



[Open-boat Fishing in Rural Lewis]

In the 16th century it is said that Lewis was self-supporting, but it must be remembered that the population of Lewis was low at that time, and long after. Even at the beginning of the 19th century the population of Lewis was only 9168 persons, as compared with over 29,000 people at the end of that century.

There was therefore a population explosion in Lewis in the 19th century and it is reasonable to assume that that was largely due to two factors. First, the introduction of potatoes into Lewis about the middle of the 18th century (although people were very reluctant to plant them at first). Secondly, the phenomenal growth of the commercial fishing industry during the whole of the 19th century. When however, the fishing declined in the 20th century the people had to leave in order to find work in the towns and cities.

Earlier, in the 17th and 18th centuries Government policies discouraged crofter/fishermen because of the way the fishing industry was administered and commercial fishing was therefore slow to develop in the Western Isles. In fact crofters were virtually prevented from ever being able to participate in commercial fishing because of the difficulty of obtaining salt, which was only available through the Custom House.

It was not until 1765 that a custom house was established in Stornoway, and even then, salt was difficult to get by the crofters. When, however, the salt duty was eventually abolished in 1825, it was then that the opportunity arose for the crofter/fisherman to participate fully in commercial fishing, even although their boats and gear were not very suitable.

During the 18th century and the early part of the 19th century, Lewis fishing boats were small. Usually they had only about a 14 to 20 foot keel and fitted with one mast, a sail and oars, and manned by 3 or 4 men with 9 to 12 hemp homemade nets. These boats cost £15 to £20 each as well as the cost of the fishing gear. It was very difficult to accumulate that amount of money when there was no financial assistance available, except from the merchants and carriers.

In addition to the herring nets, they also used hooked baited lines for whitefish in season: 'small-lines' (lion-beag) for haddock etc, and 'great-lines' (lion-mor) for cod, ling, skate, conger eels etc. They normally used herring for bait.

In the second half of the 18th century the Lewis Seaforth Proprietor and his tacksmen established a commercial salted and dried white fishery in Lewis. Salt houses or curing stations (taighean-sailleadh) were to be found dotted all round the coast of the island in every suitable cove, particularly where there was a pebbly beach, as that was very suitable for laying out the salted fish to dry in the sun and wind every day.

The Stornoway merchants paid £5.50 per tonne for cured ling, and £10.00 a tonne for cured cod at the beginning of the 19th century. The cured whitefish was also exported to places like Ireland, and there was therefore a flourishing trade in salted whitefish at that time. Fish oil was also extracted and exported.

It was during this period, towards the end of the 18th and early part of the 19th century that the kelp (seaweed) industry was also flourishing. But the removal of the salt duty opened the way for the importation of barilla from Spain, and as barilla yielded four times as much alkali as kelp, the price of kelp dropped to an uneconomic level, and the industry declined rapidly causing great hardship to the crofter population because they depended on their income from kelping to a very great extent. By 1822 the kelp industry had declined very considerably, and the people turned their attention to the Caithness fishing and the local in-shore fishing more than ever.

Robert Weir, the Calbost tacksman was said to be one of the most progressive tacksmen in Lewis towards the end of the 18th century. He was active in fishing, and the salt-fish trade, as well as kelping and agriculture. Robert Weir's fish salting station was sited at 'Mol a Ghò', the pebbly beach to the left or north of the village, where the in-shore small boats were hauled up on the beach because they could not be moored in the bay, being open to the sea. Nowadays there is a wooden shed on the site.

After Robert Weir passed away in 1821, a few years after the village was first lotted, oral tradition informs us that the Calbost salting station was operated by Norman Mackenzie, 'Tormod Buidhe', whose house was very near to Robert's house, and probably Norman was his right hand man. Norman and his widowed mother, Marion, came from Carloway originally.

Later on, the fish-salting house was operated by Murdo Nicolson, 11 Calbost, 'Murchadh Mac Dhomhnuill 'ic Thormoid', whose family came from Uig via Eishken. It may be of interest to note that there is evidence of more than one ruin at 'Eilean a Ghò', which is adjacent to the site of the salt house station at Calbost. One or more of these ruins appears to be round, which in all probability are the ruins of helping kilns.

We recall our host in the Calbost ceilidh house; Angus Morrison who was born in 1852 and died in 1945, telling us how plentiful whitefish was in his young days. He said, 'Once we took up the anchor-stone, 'cruaidh', on the end of the lines, we were quite used to the sight of the whole line floating up to the surface of the sea on account of the abundance of the fish hooked like ling, cod, skate on every hook'.

In fact, they were selective. Some of the less favoured species of fish were thrown back into the sea, or left on the beach for anyone who cared to take them. 'Bha an iasg cho pailt agus gum bitheadh sinn aig amannan a lorg àite anns an eathair anns an cuireadh sinn ceann na langa,' Angus said. (The fish was so plentiful that sometimes it was difficult to squeeze the head of a ling into a space in the boat). Angus also said that he had no boots of his own when he started his fishing career. It was his mother's boots he wore. For oilskins he used blanket-cloth, 'plancaid', tarred with archangel tar, 'teàrr-mhor'.

Facilities to enable the fishermen of Lochs to pursue their calling effectively were non-existent, except what they were able to do for themselves. In 1824 a number of places in Lewis were surveyed with a view to providing piers for the fishermen. Among the places that were surveyed was Calbost, and although piers were built in Ness and Uig in about 1835/1837, nothing was ever done for the Calbost fishermen, or for that matter, for the fishermen of any other village in Park except for the small quays they built for themselves with free labour. Portnaguran in Point, Lewis was first surveyed for a pier in 1828, but it was over 100 years later that a pier was built there, and by that time the urgent need for a pier was not so pressing. Furthermore, the pier is largely built on dry land.

The Congested District Board was formed in 1896, but it was poorly funded. Yet, they provided a small hand-operated winch for the purpose of helping to haul the boats up on the Calbost beach. That winch was installed by John Macleod, 1 Calbost, 'Iain Aonghais', at 'Mol a Ghò'. By the late 1920s it was out of action because of normal wear and tear to its brushes. It is still there.

As a result of local initiative, another second-hand small winch was installed in 1960, and the Lewis District Council contributed £30 as part of the cost of buying and installing the winch, as well as constructing a wooden shelter around it. The Congested District Board also provided financial assistance to construct a village well at Calbost. John Macleod of 1 Calbost also carried out that work.

The people of Calbost also campaigned for the deepening of the channel between the sea and the fresh water loch in the middle of the village, 'Loch Dubh', in order to give access for small boats to the shelter of what would then be an inner harbour. Surveyors looked at that proposed project once or twice, but it came to nothing.

The men of the village made an attempt to open the channel themselves sometime in the 19th century. They built dry stone walls on each side of the channel, and the ruins of these walls may still be seen. In the absence of technical assistance and funding with which to acquire cement etc to bind the loose stones together, the walls were not going to withstand the winter gales and the stormy seas, and neither they did.

The truth is that the level of the freshwater loch is well above the level of the sea, except when there is a high tide. Also, there are rocks in the narrow neck between the sea and the loch that needs to be blasted away. If that was done it is possible that the action of the sea would carve out a natural inner harbour in the course of time.

Launching a boat, or approaching the open beach at Calbost was a hazardous exercise on a stormy day. It required experience, skill and good judgement because the smallest error of judgement could well mean disaster for the boat, and possibly for the crew. Yet, fortunately, there is no record of any mishap or loss at that beach.

Large rocks covered the lower part of the beach, and it was necessary to clear a passage through these rocks from the high-water mark down to the lowest tide mark 'sgreab'. After every storm, that passage had to be cleared because the action of the sea moved the big rocks on the beach into the passage.

On approaching the beach at 'Mol a Ghò' the sail was lowered and the oarsmen took up their position, under the guidance of the skipper. They approached cautiously, watching and waiting for a calm moment between the crashing waves. Suddenly the skipper gave the order, 'Go!' and in they went on the crest of a wave, with the oarsmen pulling in unison for all they were worth. They would race on to the beach, taking care that the boat was head on to the beach, and aiming accurately for the narrow six-foot passage. Also, they would take care that they beached the boat at the very top of the wave.

Quick as lightning the bow-man who was waiting poised in the forepart of the boat with the painter-rope coiled and firmly grasped in his hand, jumped ashore at the very moment the boat touched bottom. While the boat was still upright on even keel before the sea went out, the oarsmen and others jumped quickly ashore to keep the boat on even keel and pull her up on the beach before the next wave came crashing in, with the danger of throwing the boat sideways against the boulders on the beach, if it was stormy.

Usually there were willing hands, men and women, waiting on the shore to meet their fisher folk, and give a helping hand with the hauling of the boat, as well as help to carry home the fish. The first priority was to haul the boat up past the reach of the sea and everybody took up his or her station quickly and without a fuss. Only when the boat was well out of the reach of the sea did everyone relax, and conversation started before they set to again to unload the fish and gear in order to lighten the boat and haul it right up to its berth well above the high-water mark.

There were boats berthed on the Calbost beach that were at least 20 foot keel, and the men put their backs to these larger boats in order to keep them upright and haul them up on the beach. Once the boat was secured in its berth, the skipper and crew set out the fish in even lots, one for each member of the crew, and very often a portion was set aside for widows or old and infirm members of the community, or any-one that might be ill at that time. Once that was done, lots were cast in order to be absolutely fair. The skipper asked someone to turn his back, 'Tionndaidh a mach', and call out, 'Who shall have this lot?' (Cò leis a bhitheas an earrainn seo?) The man with his back to the people responded, and the procedure was repeated until all the lots were placed.

The larger offshore fishing boats belonging to Calbost were moored in the excellent anchorage of our neighbouring village of Marvig, and in fact there were several excellent anchorages in the area, such as Cromore, Marvig, Gravir and Lemreway, which were packed with offshore fishing boats. It was not necessary to haul the small inshore boats up on the beach in these villages. They were moored.

The accumulated knowledge and experience of generations of fishermen was passed down to succeeding generations ensuring that the local inshore fishermen had an amazingly accurate knowledge of the best fishing bank as well as the reefs and the nature of the sea-bed, and the currents all round the coast for miles out to sea. Sometimes they summarised their conclusions with pithy sayings, such as "s e eolas "Rubha bu h-àird" fuireach àrd bhos a chionn". Experience had taught them that the currents at that headland 'Rubha bu h-àird' in Southern Park were likely to draw the boat and the drift-nets on to the shore at that point, unless they kept well out to seaward. In time that saying came into general use as a warning against various things.

Because of the small size of boats they used, these inshore fishermen always had to be very alert for any change in the weather because their lives very often depended on their ability to assess or forecast the weather conditions accurately. On entering our ceilidh house, one of the first things our host would ask, after greeting us, was about the weather conditions and particularly the wind. 'Dè 'n àrd anns am bheil a ghaoth?'

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