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«Doon to Lerwick and up to Yarmouth»:

the Working and Living Conditions
of the Scottish Herring Lassies c. 1860–1960



Introduction

The end of the Napoleonic Wars permitted a period of political stability and economic expansion throughout Europe. The wars had had a disastrous effect on the British fisheries, particularly with the closing down of foreign markets for cured herring. Scottish fishermen now took the opportunity to exploit the seasonal appearance of the herring around Scotland's coast and during the nineteenth century herring became the most productive fishery to emerge in Scotland.¹ They received additional support from the Fishery Board, established in 1809. This organisation both promoted and set quality control standards for the processed herring.

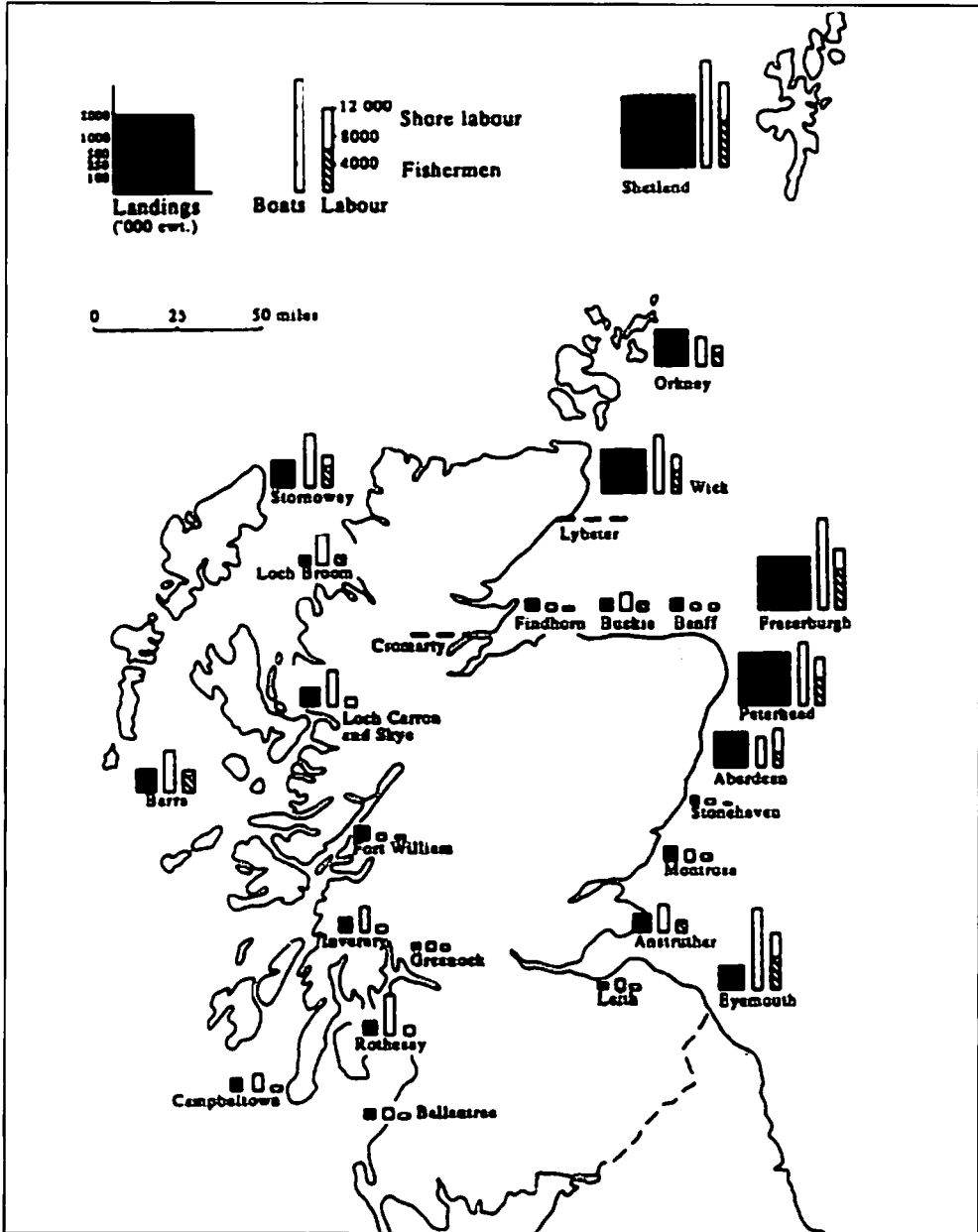
The fishing industry is generally viewed as a solely male occupation, however women have always played a central role in Scotland's fishing communities. It was unusual for a fisherman to take a wife from a farming or non-fishing background since such women would have neither the necessary skills nor knowledge to support her spouse's work. Fisher women were often regarded as having equal status to their men and in many households they were the ruling partners. More often than not the family's economy would be controlled and directed by the woman, with most of them known by their maiden names.²

This paper will examine the working life of the "herring lassies", the crowds of women who began following the Scottish fishing fleets in the nineteenth century and continued to do so until the 1960s. The herring industry depended on the work of these women to prepare the fish for curing and export. The usual employment for women at this time was domestic service. However following the herring fleet to the "gutting" provided them with an alternative way to earn a living. At the same time the women provided a crucial social and economic contribution within one of Scotland's most important industries.

Although they were often known as "lassies", (Scottish term referring to both young women and girls), they could range in age from young girls in their early teens, through to older mothers, aunts and grandmothers. The younger girls would normally learn their skills from older female relatives, with sixty fish a minute being an accepted rate for an experienced gutter. They worked in crews of three with two gutters and one packer and they would often remain as a team until one of them got married, usually to a fisherman and started a family. A curing company hired them at the beginning of the season, starting work in the early spring in the Western Isles. The women " gæd doon to Lerwick and up to Yarmouth".³ This describes the women's journey first north to Lerwick, Shetland, and then south to East Anglia. They usually began the season at Shetland or Orkney for the summer, sometimes also travelling to Ardglass in Ireland,

Title page:

A Herring Lassie ties up her "cloodies" ready for a day at the gutting. Photograph : Scottish Fisheries Museum Trust Ltd.



This map shows the herring landings at Scottish Fisheries Districts, including the numbers of boats and personnel during the peak season, 1910. The herring fleet would usually begin the season in May at Stornoway and other Hebridean ports, the boats would then move to Shetland, for the summer and then over to mainland Scotland where they would follow the shoals as they made their way around the coast. They visited all the main Scottish harbours en route including Wick, Buckie, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Aberdeen, Montrose, Arbroath, Anstruther, and Pittenweem before continuing further south to East Yorkshire and East Anglia. Courtesy of J.R.Coull.

and then south along the Scottish north east coast, further south to the East Yorkshire coast of England and finally to East Anglia for the later winter fishery.

The Crown Brand

At the beginning of the nineteenth century 50,000 barrels of herring were being produced annually in Scotland and this increased to over 1,000,000 by the 1880s.¹ Initially the cured herring were exported to the New World for feeding slaves and to Ireland during the potato famine. However, demand for the "Scotch cure" rapidly increased with Germany, Russia and Poland importing large amounts of the cured herring from Scotland. The price per barrel almost doubled during the 1850s,² and the "Scotch" herring continued to dominate the market well into the twentieth century.

The Scottish Fisheries Act of 1815 established a number of regulations with regard to the gutting and packing of herring. One of the main criteria was that the herring should be gutted using a sharp knife rather than fingers and then packed in salt within 24 hours of being caught. Additional criteria included the "cran" (approximately 160.5 litres), which was adopted as the official measure for herring and was equal to approximately 1,000 herring. The baskets used to convey the herring from the boats to the shore were known as "quarter crans" and carried an official brand of certification. This method of unloading speeded up the whole gutting process, as compared to the English method of counting individual fish. Each finished barrel of gutted and salted herring would contain between 1000 and 1200 herring depending on the grade of herring.

By stipulating exactly how the herring should be treated and cured the Fishery Board was able to establish the "The Crown Brand" as a guarantee of quality. It was this, that led ultimately, to the success of the so-called "Scotch cure", over the Dutch cured herring. It still remained legal to cure herring in any fashion, but only those conforming to the stated standards received the Crown Brand.³

The Swedes and Dutch had perfected the process of curing herring during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However in 1819 a Scotsman, J. F. Denovan received an award from the Society of the Arts for curing herring. He copied the Dutch method, but implemented it on shore as opposed to at sea and the superior quality of his herring came to the notice of the Scottish Fisheries Board. They then adopted his method as the standard for the Crown Brand or "Scotch Cure".

This meant that after the herring had been gutted and sorted, each barrel had to be carefully packed with salt covering each layer. They were fitted with lids and left for 8 to 10 days depending on the type of fish. During this time the fish would sink down in the pickle, and after 10 days or so the solution was poured out through a "bunghole". The barrel was topped up with more herring and the original pickle was returned to the barrel to fill any spaces. The barrel could then receive the Crown Brand. Eventually, larger curing companies were able to market their herring on the strength of their own reputation, independently from the Crown Brand, although they still used the same curing method. These curers were known as Trademarkers and were allowed to use their own stencil marks instead of the Crown Brand to indicate the quality of their herring.



The crew of Tom Brown & Co.'s herring station, early 1900's at Lerwick, Shetland. Notice the stencil in the foreground used to mark the barrels "TB & Co", instead of the Crown Brand. Photograph : © Shetland Museum.

The brand itself had an outline of a crown, containing the word "SCOTLAND" and the indication of the size of fish, the year and the initials of the fisheries' officer and the curer. It was a system operated only in Scotland and it specified up to seven individual categories of herring, any fish smaller than these were called "scran". These grades included:

1. Large full: Large herring full of milt(male) or roe(female) longer than 11 ¼ inches (28.7cm)
2. Full: Large herring full of milt or roe, longer than 10 ½ inches (26.2cm)
3. Mat full: Mature herring full of milt or roe longer than 9 ¼ inches (23.5cm)
4. Medium: Maturing herring, gut removed, longer than 9 ½ inches (24.2cm)
5. Mattie: Young virgin herring without spawn longer than 9 inches (22.9cm)
6. Filling: matured fish, not less than 10 ¼ inches long (26.2cm)
7. Large spent: Herring longer than 10 inches (25.5cm) which have already spawned."

To receive the sought after "Crown Brand", the symbol of high quality "Scotch cured" herring, speed in landing the catch, gutting and packing were paramount. The women and girls from fisher families had the necessary skills to process the catch to the highest standards as required by the fishery inspectors. They formed a mobile workforce, able to follow the Scottish fishing fleet as it moved round the coast.

During the 1860s Scottish fishing vessels had also begun migrating further south to English fishing ports in order to prosecute the autumn herring along the Yorkshire coast and eventual-

ly continued on to East Anglia. Following the enormous shoals of herring south, meant that the fishermen could be at the herring fishing for eight months from May until November, and this often continued into December. By the early 1900s there were approximately one thousand Scottish vessels converging at the East Anglian ports.¹⁰ From about 1850 the women followed the herring fishing fleets to process the catch, and continued this practice until the 1960s. At the turn of the century there were over one hundred Scottish curing companies operating at Great Yarmouth, with approximately 6,000 women working for them.¹¹

Pay Conditions

The curing companies, who directly employed the women, were able to effectively control the herring fishing in the nineteenth century. The companies would engage boat crews to catch a specified number of crans, usually 200, at a fixed price at the beginning of the year. The curer had to ensure that he had invested in enough barrels and salt prior to the beginning of the season and would often invest money in the fishing boats themselves, or forward money to the crews for fishing gear.

The curing companies engaged the female crews to gut and pack the herring. The girls were paid a signing on fee known as "earlas" in the local Gælic or "airleas" or "arles" which literally means "earnest pledge".¹² Before the beginning of each season the curer would visit the different fishing communities to agree terms and engage crews of three women consisting of two gutters and one packer.

This bound the women to the curer for the whole season, and they would not receive their pay before the end of the season. Whilst working they received a weekly allowance for their keep during the time they were away from home. In 1893 arles were 30 shillings (£1.50)¹³, by 1914 arles had increased to £4 each for the crew and this represented a very large amount of money to the women.¹⁴ From the available information, it seems that few retracted on this agreement, and if they did it was usually on the grounds of ill health.

"you'd to sign a paper, and you got arles...Ye were arlesed, ye see, ye was fixed. Fen ye took up your arles, ye was fixed. Ye couldna ging to another body to work...Well if we get awa' and workit to another body, ye was ta'en to court."¹⁵

The women's gutting and packing earnings were based on piecework and between 1860 and 1914 a crew was paid on average 8d. (3.5p) per barrel. In comparison, a reel of cotton cost 4d.¹⁶ Often the sum was split between the 2 gutters and the packer: 3d each to the 2 gutters and 2d to the packer, but many women divided their earnings equally. They received 3d (1.5p) per hour for "filling"; this was topping up the barrels with herring after they had settled. "Settling up" was paid at the end of the season and was the total sum due for the number of barrels which had passed inspection, plus hourly rates less any advances. In a really busy week, where the women worked up to 96 hours, they were known to produce approximately 290 barrels per team,¹⁷ each barrel of herring sold for 35 shillings (£1.75) on the market. During this same period (c.1914), whilst at Lerwick and Lowestoft, the girls also received a food allowance from the curing company of 30 shillings (£1.50) which was paid weekly.¹⁸

"We got 8d a barrel among three of you",¹⁹ and an average crew would gut between 50 and 60 herrings per minute and sometimes up to 70, resulting in approximately 30 barrels a day. After working only at Peterhead, Jessie Corstophine²⁰ had about 7 shillings (35p) left after she had paid her lodgings, which she would use to buy presents to take home. At the end of a full season from Shetland round the coast to Lowestoft, the women usually had between £12 and £15 to take home.

At this time domestic service would have only paid the women approximately 2 shillings and sixpence (12 ½ p) for a twelve-hour working day, six days a week. The main benefit of this type of work would have been the food and in some cases lodgings. However, the herring industry provided an important social and economic alternative to many women. The pay based on piecework was reasonably lucrative and the women had the additional freedom offered by following the herring fleet round the coast of Britain.²¹ Gross earnings in 1927 are estimated at approximately £262,000²² and such a figure represented a considerable economic input not only to their own communities, but also to the areas to which they migrated.

Working Conditions

The fish were emptied from the quarter cran baskets directly into the huge wooden "farlins/farlans" (gutting trough or table where the herring were poured) and coarse salt was then added to allow the women to get a better grip of the fish. Gutting involved long hours standing outside



Women gutting herring on a quayside in the 1920's at Lerwick, Shetland. Notice the fish being transported in quarter cran baskets from the two steamdrifters LT (Lowestoft) 1297 "Olivae" and LT 1296 "Land Breeze", to the gutting "farlins" or troughs, and the baskets placed behind the women for grading the herring. Photograph: © Shetland Museum.

using a sharp knife known as a "futtle" in Scots, and a "corcag" in Gaelic to gut the herring. Speed was of the essence and the women would keep gutting until the "farlin" was empty, even if that meant working past midnight to ensure the fish received the Crown Brand. At the same time as they were gutting they would deftly separate each of the fish into one of the seven grades.

The women came to know these grades instinctively and threw the gutted fish into baskets behind them for each of the different selections, with the offal thrown into a separate container at their sides. The filled baskets were then taken by the crew to be carefully packed in barrels. Each layer covered in just the right amount of salt, with the bellies uppermost in a rosette pattern. Special attention was paid to the bottom and top layers, because the fisheries inspectors would check these.

It was advantageous to be a packer if you were tall, so that you could reach the bottom of the barrel easily and also if you were left handed, in order to reduce accidents at the gutting table. Gutters were usually right handed and held the herring in the left hand with each fish being gutted in a single motion of their small, sharp knife.²³

When packed, the barrels were left for a few days to "pine" and then topped up with more herring, called "filling". This work was done every Monday. The barrels could then be sealed with the curer's branded lids and filled to capacity with additional pickle through a bunghole in the side of the barrel. The women would then help the coopers to manoeuvre the filled barrels and stack them. If properly packed, the contents remained totally undisturbed. When barrels were stacked three high on their sides, it signified that they were ready for consignment.

In Scotland during the early nineteenth century it was usual practice for women to accompany their men folk on herring fishing seasons away from home. Christian Watt (born 1833) of Broadsea tells how from an early age she baked, washed and cooked for 27 men and recalls living in sod built bothies on the shore at Loch Eishort in Skye. She also states that in 1840 "the fishermen did most of the gutting, it had not yet become a wholly female job",²⁴ although she had herself learnt to gut herring by the age of 10.

Therefore, women had already been travelling on family boats since the 1840s and 1850s to the West Coast fishing. When the Shetland fishing took off in the 1880's however, travel from the Scottish mainland to the Northern or Western Isles was by steamer, often in horrendous weather conditions. During these journeys the women were treated like cattle, with very little regard to their comfort or safety. Even after the Titanic disaster there were no life belts for a journey that could last between fourteen and sixteen hours. Most of the girls suffered from seasickness for the whole of the journey, which was considered to be a "most miserable experience".²⁵

Once the railway connections were complete in the 1860s, more women were able to travel to East Anglia for the fishing from September to December. Special trains were laid on from Edinburgh to take the women south and the tickets were paid for by the curing company. Thus their working year was extended by journeying to Yarmouth and Lowestoft, as was their earning potential.

Gutting fish in the open air is a challenging prospect in Scottish summers, and when the fleets reached East Anglia it was the beginning of winter. The East Anglian curing stations were out in the open with little if any shelter, exposed to North Sea winds and showers. Often it would be necessary for the women to break ice off the tops of the barrels before they plunged their



"Scotch Girls Gutting Herrings at Lowestoft", c.1914, the low height of the "farlins" can be clearly seen here. Photograph: Scottish Fisheries Museum Trust Ltd.

hands in to the freezing pickle. There were fires kept going for the women to warm themselves, but for some of them the cold was harder to bear after such warmth and many of them never went near the fires.³ Working in snowy squalls to gut fish with frozen hands was no easy task, "sometimes you could hardly handle the fish,"¹⁷ but they worked on dressed in short sleeves, with their sore, bound fingers and chilblains on their feet.

If a large catch was landed, the women would need to work through the night to ensure that the catch received the Crown Brand. They had to use large, crudely made oil lamps known as "bubblies" to provide some light and there must have been times when the women wondered why they put up with such horrendous conditions. There was a further drawback to this season, the fish tended to be smaller and wages lower. However, this could be balanced with the fact that there were fewer grades of fish for sorting so that the gutting process itself could be speeded up. And by increasing output a steady income could still be realised.

Gutting with sharp knives inevitably resulted in painful cuts and sores, which were constantly aggravated by the contact with the salt. The women protected their fingers with "cloodies/cloods", crude bandages made from old rags and cotton flour sacks bought cheaply from bakers, that is until the bakers realised they had a market for them. "When the flour bags gied up to sixpence we thought our life was ruin't."¹⁸ The strips of cotton were wrapped around their fingers and then tied with cotton.

"Every finger had to be tied up. Idderwise da saat wid come atween wir fingers an rub. Da forefinger wis da worst. We alwyas hed ta hae a thick wan on wir forefinger beacause dat's whaar da knife ösed ta cut da bandage..."¹⁹



Four herring lassies wearing hooded oilskins at Shetland c.1920's. They are using "putters" to move completed barrels of herring. Photograph : © Shetland Museum.

The "clouties" provided some protection, but were by no means adequate to prevent sore and painful hands; injuries often led to blood poisoning, which would mean the end to the season's earnings for a gutter.

"Some of them get dreadfully sore hands – the least scratch or cut if it is not covered up from the fish and the brine, festers and if these wounds are not attended to at once they get into a dreadful state."¹²

The girls' protective clothing consisted of high leather boots, oilskin overall skirts that fastened at the chest with buttons, worn over old skirts and home knitted woollen scarves to protect their hair. They wore short sleeved oilskins with hoods to protect them from the rain and layers of old jumpers to keep the cold out. After the First World War rubber boots were available and the Shetland curing companies provided their women with oilskins and rubber boots.¹³

Salt sores are most difficult to heal and many of the herring gutters bore the scars from their labours for the rest of their life. However it was not only their hands that were affected by this work. Many of the women were afflicted with kidney complaints, back strain, varicose veins and ulcers. They would continue to work as long as possible whilst pregnant, "It was very hard work especially if you were expecting..."¹⁴ The "farlins" where the herring were poured, remained at a very low level, usually floor level. After the First World War, they were raised to a more accessible height, reducing the need for continual bending to reach the herring.

Exhaustion to the point of dropping was not unknown to the women, but fortunately there were voluntary organisations on hand to administer first aid. The Church of Scotland and the



Volunteers dressing the women's fingers at Great Yarmouth, c.1907-1910.
Photograph : © The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland.

Red Cross sent ladies from Edinburgh to set up first aid stations and these Mission stations attended to minor ailments for both men and women. In most cases this meant injuries from knife cuts, or hands which had been crushed by heavy barrels. The volunteers at these first aid stations dressed the wounds and provided hot tea and soup for the women.

The Women's Institute at the Bethel provided help for those at Yarmouth as did the "Rest House for Scottish Fisher Folks" out on the "denes"(sand dunes). The Church of Scotland Deaconess, Miss Davidson devoted her life to the fisher girls and travelled with them along their migratory route providing medical care and hot drinks. These places provided the women with a warm place to meet when they were not working.

"Monday is always the Girls special night at any Scotch fishing station. Generally we have a short address and of course a great deal of singing."²³

In reality the Missions were also recruiting lost souls, with the Sunday Church services at the Bethel filled with Scottish Fisherfolk singing hymns. The herring crews were renowned for their singing voices and often could be heard singing whilst they were gutting. Later accounts from the women suggest that these were joyful songs, but more importantly this vigorous singing helped to dull the pain and keep their spirits up whilst working at the "farlins".

The hours worked by the women were irregular and shifts of over 24 hours were not uncommon, although fourteen was the norm. In 1913 factory inspectors obtained an agreement with



A Fish Curer's Yard, Lowestoft c.1914. Before the coopers finally seal the barrels, the women fill them up with extra herring and pour the original pickle back in.
 Photograph: Scottish Fisheries Museum Trust Ltd.

the curing companies for an alternating ten and thirteen-hour day. However, it is unlikely that this was adhered to in practice. During their long hours standing at the farlins the women's only real protection was their oilskin and clooties. They suffered continually from deep and painful ulcers, were exposed to all weathers standing into the night ankle-deep in "quagmires of mud, sand and fish refuse".³⁴ Nevertheless their morale was said to be high and their solidarity was probably heightened by their work conditions. After 1918 the factory inspectors tried to insist on first aid stations, rest rooms, canteens and toilets close to the yards, but the downturn in the industry meant that this was impossible and the women continued to rely on the charity of religious organisations.

Living Conditions

There was always pressure at the different ports to provide accommodation for the enormous influx of migrant workers as they moved round the coast. There were not only the women who followed the herring fleet but also the curers, coopers and fishermen. At Wick in the northeast of Scotland as early as the 1840s there were over 2,000 women and over 3,000 fishermen seeking accommodation: fishing boats were not yet decked and the men required onshore lodgings.³⁵

As the industry continued to expand through the nineteenth century, different locations found different solutions to the accommodation problem. In Shetland the curing companies built huts for the women to share at their own curing yards. At East Yorkshire and East Anglia the towns were busy seaside resorts during the summer months with holiday accommodation.

This guest house accommodation was easily converted into suitable lodgings for the herring girls' arrival in the autumn.

It was normal for girls to start as a gutter or packer at the age of 15. Jessie Corstophine went off to the gutting at Peterhead with her mother when she was 15, as did Annie Watt who started at Yarmouth. Others like Mrs Main of Burghead who went to Shetland first, started at the age of 13. A girl's first season away at the gutting signified an important coming of age and she acquired her first "kist", a large, plain wooden chest (36"x18"x18") for transporting everything she would need for the long herring season from May until November. She would pack her Bible, Sunday clothes and shoes, all her working clothes, "clouties, gutting knife and the "three w's", weirs, wusset and wusker (knitting needles, wool and knitting belt).²⁹ Her working clothes, "quites" oilskin waterproof bibbed overskirts, were sewn into hemp sacking and tied on to their kists, which also doubled up as seating in their wooden hut. The kists were such a weight that they required two men to carry them; usually a carter was sent round to collect the kists and take them to the nearest station to have them sent on ahead of the women.

Western Isles & Shetland

For the herring seasons at Shetland and the Western Isles the girls lived in wooden huts. At Lerwick visiting workers at the peak of the herring season could outnumber the island's population. It has been estimated that approximately 20,000 fishermen and shore workers went to Shetland in 1901.³⁰ To solve the accommodation problem, the curing companies provided huts



The interior of a herring crew's hut, Shetland. The two beds would have been shared between six girls. After 1929 following protests from the women, it was agreed that there should only be one crew of three women per hut. Photograph: © The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland.

for the women. Individual curers had their own yard within the larger fishing station, with rows of huts for their female crews. Each of the huts would be shared by six girls and were built in pairs with pitched roofs, raised from the ground with a few steps going up to the doors. There would be no furniture inside except perhaps a table. There were 2 beds fixed high up on the walls of the hut and the girls used their kists to climb up into their beds, which they shared with the two other members of their crew. They received a 30-shilling weekly food allowance from the curer and cooked and washed for themselves. There was a fireplace built of bricks with a chimney, used for cooking and heating water.³⁸

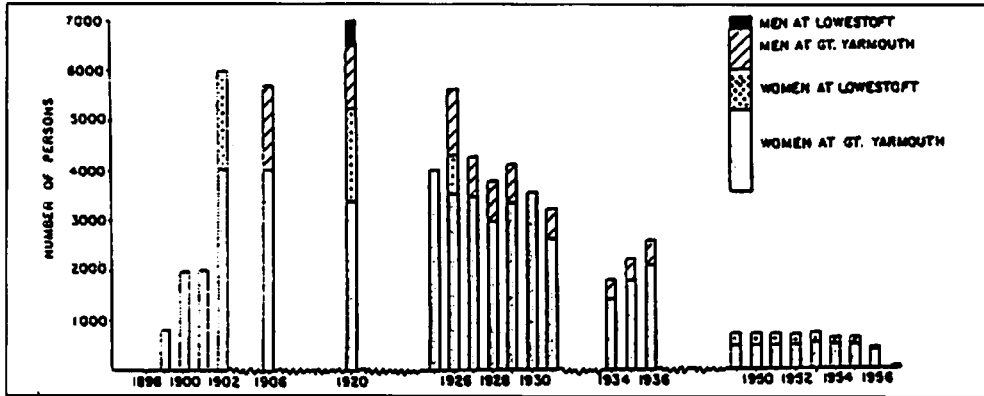
The curer supplied some household items like kettles and pots for cooking and provided coal for the women. The women decorated their huts with wallpaper and paint and laid oilcloth or sugar sacks on the floors to make their huts more homely. They would take their own home-making materials including wallpaper, dishes, cutlery, linen, rugs and dried goods like flour, oatmeal, sugar, tea. These additional items might well be packed in empty barrels for the journey if they had no room left in their kists. They also needed sheets and pillows and chaff (straw) for their mattress.

The working day at Shetland was from 6am until 6pm, although if there were a lot of herring to gut and pack they might have to continue until 3am, and then turn out again at 6am to start on that day's catch of herring.³⁹ If the catches were good, the girls lived in their wooden huts for up to 16 weeks during the summer season at Shetland. Although usually the season lasted from May until the end of June, which is when some of the women would return to their home ports for the summer fishing.⁴⁰

East Anglia

During the 1890s Scottish boats were increasingly taking advantage of the extended fishing season by fishing from East Anglia and by 1900 there were 634 boats recorded at East Anglia. By 1904 there were over 100 Scots curers at Yarmouth and the numbers of Scottish gutters and packers doubled between 1899 and 1900 (see Figure 2), with their numbers almost reaching 2,000 in 1900. From 1905 up to the First World War there were over 1,000 Scottish boats travelling to East Anglia. The fishermen were followed by 6-7,000 curers, coopers and gutters. Up to 20 special trains being chartered to bring the shore workers south.^{41 42}

There were a number of differences awaiting the women in East Anglia, one being the language. Many of the locals from these towns found it very difficult to understand the girls' different dialects, and impossible to understand the native Gaelic tongue of the women from the Western Isles. Another difference was their accommodation in lodgings rather than huts. As a result of town planning, and in order to favour local landladies, the building of huts for the gutters was forbidden in Lowestoft & Yarmouth. Therefore, the girls took lodgings with the landladies, who in the summer season rented their best rooms to holidaymakers. Before the girls arrived the landladies protected their rooms from fish oil damage and the lingering smell of herring. They covered the walls with brown paper and oilcloth and removed most of the furniture. The girls still had to sleep 3 to a bed, with two beds in each room. Some generous landladies supplied hot water, did their laundry and cooked the girls' own food that they bought each weekend. Some of the lodgings had an indoor toilet; all very luxurious compared to their functional, but basic huts in Shetland.



Scottish Migrant Shore Labour at the East Anglian Herring Fishing 1899-1957 (partial record). Courtesy of J. R. Coull.

"I'd always good lodgins in Yarmouth. Some of them were terrible, but I always had good ones."¹³

However not all of the landladies were quite so accommodating and many women were subjected to slum like conditions, infested with vermin.¹⁴ Examples of equally bad accommodation were to be found in some of the Scottish ports, at Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Wick, where people were huddled together in outhouses, stores, lofts and even worse places, observed by R.W. Duff in 1883 as "a disgrace to civilisation".¹⁵

At Yarmouth the women had to be up by 4.45am so that they had time to walk to work. The no.1 crew, the fastest and top grade team, was stationed nearest to the gate and the others were numbered from there. This meant that some crews had a longer walk at the start of the day and also shorter meal breaks because they had further to walk. The season at Yarmouth usually meant working three nights until 6pm and three nights until 9pm.¹⁶

Despite the hardships endured by them, the girls looked forward to each herring season. It brought them freedom and the opportunity to travel and earn better money. These were opportunities that few other young women relying on domestic service had at the turn of the century. Although independent, they were still able to benefit from having aunts, sisters, sometimes mothers or grandmothers as well as neighbours from their own close knit communities travelling with them who could keep an eye on them. Their guidance and encouragement was no doubt useful in the East Anglian towns when they were far away from home, faced with the temptations of cinemas, and dance halls.¹⁷

Social Life & Leisure Activities

The Missions provided the women with a focal point for meeting socially. They were somewhere warm they could go with their knitting whilst waiting for the boats to land the herring. Knitting occupied every spare minute, though not as a pastime. It was a necessity at a time when there were no suitable manufactured mass-produced garments. All the women had hus-



Scottish Herring Lassies knitting as they wait for the boats to return. The women wore a leather belt known as a "whisker". This was stuffed with horsehair and used to support the weight of the knitting and the 4-5 needles they used as they walked along the quayside.

Photograph : Scottish Fisheries Museum Trust Ltd.

bands, brothers, uncles, or sons to provide clothing for. The women could often be seen waiting by the quayside for the fleet to return busily knitting clothing for themselves and their menfolk.

Fishermen's jumpers, known as ganseys, were knitted in the round on five or more steel, double pointed needles to create a seamless garment." They used a knitting belt known as a "whisker" to support the needles as they worked. The women used blue Seafeld (Australian Merino) wool, which was very smooth 6-ply wool and the ganseys were tightly knitted to keep the rain out. The sleeves were knitted in from the shoulder to the wrist and this made it easier to re-knit the sleeve when it became worn. Different fishertowns were characterised by different patterns, denoting if a man was married, how many children he had as well as where he was from. These patterns were passed down through the generations and most young girls were adept at knitting before they began school at the age of five. The herring girls would knit

ganseys from memory as they walked around the quayside waiting for the boat. Their menfolk required up to seven ganseys each, as well as sea boot stockings and woollen underclothes knitted from wool known as Shetland Grey. The girls also had to knit their own stockings, jumpers and shawls. "We never had much spare time, but when we did all the girls used tae go about knitting."⁵⁰

No work of any kind was done on a Sunday, and everybody attended Church. The Bethel at Yarmouth and other missions held services for the fisherfolk. No Scottish boats went out on a Sunday and the men and women were able to "have a day of rest ...to refresh their souls."⁵¹ There was a tradition at Yarmouth after the Sunday service where the women and men would walk in procession singing psalms to Caister and back, this was a village 5 kilometres along the coast from Yarmouth. When they arrived back at their lodgings the women were allowed to invite their menfolk in for a cup of tea. Many romances developed from this Sunday walk, since it was one of the few ways to mix with men and meet future husbands.⁵² However, with the girls living in shared accommodation and with both male and female relatives close at hand there was very little immorality, if any at all.⁵³ When the boats came in there were further possibilities of family reunions with fathers, brothers, uncles and prospective husbands, with the women often being invited on board the family boat for Sunday dinner.

It was important for a fisherman to marry a girl from a fisher family, as she would already be adept at the necessary skills of mending nets and baiting lines. After a good herring season when the herring fleets returned to their homeports there would often be weddings during December and the New Year. All manner of souvenirs and furnishings were brought home from the season in East Anglia, including carpets, curtain material and clothing. These items would often be put aside for the women at the beginning of the season and then collected and paid for prior to their journey back to Scotland.⁵⁴ One of the most popular items brought back as wedding gifts were the china tea sets from Yarmouth, Lowestoft and other East Coast ports. All the pieces in the tea set contained painted inscriptions for example, "A Gift from Lowestoft."

Decline of the Fishery and Industrial Action

The Scottish herring industry reached its peak in the years prior to the First World War, after which it is marked by gradual decline. In 1913 there were approximately 1000 curing yards employing over 40,000 people: this included the herring lassies, coopers and general labourers. The immediate result at the outbreak of war was the loss of the two major markets, Germany and Russia. At the same time all the monies owed to British curing companies were lost, and many went bankrupt. By 1920 there were approximately 300 curing companies still operating in Britain, and in 1933 this number had been reduced to c.200.⁵⁵ Following the peace in 1918, Germany along with Poland and Russia began their own production of cured herring and in 1937 Germany's output of cured herring equalled the now reduced British output of 900,000 barrels. In the inter-war period this decrease in the output of cured herring was not balanced by an increase in either the output of fresh herring or herring used for reduction to oil and meal. Following the Second World War and despite efforts by the Herring Industry Board to develop industrial fishing, it remained of minor importance and it has never attained the importance in Scotland that it has in Norway and Denmark.⁵⁶

However, women continued to follow the herring fleet during the inter-war period, but the downward swing in the industry obviously had a detrimental effect on the numbers of herring gutters and packers. In 1920 there had been 9,000 women following the herring, but by 1938 this had halved,³⁶ and continued to decrease over time. There was a further complication as those recruited now tended to be under-employed due to the reduction in demand, which meant a reduction in earnings. In 1923 a gutting and packing crew had produced an average 575 barrels during the Scottish summer season, followed by 625 at East Anglia. By 1933 these figures had fallen to 275 and 335 barrels respectively.³⁷

There was increased industrial unrest in the period following the Great War, reflecting the general poverty and economic depression of the time. The women's living and working conditions had always given some cause for concern, and not least amongst the women themselves. There were some marginal improvements over the years, some curing yards were roofed over to provide some shelter from the severe winter weather, and the heights of the farlins were raised to reduce the constant need for bending. In 1914 the Scottish Fishworkers Friendly Society had a membership of 4,000 herring workers, and this included coopers and carters as well as the women.

They were more prepared to strike for improved conditions than other women workers were and there had been a few unsuccessful strikes leading up to the First World War. During the late 1920s and 1930s there were several strikes with the women demanding improved living conditions such as only 3 instead of 6 to a hut in Shetland. In 1929 Jean Bochel and her crew refused to sign on for the season unless they had a hut to themselves at Lerwick. The curing company agreed and following this it was accepted that no more than three women should share a hut.³⁸ In 1931 there were mass meetings in Peterhead and Stornoway protesting against a reduction of the weekly wage offered by the curers. After they had reached Yarmouth a strike among the Scottish fisher girls paralysed business, and the union (Transport & General Workers Union) was able to negotiate a compromise. In 1935 there was a summer strike at Castlebay in the Western Isles. A much more serious dispute followed at Yarmouth in 1936 when mounted police were required on the streets; nevertheless the women got their wage increase. A further strike occurred in 1936, backed by the Scottish fishermen, when there was a protest against taking fish caught by English boats on Sundays, and "curers had no choice but to concede the point".³⁹

After the Second World War there were further strikes in 1946, 1949 and 1953. The first not only resulted in higher pay from the curers, but also a more generous coal allowance, which they now received from the government. Although the women had the power to paralyse the herring season, they rarely pressed too hard for fear of bringing its total collapse. Their strikes were more symbolic protests against the poverty of fishing families as a whole, "we knew we were exploited but what could we do?"⁴⁰ One woman remembers the result of asking for another penny, which was refused and "the foreman put the bloody hose on us: drenched us with cold water."⁴¹

By 1962 there were only 10 Scottish girls at Yarmouth, and in 1968 only 8 herring drifters made the trip to the winter herring.⁴² The era of the "herring lassies" had finally drawn to a close. Rising living standards mean that people could afford to buy other forms of protein and fish species that did not require salt for preservation. Fresh fish, poultry and meat have become cheaper through modern intensive farming practices and ironically these alternative forms of



Women in the 1940's, gutting at A. Davidson & Co. Herring station, Shetland. Photograph : © Shetland Museum.

protein rely on fishmeal as feed. Not only had the markets changed, but the herring had begun to desert Britain's shores and competition was increasing from Norway, Iceland and Holland, as well as Germany and Eastern Europe, the former main markets for cured herring.

Conclusion

For a century these women followed the herring fleet as it moved around the coast of Britain, living in makeshift accommodation and working in less than ideal conditions. The work was hard, involving long hours, usually outside, in all weathers. Inevitably the gutting resulted in painful, sore hands from knife wounds aggravated by contact with the salt used for pickling the herring. Despite this the girls were renowned for their cheerfulness and constant industrious activity. The work gave them the opportunity to travel and gave them some degree of freedom from parental control, whilst at the same time allowing them to supplement their families income.

The "herring lassies" played a vital role in the Scottish herring industry, and without their labour skills the Crown Brand quality may not have been such a success. Their skills did not go unnoticed and between the wars Buchan fisherwomen travelled to Iceland and Alaska to teach their gutting and curing skills. During the Second World War, Nairn women went to Nova Scotia³ for the same reason.

In the inter-war period, as the industry slowly went into decline, fisher families were faced with increasing poverty. The women took industrial action, not only to voice concern for their

own immediate monetary needs, but also their communities' lack of means. They did receive pay rises, but in real terms these only helped to balance the loss of earnings faced by many fishermen. Rising living standards and changes in diet after the Second World War succeeded in reducing the demand for salted herring, and with the development of gutting machinery, the women's skills were no longer required. Instead they found employment in the new factories working with frozen shellfish and whitefish, or electrical components,⁶¹⁻⁶³ work which they found surprisingly easy and well paid when compared to their days at the herring.

In the 1970s fishing vessel capacity increased phenomenally, boats were becoming bigger and more powerful with diesel engines. A small fleet could catch the equivalent in one day of what the fleet had caught during the whole East Anglian herring season. This intensive fishing led to a 6-year ban on herring fishing between 1977 and 1983 to allow the fish to replenish. Klondyking has become the domain of huge factory ships from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. The huge ships, which lie off the Scottish coast have now taken over the role of the herring girls, and these ships now process the fish brought to them by Scottish fishing boats.

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Summary

DE SKOTSKE GANEJENTENE

Denne artikkelen beskriver arbeidsmiljøet og hverdagslivet til de tusenvis av ganejenter som hadde en sentral rolle i de skotske sildefiskeriene i tidsrommet fra 1860 til 1960-årene. Disse "jentene", noen av dem kunne være både mødre og bestemødre, fulgte den skotske sildeflåten rundt kysten av Storbritannia for å bearbeide silden. Arbeidet måtte utføres etter bestemte regler som var satt av "the Fishery Board" som hadde ansvar for sildefiskeriene.

Kvinnene arbeidet i gjenger som besto av to ganejenter og en legger. På grunn av "the Fishery Board's" regler måtte de gane silden med en skarp kniv innen 24 timer etter at fangsten kom i land. De måtte sortere fisken i syv forskjellige kvalitetsgrupper. Arbeidet måtte gjøres raskt og nøyaktig, kvinnene ganet fra 60 til 70 fisk per minutt. Hver tønne rommet om lag 1000 sild. De la ned 30 tonner sild hver dag. Leggeren pakket silden i tønnene sammen med salt. Det var strenge regler også for dette arbeidet, f.eks forskjellig kvantum salt i hver kvalitetsgruppe. Arbeidet måtte gjøres skikkelig for å få de fulle sildetønnene stemplet med kvalitetsgarantistempelet, "the Crown Brand".

Ganejentene var ansatt av firma som betalte dem et engangsbeløp pr. sesong pluss akkord. Lønnen ble betalt på slutten av sesongen. Dette arbeidet var bedre betalt enn å arbeide som tjenestejente, som var alternativet for unge kvinner i denne perioden. Men det var et toft og hardt arbeid. De måtte jobbe utendørs i all slags vær med liten beskyttelse, og hadde ofte smerter på grunn av saltsår, frostknuter og nyreproblemer. De brukte kluter for å beskytte fingrene sine. Disse klutene eller bandasjene kaltes "clooties". Kvinnene stolte på frivillige helseorganisasjoner og misjonsstasjoner når de trengte førstehjelp. Slike religiøse organisasjoner viste omsorg for kvinnene, og tilbød gjerne et varmt sted hvor de kunne møte hverandre.

I løpet av sesongen flyttet de med fiskeriene fra vestkysten av Skottland via Shetland mot sør til East Anglia i England. De reiste med dampskip mellom det skotske fastlandet og øyene, og med tog fra Skottland til England. Når de jobbet i Skottland bodde de midlertidig i små hytter, og det var som regel seks kvinner i hver hytte. Hytten hadde bare to køyer, så de måtte dele seng. I England bodde de i losjihus som ble leid ut til turister om sommeren. Da ganejentene jobbet her om vinteren, var husene ledige. Men de måtte dele rom, som i Skottland, seks kvinner og bare to senger i hvert rom.

Ganejentene arbeidet alltid. Mens de ventet på en ny fangst, var de opptatt med strikkepinnene sine. De strikket gensere til mennene sine og klær til seg selv. Det var ikke mulig å kjøpe ferdiglagde klær. Hver enkelt fisker trengte omtrent syv gensere samtidig, en for hver arbeidsdag og en til søndagsbruk.

Vanligvis levde den skotske fiskeribefolkningen i fast sammensveiset fellesskap. Når ganejentene fulgte sildeflåten rundt kysten, var de fremdeles omgitt av slektninger. Nettverket beskyttet dem mot umoralsk oppførsel, men ga også mulighet til å oppnå nærmere kontakt med menn fra eget fiskermiljø. De aller fleste ganejentene giftet seg med fiskere.

Etter at første verdenskrig var over i 1918, begynte det skotske sildefiskeriet å avta. Eksportørene mistet de store markedene i Tyskland og Russland. I løpet av depresjonen og de sosiale konfliktene i 1930-årene, sluttet kvinnene gradvis å følge silden. I 1960-årene var det bare noen få som reiste til East Anglia. Silden fra de skotske fiskebåtene ble bearbeidet av russiske "klondykers", og tiden da flokken av ganejenter reiste rundt i landet, var over.