

Fish Saving

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A history of fish processing from ancient to modern times - By C.L.Cutting BSC, PHD, FRIC.
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Fish and Shellfish were one of primitive man's main foods on his earliest days as a food gatherer. It was in search of fish that he spread along the Seaboard and up the rivers.

The improved Dutch cure is attributed to William Beukels or Beuzelzoon. There were several variants of the spelling. His dates are uncertain, 1347, 1387, and 1401 have all been mentioned either for his birth or death.

The Decline of the Dutch Fishery

There were frequent naval warfare between the English and the Dutch in the 17th century. Blake captured about 100 Dutch vessels of Buchan Ness in 1652. That year (1653), the Dutch fleet, still amounting to some 2,000 sail, was kept at home; this was its first serious check. For the next 60 years until the peace of Utrecht in 1713 Holland was at war either with England or France, or both.

In 1702, the war of the Spanish Successor broke out and in that year four French men of war defeated an armed convoy and burnt 400 vessels of the Dutch fleet in Brissay Sound in the Shetland Islands.

The Dutch superiority has suffered a rapid decline (Dutch Cured Fish) during the 18th Century.

Whereas in 1679, after the peace of Nijmegen, they had 4,000 vessels and 200,000 men employed in fisheries. By 1736 the herring fleet numbered only 300 sail, and in 1779, 162.

In 1756 incidentally, it was estimated that 1,100 British fishermen were engaged in Dutch boats. By 1784 there was only 270 vessels altogether.

After the zenith of the Dutch Supremacy in the middle of the 17th century the quality of the product also began to fall away.

After the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Holland had only 137 vessels and the decline continued, until in 1853 there were only 92 ships landing a total of less than 5,000 tons.

The Union depressed the Fisheries of Scotland by introducing the restrictive English duties on salt etc. moreover the bounty system put a premium on the building of large vessels of the type required by the Dutch fishing for long periods 400 miles from home, but not the most suitable for the Scottish Lochs.

Adam Smith said that it has been too common for vessels to fit out for the sole purpose of catching, not the fish, but the Bounty (The Wealth of Nations 1776).

In 1805 the Society of Arts offered a reward for curing herrings using the Dutch Method. In 1819 and 1820 J.F. Donovan of Leith got rewards of 50 guineas and £50 respectively for his succession in obtaining the assistance of experienced Dutch curers in catching and curing herring on the west coast of Scotland to purchase a commodity equal to the Dutch Cure.

These developments marked the beginning of the rise off the Scottish, to become for a time, the greatest herring fishing nation in the world.

In 1808 a further Act was passed for the further and better regulations of the British Herring Fishery establishing commissioners to brand herrings into full, Matze, Schotten etc.

Bounties were withdrawn in 1829 and the price of salt then fell from £32 to £1 per ton within a decade and to 72/- ton in 1880. 1707 Treaty of Union between England and Scotland.

A writer in 1784 says of the inhabitants of the Western Highlands and Islands "the laws which particularly oppress them are the salt laws, and if ever it is expected to make the fisheries flourish, they must undergo a radical change - Ferguson J (cd) Letters of George Dempster to Sir Adam Ferguson 1756/1813 - (London 1934)

Steam

It was not long after steam trawling had proved itself that steam was applied to the herring drifter. Elliot and Garrod of Beccles seem to have introduced a steam capstan for hauling the nets of sailing drifters about 1884.

The first steam drifter was built at Lowestoft in 1897 and was an immediate success, making twice the catch with the same spread of nets.

The Herring Industry Board was set up in the United Kingdom as a result of the recommendations of the Sea Fish Commission's first report in 1932. The Board was reconstituted in 1938 and given powers, which have been renewed since the war, to regulate the industry and to take responsibility for research and development.