

Loom Invented to Weave Cotton Net

Then there was the invention of the loom that was capable of weaving cotton gill nets in 1850 by James Patterson of Musselburgh. The new nets were less bulky and the boats could carry more of them, thereby increasing their catching power. The catching power was also being increased as bigger boats were coming into use. Open boats were being replaced with half decked boats at first, and then fully decked boats.

While all this was going on British curers also showed commendable courage and initiative by coming forward in their hundreds to take full advantage of the available opportunities. Curers speculated by setting up facilities for a fast and efficient system of gutting, packing and dispatching the catch. That entailed employing a large number of men and women to meet the ever-increasing demand in the 19th century. The Dutch monopoly in the European market for salt herring was seriously affected by the Napoleonic wars and as the century progressed the British took over the whole European market for cured herring.

The remarkable growth of the herring fishing industry in Scotland in the 19th century coincided with the Highland clearances and the industrial revolution in the early part of the century. There was also a population explosion both in the Hebrides and the whole of Scotland in the 19th century. In Lewis in 1801 the population was 9,168 persons and 50 years later in 1851 the Lewis population had more than doubled to 19,711 persons, and it continued to rise until it peaked in 1911 at 29,243 persons.

That was also the time at which the herring fishing industry was at its height. Some people attribute the rise in the population to the introduction of the humble potato which first came around 1753. One thing is certain, and that is that the availability of potatoes and herring in plentiful supply was a blessing for the people of the Islands, because we never knew what hunger was so long as we had a diet of potatoes and fish and an abundance of dairy products. Our diet may have lacked variety, but it was wholesome and healthy and within reach of the people by their own effort, if land was available to them. Unfortunately land was not always available and that caused great suffering. Crofting and fishing were complementary in the Islands and the west of Scotland and the decline of the fishing seriously affected the prosperity of the crofting communities, hence the present depopulation.

