19th century.

The discovery of a new way to cure salt herring was probably an event that was of even greater significance to the development of the herring fishing in Scotland than even the new harbour facilities at Wick and elsewhere. This enabled the lion's share of the European market to be captured within a short space of time because of the excellence of the quality of the Scottish herring.

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