



## [The Fishery after the Second World War]

In 1945/46 thousands of war weary ex-servicemen trickled back home after being discharged from the services where they faced mortal danger for years. Naturally, they looked forward to finding work at home where they could relax along with their families.

Before they were called up in 1938/39 the main opportunities for employment in Lewis was in the fishing industry which was very depressed in the 1930s. Harris Tweed which was buoyant in the 1930s, ever since the orb trademark was amended in 1934, had in fact overtaken the traditional herring fishing industry as the largest employer of labour in the Island, but in the late 1940s Harris Tweed was going through one of its periodical slack periods and opportunities for additional employment were limited.

Many of the ex-servicemen therefore turned to the work they knew best which was fishing, and they invested their hard-earned gratuities in second hand motor boats and steam drifters. Lack of capital and a lingering doubt at the back of their minds prevented them from considering the purchase of new purpose-built boats.

The Lewis Association, which was a voluntary association of local business and professional people which was formed in 1943 to study the social and economic needs of the Island in the post war period, did valuable work by compiling several reports on various subjects, one of which was fishing.

In the Lewis Association Fishing Report which was published in 1947, it was stated that local fishermen had shown that they had faith in the future of the fishing industry because some of the large fishing vessels in the local fleet were expensively re-fitted and re-conditioned and the character of the local fleet had greatly improved. In that way it will be seen that the ex-servicemen and the local fishermen tried hard to make a success of the Hebridean herring fishing industry after the Second World War.

Certainly there were new opportunities opening up in the form of grant and loan schemes offered by the fisheries division of the Scottish Home department and subsequently by the white fish authority and the herring industry board. Two exercise crews did take advantage of the grant and loan scheme immediately after the War by acquiring two 75 foot MFVs (motor fishing vessels). These MFVs had their origin in a programme of construction initiated by the Admiralty in 1942 in order to supplement the duties carried out by the hundreds of fishing boats and other small vessels requisitioned from peaceful purposes for use in a wide range of wartime duties.

The MFVs were built in four classes, 45 foot, 61 foot, 75 foot and 90 foot long. There were 200 of the 75 foot class built and it was two brand new boats of this class that came to Lewis in 1947. The approximate cost was about £7,000 each. They were renamed 'Muirneag II' SY704 of Knock, Point and 'Sandy Bay' SY719 of North Tolsta.

In all, there was a substantial fleet of drift net fishing boats in Stornoway by about 1950 and all of these crews tried hard to make a success of drift netting in conjunction with the traditional great-line white fishing in season.

In 1950, a veteran fisherman from Sandwick, Stornoway of Cromore extraction, Calum Dhomhnuill 'an Òg who skippered several steam drifters and motor boats in his day, decided along with his son Murdo C MacLeod to acquire a new fishing boat and he confided in one of his pals, another old skipper known as Aonghais Mhurchaidh Bhig of Ranish extraction, that he was thinking of getting a new modern fishing boat. Taken by surprise and probably being somewhat jealous, his contemporary reacted by saying, 'What! The only new boat you will ever get is one with the number on top'.

Nevertheless, the new 'Ivy Rose' SY347 length 58 feet, built by Jones of Buckie, came to Stornoway in 1950. Her name was a combination of the last two steam drifters he had, the 'Girl Ivy' and the 'Rose'. The writer spent a season on the 'Girl Ivy'.

The new Ivy Rose reached Stornoway just before the opening of the summer herring fishing season while the rest of the fishing fleet were being pained as was customary before the opening of the fishing season. As the Ivy Rose was ready for sea they were out with their drift nets and got several good hauls of herring.

Normally the opening of the fishing season was discussed by the conservation conscious Lewis Fishermen's' Association of which Alastair Ruadh Smith, Aird, Point, was chairman at the time. There followed a meeting of the fishermen's' association at which a heated debate took place and the outcome was that the committee closed the port until the customary date for the usual start of the summer season fishing.

That incident illustrates how very strictly the Hebridean fishermen observed what they deemed to be good conservation practices. Little did they know then, that in a few years' time, conservation practices would be set aside in a mad scramble to make more and more money while fishing the plentiful shoals of herring round the Hebridean coast, cleaned out of the sea by big trawlers, some from distant ports, over which the Hebridean Fishermen's Association had no control.

The new Ivy Rose did very well but old Calum Dhomhnuill 'an Òg naturally found it difficult to adjust to the new methods of locating the herring shoals by reference to an inanimate machine located in the wheel-house, instead of the usual signs of the presence of herring.

On one occasion he wanted to follow his own judgement and set their nets off Bayble head as the big Stornoway steam drifter 'Windfall', despite the fact that the fish locating machine showed no signs of fish. However, the young members of the crew prevailed on him to try and locate signs of fish on the echo sounder before setting the nets. They searched for a considerable time until it was late in the evening, when at last they located a shoal of herring on the electronic fish finding gear. In the morning they hauled a 60 cran shot while the Windfall limped into port with 3 or 4 crans. The old skipper had to admit that the new-fangled modern gadgets were useful.

The Ivy Rose worked drift nets until about 1967/68. They also tried seine-net and fished all round the coast as far as Lerwick, Fraserburgh and Peterhead. After the old Skipper retired and his son Murdo C Macleod who had a navigation certificate, took over as Skipper. They got one big shot of 168 cran with drift-nets in a sheltered sea loch in Harris on a winter's night in the 1950s. In the late 1950s they acquired a light trawl.

Skipper Sandy Macleod, son of the well-known Skipper, Alastair Chaluim Alastair of the old sail boat Muirneag from Knock, Point, and his crew took their new modern MFV Muirneag II SY704 to the English East Anglia herring fishing in 1949 and again in 1952. But by that time the English herring fishing had declined seriously. Another elderly, well known skipper from Point, Alastair Ruadh Smith, 7 Aird, Point took the Steam Drifter, 'Le Rig' SY820 owned by J N Campbell, Portvoller, Point, to the English East Anglia winter fishing once or twice in the late 1940s, although he was past his mid-60s at that time.

The last Scottish herring fishing drifters to try the English fishing was in 1967. By that time trawlers, mainly continental, with massive catching power had destroyed the immature herring breeding stocks on the Dogger Bank by indiscriminate fishing and killed the whole North Sea herring fishery dead.

In a post script to their fishing report, dated August 1947, the Lewis Association stated that the catching power of the Stornoway herring fishing fleet was artificially restricted, and the port was closed altogether several times recently because no adequate arrangements were made to dispose of quite moderate landings by a small fleet.

The official policy for keeping the fishing fleet fully occupied, was to offer 30/- (£1.50) per cran for fishmeal for all herring surplus to the requirements of the home-market. If the whole fishing fleet had worked without restriction in the summer months the bulk of the catch would have gone to fishmeal at the uneconomical price of 30/- a cran of four baskets, instead of the pool price averaging just under 90/- (£4.50) for the kippering. The herring industry board seemed content to expect the fishermen to continue fishing all out for an overall price of just over 30/- per cran mainly for fish meal in 1947.

Herring prices were low in the 1950s and the market, other than for fishmeal, was very restricted. The home market only consumed about 35% of the annual catch. Crews were in danger of falling into serious debt and by the mid or late 1950s, one boat after another was forced to abandon the struggle until, according to the list of Lewis and Harris fishing boats in Olsen's Fisherman's Nautical Almanac, the fleet was down from over fifty boats in 1957 to six boats in Lewis and five boats in Harris in 1960, as follows:

Lewis	Harris
Renown SY14	Venture SY...
Pansy SY29	Catriona SY...
Isabella SY142	Marion SY...
Seafarer SY210	Scalpay-Isle SY429
Golden Sheaf SY...	A Mhaighdean Hearnach SY824
Ivy-Rose SY347	

The Glasgow Herald of 2.6.59 also confirmed that there were only six full-time crews in Lewis and five in Harris. Contrast that with the following number of Boats fishing from Stornoway and Barra 80 years earlier:

Year	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882
Boats	871	1,084	1,381	1,285	1,300

By the mid or late 1950s, the main emphasis of the Stornoway fishing fleet was no longer on drift-net fishing. Most of the boats alternated from drift-nets, white-fish line fishing, one or two boats tried seine nets and even ring-netting. At that time prawn fishing in Stornoway was still a new form of fishing that did not catch on really until the 1960s. Prawns used to be dumped overboard because there was no market for them, also the local fishermen

maintained that the rocky nature of the sea-bed in the Minch was not very suitable for seine net fishing and they suffered a lot of damage to their seine nets and light trawls until they became familiar with the nature of the sea-bed and were able to chart and avoid certain areas.

As a matter of interest Olsen's Fisherman's Nautical Almanac lists eight steam drifters in Stornoway in 1957 as follows: Windfall, Hero, Lewis, Coronata, Handsome, Invernairne, Le Rig and Alfin.

Nations like Iceland, the Faeroes and others who regarded their fishing industries to be of prime economic importance nationally, took steps to safeguard and conserve their fishing stocks by extending their inshore fishing limits. Iceland extended its inshore fishing limit to 4 miles in 1952 and then to 12 miles in 1958. Subsequently, Iceland extended its fishing limit unilaterally to 200 miles but the meddling British reacted by sending Royal Naval Frigates for the second time to conduct a cold war by giving naval protection to British trawlers fishing for cod illegally within Iceland's fishing limit of 200 miles.

Britain attempted to impose their will on a small nation by intimidating Iceland on the grounds that they were protecting British interest so called, in someone else's backyard, instead of taking similar sensible steps to protect British fishing communities by asserting our own territorial fishing rights over our own coastal waters.

When however, big businesses discovered underwater oil and gas reserves in our coastal waters in 1975, the British attitude, and that of the other coastal nations that were going to benefit from that discovery transformed overnight and Britain and other nations established a 200 mile limit unilaterally on 1 January 1977.

In the new circumstances a future was assured to the fishing industries of the independent communities like Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Norway etc. The inshore fishermen of Scotland would have won a similar secure position, but for the willingness of the British Government to gain favour with the common market countries at the expense of the expendable Scottish fishing communities.

Sociologically and economically the survival of most of the Scottish Highland and Island communities is dependent to a very large extent on protection for their inshore fishing industry and the Outer Hebrides is no exception.

By 1970 Britain was well down in the league of major fishing nations of the world with landings only contributing less than 0.2% of the gross annual product. Nevertheless, fishing was of particular importance to Scotland and the then six Common Market countries recognised at first that their original fisheries policy was inappropriate for Scotland.

The British Conservative Government of Mr Heath did not however, attach sufficient importance to our fishing industry to include it in the list of things they considered necessary to negotiate and secure agreement on, before entering the enlarged European Community on 1 January 1973. Early in 1974 a Labour Government was returned in the general election and they held a referendum in 1975 on new terms of entry to the European Community, but without any long term protection for the Scottish fishing industry. Britain voted by a majority to remain with the European Community, with the Western Isles and Shetland voting against.

Having exhausted the fish stock in most of their own waters the European countries of the Common Market claimed a full share of the British fish resources and the Treaty of Rome grants them that right. The Treaty of Rome clearly states that the rules applied to each member state in respect of fishing shall not lead to differences in treatment of other member states. Member States shall ensure in particular, equal access to, and use of, their fishing grounds for all fishing vessels flying the flag of a Member State and registered in community territory. In other words, fishing up to the shore, by all EEC countries was built into the Treaty of Rome.

Nevertheless, it seems that some concessions were granted to Britain and the present position is that the old British 3 mile fishing is done away with. There is a common market 200 mile territorial limit in force with exclusive fishing zones within that limit for countries claiming historical fishing rights. There is also a 12 mile limit, which is almost exclusively British but there are some exceptions for EEC countries based on historical rights. The Minch is closed under the 12 mile limit. There is also a 6 mile British only limit, for instance on the west coast of Lewis. It seems the present regulations governing fishing limits are somewhat complicated.

[ends]

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