



[The Last Gill-Net Boats]

The MacLennan Brothers of Marvig had a long tradition of gill-net herring fishing. Their last three fishing boats were 'Ebenezer', 'Seaflower' and in 1960 they got the 'Seafarer' SY210, a modern fishing boat equipped with all the latest fishing and navigating aids.



(Above: The MacLennan brothers. Below: The 'Seafarer')



Although the gill-net herring fishing method was generally accepted as conserving the herring stocks and the Seafarer was the only gill-net boat engaged continuously on commercial drift-net herring fishing in Lewis and exclusively supplying the local Lewis market for several years leading up to the ban on herring fishing, yet the authorities refused to allow the Seafarer to continue fishing with gill-nets for the local Lewis market.

In the circumstances the MacLennan brothers were forced to moor their modern fishing boat in the local anchorage at Marvig, Lochs, and take temporary work ashore for 2 or 3 years while the herring fishing lasted.

Officialdom stubbornly refused to modify the ban on the last remaining drift-net crew in the Island. They were treated in the same way as the guilty parties whose catching power was such that they fished the herring clean out of the seas round the Island. It was reckoned that one modern Purser could outfish 500 boats of the type that was in use in the 1840s. One 90 foot Purser landed 968 crans in Shetland on one occasion, while the top shot for a herring drifter was said to be about 100 crans. The average landing of a gill-net drifter might be in the region of 10 or 20 crans of thereabouts. The last herring catch hauled by the Seafarer SY210 was 27 crans or 54 units, which is the

modern measure (two boxes or two baskets to a unit). In the face of the prolonged ban on herring fishing and the continued uncertainty the MacLennan brothers of Marvig were forced to give in and sell their boat in 1979.

In the last few years of herring fishing there was only one boat in Harris that worked the gill-nets continually. It was the 'Constant Friend' SY118 owned by four Mackinnon brothers from Scadabay, Harris. They laid up their boat in Bayhead, Stornoway for over a year during the herring ban and lived aboard while they worked during the day at the Arnish oil fabrication yard nearby.

Thus ended the traditional commercial gill-net herring fishing in Lewis and Harris, and for the first time in many generations the numerous anchorages in rural Lewis and Harris were left without a drift-net herring fishing boat. Gone also were the numerous 'kipper houses' in Stornoway and the herring gutting girls etc.

Herring caught in drift-nets were of superior quality because the fish were not de-scaled and softened by excessive handling. Furthermore, the size of mesh in the nets was geared to catch the larger and more mature fish. In that way, conservation was built into the gill-net method of fishing; it was compatible with the conservation of fish stocks. A serious side effect of the prolonged herring fishing ban of the late 1970s was that a new generation grew up that had never acquired a taste for herring, 'the king of fish', and in consequence of that, and the increasing popularity of fast and packaged foods, the home market demand for herring was adversely affected by the conservation ban.

A friend of mine was down at the quay in Stornoway in 1990 in the course of his work, servicing a fishing boat. The crew of the boat unloaded a few boxes of mixed whiting and haddock onto the quay, and presently two young Stornoway 12-14 year old boys came along and they surveyed the boxes of fish and debated what species of fish it was. In the end they concluded it was herring. This was a far cry from their earlier Stornoway counterparts who assiduously gathered sufficient skeds round the quay to sell in order to acquire some pocket money.

Human greed and the neglect by the authorities to introduce sensible conservation measure in good time destroyed a valuable natural resource, which provided employment for a large number of people in Scotland, as well as a valuable source of food.

Also, as crofting is by nature a part-time communal occupation requiring additional employment for the crofter and his family, and fishing was always the main ancillary source of employment in the crofting areas, once the fishing went down, as it did to six fishing boats in Lewis in 1960, serious depopulation set in as people had to seek work in the southern towns and cities. In that way the crofting way of life was seriously affected and in some places it all but virtually collapsed in the absence of active young people.

Absentee crofters are a symptom of the crofting problem, not the cause. The cure is more employment, not so called viable crofts, and multiple tenancies of crofts only intensifies the problem without even making the multiple crofter a viable agriculturist.

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