



[Herring Prices and Catches in Lewis, 1913-45]

Stornoway was unique in that it had the longest herring fishing season in Britain and the quality of Stornoway herring was unequalled in any other major port. Probably this was due to the geographical position of Stornoway in relation to the herring spawning grounds and the seasonal variations in the spawning times, off the West Coast of Scotland and around the Outer Hebrides.

Unlike many other Scottish herring fishing ports, which had their fishing, concentrated mainly into a few summer months, Stornoway's herring fishing seasons usually lasted for almost 10 months of the year. Early summer season, main summer season, autumn and winter seasons. Sometimes the winter herring fishing was of major importance to the local fishermen and it was also customary for many of the herring fishermen to turn to great line white fishing in the late winter and early spring months.

A feature of the herring fishing in Lewis was the way the herring shoals entered the various Sea Lochs in the winter months. In the winter of 1927/28 an unusual dense shoal of herring entered Loch Erisort, 'Sgadan-Mor-Loch-Erisort'. No one ever saw such a dense shoal of herring anywhere before or after. It began on 11th November 1927 and continued all winter.

Only a few nets could be set at a time and the nets could only be left in the sea for a very short time; say about half an hour, for fear of the loss of the nets owing to the weight of herring enmeshed. Roderick MacKinnon, Garyvard remembers the loch herring boom of 1927 very well, as he was a young man of years working with an older crew from Garyvard. They lost a number of nets, but it was a very low price they were getting from the Stornoway curers and the continental Klondykers anchored in Loch Erisort that he remembers best. Prices were as low as 5s/- a cran (25p) for 1,000 herring.

People filled buckets of live herring among the seaweed at the bottom of the crofts anywhere round the shores of Loch Erisort in 1927. They gathered buckets of herring for the cattle. An estimate of 30 million herring was taken from Loch Erisort in 1927. The continental Klondykers doused the herring in rough salt and took it directly to the continent.

Every available fishing croft in Lewis was at the bonanza on Loch Erisort and without doubt in encouraged the Lewis fishermen to purchase more and in many cases bigger, second-hand boats from the East Coast of Scotland in the 1920s. The early 1920s were depressing years of emigration, unemployment and poor fishing.

In 1930 Roderick MacKinnon and his crew felt confident enough to buy a large 38 foot second hand motor boat called 'Try Again' SY 108. Many other fishermen in Lewis invested in large second hand sail Zulu boats in the late 1920s and early 1930s because they were optimists and they felt that the herring fishing had taken a turn for the better.

However, instead of an improvement in the 1930s both catches and prices were particularly disappointing as may be seen from the following table for 1913 to 1945 showing the catch in cwt baskets. The total value, the whole catch per year and the price per cwt basket. The following table shows that the 1920s and the 1930s were a period of low catches and low prices as well as damaging fluctuations. The prices per basket given below are average prices and in actual fact the price obtained in many, many cases were far below the price given here. Indeed, very often there was no purchaser and the catch had to be dumped back into the sea.

Year	Cwt Baskets	Annual Value of Total Catch (£)	Price for Cwt Basket in new pence
1913	524,250	170,766	32.5 pence
1914	573,950	142,668	25 pence
1915	119,180	87,928	73.5 pence
1916	391,186	244,149	62 pence
1917	435,623	251,810	57.5 pence
1918	372,727	379,078	101 pence
1919	315,772	258,213	81 pence
1920	372,000	182,721	66 pence
1921	135,543	82,214	60 pence
1922	240,816	78,863	32.5 pence

1923	286,263	79,746	27.5 pence
1924	488,812	254,495	51.5 pence
1925	394,503	261,507	66 pence
1926	489,665	190,912	39 pence
1927	775,317	318,637	41 pence
1928	630,759	326,736	51 pence
1929	373,214	155,155	41.5 pence
1930	286,167	202,448	70 pence
1931	238,036	171,915	72 pence
1932	269,864	160,401	59 pence
1933	165,572	115,470	69.5 pence
1934	89,202	43,485	48 pence
1935	215,449	117,632	54 pence
1936	180,233	82,462	47.5 pence
1937	118,678	60,543	50.5 pence
1938	194,425	97,971	50 pence
1939	115,381	64,027	50 pence
1940	182,101	214,203	117.5 pence
1941	253,031	343,299	135 pence
1942	300,482	412,148	137 pence
1943	230,966	300,194	129 pence
1944	177,124	227,133	121.5 pence
1945	216,996	273,139	125 pence

As may be seen from the above table, only in 1918 when the country was near to starvation from U-boat action, and again in the 1940s under the pressure of the Second World War, did the price of a cwt basket of herring (containing approximately 300 herring) exceed £1.00

In the 1930s herring prices were even more depressed. In 1932 the Garyvard crew of the 'Try Again' SY108 sold a fairly good catch of herring in Stornoway for 2s/6d a cran of 4 baskets, 12.5p in present money for about 1,000 herring or about 3p a cwt, and to add insult to injury the curer, as was customary, demanded an extra few cwt of herring free, by way of discount.

Later on in the 1930s prices were even more depressed, both Murdo MacKinnon, Garyvard the Free Church elder and his cousin Roderick Mackinnon, (Ruaraidh Rob) confirmed that it was only after returning home from serving 5 years in the Second World War as Royal Naval Reservists that they were able to pay for the last set of new herring nets which they used in the 'Try Again' SY108 before they were called up at the beginning of the War. Meanwhile, the boat itself was sold, as it was lying idle in Garyvard harbour during the war years.

During the lean and hungry years of the 1930s the British Government justified their policy of allowing poor quality Norwegian winter herring on to the British Market in quantities of upwards of 20% of the total home market consumption, by maintaining that Norwegian herring were not sold at prices below the price obtained for British herring at that time.

The fact was that the low price at which inferior Norwegian herring was dumped on to the British market in the 1930s depressed the price of superior quality British herring from the West coast of Scotland to more or less the same price level as the Norwegian herring. In that way the poor quality foreign product was imported at the expense of the high quality Scottish product.

Worse still, was the fact that the British Government encouraged the import of cheap Norwegian herring at a time when it was not always possible to sell Minch herring in the 1930s and therefore, catches had to be dumped back into the sea, and fishermen in ever greater numbers were abandoning their boats and the herring fishing industry and forced on to the unemployment to satisfy the merchant importers and fish processors of Hull and Grimsby.

Fortunately, by that time prospects for work in the Merchant Navy had greatly improved and a great many Hebridean fishermen joined the Merchant Navy and the whaling in South Georgia in the Antarctica as well as work in the industrial towns and cities. In a few short years the British Government were mobilising these same Naval Reservist fishermen to serve in the Second World War.

The following table of seasonal herring landings for the lean years 1913/1945, as extracted from The Lewis Association, a pamphlet on fishing, illustrates graphically the importance of winter fishing as well as shorter seasons to the fishermen of the Hebrides.

Quantity and value of seasonal herring landed at Stornoway from 1913 to 1945 (great summer and early winter totals combined for the years 1913 to 1924)

Year	Winter <i>1Jan-31March</i>		Early Summer <i>1April-10June</i>		Great Summer <i>1July-30Sept</i>		Early Winter <i>1Oct-31Dec</i>		Total	
	Cwt	Value	Cwt	Value	Cwt	Value	Cwt	Value	Cwt	Value
1913	366,524	£87,878	56,814	£28,653	100,912	£54,235			524,250	170,766
1914	388,778	68,595	45,177	15,278	139,995	58,795			573,950	142,668
1915	37,511	11,617	10,694	12,241	70,975	64,070			119,180	87,928
1916	253,144	163,216	42,416	18,280	95,626	62,653			391,186	244,149
1917	384,453	212,747	12,789	9,060	38,381	31,003			435,623	252,810
1918	296,772	297,233	25,702	33,966	50,253	47,879			372,727	379,078
1919	198,876	184,984	23,917	16,961	92,979	56,265			315,772	208,213
1920	88,627	59,361	35,198	30,958	148,176	92,402			272,001	182,721
1921	58,289	30,553	13,335	11,589	63,919	40,072			135,543	82,214
1922	37,886	12,415	13,570	8,493	189,360	57,955			240,816	78,863
1923	138,498	33,900	22,958	9,643	124,807	36,203			286,263	79,746
1924	340,870	133,268	51,954	33,757	95,985	87,470			488,812	254,495
1925	112,249	42,103	62,783	52,028	187,089	153,615	32,382	£13,761	394,503	261,507
1926	86,257	34,231	85,734	39,469	120,046	76,464	197,628	40,748	489,665	190,912
1927	169,642	26,536	50,669	23,323	341,481	171,472	213,525	97,306	775,317	318,637
1928	173,267	56,529	99,117	42,816	307,040	210,759	51,335	16,632	630,759	326,736
1929	83,710	21,406	127,915	42,933	157,782	88,586	3,837	2,230	373,244	155,155
1930	18,369	20,212	48,762	26,490	166,544	154,020	2,492	1,726	286,167	202,448
1931	38,473	12,163	39,929	32,306	143,661	124,004	15,973	3,442	238,036	171,915
1932	16,091	3,838	15,969	7,315	165,392	130,115	72,412	19,133	269,864	160,401
1933	54,594	20,857	11,910	9,876	94,115	83,717	4,953	1,020	165,572	115,470
1934	5,970	1,735	18,233	5,729	60,046	33,485	4,953	2,536	89,202	43,485
1935	32,421	11,513	83,467	33,607	94,515	70,677	5,046	1,835	215,449	117,632
1936	30,666	9,256	120,110	57,439	12,033	10,014	17,424	4,753	180,233	81,462
1937	4,271	1,506	53,532	18,038	55,510	38,994	5,375	2,005	148,678	60,543
1938	9,054	2,678	86,234	37,576	85,185	53,590	13,952	4,127	194,425	97,971
1939	5,982	1,827	71,245	39,824	15,737	12,995	22,417	9,381	115,381	64,027
1940	48,361	56,169	16,694	19,551	49,135	54,849	67,911	83,634	182,101	214,203
1941	34,972	45,378	54,969	74,198	97,716	135,986	65,374	87,737	253,031	243,299
1942	47,054	65,855	53,591	74,711	137,676	184,580	62,161	87,002	300,482	412,148
1943	40,076	55,937	45,933	62,310	125,753	157,187	19,204	24,760	230,966	300,194
1944	15,753	20,404	52,684	67,668	60,643	76,636	48,044	62,425	177,124	227,133
1945	14,060	17,940	50,161	61,270	70,038	88,661	82,737	105,268	261,996	273,139

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