



Herring Cadging

Herring cadging, which was the offering of herring for sale from vehicles on the village roads, had its hey-day in Lewis in the 1930s when there were dozens of fish-hawkers competing for the available supplies of herring on the Stornoway quayside as the boats returned from the fishing grounds, and tied up early in the morning.

These cadgers have provided a very useful and reliable service for the rural housewife by bringing fresh fish to her door daily at a very competitive price. The whole island was parcelled off into geographical runs or areas by an unwritten understanding between the cadgers and each run was serviced by a particular cadger, who was usually a resident of the area concerned. Each cadger was therefore well known to his customers.

Although the daily supply of herring required by each cadger was only on average two or three crans, the cumulative total requirements of all the cadgers throughout the island was quite considerable and therefore cadging was an important feature of the herring fishing industry in pre-war days.

A considerable quantity of home cured herring was consumed in Lewis ever since salt became freely available. In earlier times local small open boats supplied the island demand for both fresh herring and herring for home curing. Since motor vehicles became plentiful in the 1930s and travelling shops became a feature of the rural scene it was only natural that fish hawkers would take up their place among the travelling shops. In the town area there were a few horse-drawn floats in the 1930s such as 'Rob-an-Deacoin' and the 'Greaser' etc.

The cadging market was a natural outlet for the boats that were unfortunate enough to have only netted small catches that was not worthwhile for the big curers, who normally secured their herring supplies in large quantities at the regular fish mart. Cadgers were quite prepared to buy small quantities of herring, even down to half a basket. The fishermen were also assured of a fair price because of the nature of the trade and the keen competition for herring supplies among the numerous cadgers that were struggling to earn their living in conditions of considerable unemployment.

Boats came back to port very early in the morning after hauling their nets and the cadging fraternity would be waiting for them on the quayside. As soon as the boats tied up the cadgers jumped on board to seek supplies. Many of the cadgers travelled from the distant parts of the island and therefore they had to get up with the morning light in order to ensure a reasonable supply of herring for the day's run. Otherwise they would have nothing to sell, with which to meet their unavoidable expenses. By selling the small unimportant catches to the cadgers the fishermen escaped paying the usual salesman commission payable on all fish that was sold through the fish mart.

There was no weekly wage in the herring fishing industry in pre-war days and therefore the fishing community had to manage until the time of the square up at the end of the season. Not only that, but very often the fishing was so poor that there was little or no money left for the men to take home to their families at the end of the season after all necessary boat and running expenses were paid.

The money raised from the sale of herring for cadging was in the nature of pocket money, and was referred to as stoker money. As a rule it was kept aside by the skipper until the end of the week, as it was the only money available to the fishermen during the week and sometimes during the season. However hard the times were, many of the fishermen had a dram out of the stoker money and the rest was spent on groceries for their families for the weekend.

Stoker money was also earned by selling mackerel to a fleet of Norwegian Klondykers anchored in 'Glumaig' Bay within the anchorage of Stornoway harbour during the summer months in the 1930s. Usually the fishermen got small amounts of mackerel among the herring and there was a keen demand for it from the Norwegian Klondykers. All the Klondike vessels had small motorised skiffs of approximately 15 feet long and they proceeded out past Arnish lighthouse to meet the fishing boats as they were coming to port early in the morning.

These small Norwegian skiffs were good sea worthy boats and however stormy it was, they were bobbing in the waves at the back of Arnish lighthouse, each one trying to entice the incoming fishing boats to follow them to their parent ship. Inducements were offered in the form of tobacco or cognac and the most generous of the Klondykers usually got the best supplies of mackerel.

The Norwegian Klondikers were the only sales outlet for mackerel in the pre-war period and in the absence of any other competition the price was very low, only about 2s/6d a basket. At the end of the season many of them sold

their skiffs which were made from three planks, to the local fishermen and some of them were to be seen in Lewis for many years.

In the post war years salesmen were unhappy about the private sales of fish to the cadgers and eventually in the 1950s and 60s the cadger outlet was brought under the control of the regular fish selling mart. Cadgers sold their herring by the score and naturally they preferred small herring, whereas the curers preferred the big herring for kippering or curing.

The effect of the cadgers securing their herring supplies in competition on the open market was that prices were forced up and the curers were obliged to pay a higher price for small herring, particularly when supplies were scarce. Previously the price for small herring on the open market was often depressed.

The traditional basket and cran measure was also replaced by boxes, units and tonne, and before the last boats ceased to fish with herring gill-nets in the late 1970s the price of a unit, which was two boxes, was up to £80 a unit. The effect of the herring fishing ban in the late 1970s was that a generation grew up that was not used to eating herring, either fresh or cured. Furthermore, once the ban was lifted it was difficult to get supplies of herring locally as all the gill-net fishing boats had ceased to fish. In the event, there were less and less herring consumed in the Western Isles and, although there is still a very strong demand among the older generation for fried herring in the summer, the younger generation have never acquired a taste for it and therefore they neglect this tasty food of very high nutritional value, now recommended by scientists for the good of our health.

The 'Seafarer' SY210 from Marvig, Lochs owned by the MacLennan brothers was the last boat that fished for herring in Lewis with gill nets. Because of over-fishing, herring fishing was banned in 1977 and the ban was not lifted until 1983. By that time the MacLennan crew from 18 Marvig were forced to sell their boat.

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