

FISHERIES.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

Supply of Fish in Scotland—Herring-fishery—Highlanders coming to Herring-fishing—Fishermen of East Coast—Difference of Language in Nairn—Departure of Herring-boats ; dangers to which they are exposed—Loss of Boats and Lives—Fishing in good weather—Loch fishing—Fishing Stations on West Coast—Fishing for Haddocks, etc.—State of British Sea-fisheries.

THE northern seas and bays of Scotland swarm with fish to an almost unequalled extent ; and although in many situations and districts considerable use is made of this bountiful provision of nature, it cannot be doubted that much greater benefit might be obtained from it.

As far as relates to commercial speculation the herring holds the first place, or nearly so. The fishermen on this eastern coast go out about the middle of July, previous to which they have been for some weeks employed in preparing their boats, overhauling their tackle, and engaging extra hands, generally Highlanders, who come down to the coast at this season in order to hire themselves to the

owners of the boats for the six or eight weeks during which they are out at sea. These men earn during the season from three to six pounds, a perfect godsend to the poor fellows, whose eyes are seldom gladdened by the sight of hard money during the rest of the year. Just before the time when the herring-boats go out, the roads are dotted with little groups of Highlanders, each man having a small parcel of necessaries tied up in a handkerchief and carried on a stick over his shoulder. They are sadly footsore and wayworn by the time they have traversed the island from the west coast. Being little accustomed for the most part to walking anywhere but on springy heather and turf, the hard roads try them severely. Most of them are undersized and bad specimens of the Celtic race. Very little English is spoken amongst them, as not one in ten understands a word of anything but Gaelic. When they have occasion to go into a roadside shop to purchase anything, or to ask a question, a consultation is first held amongst the party, and then the most learned in Saxon is deputed to act as spokesman, for there is scarcely any Gaelic spoken along the east coasts, the fishermen in particular being almost wholly a foreign race of people, that is, not Highlanders. Some are English settlers, and some are descendants of Danes and other races who have originally been left by chance or choice

on this coast. Their names are frequently Danish or Swedish. In fact they are altogether a different people from the Celtic inhabitants of the neighbouring mountains. There is an almost regular line drawn through the country, where the Gaelic language ends and the English commences. The town of Nairn is divided by this line, one half of the inhabitants being talkers of Gaelic and the other speaking only English. It is said that one of our prime ministers boasted to a foreigner that his master, the King of England, possessed a town so extensive that the inhabitants of one end spoke a different language from those of the other end. Nairn was the town in question; and whatever the merit of the joke may be, it corroborates what I stated.

To return, however, to our Highland fishermen. Wearily and heavily the poor fellows labour along the road, and by the time they reach Forres, Nairn, and the other towns near the shore, they are sadly knocked up, their food during the journey having been poor and scanty, consisting generally of potatoes, and perhaps oatmeal, mixed up frequently with cold water, a sorry mess for a Highlander who is taking the unaccustomed exercise of tramping along a hard road. Many of these men know pretty well where, and by whom, they shall be hired, but others have to seek employment where they can. Their faces grow visibly shorter as soon as

they are engaged ; and they set to work, though possessing little seamanship, to assist in putting into order the nets, floats, stores, etc. In a few days every boat is afloat and ready. Then comes the parting-glass with their shore-staying friends, which, by the by, is often multiplied until it amounts to a very fair allowance.

As the boats set sail from the small harbours and piers, the wives and families of the fishermen who belong to the place come down to see their relatives off ; and many groups of weather-beaten women sit and watch the boats till out of sight, discussing anxiously the chances of a good or bad season, a matter of no light import to them, as their comfort during the rest of the year almost entirely depends upon it.

I have frequently seen some stout boy, strong and fearless, but too young to be allowed to accompany his father, hide amongst the nets, sails, etc., in the boats, hoping to get taken out unobserved, till they were too far out at sea to send him back. The little fellows, however, seldom succeeded, and were generally chucked, unceremoniously enough, out of the boat, either on to the pier whilst the boat was passing alongside of it, or into some of the numerous haddock and other fishing-boats which lie at anchor in the harbour.

The herring season, although a time of hard

work to the men, is for the most part a time of rest to the women. Instead of having to tramp, as they shortly hope to do, miles into the country with a weight of fish on their back which would be almost a burthen for a donkey, they have little else to do than to gossip with each other, and set lines about the harbour and shores, excepting in those places where the herrings are cured and put into casks for foreign consumption, where they are busy enough. The boats which go out from many of our small towns seldom return home again until the season is over ; but leave the produce of their fishing at the curing stations every night if possible.

The herring-fishermen have not only much hard work, but many dangers to contend with. Whilst far out at sea tending their nets during the night-time, storms of wind suddenly come on ; and a scene of hurry and confusion ensues which can scarcely be imagined. Anxious to save their tackle and unwilling to lose any chance, the men in some boats are busily engaged hauling up their nets ; other boats are driving past them with everything in confusion and their sails flapping in the wind. Others, manned by more prudent and able hands, who have forseen the coming storm, are scudding with everything snug for the nearest port, and lucky are the boats which reach it without loss of tackle or life. Frequently, by waiting too long, whilst

endeavouring to save their nets, the poor herring-fishers are placed in the utmost danger, and are driven helplessly out to sea, where they either toss about at the mercy of the winds and waves till the storm somewhat abates, or are swamped and lost, the men probably having been wearied out by their efforts to keep the boat's head straight to avoid shipping the broken waves which surround them. The crews too, the chief part of whom are generally landsmen, or, at best, men accustomed only to the calm waters of the west coast lochs, become disheartened and useless at the hour of need, affording little assistance to the "skipper" of the boat, who is probably the principal owner also, and who, if he saves his life, has the prospect before him of heavy loss or ruin. Many and many a herring-boat flounders in this way at sea, her crew worn out by their exertions. At other times an inshore wind dashes the boats on the iron-bound coasts off which they have been fishing, and the crews perish before the eyes of their wives and families. Instances have occurred of a crew reaching some rock within a short distance of the shore, and within hearing of those assembled on the beach, who, after having vainly attempted to afford them assistance, see the poor fellows gradually washed off one by one as their strength fails them during the rise of the tide. There are but few harbours on

the east coast into which the boats can run if caught in a storm and driven away from the safer parts of the coast. If a heavily laden herring-boat is overtaken by rough weather, it is very difficult to get rid of the cargo quickly enough to escape being swamped. In fact the throwing them overboard is a long operation; and sometimes, when they have a lucky haul, they load until the gunwale of the boat is but a few inches above the water. In this case the shipping of a single wave is sufficient to swamp them. A cargo of large fish, such as cod or skate, may be thrown overboard with some degree of quickness—not so a cargo of herrings.

Although the months of July and August generally pass over without any very dangerous weather, September is frequently a season of sudden squalls and storms on our coasts.

This year, 1848, one of these sudden storms came on towards the end of the fishing season. It reached from the north coast to near Sunderland, beyond which place the wind was comparatively light. The boats had gone out with a gentle breeze, nor had there been any warning of bad weather; but before morning, on the east coast alone, more than a hundred fishermen were drowned, and the loss of boats, nets, etc., was immense. Nothing could be more melancholily significant of

the havoc which that storm had caused than the fact of *one* fisherman bringing to his house *fifteen* blue bonnets, the owners of which must have all perished near the same spot. Fishermen are generally men with large families, and the numbers of widows and orphans left dependent on the charity of the world in these cases are always very great.

This is the gloomy side of the picture of herring-fishing; but it has its bright one, for I do not know a more exhilarating sight than the fleets of herring-boats standing out from all the larger towns between Wick and the Firth of Forth on a fine day during the fishing season. All along the coast, where at other times the indolent habits of the fishermen are prominently seen, everything now evinces life, energy, and activity.

Hundreds of brown-sailed boats go out from some of the harbours at once, the place resounding with the loud but good-humoured greetings and jokes, from one boat to another, as they pass with all speed of sail and oar to the herring-grounds, each eager to be the first to reach the place so as to have choice of station. A fresh but gentle breeze takes them merrily out, and their nets are cast and fixed, buoyed up by their large round floats, or by what are much used in some places, prepared dogskins—a most unworthy fate for so noble an animal. To make these floats they cut

off the head, and take the whole body out at the aperture, leaving the skin otherwise entire. It is then dressed and tarred over. The neck is stopped up by a wooden plug made to fit it, and the skin having been thus rendered water-tight is filled with air, legs and all; so that the float consists of the entire dog minus his head. Blown up and extended as it is, and black with tar, it is about as ugly but as serviceable a float as can well be imagined.

The herring-nets being laid, the men, if the shoals do not appear to be on the move, set to work to fish for cod, halibut, etc., of which they frequently catch great numbers, earning in this way a considerable addition to their wages. Warned, however, by the cries and activity of the sea-birds, and by other well-understood signs, all at once they take up their lines, in order to attend to the main object of their fishing, and in a few minutes you see every boat hauling up the herrings which hang in the meshes of the nets, and glance like pieces of burnished silver as they break the surface of the water. Sometimes the dog-fish do great mischief, biting the herrings in two, and tearing the nets. When, however, all goes well, the nets are soon hauled in, and the fish disentangled from them as quickly as possible, and in a surprisingly short space of time all is made ready for another draught.

Sea-birds innumerable attend on the herring-boats, finding it easier to pick up the dead fish, whether whole or in pieces, which fall into the water, than to dive after the living ones. The larger gulls eat immense quantities. I was assured that a black-backed gull has been seen to swallow five goodly-sized herrings in rapid succession. He was then so utterly gorged and unable to move that he was caught. All these flocks of birds enliven the scene—some, like the gannets, dashing down from a height into the calm water, and almost invariably catching a herring; others diving and attacking the shoals far down beneath the surface; while the gulls for the most part feed on the maimed and broken fish. Every bird, too, seems to be trying to scream louder than the rest, and such a Babel-like mixture of sounds can scarcely be heard anywhere else. Altogether it is a most interesting and animated scene, and to see it in perfection it is well worth while to take the trouble of passing a night in a herring-boat instead of in one's bed. In fact I can truly assert that two nights spent many years ago in herring-fishing have kept an honoured place in my memory, and are looked back to as among the most amusing of my out-door adventures.

A different mode of pursuing this fish is resorted

to when the shoals take to the lochs or salt-water inlets on the west coast. The scene is then one of singular interest and beauty. The fishing is carried on in what looks like a calm fresh-water lake, winding far up into the mountains, which, overhanging the water, echo back with startling distinctness every sound which is uttered on its smooth surface. The picturesque rocks, dotted with noble old birch-trees, with their weeping branches hanging like ladies' tresses over the deep water of the bay, and the gray mountain slopes above these, add a beauty to the scene which is so unexpected and so unusual an accompaniment to sea-fishing, that to be understood it must be seen. Hundreds of boats are actively employed in every direction, whilst larger vessels lie waiting to get their cargo of fish complete, and then stand out from the bay, winding round its numerous headlands until they can take advantage of a steady wind blowing from some one certain point, instead of from two or three at once, as mountain winds always do. In addition to these vessels which are bound for Liverpool, Dublin, London, or elsewhere, there is the Government cruiser, distinguishable at once by its symmetry and neatness, lying near the mouth of the loch, with its tall mast and long yards, keeping order amongst the thousands of men who are all rivals in the same

pursuit and all eager for the best places, or what they consider as such. When she fires her morning and evening gun, or makes any other signal, the echo is repeated again and again loud and distinct, and then dies away with a rumbling noise like far off thunder, as the sound penetrates up some distant glen. The deer feeding on the grassy burns of the corrie hear it, and lifting their heads, listen intently for some minutes to the strange sound, until having made up their mind that it is not a matter that concerns them they resume their grazing, only listening with increased watchfulness to every noise.

As the risks and expenses of carrying on the herring-fishings are large, so are the gains considerable, if the season is favourable and the fishing lucky.

It would be a very great assistance and cause of safety to the seamen on our northern and most frequented fishing stations had they the advantage of a few small steamboats, or tugs, such as we see in such numbers issuing out of the Tyne and other rivers of England, grappling with great black colliers and traders several times as big as themselves, and carrying them off (as a black emmet does a blue-bottle fly) in spite of wind and tide.

One small steam-tug could tow a line, a perfect Alexandrian line, of herring-boats to and from their

fishing-stations; and in the event of an approaching storm, a change of wind, or other dangers, they would be of the greatest use in bringing home the boats, nets, etc., under circumstances in which, at present, much danger and much loss of life and property are sustained.

There is a general emigration from many of the western stations as soon as the herring season is over. Men, birds, beasts, and rats among the rest, all desert them. Of birds the number is very great: having assembled to feed on the refuse of the herrings, particularly at the curing stations, they now depart in all directions; whilst the rats have occasionally been seen migrating in large numbers from Wick and other places, and distributing themselves through the country, in order to change the fish diet, which they have for so many weeks luxuriated on, for a vegetable one. On the east coast, where the agricultural population is numerous, the refuse of the herrings is used in great quantities as manure, and being laid out in large heaps on the fields preparatory to being mixed with other substances, poison the air and attract great numbers of sea-gulls, who appear very willing to exchange fresh fish for that which is half rotten; but a sea-gull has a most convenient and unfastidious appetite, thriving on anything that comes in his way.

The Highlanders who have assisted at the fishing on the east coast now return home with heavier bundles and purses, but lighter hearts ; however, I fear that many of the inhabitants of the fishing villages spend a great part of their hard-earned wages in whisky instead of applying it to the comforts of their families. Some are more prudent, and lay the money by, in order that in due time they may become owners of a herring-boat themselves.

The inhabitants, at least the males, of fishing villages are an indolent-looking race, going about all their land occupations in a slow and lazy manner, and being for the most part remarkably ignorant. But we should bear in mind that they spend their nights at sea, in laborious and fatiguing occupation, exposed to cold and wet, and that it is only during their intervals of rest that we see them, when they are lounging about half asleep, and leaving to their wives the business of preparing their lines and selling the fish.

The coiling of a long line, with about three hundred hooks on it, is a mystery to the unpractised and uninitiated. Each haddock-boat takes out coiled lines with from two to three thousand baited hooks upon them ; and yet so perfectly and skilfully are they arranged that they never catch or

entangle, but run out with as great certainty and ease as a ship's cable.

The haddock-fishing on the coast is carried on in smaller boats than the herring-fishing; each boat has, however, more hands on board, partly for the sake of rowing, and partly of working these long lines, or "*shooting*" them, as it is called.

The boats frequently run forty or fifty miles to set their haddock and cod lines; going from Nairn and the adjacent fishing villages over to Wick, where they are almost always sure of a plentiful supply of fish.

Trawling for flat fish has not yet been tried to any extent, but I have no doubt that it would be a most profitable and useful speculation. At present we get no soles, but occasionally some turbot are caught: for these, however, the demand is confined to a few of the neighbouring gentry; and, consequently, this kind of fishing is not much practised. A boat's crew does occasionally go out to fish for turbot, using a very simple and small kind of hang-net, and generally brings home a good supply.

Looking at the state of British sea-fisheries in general, it appears to me undeniable that the advantage derived from this great and inexhaustible source of wealth is as nothing compared to what it might and ought to be. It is true that of late

years some enterprising individuals have done, and are doing, a great deal towards improving this branch of commerce; and the speculations recently entered into for the more regular and more abundant supply of the southern markets will doubtless lead to more extensive competition and to improved methods of fishing; but Government might, I conceive, greatly promote this important branch of national industry by regulating the size and construction of the boats, which are often most miserably inefficient, encouraging the fishermen in every possible manner, affording them the protection and assistance of large vessels and steamers at different points, during the busiest times of the fishing season, expending sums of money in tackle, boats, etc., to be repaid or partly repaid by the fishermen, and also by having surveys made and soundings taken off many parts of the coast, in order to find out the banks and feeding places of the cod and other large fish. The Dogger Bank, and all the principal fishing-grounds have been discovered by chance; and it cannot be doubted that were a careful survey made, many other equally prolific localities would be found.

The fishermen would at once know, were they provided with plans of the different depths, etc., of the sea, where the best spots would be for fishing,

according to the nature of the bottom, the currents, tides, etc. But they are quite unable to make these observations themselves from want of proper boats, etc.; nor can a simple fisherman afford to spend weeks or days of fine weather in taking soundings and making systematic series of experiments; and hence it is, as I said before, our best fishing banks have been found out by chance.

In short, our fisheries, by careful attention on the part of Government and by a very moderate outlay of public money, might be made the source of food and employment for thousands and tens of thousands more of our suffering population than are at present supported by them. The seas which surround our coasts contain an inexhaustible supply of wholesome and nutritious food, and nothing is required to render it largely available to all but a more efficient, systematic, and well-regulated mode of procuring it.

