



## Drift Nets

Drift nets get their name from the manner in which they are worked. The nets are cast or shot into the sea where they hang perpendicularly from floats on the surface of the sea, forming, as it were, a perforated wall. When the shoals of herring try to pass through the perforations or meshes, they are caught because the meshes are only large enough to permit the head and the gills of the fish to enter, but too small to allow the thicker part of the body of the fish to pass through.

Before James Patterson of Musselburgh invented a loom that was capable of weaving cotton nets, about 1850, all fishing nets were hand made from hemp yarn in the homes of the fishermen, very often by the women folk. We recall our host in the ceilidh house relating to us how my grandfather Kenneth Nicholson of Calbost was helping his father to make a new net when the civil engineers came to measure out the Calbost Crofts at the time of the second letting, which was about 1850. It was Kenneth, as a boy, that assisted the engineers with the measuring at Calbost. Rev. Hugh Munro, Parish Minister of Uig, Lewis, states that in the first statistical account, about 200 years ago in 1795, there were 275 net makers in the parish of Uig at that time.

The old handmade nets were soon replaced by the less bulky cotton machine woven nets which were longer and deeper and as the fishing fleets were expanding rapidly at the time and larger boats were coming into use there was a very big demand for nets. Eventually the rights in the first net loom was acquired by J&W Stewart of Musselburgh, Scotland and that company supplied generation after generation of Highland and Island fishermen with herring nets. On average there are 30 to 36 meshes per yard in a herring net or, in other words each mesh measures approximately one-inch square. When a fisherman is ordering a new herring net he refers to the size of mesh he wants as say; 35's, which means 35 meshes to the yard.

The small open boats the fishermen used in earlier times were manned by a crew of three or four men, each of which provided a few home-made hemp nets. In due course the large steam drifters and Zulu sailing boats used 70 to 80 cotton nets and each net was about 36 yards long by 17 yards deep. The nets were tied together end to end and laid out in the hold of the boat in regular order, ready to be shot or cast into the sea. Once the whole drift of nets were shot they extended in a long straight line for nearly 2.5 miles long. In that position, with the vessel tied to the end of the long line of nets, they were left to drift with the tide and wind until it was thought desirable to haul them back into the boat, hence the designation drift nets.

Herring move about in large shoals and as a general rule drift nets were set about sun set and hauled just before dawn. Drift net herring fishing was therefore usually carried out at night because it was felt that the herring were influenced by the change in light and is therefore more inclined to be on the move or rise to the surface at dusk or dawn or in bright moonlight, rather than in either broad daylight or darkness. It is also felt that herring are more likely to strike the nets in a light breeze, rather than in a calm spell.

In the days before fishing boats were equipped with modern technological equipment to enable them to locate the herring shoals; the fishermen relied on various signs which they took to indicate their whereabouts, such as an oily surface, the presence of whales or an abnormal number of solan geese or other sea birds. Some fishermen claim that they can smell the herring and an experienced eye can judge from the colour of the sea if there are herring likely to be about, because herring feed on plankton, which is minute animal and vegetable organisms floating in the ocean, and if that is present in large quantities it tends to turn the sea to a light milky brown. A large shoal of herring can also be seen by the naked eye if it is near the surface. The sea turns a reddish colour.

When the nets are set they are not fixed to anything and neither are they towed, but left free to drift as the wind and tide bears them along, with the boat attached to the end of the long line of nets by paying out an extra 40 or 50 fathom of the spring or lead rope which is attached to the bottom of the nets. The length of rope between the vessel and the nets was called swing rope because it allowed the boat to swing in the wind.

The depth at which the nets hang below the surface of the sea depends on the length of the buoy rope. That is the rope that stretches between the float or buoy on the surface of the sea and the top or back-rope of each net. Generally speaking the usual length of buoy rope was about two fathoms, but some of the boats, usually the middle class boats, used an extended buoy rope, to about six fathoms. If however the herring shoals were observed near the surface the buoy rope would be shortened.

The long line of floats served to mark the position of the nets and that enabled vessels to keep clear and avoid damaging the nets with their propellers. When there is a large shoal of herring enmeshed in the nets, the buoys

show the extra weight as they may be low or even dipping in the water.

To give the nets buoyancy and help to keep them upright in the water there is a long row of round corks, approximately 3 by 2 inches, set about 9 inches apart and fixed between the top edge of the net and the back rope by means of short cords, perhaps about 9 inches long, called daffins.

The nets are weighed down by means of the spring rope otherwise known by several names such as lead, messenger, bush or warp rope, which is attached to the bottom edge of the nets. This heavy 3.5 inch tarry rope is also used to haul the nets on board by means of a steam capstan or winch. The spring rope is attached to the nets by a short length of rope known as stopper rope which hangs from the bottom corner of each net. The stopper rope is disconnected from the spring rope as the nets are hauled on board. At the same time the spring rope is coiled by the cook coiler boy in the rope locker below deck.

When the drift nets are shot the mizzen sail is set, in order to keep the drifter steering to the wind and nets. Incidentally the designation drifter is correctly applied to any vessel that operates drift nets whether powered by sail, motor or steam. In the islands however, there was a tendency to confine the word drifter to a certain class of herring fishing vessel that was always driven by steam.

Once the nets are set the correct fishing lights are placed in position which are two white lights, one above the other, and the lower one indicating the direction which the fishing gear lays. Then the crew partake of a light meal and the watch is set. The rest of the crew retire leaving one man on watch. If the weather is rough it may be advisable to lay out more swing rope so that the boat may not have too much drag on the nets. Sometimes the watchman pulls the boat up to the nets and tries the first net to see if there are any herring enmeshed. He might then judge that he should give them a while yet to see if a larger quantity of herring en-meshes.

After a suitable period of time elapses or at an appointed hour the watchman prepares tea and calls the crew to turn out and haul the nets. As a rule fishermen only get very little sleep and never more than a few winks at a time. It is therefore difficult to rise out of bed in the middle of the night when the landlubbers are settling down warmly and cosily. It is particularly difficult for young people and naturally it is not easy to be in a cheerful mood. However, a fisherman lives daily in hope and anticipation of a good catch. If, therefore, there is a good catch in the nets the men become very cheerful and the hard work of hauling the nets is somehow but light work. If, however, it is a blank haul there is an air of depression and heaviness about, and very little small talk.

In the days before the spring rope was invented towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the herring nets were weighed down by attaching small stones to the bottom edge of the nets at suitable distances apart. In the case of the 'Baldies' or middle class boats of up to 35 or 40 feet long, there was insufficient room in the boats to accommodate a large quantity of spring rope and they continued the practice of using stones to weigh the nets down in the sea. In the 1920s someone invented a small bag 12 inches long by 3 inches diameter filled with sand to replace the traditional stones called sinkers. The sand bags were easier to fix to the nets and easier on the nets and were therefore a big improvement. That did not last long because it was replaced again in the so called march of progress by the use of short pieces of chain, six to eight links long depending on the weight of chain that was the ultimate improvement in that particular form of sinker.

The method of hauling the nets in the middle and smaller class of boats was quite different to that in the larger boats where they had the use of steam and therefore used a spring rope (which was attached to the bottom of the nets) on a Steam Capstan to haul the rope on board, as a very welcome aid to the crew while hauling the nets. In the smaller class of boats there was no sole rope or bottom rope on their nets and therefore they hauled their nets by the corked back rope or top rope which they hauled on a flywheel winch, popularly known as the iron man. Because of that the back rope of the nets used by the small class of boats was of a much heavier rope in order to take the strain hauling the nets.

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