



## Barking and Drying the Nets

Drift nets need constant attention and maintenance and fishermen spent a lot of their time barking, drying and preserving their nets until the introduction of synthetic fibre nets in the 1950's.

Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the barking of nets was done by immersion in a hot preservative substance made principally from the bark of the native oak and birch trees. After that cutch from the east such as India and Borneo was used.

In India cutch was made from the bark of the 'acacia' tree by stripping the bark from the trees and boiling it in water and the thickened extract was decanted into iron pots and boiled again until it attained a syrupy consistency. Then it was poured into moulds and exposed to the sun and air until it hardened into a dark brown substance.

In Borneo cutch was made from the bark of the 'mangrove' tree and it was also boiled twice in the same way as in India and dried into marketable brittle blocks. We recall Calum Macinnes, 13 Glen Gravir, (Calum Aonghais Fhionnlaigh) relating to us how he was surprised one day in Brunei state in North Borneo, where he was for many years as Director of Education and a member of the legislature, on picking up the distinctive and familiar aroma of barking the nets back home. Closer investigation revealed the site of a cutch-making operation and an old man explained to him how the process of forming the cutch was carried out. Apparently cutch was imported into Britain in several forms but the superior kind favoured by Island fishermen was known as 'Pegu-Catechu'. It was marketed in brittle blocks in hundred weight-boxes and we recall it was covered over with the leaves of the trees. The boxes, 'Bucais-chartach' were made from reddish hardwood from the acacia tree and it was about four feet long by one foot high. The wood from these boxes was in great demand for various uses about the house and it would be interesting to know if any of it is still left.

In earlier times the barking of the nets was carried out in large cauldrons heated by a fire of peats under the cauldron. In Lewis the large three legged pots used normally to dye wool for Harris Tweed 'Prais-dhath' was also brought into use at times as barking pots - 'Prais-chartach'. The strength of the solution of cutch used for barking the nets depended on the age of the nets and the extent of work to which the nets had been subjected. Nets were always barked at the start of the summer season and regularly every few weeks during the fishing season to prevent damage or decay to the twine or the ropes of the nets.

The arrival of steam enabled the fishermen in the larger fishing vessels to bark their nets in a large portable tank placed in the hold of their boats and heated by placing a steam pipe in the tank. The chore of barking nets became comparatively easy with the arrival of steam because the whole net could be hoisted into and out of the tank mechanically by the Burton tackle on the mast.

The coal hulks anchored in Stornoway harbour provided a similar barking service for the smaller vessels that did not have any steam facilities of their own. The arrival of man-made fibres dispensed with the need for barking nets. Drying the nets, 'Sgaladh-na-Linn' was also undertaken regularly by the fishermen in order to preserve them from decay. On such occasions the whole fleet of nets was ferried ashore and spread out, one over the other, on a suitable closely cropped grassy slope or meadow that was big enough to allow for the full length and breadth of a net.

That exercise was carried out regularly in between each barking time. The boats in the Marvig anchorage spread their nets as a rule at 'Rubha-na-h-easgainn' near the entrance to the harbour and the Macleod Brothers, 3 Marvig.

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