



The British Fisheries Society

By the beginning of the 19th century the long years of neglect and mis-management of the British fishery was at last coming to an end. The new century ushered in a period of growth because it was then that the herring fishing industry of Scotland caught on, following the activities of a number of far sighted prominent people and societies which culminated in the incorporation of the British Fisheries Society which greatly helped to lay the foundations of a very successful Scottish herring fishery by challenging the Dutch in the European Markets and elsewhere.

An important milestone in the development of the Scottish herring fisheries was the formation in London in the 1770s of the Highland Society of London by 25 Scottish gentlemen. Among the objectives of the Highland Society of London was a desire to bring about improvements in the Highlands of Scotland.

At that time prominent people had written pamphlets and essays on the subject of the northern fisheries. Among them was Mr John Knox who advocated the building of fishing villages in the Highlands and Islands. In due course he delivered a lecture to the Highland Society of London and that lecture was subsequently published and distributed under the title of, 'A Discourse on the Expediency of Establishing Fishing Stations and Small Towns in the Highlands of Scotland and the Hebridean Islands'.

In the paper John Knox proposed that about 50 fishing villages be built in the Highlands containing about 30 or 40 houses with gardens as well as harbours, storehouses, curing sheds, schools, churches etc. These fishing settlements would in turn create work for various tradesmen such as boat builders and craftsmen of various kinds, as well as a focal point for fish curers and merchants.

Mr Knox also pointed out that it was unlikely that Parliament would provide money to cover this scheme and therefore it must fall to people like the Highland Society of London to raise the money by subscription.

Another important event at that time was a visit to the Hebrides in 1775 by George Dempster, a Member of Parliament. On returning to Westminster, Mr Dempster supported the setting up of a House of Commons Committee of enquiry to consider all aspects of the British fisheries as well as the restrictions imposed on the fishing industry by the high duty on the salt.

Valuable work was done by that House of Commons Fisheries Committee. They concentrated their attention on the herring fishing industry giving particular attention to the north and west of Scotland where they acknowledged that it was the ordinary inshore fishermen that particularly needed encouragement.

The Fisheries Committee proposed that a society be set up with private money in order to build fishing villages and harbour facilities on the north west coast of Scotland, very much in line with the proposals put forward by John Knox and others. They also recommended strongly that the small boat fishermen might be allowed to sell their fish to the large British busses because of the complete absence of any worthwhile markets for herring in the Highlands at that time. This was the first real encouragement that the small inshore fishermen of the Highlands and Islands received.

In this both the House of Commons Committee on Fisheries and the London Highland Society and other individuals arrived at much the same conclusions regarding the promotion of the fisheries in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the early 1780s.

The next thing that happened, because of the growing co-operation between all the parties interested in the promotion of the fisheries in Scotland, was the incorporation of a society in 1786 called 'The British Society for Extending the Fisheries and Improving the Sea Coast of this Kingdom'. The original title of the society proved rather cumbersome and gradually the society came to be known as 'The British Fisheries Society', although not officially until 1857.

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