



The Herring Girls

Herring gutting was a valuable seasonal source of employment for the girls and women of the fishing villages of the Scottish Islands and round the Scottish coast during the 20 years or so, the period ending with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Other than domestic and craft work in their own communities, there was very little work available to women in the islands and other remote communities in the 19th century and even in the first half of the 20th century, and therefore, although the work of herring gutting entailed long hours of very hard and dirty work for a low wage, the work was appreciated and, because of the companionship and the team work the cheerful girls looked forward to the opening of each fishing season.

Highland and Island women were used to hard work and they cheerfully gave a good account of themselves when they were at the fishing. For that reason they were popular with their employers and the other workers involved in the herring trade.

Thousands of Hebridean herring girl gutters travelled every season, summer and winter, particularly from the 1840s onwards to most if not all the main Scottish and English herring fishing ports, such as Lerwick, Stronsay in the northern Isles, Wick, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, etc. as well as the Irish, Isle of Man and English fishing ports. In autumn there was the English East Anglia herring fishing based mainly on Yarmouth and Lowestoft.

The main European markets for salted herring were Germany, the Baltic States and Russia and the First World War seriously damaged these markets. Germany suffered from serious inflation after the First World War. Stornoway curers, as well as others, were paid in worthless money after the war. Also, these countries built up fishing fleets of their own. By the 1930s the herring catch in Scotland had fallen to a fraction of what it was in the early part of the 20th century.

Herring fishing was a failure during the 20-year period between the first and second world wars. Fortunately for us in Lewis the Merchant Navy picked up in the early 1930s and the Harris Tweed weaving which was very busy in the 1930s saved us from mass emigration and migration. The Second World War finally brought about the end of the herring curing industry and the herring girls, 'Clanighean-a-sgadan' with their peculiar skills were redundant, no longer needed.

The last age group of Lewis girls that participated in the gutting and packing of herring as beginners or coilers as they were called, were those who were born in the early 1920s and, who like many generations before them, got their first job opportunity at the herring gutting after they left school at 14 years old, which was the school leaving age then.

Many of the herring girls were engaged on a forward basis by the same curer year after year. At other times curers got in touch with a former reliable girl employee before the start of the fishing season and she was given discretion to engage the necessary number of girls from among her friends and acquaintances. That demonstrated the confidence the curers placed in the fishing girls, as may be seen in a letter in our possession from fish curer, T.P. Burnett to Betty Finlayson, Calbost. The contract of engagement was always sealed with a token payment or pledge, 'airleas' which usually consisted of 10s/-(50p). Once the 'airleas' was accepted both sides felt fully committed and the contract was always honoured. At the end of the summer season curers would engage girls for the autumn East Anglia herring fishing season. At one time every young Island girl looked forward to the time when they were old enough to get away to the fishing.

Each girl packed all her possessions, including clothes, oilskins, rubber boots and bedding etc. into a wooden chest or 'kist', which also at times served as a wardrobe, a seat and even at times a table in the unfurnished wooden huts that were the girls accommodation at some of the fishing ports, such as Stronsay etc.

As children we looked forward with keen anticipation to the return of the neighbouring fishing girls and particularly the 'kist' which followed a few days later. The 'kist' always contained tit-bits such as Yarmouth rock and other delicacies such as fruitcakes, which we were not used to, and which were therefore highly acceptable. Every dresser in the Island also contained evidence of the fishing girls travels to the various fishing ports in the shape of dishes and ornaments such as butter dishes marked 'a present from Fraserburgh', or Yarmouth etc.

Usually two crews consisting of six girls lived in each hut. They bought and cooked their own food. In some of the fishing ports the girls lived in lodgings and sometimes they were quite crammed with as many as three to a bed at times. Generally speaking, except for the English winter fishing, the girls provided for themselves.

Travelling to and from the fishing ports was a trying time for the girls, particularly to the distant Islands of Orkney and Shetland where they sometimes went in their hundreds on a small unsuitable ship direct from Stornoway. The alternative was to travel by train to Aberdeen and endure a long sea crossing. If they were caught in bad weather, as they certainly were sometimes, they endured great suffering and on one or two occasions it was a marvel that the direct voyage from Stornoway did not end in disaster.

In the normal course, the girls were packed on board the Stornoway / Kyle of Lochalsh mail steamer in their hundreds along with all the other passengers, without any regard to the proper passenger carrying capacity of these ferry boats. In Kyle of Lochalsh they boarded trains bound for the various fishing ports.

Nevertheless, it was a jolly time for the hundreds of lively good-humoured young girls of comely appearance. The boat and the train echoed to the lusty Gaelic singing of the girls, as they bantered among themselves and mercilessly ragged any male acquaintance that came within sight.

The fisher girls worked in teams or as they were called 'crews' of three girls. Two of them were gutters and the third, usually the tallest girl, was a packer. She packed the gutted herring in tiers of salt in barrels. The dexterity of the girls gutting and packing the herring had to be seen to be believed.

The routine was for the girls to be woken up at 5a.m. by a cooper banging at their door and calling, 'get up and bandage your fingers'. Over a cup of tea the girls tied bandages round their fingers in order to avoid being nicked or cut with the special sharp knife they used to gut the herring called 'cutag'. If they should happen to cut themselves accidentally the salt entered the wound and it was very painful, but worse still it often turned septic and at times was so bad as to necessitate having to go off work or even on occasion to return home. Since the work of gutting the herring was carried out very fast, at the rate of 30 to 50 herring a minute on average, hour after hour all day, the chances of cutting their fingers was very high, particularly if they were distracted by anything.

Work commenced at 6a.m. and the first part of the day was taken up with replenishing or topping-up yesterday's barrels, 'ath-lionadh' and generally tidying up the curing yard ready to receive the day's herring catch. Breakfast of porridge, bread and jam etc. was at 8.30a.m., and as the work depended on the quality of herring landed each day, there were days when it was very slack. At such times the girls would go round the quay for a walk, arm in arm singing Gaelic songs and knitting socks etc. as they were on the lookout for young men from home as deck-hands on the fishing boats.

When there was a good supply of herring in port the girls worked long hours. Normally they worked from 6a.m. to 6p.m. but longer if there was a glut of herring. The reward was hardly commensurate with the hard labour that was expected from these young girls.

In fact, if the herring was not plentiful enough to ensure that the girls worked practically double normal working hours, there was little money coming to them at the end of the season. There were occasions when they only got enough pocket money to take them back home. The normal average take home pay for a whole season was about £10 to £12 up to the beginning of the 20th century.

Although the herring girls were on the whole fairly easy going, it is recorded that they participated in strikes occasionally in order to improve their pay and working conditions. One such occasion was at Yarmouth, when all the girls demonstrated their solidarity by coming out on strike almost unanimously, in support of their demand for a rise of 2d from 10 old pennies to 1s/-or 12 old pennies a barrel.

On that occasion some of the older women were reluctant to come out on strike and support the pay demand. A large delegation of jolly young girls was sent out to reason with their reluctant colleagues at the curing yards involved. They did not waste too much time in reasoning with these 'blackleg' girls but turned the powerful sea water hose on their hesitant colleagues and very quickly achieved full and unanimous support for the strike.

On that occasion mounted police were brought up from London to intimidate the girls but they would not be provoked but continued their good-humoured bantering, singing and laughing. After a week they gained their full demand for 1s/-a barrel.

Although the work of gutting the herring involved long hours of arduous and dirty work in poor conditions, it had its compensations and the girls looked forward to the herring season each year because they had a lot of fun at the herring. Saturday night was the highlight of the week, when the boats were in port and the boys from home came to the 'ceilidh'. In some of the fishing ports Highland dancing took place every Saturday evening where the good humoured and quick-witted girls bantered with the coopers and the fishermen from home. The Sabbath was strictly observed and the dancing and music stopped at 10p.m. on Saturday.

It was customary for one or other of the Highland Ministers to accompany the fisher girls and deck-hand men at various ports such as Wick in order to provide for their spiritual needs. Open-air meetings in Gaelic were attended by thousands of fisher folk. At that time Wick had the largest congregation of fisher folk anywhere in the country.

Many of the girls met their future husbands at one or other of the fishing ports. Romances blossomed and sometimes marriages were solemnised before they travelled back home. Usually they matched up with partners from their own area and if you look at your grandparent's marriage certificate you may find that they married in Fraserburgh or some other fishing port. On occasion however the marriage partner might be from one or other of the Scottish or English fishing ports. My Aunt Mary, 1886-1917, was married in Grimsby, in England. Mrs Wilson died young.

Three Caithness fisher girls settled in Marvig, Lochs. Two were sisters, Betty and Barbara MacDonald from Bettyhill. Betty, 1827-1907, was the wife of Alistair Thormoid Macfarlane, 10 Marvig, 1923-1910. They raised a family of two girls and three boys (Allan, the oldest died young). Betty's sister Barbara was married to Donald MacLennan, 6 Marvig, 'Dhomhnuill Ruadh Mhurchaidh Dhonnachadh', who's family of six girls and a boy moved to 26 Lemreway in the 1950s. The boy was the youngest of the family born in 1871 and he was known as 'coachie', a businessman and a yacht owner in Stornoway.

The third Caithness girl was Jean Munro from Melvich who married Roderick Finlayson, 8 Marvig. She was the granny of the late Rev. Angus Finlayson, North Tolsta. These three fisher girls married in the early 1850s and they travelled home to Marvig at the end of the Caithness herring fishing on their husbands' fishing boats.

When the boats landed their herring on the quay the coopers sprinkled it with rough salt as the fishermen poured the herring from their baskets into the buyers kits 'curda'. Each kit contained a basketful of herring and when there were a fair number of kits ready they were loaded onto lorries (earlier it was horse-drawn lorries that were used) and conveyed to the curer's curing yard and poured into large wooden troughs known as 'farlins'.

A farlin could take many crans of herring depending on the size of the farlin. The gutting girls positioned themselves along both sides of the farlin after the herring was lightly sprinkled with rough salt, which enabled the women gutters to grasp and hold the otherwise slippery herring. Speed and fast handling was essential.

The gutting was done in a remarkably quick movement. The girls grabbed a herring and in a fast movement with the special very sharp knife called 'cutag' the gut was removed by a quick turn of the hand. Without so much as a glance the fish was flung into one of the three containers placed on the floor behind the gutter as a preliminary selection of the herring into three grades, large, medium and small, or as the trade referred to them, maties full, maties and maties small.

The small containers, tubes or baskets were taken from the gutters and plunged into a large trough and again lightly sprinkled with rough salt ready for the packer to set to work. Sometimes the two gutters of the team brought the tubes with the selected herring to their packing partner. The packer then set to work, seizing a handful of herring and arranging them in tiers in a rosette fashion with the bellies of the herring uppermost and their heads toward the outside of the barrel. The tiers were at right angles to each other and a liberal sprinkling of rough salt was applied to each layer, under the eagle eye of a very competent and experienced cooper.

A barrel of herring was said to contain about 700 herring on average and the whole job of gutting, dousing, and packing only took about 10 minutes on average. The crew of three girls gutted and packed about 30 barrels a day of 10 hours, or about one fish every 10 seconds of the working day.

It was the cooper's first job each morning to examine every barrel packed on the previous day to ensure that no pickle had leaked away, and if so the fish had to be repacked in order to make sure that every barrel of fish reached the customer in top quality.

After the fish settled in the barrels and the salt melted, the barrels were opened and once again filled to the top, 'athlionadh'. The barrels were then fitted with a tight lid and left for 10 days or so. Then the pickle was run out through the bung hole and the barrel was again opened up so that it could be topped up with more herring, 'tres-lionadh' or third filling. Then the lid was re-fitted and sufficient pickle was poured back in through the bung hole to fill the barrel. The barrel had then to lie maturing for 15 days before they could be branded with the official brand, ready for export.

It will be seen that great care was exercised in the curing of salt herring in Britain and it was in that way that the British cured herring done in accordance with the 'Scotch-cure' captured the European continental market for cured herring and retained it until the First and Second World Wars destroyed the trade on which a large number of men and women in the Islands depended for their living.

In that way the crofting economy which depends on fishing as a complementary ancillary industry was undermined when the herring fishing ceased after the Second World War. The agricultural aspect of crofting is a part-time

occupation and it is absolutely necessary for the crofter and his family to have some other form of gainful employment to enable him to sustain the crofting lifestyle.

The two World Wars had a tremendous influence on the herring fishing industry. Many of the fisher girls were engaged in work in munitions factories and nursing etc. in the cities although most of them returned to fishing after the First World War. More and more Hebridean girls began to stop in cities such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness etc., after the herring fishing season, particularly after the English winter fishing ending in December, in order to find work in the off season, in service in the big affluent houses.

Service in almost all these affluent big city houses was a worse form of slavery than the herring fishing which was at least jolly and humorous. Whereas the girls in service, often 2 or 3 of them in the one house, were invariably subjected to class discrimination and exploitation in both long hours of duty and a miserable monthly wage of only a few pounds, and one night off a week. The Second World War emancipated the service girls and they went to work in offices and industry and more particularly in nursing. The big houses were sold and the well-to-do went out to the suburbs to smaller houses.

Of course there was a certain attraction in the bright lights and the well-stocked shops, even if there was little or no money to buy the desirable wares on offer. There was also a certain degree of security and permanency in service work, and it was cleaner. Also, cities like Glasgow with a large Highland and Island Gaelic community, and numerous entertaining events as well as Gaelic religious services, enabled the young people to feel somewhat at home in the big cities between the two World Wars.

Not many in the age group born in 1923 onwards took up herring gutting as a career because of the depression and decline in the industry when they came of age in the late 1930s. Instead they sought work elsewhere. The men also switched to the Merchant Navy in the late 1930s in large numbers because they often ended a whole summer season as deck hands on the Scottish east coast in debt. As Mr Donald Nicolson, Calbost did when his east coast employers sent him an account for the oilskins and rubber boots he had used during the summer fishing season. The Second World War accelerated these changes.

Then after the war it was no longer a practical proposition to continue cultivating the crofts in the labour intensive traditional way with a spade, building up strips of lazybed cultivation 'feannagan', mainly for the maintenance of the domestic cow. Actually there was no arable land in the Paicr district that could be worked by mechanical means, and the land use there changed to its natural use, which was grazing of stock, after the Second World War.

Fishery Board Reports give a lot of interesting information. The 1911 report states that the number of gutters and packers employed in Scotland was between 13, 000 and 14,000 of which the great majority were from the Highlands and Islands. In a busy season these workers earned a total of nearly £100,000.

There is also the following table of summer season earnings about that time:

Helmsdale	230 women	earning an average of £19/-/-	in 15 weeks
Wick	1140 women	£12/-/-	in 12/13 weeks
Shetland	1492 women	£14/-/-	in 18 weeks
Orkney	282 women	£20/-/-	in 15 weeks
Stornoway	2433 women	£8/14/3	in 16 weeks
Barra	704 women	£13/12/-	in 29 weeks

That indicates that the earnings of the herring gutters were very low.

In the context of history nothing ever remains the same for very long, yet inevitably comparisons are made as to the quality of life, past and present. We lament the passing of many good things, but in fact life was pretty hard at many times in the past, but more so for some, as indeed is the case today as well.

A crew of 3 young girls from Cromore were at the summer fishing season at Wick, when they contracted measles. Sadly they all died and were buried at Wick. They were two sisters, Mary and Peggy born in 1867 and 1869 respectively, daughters of Kenneth Mackenzie, 'Coinneach Dhomhnuill', 5 Cromore, and his wife Peggy Macleod, formerly of 1 Ranish. And Mary Macleod born 1870, daughter of Murdo Macleod 'Aonghais Ruadh'. They were buried at Wick because it was not possible to bring remains home at that time, as Wick was considered to be very far away in the context of the transport facilities available then.

Then there were 4 young men from Calbost who did not return from the east of Scotland herring fishing. They were Hector Macleod, born 1887, son of Kenneth Macleod 'Coinneach Thormoid', 6 Calbost. He was lost overboard at Lerwick and they were unable to recover his remains. Roderick Finlayson, born 1877, son of Donald Finlayson, 10 Calbost, also lost overboard on the east coast and his remains were not recovered. Robert Macleod, born 1859, son of Duncan Macleod, 14 Calbost. He was drowned at the Wick fishing aged 21 years. John Macleod, born 1864, a brother of the above Robert. He died at Fraserburgh at the early age of 20 years. Many others also lost their lives.

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