



## [Ring-net Fishing]

Modern ring-net herring fishing did not come to Lewis and Harris in a commercial way until the 1950s. A form of ring-netting, or circle netting as it was referred to earlier, was used for herring fishing in Scotland in a small way ever since 1830.

Apparently circle netting for herring was originally used in the Loch Fyne area. In its earlier form it was simply an idea by some fishermen to assemble several drift nets together and set a long line of nets in a circle round a shoal of herring observed in shallow water. Both ends of the circle of netting were taken ashore in order to haul the net and the encircled fish onto the beach. The same idea was used in Lewis and probably other places on a small scale for cuddies and on occasion for sea trout but not for herring we are told.

The ring-net method of fishing for herring involved in stages, from using an improvised ring-net, comprising of a few drift-nets in a suitable place from the shore, to a specifically designed net for the purpose of ring-netting, but still hauling the net on to a beach. Small open boats were used at first to set the ring-net but later larger boats were used, which in time were half-decked forward as was the case with drift-net fishing boats all round the Scottish coast at that time.

As time went on the ring-net fishermen gained experience in the new form of fishing and eventually they ventured out into deeper water off-shore, using a pair of boats. Once they located a shoal of herring, which they did at first by long experience of observing certain signs, one of the boats dropped anchor and remained stationary, holding one end of the ring-net, while the other boat set the net in a circle round the shoal of herring, bringing the other end of the net back to the stationary boat.

Then both crews came together in one boat and hauled the net and the fish on board. That exercise could be repeated several times if necessary until they had sufficient herring to go off to the market. The introduction of motor power and later on winches, as well as modern purpose built boats and sophisticated machines to enable the fishermen to locate the herring, enabled the fishermen to use deeper nets in order to fish in the open sea.

From the very outset, drift-net herring fishermen were strongly against ring-net trawling on the grounds that it destroyed the herring spawn and fry, and that the dumping of unwanted dead fish damaged the normal fishing. The fishermen also maintained that ring-netting broke up the herring shoals and scared them away, and that in time the livelihood of the drift-net fishermen would be destroyed.

Those who were in favour of ring-net trawling argued that it was free to anyone to participate in that form of fishing. Also that ring-net trawling was a cheaper and much more effective form of fishing because earnings were much higher. They maintained strongly that ring-netting would never damage the herring fishery and that, strictly speaking, it was not trawling because the net was not towed after a boat.

In that way a fierce debate raged about the merits or otherwise of ring-net fishing and petitions were drawn up for and against the practice. An Act of Parliament in 1851 rendered ring-net fishing for herring illegal but the ring-net fishermen defied that law and continued trawling. Legal proceedings were taken against some ring-net fishermen but the Act could not be enforced and in 1867 it was repealed.

For a long time, ring-net fishing was mainly confined to the South West, such as Kintyre and the Clyde area. They sometimes ventured north to the Minches but were met with extreme hostility at first. In the Loch Fyne area some of the fishermen used both ring-nets and drift-net but towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century drift-net fishing was declining in the Loch Fyne area while ring-net was on the ascendancy. The value of the ring-net fishermen's catch per person far exceeded that of the drift-net fishermen's by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Loch Fyne skiff which was used extensively in the south west was a boat of distinctive design. It was originally built in the district of Campbeltown, Tarbert, Ardrishaig and Inveraray etc. In 1902 it cost about £97. They were open boats at first but by the 1870s the length had increased from 20/25 feet to 25/30 feet. Later on they were half-decked and eventually fully decked. Before the First World War the length of a Loch Fyne skiff ranged up to 40 feet.

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the design had found favour beyond Kintyre and Loch Fyne, particularly in the Loch Broom area, where they were eventually built and used extensively. Between the two World Wars a fleet of

Loch Fyne skiffs from the Loch Broom area, 'mor-thir' fished from Stornoway in the summer months. All of them varnished with clear varnish on the new wood.

The Loch Fyne skiff was also popular in Lochs, Isle of Lewis, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were known there as 'Gullpaich', presumably because the design was associated originally with Gilphead area. In the 1930s there were several of them fishing from the Marvig anchorage such as 'Lady Marjorie', Skipper - John MacMillan No 17, 'Clan MacLennan', Skipper - Donald MacLennan No 18, 'Starlight Rays', Skipper - Donald Kennedy, 2 Calbost. The 'Ribhinn Donn', Skipper - Kenneth MacKay, 7 Calbost, which was involved in the drowning of the two young Calbost Morrison lads on the way to re-occupy Steimreway, was a Loch Fyne skiff 'Gullpaich'. Another Loch Fyne skiff, 'Queen Mary' which was built at Loch Torridon in 1911 may be seen at Gairloch Museum where it is preserved for posterity.

Fishing boat design in the Campbeltown area and further afield was revolutionised by an enterprising fisherman from that area called Robert Robertson. He had seen a canoe-stern craft in Norway and he got a Naval architect from Glasgow, W J MacBride to draw a plan for him.

Subsequently the St Monans boat-yard of J Millar & Sons, advertised two engines for sale and Mr Robertson called at the yard and asked Mr Millar if he would build to his own design. Mr Millar agreed and Mr Robertson gave him an order for two identical boats and fit the engines into the resulting vessels. Both boats, the 'Falcon' and the 'Frigate-Bird' were delivered in 1922, each fitted with 18/22 Gleniffer Engines and acetylene gas lighting was installed throughout. Length about 50 feet, some 10 feet longer than the largest of the Loch Fyne skiffs at that time. A wheelhouse aft which was another innovation, as well as a full deck.

The total cost of the two boats including nets and gear was £1277. Robertson's pioneering ideas were not fully accepted until the 1930s. It was 1928 before a suitable winch was available for ring-net working. Eventually Mr Robertson's faith proved to be fully justified. The 'Frigate-Bird' was subsequently bought by the Navigation Department of Lews Castle College, Stornoway. Later on it was sold to the east coast of Scotland.

The fishermen of Lewis could not overcome their dislike of ring-net fishing and only one Lewis boat ever participated in that form of fishing. The Hebridean fishermen were always very conscious of the need to conserve the herring stocks and they formed an association of fishermen and debated annually when to open the port and whether there was a need for a close-time at the beginning of the season. Their intentions were good whatever may be said by the experts about the soundness of their approach scientifically.

In 1950 the progressive Macmillan family of several brothers of 32 Lemreway, ordered a purpose built new fishing boat the 'Isabella' SY142 - 52 feet overall with an 88 HP Kelvin Diesel Engine and as they were well aware that ring-netting was extensively used in the Minches as elsewhere at that time, they got a ring-net along with the boat. Nevertheless they tried the traditional drift-nets to begin with but later they alternated between ring-nets and drift-nets.

They worked the ring-net in partnership with boats from various places, notably the 'Harmony' from Plockropool, Harris, the 'Venture' from Scalpay, the 'Constance' from Gairloch, the 'Catherine' from Kyle-of-Lochalsh, the 'St Clare' from Girvan and the 'Golden Fleece' and 'Morag Bhàn' from Campbeltown.

Ring-netting was much more successful for the crew of the 'Isabella' than drift-netting. In one haul in West Loch Tarbert, they lifted 450 crans. They also ranged far and wide in search of herring, reaching south as far as the Isle-of-Man. Their last winter fishing was with drift-nets and as some members of the crew were getting too old for that heavy work, they decided to sell the boat in 1963, having done reasonably well on the whole with it.

As might be expected in an area where everybody is familiar with the sea from an early age, fishing always played a prominent part in the economy of all the Hebridean Islands, but particularly in the economy of Scalpay Isle, Harris, where agricultural land was scarce. The original population of Scalpay, Harris which was about 28 families, was forcibly removed from Pabbay Island on the West coast of Harris where they had good productive land and planted on Scalpay about 1848 as a punishment for their alleged illicit distilling of whisky, although that was never proven because a Still was never found on Pabbay.

The canny Pabbay people were said to have an arrangement with their ferryman from the mainland of Harris whereby he arranged his sail in a certain way as a pre-arranged signal, indicating that he was carrying a customs officer on board. That enabled the Pabbay people to take the necessary evasive action presumably. Pabbay whisky was famed for its fine quality and that was their undoing.

The Estate was determined to reform the people of Pabbay by forcing them to earn their living from the sea instead of the land and on the pretence that the people needed to be taught how to fish, other families from Harris were drafted into Scalpay and in the usual fashion Crofts were split into two units in order to accommodate the new families as well as to ensure that they would not be able to grow much barley.

The enterprising Scalpay people soon adjusted to their new environment and they built-up a fleet of fishing boats and in due course there were about half-a-dozen herring curing stations on Scalpay. Eventually, decline came

and by 1956 there was only one Class I fishing boat left in Scalpay. Then the Scalpay fishermen diversified to ring-net fishing and eventually there were four or five pairs of ring-net fishing boats on the Island and they were doing very well indeed until herring became scarce and eventually the herring fishing ban was imposed in 1974.

[ends]

**AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE [www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk](http://www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk)**

Author: Angus Macleod

Date: 1998

Original document title: Ring Net Herring Fishing

Location in physical archive: Series G, File 4, Section 15

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

© Angus Macleod Archive