



[Landing the Catch]

In Stornoway the herring fishing fleet was in port all day. In the evening they all set off for the fishing grounds, and as there were no mechanical aids to help them to locate the shoals of herring, they relied on their own intuition or on signs, such as the presence of solan geese diving in a concentrated area, or an oily surface of the sea, or the presence of whales. Eventually the nets were shot and after a cup of tea, one man was left on watch and the rest turned-in for two or three hours. At a pre-arranged time the watchman called the crew and after a hurried cup of tea the nets were hauled back into the boat, shaking the herring, if there were any, out of the nets as they came aboard.

On the way back to port in the early morning, the crew proceeded to lift the nets from the hold to the deck on each side of the hold in order to remove any herring that was not already shaken out of the nets, and also to gain free access to the hold to enable the crew to unload the catch of herring onto the quay.

As soon as the boat arrived in port, two of the crewmen descended into the hold with an empty basket and carefully selected a sample of the catch. The sample had to be truly representative of the quality of the catch and the various sizes of herring in the whole catch. The sample consisted of about 60 to 80 herring and it was taken along to the fish market, where an auction of all the herring in port took place each morning. The system of auctioning the catch dated from 1884. Prior to that, boat-crews agreed, in advance, a fixed price from the curers throughout the whole season.

All the fishermen congregated at the fish-mart for the auction and as young coiler boys, we were quite amused with the skill and speed of the auctioneers, as well as the methods used by the buyers to place their bids. At the time we were quite puzzled as to how the auctioneer's eye caught the subtle signals coming from the prospective buyers. After a while we realised that some buyers signalled their bid by a wink or a fast movement of the eye. Others looking on casually with their hands in their pockets and apparently looking quite unconcerned would indicate their bid by tilting the cigarette they were smoking, upwards by a movement of their lips. Others glanced upwards. No one spoke a word except the auctioneer who poured forth a torrent of words. We were very impressed by the able and efficient way the institution of the fish-mart worked.

The catches were bought by the curers on the strength of the samples and when the herring was being landed from the boats, the cooper or buyer's representative kept a sharp eye on the quality and size of the herring to see if it corresponded with the sample submitted. On occasion the buyer complained and the landing operation of the herring was suspended. The port arbiter would be called and he would arbitrate the dispute.

He would pour one of the kits already on the quay, or alternatively he might call for a basket of herring to be filled at random from the hold of the boat and poured out on the quay. He would then select the herring into groups according to size and quality.

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Author: Angus Macleod

Date: 1998

Original document title: The Lifestyle of Yesteryear's Fisherman

Location in physical archive: Series G, File 4, Section 19

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/7/x (additional file)

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