



The Transition from Sail to Motor

The transition from the age of the sail to the motor came in gradually over the first 30 or 40 years of the 20th century. First came the emergence of the steam drifter which made its first successful appearance in Scotland at the end of the 19th century, about 20 years after the launch of the first Zulu fishing boat. Nearly all the steam drifters were built between 1900 and 1914, by which time there were about 900 in Scotland.

The continual decline and eventual disappearance of the sail as a means of propulsion for fishing boats was accelerated by the conversion of the sail fishing boats to motor. The first marine engines were installed in fishing boats in Scotland about 1906/07, but it was in the late 1920s before the wholesale conversion of the fishing fleet took place in Lewis. There were virtually no purpose built motor fishing boats in Lewis before the Second World War, the whole fishing fleet consisted of ageing steam drifters and converted sailboats.

In 1901 a big Zulu sailboat 80 feet overall cost approximately £700 while a steam drifter cost upwards of £2,500. On top of the initial cost, steam drifters were expensive to run burning up to 20 tons of coal a week, whereas sailboats incurred no expense while at sea. Steam drifters were viable enough during the prosperous period before the First World War, but the loss of the herring market and the inflated cost of coal etc. as a result of the War sealed the fate of the steam drifter.

A Stornoway Almanac lists 143 large sail fishing boats registered in Stornoway in 1899, the vast majority of them from 30 to 50 feet keel, but some of them were up to 60 feet keel. During the height of the summer fishing season there were 692 boats employed on fishing for herring in Stornoway, many of them from other fishing ports. The total number of local persons employed in connection with the various branches of the sea fishing industry in Lewis in 1897 was 7587 persons.

A similar Stornoway Almanac in 1931 lists 15 large steam drifters, 46 Class 1 converted sailboats to marine engines and 12 Class 1 sailboats. The list does not include the numerous classes of two and three. It might be of interest to list the last sail fishing boats in Lewis in the early 1930s.

In 1903 Skipper Alexander Macleod, Knock, Point ordered a new 80 foot Zulu sail fishing boat from the boat yard of William Macintosh, Portessie. It was called the 'Muirneag' and this boat was destined to be the last class 1 Zulu sail fishing boat in Lewis, and we believe in the whole of Scotland. By the beginning of the Second World War there were only two large class 1 Zulu sail fishing boats in Lewis, and by the end of the war, only the 'Muirneag' SY 486 was left. She participated in her last gill net herring fishing season immediately after the Second World War, and she was then laid up and sold for auction in Stornoway in 1947 for £50 and taken to the beach at Balallan where she was broken up for fence posts. That was the end of the sail fishing era. How we wish the 'Muirneag' was preserved for posterity in a maritime museum.

However romantic and brave we may view the era of the sail; it is certainly true that the fishing was a hard calling during the sail period. A glimpse of the hardship may be gained from the following episode.

Alexander Macleod of Knock, Point, who sailed the 'Morven' SY 1217 in the Coronation Race in 1902, experienced perhaps his worst fishing trip ever in December 1891. As a young skipper aged 23 years in charge of the 49 foot keel Zulu sail boat 'Johanna' SY 853, he hauled a boat full of 120 crans of herring in Loch Inchard just below Cape Wrath. They set sail about 9 a.m. in a strong south westerly wind for the market at Stornoway, eventually the wind rose and by 10 a.m. they had to shorten sail to the last reef. Eventually it was blowing a howling gale that caused considerable and widespread damage including the uprooting of many trees on the mainland. They battled with the elements all day and it was 11 p.m. when they made their first landfall at the Butt of Lewis. Skipper Macleod had been at his post, the wheel, all day. Shortly after making their landfall as they were coming about on the starboard tack the foreyard broke and their sail was torn. In this desperate emergency the crew went to work at once and got the mizzen sail rigged up to the foremast, but after a while the yard of the mizzen sail broke and the sail was damaged by the ferocity of the wind. In the absence of both sails the boat lost all power and she was lying helplessly broadside on in heavy seas. The crew's first and most urgent task was to get the boat head-on into the wind as quickly as possible before they were swamped. They therefore set about immediately to prepare an improvised sheet anchor by tying made up nets at intervals to the spring rope but before they were ready to deploy the sheet anchor a heavy sea struck the boat and everybody agreed that it was a miracle that they were not swamped. They then re-doubled their efforts and proceeded feverishly to jettison their herring catch overboard in order to lighten the vessel.

Eventually having rigged up and streamed the sheet anchor and brought the head of the boat into the wind, they rode the storm out until 10a.m. the next day when the wind moderated and shifted to the west. Meanwhile the crew were busy splicing the broken yard with fend-offs and repairing the sail as best they could, using corks and twine to secure the tears. After much hard work they got under way again somewhere in the open sea off the Butt of Lewis, and they crawled back to Lochinver at 4p.m. not far from where they had left two mornings earlier. The only other boat that was caught in the gale disappeared without trace.

In 1899 Skipper Alexander Macleod, Knock, made a record-breaking homecoming voyage at the end of the East Anglia herring fishing season, as we are told by Donald Macdonald in his book 'Lewis'. It was the same boat that he sailed in the Coronation Race, 'Morven' SY 1217, and he covered the distance of about 500 miles from Lowestoft to Stornoway non-stop in 48 hours. For comparison we quote an east coast writer who states that, 'in 1903 Jim Blaikie sailed the "Alexandra" a large Fifie, from Wick to Yarmouth, a distance of about 460 miles in forty two-and-a-half hours', and he says, 'That time was never broken by a fishing vessel'.

When we consider that the 'Morven' had to negotiate the treacherous Pentland narrows and a much longer distance than the 'Alexandra', we feel that skipper Macleod's achievements might be even more impressive than that of Jim Blaikie.

During both World Wars the Government took control of the fishing fleet and used many of the large boats as navy auxiliary vessels. The steam drifter 'Herring Fisher' owned by the fish curers Duncan Maciver Ltd. Stornoway, was enlisted in the patrol service section of the R.N.R.T. together with her fishing skipper Domhnuill Ruadh Smith, 7 Aird Point. Alistair Macfarlane, 10 Marvig, served on her as a mate although he was nearly 60 years of age then. They were based in Scapa Flow but ranged as far as the Mediterranean Sea.

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