



[The Caithness Fishery]

Very early in the 19th century fishing boats from Lewis were among the boats that were attracted to the Caithness fishing 'Iasgach Gallamh'. It was reported that three Lewis fishing boats were among the ten boats lost in a gale at Wick in 1818, with the loss of 13 lives.

The failure of the Kelp industry in the second quarter of the 19th century caused the Islanders and other west coast crofters to turn their attention more and more to the east coast of Scotland fishing as hired hands. Also, after the discovery of the new 'Scotch-Cure' Hebridean and west coast women fish-gutters were to be found in their thousands in every fishing port round the Scottish coast. Later, about 1869, both men and women began to go to the East Anglia Autumn fishing.

For over 100 years hired hands and fisher girls from the Hebrides continued to go to the Scottish and English herring fishing, until the beginning of the Second World War. This had been gradually decreasing since the First World War, because the European export market for British herring never fully recovered after the First World War.

Herring was primarily an export market product. The easy access to the expanding home market provided a steady, if small outlet. By 1800 the population of Scotland had risen to 1,600,000 and both Edinburgh and Glasgow had 80,000 each. The industrial revolution had also raised the standard of living and created a demand for fish. Communications also improved, roads and railways were built where previously there had only been the crudest of footpaths. Canals were also constructed.

In the almost complete absence of harbour facilities in the early part of the 19th century small open boats were an advantage because they were more easily handled and the small fish were very plentiful near the shore and in the sheltered sea lochs. Also the high cost of larger boats was an inhibiting factor then, as now, because the fishermen had very little capital. Unless the crew had a marketable boat from which they could raise some capital it was difficult to acquire larger and better boats. The weight of the boat was also an important factor, because fishermen hauled their boats up onto the beach at the end of the fishing season. This practice continued even after they began to go to the Caithness fishing, as was often related to us by our host in the ceilidh house, Angus Morrison.

Subsequently the open boats began to be fitted with half-deck forward and that provided shelter for the crew at sea. That shelter was referred to as the 'den'. Our ceilidh house host referred to it as 'an denna'.

At that time Garibaldi's name was on the lips of everyone as he was engaged in the Italian Wars of Independence and the half-decked hulls soon became known as 'Baldies', a designation which is still applied to medium sized fishing boats. Before long, full decking boats came into fashion in the 1850s.

The fast expansion of the Caithness herring fishing in the 19th century was greatly assisted by the large reservoir of suitable labour available as a result of the dreadful Highland clearances that were taking place then. Wick was a natural haven for disposed crofters who needed to sustain the growth of the industry as fishermen and in a variety of trades such as coopers, sail making, rope works, net works, boat builders, and other building work, including quays, houses, furniture etc.

There was also a large influx of visiting fishing vessels coming to Wick each season. In the early 1850s there were about 12,000 visitor workers at Wick, of which nearly 5,000 were from the Highlands and Islands. It was said that Wick had the largest Gaelic congregation in the World, in season, at that time. A minister came with the Gaelic contingent from the north and west and they congregated in their thousands on the banks of the Wick River to hear him preach.

From the foregoing, we see that the herring fishing industry in Scotland developed greatly towards the end of the 18th century, but more particularly in the 19th century. In the 20th century the gill net herring fishing declined and virtually died by the 1970s.

Voluntary effort and private enterprise played a prominent part in the development of the herring fishing industry. The formation of the Highland Society of London by 25 Scottish gentlemen in the 1770s was a milestone, followed by the formation of the British Fishery Society in 1786. Then there was the policy of the newly formed British Fishery Society to establish fishing settlements on the west coast of Scotland, and also what amounted to

an act of faith to develop Wick as a fishing port when they were experiencing great difficulty on the west coast. The Society also campaigned for a relaxation of the crippling tax on salt, which was eventually reviewed in 1817, with great benefit to the herring fishing industry in Scotland.

Then, in 1819 J.F. Donovan of Leith discovered the 'Scotch-cure', an event that was of very great significance because it set a quality standard for herring cured in Scotland. Actually the 'Scotch-Cure' was only a variation of the 'Dutch-cure' invented centuries before by Peter Brockels.

Whereas the Dutch cured their herring at sea in large vessels which at first sight would appear to give them an advantage, the British with their traditional shore curing methods were more flexible once J.F. Donovan perfected his 'Scotch-cure' in 1819. This enabled them to improve the quality by monitoring the various steps very carefully.

The British insisted on the herring submitted for curing being newly caught and absolutely fresh. Salt was not allowed near the fish before it as landed. Fishery officers were appointed to monitor the quality of the end product and apply the 'Crown Brand' to each barrel after confirming that the fish was selected into classified groups and cured properly. In that way the 'Scotch-cure' and the 'Crown Brand' guaranteed the quality of the fish and that generated confidence and satisfaction among the buyers.

Very soon British cured herring gained a reputation for being the best in the world and the achievements of the industry in the first part of the 19th century consolidated a secure foundation on which to build a prosperous herring fishing industry. The importance of the market place was appreciated, and at the time harbours and shore facilities were being provided.

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