



[The Spring or Lead Rope]

The concept of a spring rope was devised in the 1880s and until then the earlier experiments with steam-drifters on the east coast of Scotland in the 1870s were a failure. This was because the propellers were too easily fouled by the drift nets and therefore the switch to steam-drifters was delayed until near the end of the 19th century.

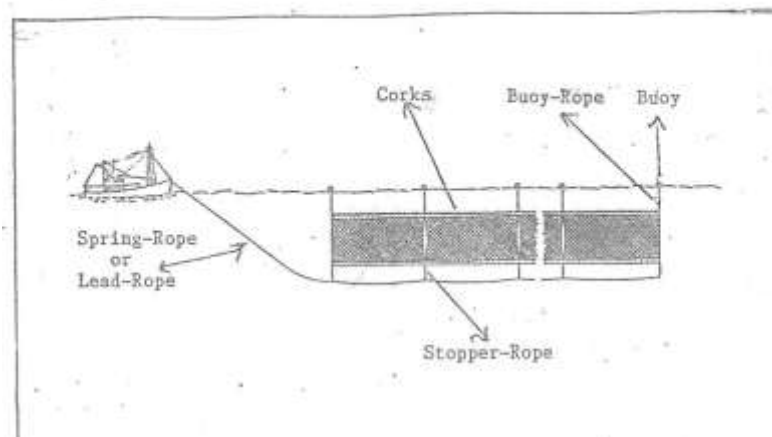
The purpose of a spring rope was twofold, firstly to weigh down the nets - hence the name lead rope - and secondly to assist the crew to haul the nets aboard by using the steam capstan to haul the spring rope which was hanging below the sole rope along the bottom of the nets. The spring rope was attached to the nets by means of a short, two-fathom rope called a stopper hanging down from the end of each net. The crew man, usually the skipper, in charge of the steam capstan at the time of hauling the nets aboard would detach the stopper from the spring rope quickly and allow it to travel steadily down through the aperture in the deck as it came off the capstan and into the rope locker below deck. It was here that the coiler boy kept the strain and carefully coiled the rope in a manner that would ensure that it would run out freely when the nets were being set the following evening. If the spring rope fouled the coiler boy was in for it.

Almost all the boys in the fishing villages looked forward keenly to the time when they could leave school at the age of 14 years and find a place in one or other of the local boats as a cook/coiler, only to realise very quickly that it was the hardest possible introduction to the discipline of earning a living.

The task of coiling the spring rope in a confined smelly place for 3 or 4 hours in near hopeless conditions, with sea sickness in a rolling and pitching boat, left the boy in no doubt that he was better off at school, but it was too late now. Anyone who came back for more after enduring the first season was ready to tackle any job anywhere in the world, as indeed many of them did. Before the spring rope was invented the herring nets were weighed down by means of attaching small stones at intervals to the bottom of the nets. Boats which were smaller than 35 to 40 feet keel did not have the room to accommodate a steam boiler, capstan and spring rope, and therefore they relied on hand winches to haul the nets. Such boats continued to use small stones to weigh down the nets. In the 1920s the stones were discarded in favour of small oblong sandbags and later on a few links of chain replaced in the sandbags. That itself was a big improvement.

The peak year of the herring fishing in Scotland was 1907 when two-and-a-half million barrels of cured herring was processed. In 1913 there were 3,500 fisher girls from the Western Isles at the winter East Anglia herring fishing season which lasted from the beginning of October to early in December. It was in the early 1900s that these movements of herring gutters and hired boat crew hands reached their height. However as late as 1936 there were still 1,000 Western Isles fisher girls at the East Anglia fishing as well as many hired hands. The Second World War put an end to all that forever.

DRIFT-NET FISHING



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