



[Buoys]

Up to the early part of the 20th century fishermen used homemade buoys exclusively and almost all of these used in the Islands were made from sheepskins, but in other places dog skins and probably other skins were used. Home-made buoys continued to be made, on occasion, even up to the late 1930's and we ourselves helped to make some as follows.

The fresh sheepskin was liberally sprinkled with salt and folded in on itself and rolled into a ball with the wool part to the outside. It was then hung up for a week or two until the wool could be plucked off easily. Once the wool was removed the buoy makers got a suitable piece of wood for a stock, 'Ceann Put' or 'Buoy-top'. The piece of wood for the stock was fashioned into a round object with a lip at the bottom over which the skin was bound. At the top of the stock a one inch hole was bored across from side to side in order to insert the buoy rope that attached the buoy to the net. Then a half inch hole was bored through the wooden stock for the purpose of inflating the finished buoy which was done by mouth.

The buoy maker then got a piece of cutch (normally used for preserving the nets) and placed it on the inside middle of the skin (in some places such as Ness they used a good sized potato instead of cutch). The purpose was to find the centre of the skin as the weight of the cutch weighed down the double skin evenly while the edges of the skin were gathered carefully round the lipped end of the stock in order to bind the skin round the stock with suitable twine (the wool side of the skin was always kept to the outside of the buoy).

The man would then inflate the buoy by blowing air into it by mouth, through the inflating hole in the stock in order to see if the pleats in the skin at the drawing-in needed adjustment to ensure that the buoy was properly proportioned in a regular well rounded shape, avoiding protruding irregularities.

Once all the adjustments were made and the buoy-maker was satisfied that the buoy was correctly shaped, he bound it very tightly round the stock repeatedly with suitable twine. The procedure that was followed to ensure that the joint between the stock and the skin was bound as tight as possible and airtight was to tie the end of twine to some fixed point and standing well back, one rolled the buoy round and round carefully in his hands as the twine was being bound round the stock. Finally the end of the twine was fastened by pulling it through under the winding twine by means of a loop of twine inserted previously. He then trimmed off any surplus skin.

A liberal mixture of archangel tar and linseed oil would then be poured into the buoy through the air passage using a small filler, and the buoy would then be shaken well to spread the liquid round inside to enable it to soak into the skin and preserve it and keep it air and water tight as well as keeping it pliable. A small quantity of archangel tar and linseed oil mixture would be poured into the buoy annually or from time to time to maintain it in good order.

Later on they used the round stock from cast-off canvas factory-made buoys to make sheepskin buoys and we still possess one of these. They also made smaller sheep skin buoys for a marker for the small and great lines, usually referred to as put-sàs and I also possess one of these.

In due course the canvas factory-made buoy replaced the sheepskin buoy and they were manufactured in a variety of sizes. Every spring the fishermen painted their canvas buoys in bright colours before the start of the summer fishing season. As boys we used the round stock of the old canvas buoys as a wheel on a toy barrow made from a 56lb margarine wooden box and we were as proud as punch.

In less affluent times a tear or hole in a buoy would be repaired by inserting a piece of flat wood slightly larger than the hole into the tear and tacking the skin round the tear through the wood in order to seal the hole. Buoys repaired in that fashion lasted quite satisfactorily for years.

Modern buoys are made from plastic and do not need painting or maintenance of any kind.

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