

## CHAPTER VII

### *Drift-net Fishing*

**H**ISTORICAL NOTES. We do not know when the drift-net was first invented or when it was first used for catching herring, mackerel, or pilchard. It has certainly been in existence for hundreds of



HERRING-DRIFTERS AT LERWICK

years, although it is probably not so old as the seine- or casting-net. Neither can we give the date of the earliest herring fishery, but this probably goes back to between three to five thousand years before Christ. Great Yarmouth seems to have been resorted to by fishermen during the herring season as early as the sixth century. There was herring-fishing off the coast of Flanders in the time of Charlemagne.

There is no reason to suppose that the fishermen of this remote period used any other method than that of

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drift-nets. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that drift-nets have been employed ever since that far-off age when herrings were first captured in the open sea. For they are the only sort of nets by which herring, pilchard, and mackerel (*i.e.*, 'pelagic' fish, swimming on the surface of the water at a certain distance from the land) can be caught in any great numbers. I have no space in which to relate in detail the story of the drift-net fisheries in Northern Europe; it would require a volume in itself. In this chapter I can do no more than give a brief description of the British drift-net



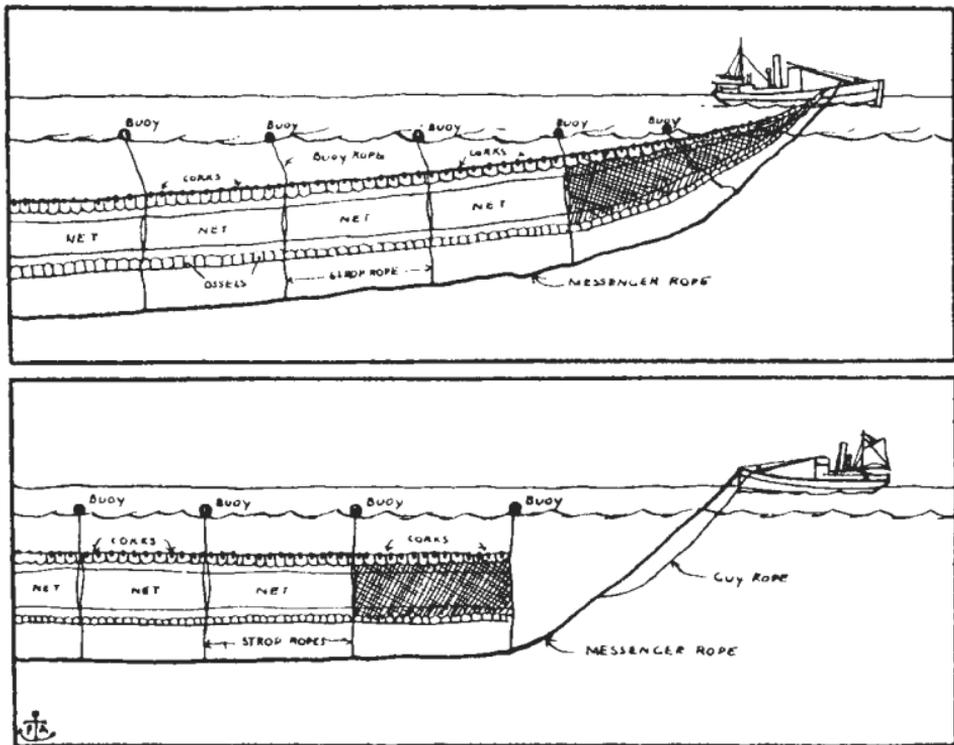
SHAKING DRIFT-NETS AT SCARBOROUGH

fishery as it is carried on to-day, and some account of the lives of the drifter fishermen themselves.

**DESCRIPTION OF DRIFT-NETS.** Drift-nets are so called from the manner in which they are worked. They are neither fixed, towed, nor hauled within any definite limits of water, but cast or 'shot' at any distance from the land wherever there may be signs of fish and wherever the tide may happen to take them. They are allowed to drift until it is thought desirable to haul them in again. When at work they extend in a long single line. Their upper edge is supported at or near the surface by means of floats. The nets themselves hang perpendicularly in the water. They form, as it

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were, a perforated wall or barrier between two or three miles long, hanging two fathoms below the surface. To the corner of each net are attached round, balloon-shaped canvas buoys, not unlike large footballs. These serve to mark the position of the nets, and to relieve



NET BEING SHOT AND IN FINAL POSITION

excess of weight if there is much herring or mackerel in the nets. The shoals of fish try to pass through this barrier. They force their heads into the meshes, the size of which depends on whether herring, pilchards, or mackerel are expected to be caught.<sup>1</sup> The mesh must be large enough to permit the head and gills to enter, but too small to allow the thicker part of the fish to go through.

**METHOD OF FISHING.** As a general rule drift-net

<sup>1</sup> Herring mesh averages 30-36 per yard, pilchard mesh 36 per yard, mackerel mesh 25-29 per yard.

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fishing is carried on only at night, the best time being just after sunset or just before dawn. It seems that the fish are somehow influenced by the change of light, and more inclined to move then than in broad daylight or absolute darkness. Although details vary according to locality, the following description of the method of 'shooting' drift-nets will apply almost equally well to any part of the British Isles.

There is not much difference in the method employed, whether the vessel be steam, motor, or sailing lugger. The ordinary time for beginning work is just about sunset. When the fishermen think they have arrived where herring or mackerel are to be found, or if there is any appearance of fish on the surface of the water, immediate preparations are made.

The nets have been stowed in regular order in the hold or net-room. To prevent any danger of hitching while they are passing over the deck a 'bank board' is placed between the hatchway and the top of the bulwark, over which they are hauled, a roller at the edge of the hatchway taking off the strain upon them as they are being drawn up from below. The warp, or 'messenger-rope,' to which the nets are attached, is run out over a roller, called a 'molgogger,' or 'jinny.' Two hands shoot the nets, one taking charge of the corks, buoy-ropes ('buff strops'), and buoys, the other looking after the netting itself. Another man attends to the 'seizings' (strop-ropes) of the nets as they come up on deck and passes them forward to the mate, who makes them fast to the warp as it runs out over the molgogger. When all the fleet of nets has been paid out fifteen or twenty fathoms more warp is let go as a 'swing-rope.' The vessel is then brought round head to wind. A mizzen is set to keep the drifter in this

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position, and the foremast is lowered. Two white lights are placed to show that the vessel is fishing, the lower of the two indicating the actual direction of the nets. The watch is set, and the vessel drifts with the tide. In bad weather more swing-rope is required so that the boat may not have too great a drag on the nets.



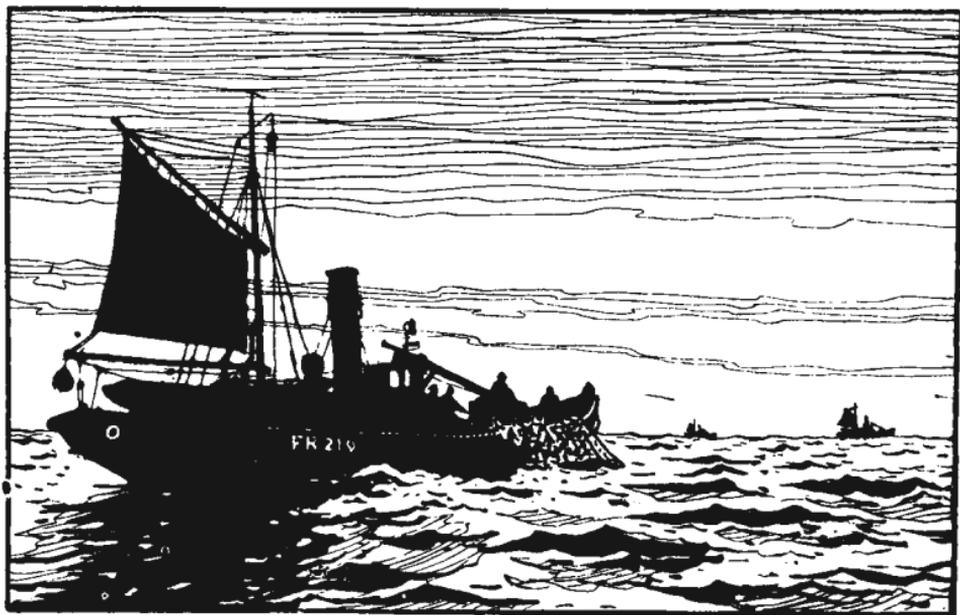
SHOOTING DRIFT-NETS

While the nets are in the water the warp is occasionally hauled in as far as the first net to see if fish are about. Sometimes great damage is done to the nets and to the herring by dogfish.

After three or four hours the process of hauling begins. The warp, or 'bush-rope,' is led through a block fixed on the bulwarks, near the capstan, and down into the rope-room, where a boy coils it down so as to be ready for running out when it is again wanted. One man, the 'cast off,' disconnects the nets from the warp, two others take charge of the buoys and seizings, and four more stand in the hold and shake out the fish from

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the nets. The buoys are stowed away in the wings of the hold. Should there be a good catch the process of hauling may take several hours. As soon as the last of the nets has been brought on board the vessel proceeds back to port at full speed so as to reach the market as early as possible. The men draw all the nets from the



HAULING NETS AT DAWN

hold, shake out any fish that may still be entangled in them, and pile the nets on either side of the deck. On the Cornish drifters, which are much smaller and narrower than the Scottish, the nets are piled up on the forward part of the deck.

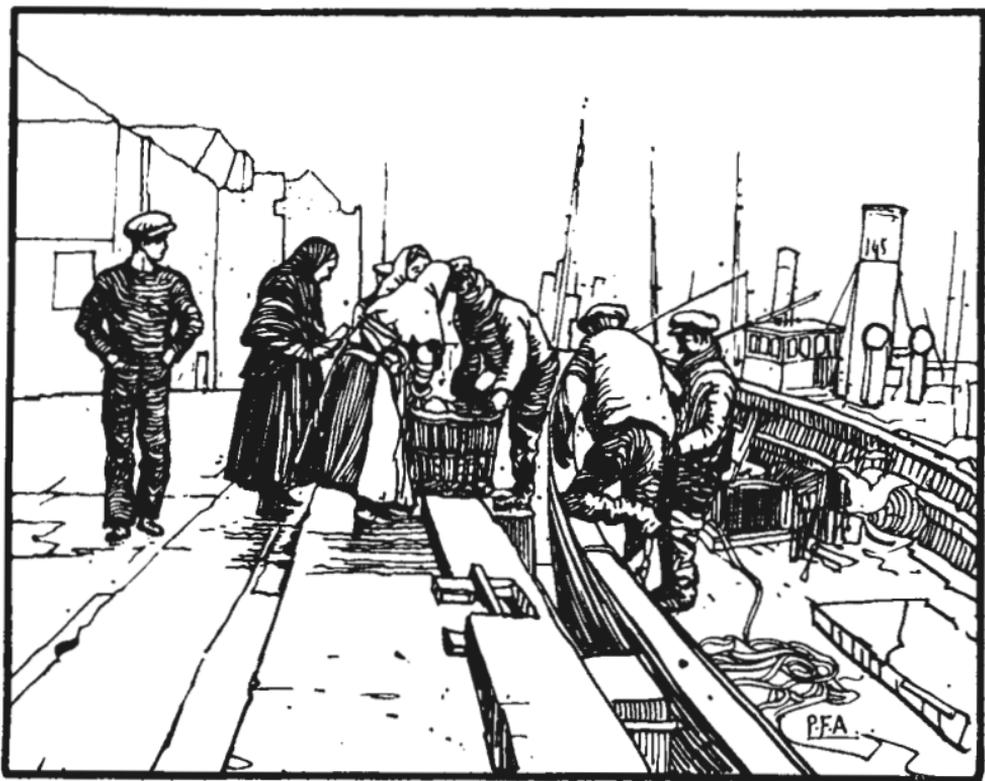
On arriving in port a sample of herring or mackerel is taken up at once to the fish-market by two of the crew, unless the drifter should be working for some particular curing-firm, in which case the fish is landed at once close to the gutting-sheds.

Drift-nets need constant attention and frequent mending. Every Saturday the Scottish fishermen 'bark'

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their nets by immersing them for two or three minutes in a strong solution of tannin and boiling water. They are afterward taken ashore and laid out to dry until Monday morning.

Drift-net fishing is also carried on in much smaller



LANDING A SAMPLE OF HERRING

vessels off the south coast of England, especially in Devon and Cornwall, chiefly during the winter months, when shoals of herring and mackerel make their appearance in the Channel. The vessels employed by the inshore fishermen are very small when compared with those on the east coast—in fact, many of them carry no more than two hands. They put to sea an hour or so before sunset and return toward dawn. Eight to fourteen nets are carried for mackerel, six to ten for herring. They are usually forty fathoms in length along

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the head-rope and five fathoms deep. In Devonshire the ropes that connect the buoys, here made of cork, not leather, as in the North Sea steam- and motor-drifters, are called 'lanyards.' The nets are shot in much the same way, allowance being made for the small size of the boats as compared with those already described.

Here are a few personal impressions by Stephen Reynolds<sup>1</sup> of a night's drift-net fishing for herring off Sidmouth :

We were to sea. The water, which barely gurgled beneath the drifter, was rushing up on the beaches under the cliffs with a myriad-sounding rattle. . . . The little craft our kingdom was—twenty-eight feet long by eight in the beam—and a pretty pickle of a kingdom !

Mixed up together in the stern were a couple of spare cork buoys, rope, sacks of ballast and Tony. Midships were the piled-up nets and buoys. For'ard were more ballast bags and rope ends, some cordage, old clothes, sacks, paper bags of supper, four bottles of cold tea, two of paraffin oil, and one of water, the riding lamp and a very old fish box, half full of pebbles for cooking on. All over the boat were herring scales and smelly blobs of roe. It's some time now since the old craft was scraped and painted.

But the golden light of the sunset gilded everything, and the probable catch was what concerned us.

We chose our berth among the other drifters that were on the ground. We shot two hundred and forty fathoms of net with a swishing splash of the yarn and a smack-smack-splutter of the buoys. We had our supper of sandwiches and tattie-cake and hotted-up tea.

"Can 'ee smell ort?" asked John, sniffing out over the bows.

"Herring!" said I. "I can smell 'em plainly."

"Then ther's fish about."

<sup>1</sup> *A Poor Man's House.*

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

Tony, however, remarked the absence of birds, and declared that the water didn't look so fishy as when they had had their last big haul. "They herrings be gone east," he repeated.

"G'out! What did 'ee come west for then? I told yu to du as yu was minded, an' yu did, didn't 'ee? Us'll haul up in a couple o' hours an' see w'er us got any."

We didn't turn in. We piled on clothes and stayed drinking, smoking, chatting, singing—a boat full of life swinging gently to the nets in an immense dark silence, an immense sea whisper.

About nine o'clock we hauled in for not more than nine dozen of fish.

The trip was an unsuccessful one, and, after shooting their nets three times and having been at sea for sixteen hours in an open boat on a winter's night, Reynolds admits that they had to return home with only three hundred herrings, "and the price three shillings a hundred! It is nothing to fishermen, that; but we were all glad of our breakfast, a smoke, and our beds."

But he tells us of another winter afternoon soon afterward when he again shoved off the beach to the fishing-grounds six or so miles away:

Uncle Sam's drifter is only a twenty-two-foot boat. We started about three in the afternoon, the sea calm and wind slight nor'-west. In fact, we had to use the sweeps to get down west of Straight Point. [*Sweeps* are eighteen-foot oars.] It was deadly cold going down, though I had every article of underclothing in duplicate, and took a turn at the after sweep to get warm. About five we shot seven nets—two hundred and forty fathoms altogether, six fathoms deep, and sunk below the buoys about a fathom. It was a pretty sight by sunset and rising moon. You'd have thought not a herring in that bit of sea could have escaped. I counted twenty-seven drifters out there. We boiled cocoa on tow saturated with paraffin in a saucepan, had supper, and gossiped with a man from another drifter who came up to

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us in a punt. Then we tramped about the boat to keep ourselves warm, and yelled conversation with the next drifter. About seven we failed to see the fourth buoy from the boat ; buoyed the end of the net, cast it adrift, and took a trip down the buoys. The fourth was sagging in the water—the rest we couldn't see. " We'm going to see sport ! " we shouted as we went back to the end of the nets. After waiting a bit for the net next to us to fill we began to haul. I took the head-rope—the rope along the top of the nets—while Bob and Tom took the yarn. Lord, how we hauled !—cursing, puffing, and straining. The fish shone white in the water below the head-rope ; came up shining and large in the net—like grains of corn on an interminable ear. Now a tangle, then all the net and fish wound round my head-rope, which I could hardly budge for minutes at a time. Yard after yard came up, solid with fish. We got wet through, and we didn't care. They shouted for help, and I cursed 'em for damn' fools for calling help, they'd have to pay, before I was done up. And I did last out—aching madly. We all cursed each other, and the trim of the boat, and our own backs. At last, when we had the fifth net in, the boat was a foot from the water's edge, and down by the bows, and we had to call another boat. They took the sixth net, and then gave up, as their smaller boat was down to leaking-point. We tried to take in the seventh ourselves, but by the time it was half in we had to cut off the net and give it to the second boat near.

The moon had clouded, with a great big halo, and the wind was rising N.E.—dead against us. The main thing was to get our boat home before the sea made and came in over. We had to tack, and kept two sweeps out to wind'ard, in order to keep the boat close up to the wind. It was a weird coming home, full of work and anxiety to land the fish now we had got 'em. We had to tack far out, where the waves were larger and skatted over the bows. . . . We got into Sidmouth, found there was a lop in shore, and had to have two boats out to take some of the nets off before we could land.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. Wright, *Letters of Stephen Reynolds*, p. 61.

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

This is a vivid picture of drift-net fishing in its most primitive conditions, now almost a thing of the past, but which at one time could be witnessed all round the coasts of Great Britain.

**SAILING-LUGGERS.** The old sailing-luggers found everywhere round the coast of Britain until forty years ago have now almost disappeared. The Yarmouth luggers were vessels of about thirty-six tons, fifty feet long with seventeen feet beam and seven feet deep. They had two masts with dipping lug-sails, carrying a jib when necessary. All the larger boats were built with counter and square sterns, but some of the smaller luggers had an upright round stern. In the centre of the vessel was fixed a broad upright piece of timber, about twelve feet high, fitting in the deck. It was called a 'mitch-board' (probably corruption of 'midship board'), and upon this rested the foremast when lowered during the hauling of the nets.

The Cornish drifters, with their clean, easy lines, sharp stem and stern, dipping lug-sails, and long outriggers, are familiar to every one who has been to Newlyn, Portleven, or St Ives. Although most of them are now fitted with motors, the type of vessel has not changed so much as on the east coast, steam-drifters having entirely replaced the sailing craft once found at Yarmouth or Lowestoft. The rig of the latter was almost similar to that of the still-remaining Hastings and Brighton luggers, although they were much larger vessels.

The modern Lowestoft sailing-drifter retains the lines and position of masts of the old lugger, but a fore-and-aft rig has now been adopted.

In Scotland the wonderful old sailing-luggers, 'Fifies,' 'Zulus,' and 'Skaffies,' still quite common twenty

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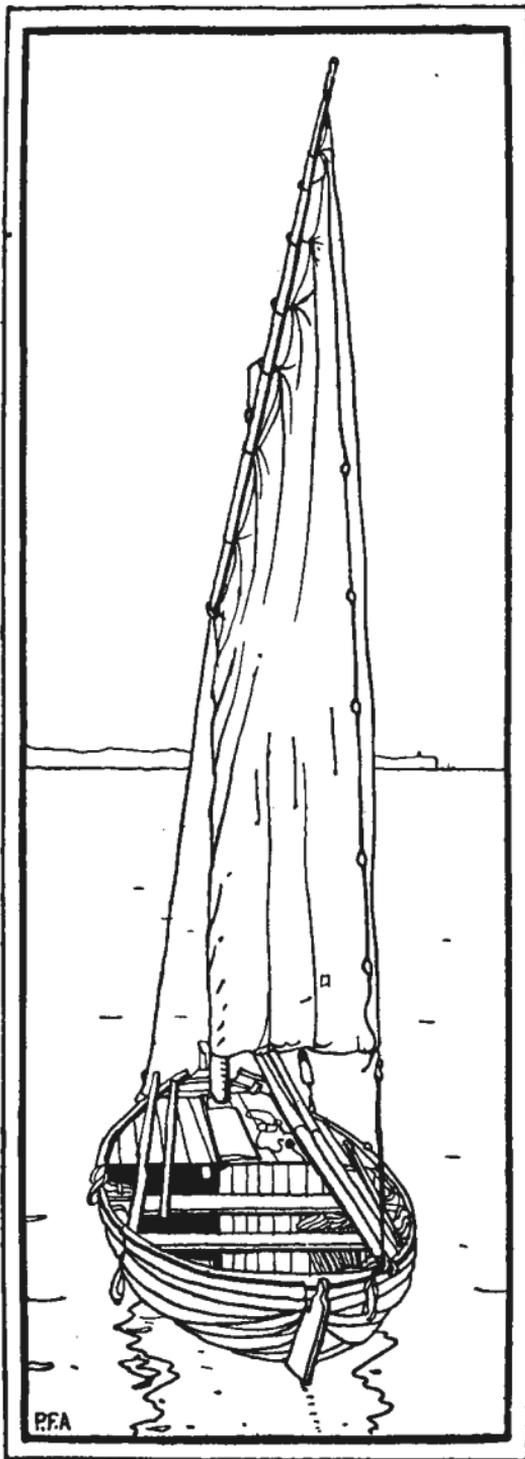
years ago, have now gone for ever, those few which remain having been fitted with motors and their masts cut down so that they are almost unrecognizable.

The skaffie boats, many of which were small un-decked or half-decked craft such as I have shown in



CORNISH DRIFTERS

the accompanying drawing, were characterized by their raking sterns and stems. They were the favourite type of boat in use for all kinds of fishing on the greater part of the Moray Firth until about the year 1880. An old resident on that coast has told me that it was a thrilling sight to watch the fishing-boats coming up the Firth to Inverness with their catches. Most of the boats were quite small and carried what seemed a



A HALF-DECKED 'SKAFFIE' BOAT

portentous spread of canvas. The daring of these fishermen was a matter of admiration. "More than once I have seen them coming through what the pilots used to call 'clean smoke' when no other craft would venture out," he said, "yet serious accidents seemed to be very rare, though I have several times seen the mast blown out of a fishing-boat."

The Fife boat, with very little rake on either stem or stern, was the almost universal type found on all other parts of the east coast of Scotland, and it maintained its position even after the introduction of the so-called 'Zulu' on the Moray Firth. There has always been some doubt as to the real origin of the name 'Zulu,' but the common explanation is that the first boat of this type was designed at Lossie-

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mouth in 1879 by William Campbell as an attempt to combine the good points of both Fifies and Skaffies —i.e., the straight stem of the former and the raking stern of the latter.

At that time the Zulu War was going on in South Africa, and this new type of boat was nicknamed after the natives whom we were fighting! Anyhow, the first Zulu, *Nonesuch*, proved such a success that within a few years the old Skaffie had quite gone out of favour, except in a few remote fishing villages, and, until the advent of the steam-drifter, was the only type of vessel employed in the herring fisheries between Banff and Avoch.



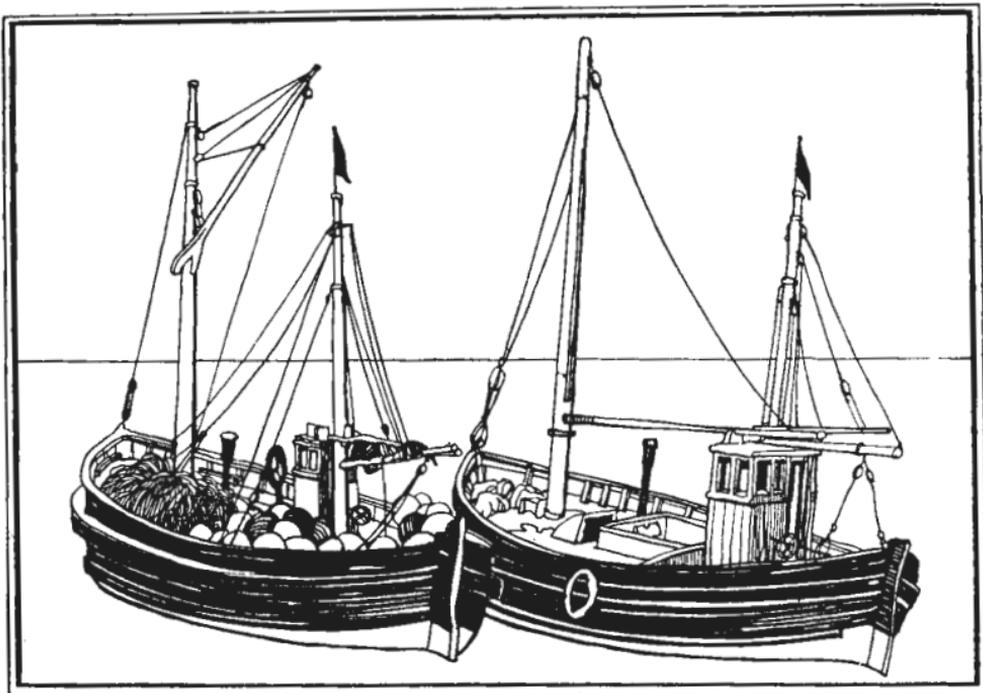
A 'ZULU' BOAT

Another story relating to the origin of the Zulu boat is that a young Lossiemouth fisherman had married a Buckie girl, and they wanted to build a new boat. The husband, who had always sailed in a boat of the Fife class, naturally wanted to build one after this model, but the wife's father owned a Skaffie, and she obstinately stuck out for the latter type, especially as she was defraying half

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the cost. After much discussion and argument a compromise was finally arrived at: the husband got his way as regards the bow, while the wife won as to the lines of the stern, and that, so they say, is the origin of the first Zulu!

Those of my younger readers who never had the



EYEMOUTH MOTOR-DRIFTERS

privilege of seeing a fleet of brown-sailed Zulus and Fifies under canvas reaching in a hard breeze can have no idea of the sense of power and grandeur that they conveyed. More than one writer has described the Zulu fishing-boat as the most noble sailing-craft ever designed in the British Isles.

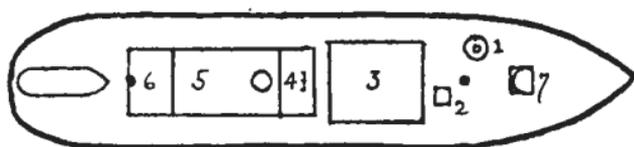
In the limited space at my disposal I regret that I cannot deal more satisfactorily with the various types of motor-drifters now to be found in all the Northern European countries where herring-fishing has been carried on for many centuries. The accompanying

## *Drift-net Fishing*

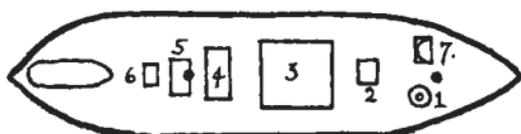
drawing shows two typical modern motor-vessels from Berwickshire.

**STEAM-DRIFTERS.** I will now give a few more details about the life on the steam-drifters that are engaged in fishing on the North Sea during the greater part of the year, but which move to the English Channel during the winter months for herring and mackerel.

The first steam-drifter was built at Leith about 1880.



STEAM DRIFTER



MOTOR DRIFTER

1. Steam Capstan. 2. Hatch for Ropes. 3. Hold. 4. Wheel House  
5. Engine Room. 6. Galley. cabin below 7. Foc'stle.

DECK-PLANS OF STEAM- AND MOTOR-DRIFTERS

In 1882 there were seven Scottish steam-drifters employed in the herring fisheries, but it was not until after 1890 that the steam-drifter began to supersede the sailing-drifter in England.

In the ten years between 1898 and 1908 the number of sailing-drifters decreased by more than 2500, while the number of steam-drifters increased from 41 to 943. A steam-drifter is a smaller vessel than a modern trawler, and can easily be distinguished from one of the latter type of vessel owing to the absence of a 'whaleback' bow, 'gallowses,' and trawl-winch. An average-sized steam-drifter is usually a vessel of 80-90 feet, seldom over 90 feet, with a beam of 18½-20½ feet,

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a draught of about  $9\frac{1}{2}$  feet, and tonnage of 40 to 48. Like the steam-trawler, it is fitted with triple-expansion engines, with a speed of 9-11 knots. The foremast can be lowered when the vessel is steaming against a head-wind or is engaged in fishing. The steam-capstan for hauling the nets is placed on the foredeck near the mast, either on the starboard or port side, being similar to the steam-capstan of an old sailing-trawler, but raised up higher and not so powerful.



A LOWESTOFT  
FISHERMAN

On the starboard side of the vessel, just forward of the hold, is the place where the messenger-rope is stowed away. The nets and buoys are stored in the hold.

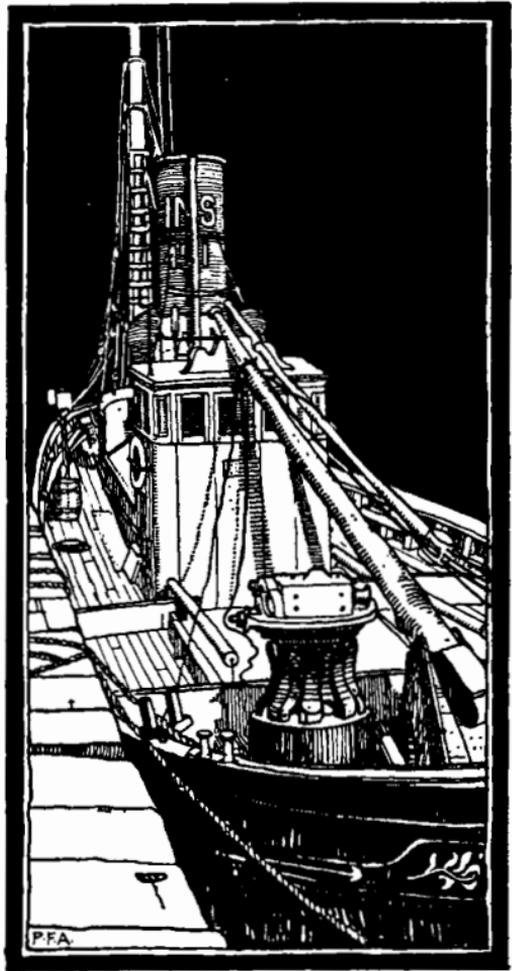
LIFE ON A DRIFTER. I will now try to give some idea of the life of a drifter fisherman. It is no joke for a boy who goes to sea for the first time in a steam-drifter. He will have to get his first experience on board one of these little vessels, however

hardened he may become to the life later on.

He will probably know little or nothing about either cooking or fishing. Contrary to his expectations, he will almost certainly be violently sick within an hour or so after leaving the harbour, unless he happens to be one of those lucky beings who are immune from sea-sickness. Having got over his first bout of this disagreeable experience he may think it is the last, but most likely when he starts on the job to cook in the galley he will be sick again. Then when the nets have to be hauled in and he is told to coil the ropes he wonders why he was such a fool as ever to have wanted to go to sea. He has to go forward and crouch in a small dark sort of cupboard about seven or eight feet square, coiling

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the warp all the time it is being hauled in at varying speeds by the steam-capstan. His arms ache with the unaccustomed work. His brain feels dizzy with the stuffiness of the place and the constant need of moving round to coil the warp. Water drips on him; his clothes are soon black and greasy. If there is a big catch of herring the hauling may take as much as five hours. (One Lowestoft fisherman I know told me that on his first trip to sea he was kept at this job for seventeen hours on end.) He thinks he is going to die, and wishes he could. However, the job is over at last, and the neophyte can now turn in to his bunk for a few hours' rest. Having got over his seasickness, a new trouble will face him—namely, salt-water boils, caused by the continual rubbing of his oilskins on the wrists with salt water and scum from the herring. They are painful in the extreme. And if they become bad he may have to stop ashore for a week. But probably he will not give in, for the east coast lad, whether Scots or English, comes from a sturdy, tough stock. Many a night he will be on deck in the biting cold—the North Sea *can* be cold in a N.E. wind!—hauling and shooting



A LOSSIEMOUTH DRIFTER

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nets. There is no protection from either cold or wet on the deck of a drifter. He wishes he were back on shore and could 'go to the pictures' and sit in the warm. On the contrary, he has to work hard day and night, getting precious little thanks for it, and not much pay.

The conditions of life on a typical Scottish drifter are perhaps more comfortable than those of any British fishing-vessel, owing to the fact that the vessels are owned by the skipper and crew themselves, who take a great pride in the appearance of their particular ships. Indeed, so spick-and-span are some of the Moray Firth drifters from Nairn, Lossiemouth, Buckie, or Macduff, to mention but a few places at random, that they would stand comparison with many a private yacht. During the past ten years I have been privileged to make not a few trips on these wonderful little vessels, and would here like to express my gratitude for the hospitality shown me by the crews in accepting me as one of their 'shipmates.' If space allowed I could tell of many happy days fishing in the Moray Firth, off the Shetlands, and off the Hebrides, but I must content myself with relating the story of a never-to-be-forgotten trip in a certain Moray Firth steam-drifter.

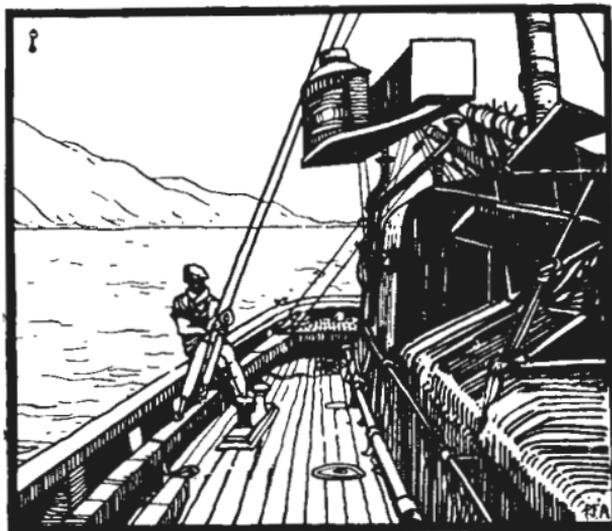
DAILY LIFE ON A SCOTTISH STEAM-DRIFTER. The invitation came about in this way. I was sitting down by the harbour at Buckie making a sketch of the drifter *Monarch*. It was a bright, sunny morning in June. The pattern of the lines of the black hull against the vivid blue of the sky contrasted with the brown jumpers of the crew, who were hard at work painting the bows of their ship. "Aye, she looks right bonny like that, painted up bright and clean," they remarked approvingly of my sketch.

And as I went on drawing the men stopped to watch

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me. I learned that in a few days they would be leaving Buckie for the west coast. The skipper remarked that perhaps I would care to come along with them. "You'd get some fine drawings of the Coolins in Skye and all those islands," he explained. "And there's Barra too, with Maclean's Castle." Could anyone resist such an invitation? The "road to the isles" in a herring-drifter? Such invitations do not present themselves every day.

The vessel which was to be my home for the next three weeks was just a typical pre-War Scottish herring-drifter, built of wood at Buckie in 1907. She was 85 feet in length, with 19 feet breadth, 8 feet depth, and 82 gross tonnage. She carried a crew of six men, most of them members of the same family—brothers, first cousins, uncles, and nephews. I felt as if I was the honoured guest in a yacht. We left Buckie Harbour at midnight, "after Sunday was past," and about dawn arrived at Inverness, where we had to wait an hour or two before we could get through Clachnaharry locks. For some reason or other we did not leave again until after midday, and all the afternoon we were steaming down Loch Ness, until, about four o'clock, we arrived at Fort Augustus.

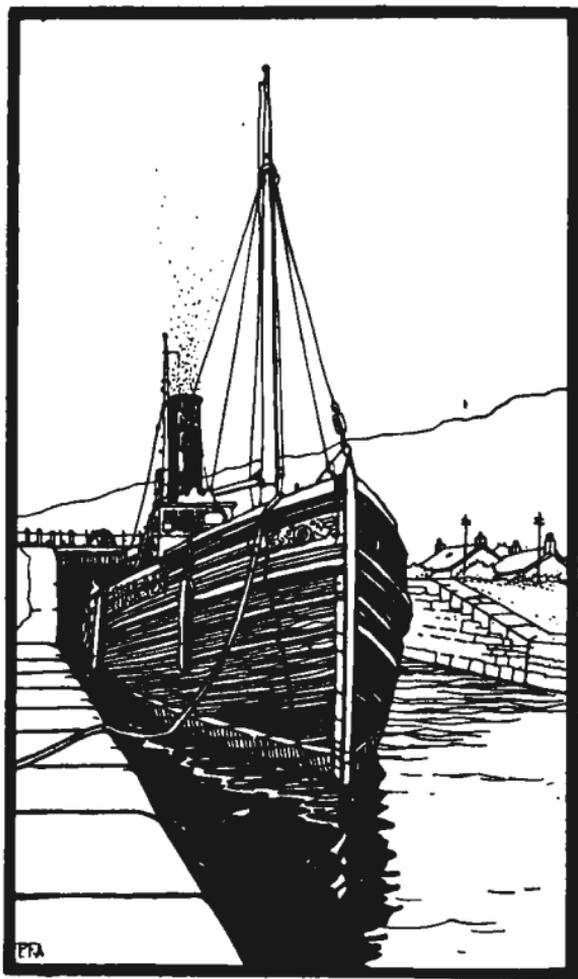


AFTER DINNER ON LOCH NESS

MEALS ON A SCOTTISH DRIFTER. We were specially

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lucky to have a really excellent cook on board. Alas! I know by bitter experience on other fishing-vessels, both trawlers and drifters, that all their cooks are not



IN THE LOCKS, FORT AUGUSTUS

up to his standard. What wonderful plum-duff he could turn out! How light and tasty! His soups (especially his Scotch broth) were better than any other soups I have ever tasted on Scottish fishing-craft. I also recall his fried herring. I regret that I never learned the secret of how it was done. It was a superlatively good herring that any first-class *chef* would have been proud of. One lives well and plentifully on every Scottish drifter; at least, one did in those days. The crew are accustomed to good food in their homes, and, as far as possible, they make sure that they get it when they are at sea. Perhaps in the present hard times, when almost every Scottish fisherman is heavily in debt, conditions are not so good. Two or three bad seasons will mean that a drifter gets hopelessly into debt. Fishermen are obliged to raise money somehow to pay interest, the drifter itself goes for the coal-bill,

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his house is mortgaged, he may have nothing left but a few nets, and they may have to go also.

There was not much spare accommodation on board. I was lucky in getting a bunk to myself, as one of the deck-hands moved his gear into the fo'c'sle and left his berth vacant for me. Otherwise I should have been obliged to 'turn in' to the bunk of whoever happened to be on watch at night, an experience which has been my luck in other fishing-craft, and which becomes rather annoying after a few days. Having got through the locks at Fort Augustus—always a slow process, especially when one has to wait for several other drifters ahead of one—we steamed on through Loch Oich and Loch Lochy, reaching Banavie about eight o'clock. Here we tied up for the night, as it was too late to get through "Neptune's Staircase," as the locks of the western end of the Caledonian Canal are called. The day had been fine and cloudless. Now it began to drizzle. We were in the West Highlands. Ben Nevis was shrouded in mist. There was nothing to tempt us on shore, so after supper we turned in early and had a long sleep.

FISHING OFF THE HEBRIDES. The following morning the mist cleared off after the sun rose. Onward we steamed, through Loch Linnhe, past Fort William, through the Sound of Mull, and so on again into the open waters of the Minch. Here in the long-drawn-out twilight of a July evening in northern latitudes we shot our nets for the first time. Far away to the west lay the Hebrides. The rays of the setting sun lit up the strange, jagged peaks of the Coolins, changing them in rapid succession from the glowing orange to rose-pink, then violet. After the nets had been paid out (in the manner already described in this chapter), following the

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example of the crew, I went below and turned in for a few hours' sleep before we had to start hauling, soon after midnight.

During those weeks I was a 'spare hand' on board this drifter, my special job being to make tea for the crew while they were hauling the nets between midnight and dawn. This left the cook free to help with the work for'ard. Unless one has been accustomed to the work of shooting and hauling drift-nets from boy-hood one is not much use in 'lending a hand.' The work is highly specialized and technical, and requires experience and practice, as I have already explained. Realizing that I was more use in the galley than among the nets, I confined myself to seeing that the kettle was kept boiling!

The following morning was wet and squally, with a strong wind from the westward. We steamed into Mallaig, where, with the rain driving down in torrents, we landed our night's catch of herring.

Day after day we repeated the same programme, but never shooting our nets in quite the same spot, and hardly ever returning to the same port the following morning.

It was this delightful uncertainty that added to the excitement and interest of the trip. The skipper would suddenly make up his mind as to our course without any apparent or obvious reason so far as I could discover.

One morning when I woke up and went on deck from the stuffy little cabin I found we were steaming into Loch Boisdale, on South Uist. Here again, as at Mallaig and in so many other places in those damp, moisture-laden West Highlands, it also rained hard. Anything more desolate than South Uist on a wet morning about

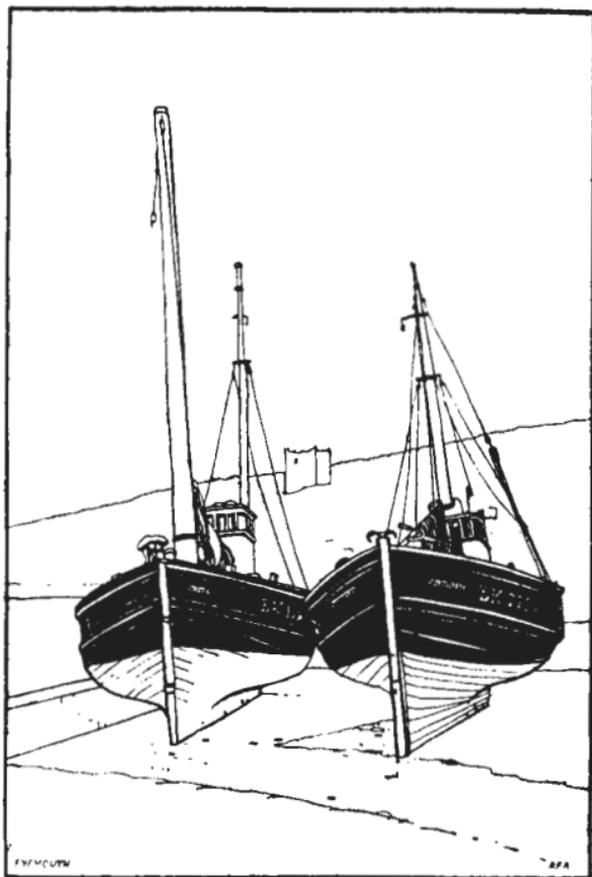
## *Drift-net Fishing*

6 A.M. can hardly be imagined. That same night we shot our nets off Benbecula, and the following morning landed our fish at Castlebay, on the isle of Barra.

Around us were fifty or sixty other drifters, so many and so crowded that it was impossible to count them. They came from every fishing-port in Scotland, also from Yarmouth and Lowestoft.

Behind them rose the bare rock and vivid green grass, broken here and there by patches of black peat and little grey stone crofts roofed with turf. The west wind blew off the land, bringing with it the scent of peat reek mingled with the smell of herring from the many curing-stations. And the air resounded with the harsh cries of thousands of seagulls.

I went ashore to explore the island. But, as is often the case in the Hebrides, the brilliant morning changed suddenly to a grey and overcast afternoon. The wind got up, and in an hour or two it was blowing so hard that all the drifters put out to sea earlier than I had anticipated, and I saw my own ship going off without me.



TYPICAL SCOTTISH MOTOR-DRIFTERS

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

And so I was stranded on Barra. For several days I remained on the island expecting to see my drifter return, and Hebridean hospitality lived up to its reputation. Day after day I waited, and there was no sign of my ship. One day a skipper to whom I was talking told me that I should probably find her in Oban, so I decided to risk leaving Barra.

That night I went on board a certain Nairn drifter at the invitation of the skipper. We shot our nets off the isle of Tiree, and the following morning set our course for the Sound of Mull. As we steamed into the crowded harbour of Oban there was my Buckie drifter alongside us. The crew were much amused at my having been 'marooned' on Barra. Thanking the Nairn skipper for his kindness to me, and having said good-bye to his friendly crew, I rejoined my ship for the rest of the trip.

And if there was not so much to say about fishermen and fishing ways in other parts of the world in the limited space of this book I could write a great deal more of happy days spent on Scottish drifters; of trips from Lerwick, in the Shetlands, of autumn visits to Yarmouth and Lowestoft, when it was difficult to find time to go on board all the drifters among whose crews I had friends and with whom I had been shipmate on different occasions.

It is always a glad moment, both to the crew of a drifter and to their families, when the men return home after several weeks or months away at the fishing. But the time spent on shore is not passed in idleness. Nets have to be mended, the vessel cleaned and painted, the engines repaired if necessary. Then, again, accounts have to be settled up and bills paid. The Scottish fishermen, most of whom own their drifters, usually

## Drift-net Fishing

arrange this as follows. When the total amount earned during the season has been ascertained from the curers the expenses of the drifter—coals, paint, oil, repairs, etc.—are deducted. The remainder is divided into three parts: one goes to the men, another to the nets, and the remainder to the ship—for loss, wear and tear, or for a dividend. If the nets are owned by the men this portion comes to them. The running-expenses of a steam-drifter are heavy, and in these days it is not easy to make any real profit at the end of a season's fishing.

The Scots fishermen generally own their houses, but they have to provide provisions for the ship as well as for their homes, not to mention the other expenses that go to keep a large and usually increasing family. Until recently it was almost impossible to persuade an Aberdonian or Banffshire fisherman to draw upon his savings from better years to pay bills. If the fishing had been good everything was paid for at once; if not, the tradesman had to wait. The story is told of a certain Peterhead skipper who remarked to the butcher who suggested he should take out his savings to settle a long-overdue account, "Na, na, a'm no' gaun tae tak' my guid money oot o' the bank tae pey you; ye'll juist hae tae wait for it, the same as I wull



THE END OF THE FISHING SEASON

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

hae tae dae. When I get it you'll get it, an' no' before that, no likely." But the last ten years or so have been unprofitable to the drifter fishermen, so that I imagine



OLD-TYPE SCOTTISH FISHING-BOATS

the butcher's patience must have long ago become exhausted.

Times have changed since the Scots fishermen went herring-fishing in small open boats holding four or five men only. Life was more leisurely. There was none of the feverish anxiety to find the money to pay for the coals and running-expenses of the steam-drifter and to provide the shareholders with

their dividend. In those days there was time for everything. If the weather was good the men went out and fished; if the weather was bad they stayed at home, made nets, and told stories. They had enough to eat, enough to wear; they owned their own small crafts and boats; they were poor, but had not the same worries and anxieties that harass every drifter fisherman to-day, and perhaps they were happier.

SCOTTISH FISHER-LASSIES. When writing about the

## *Drift-net Fishing*

drift-net fisheries of Scotland one cannot pass over the important part taken in them by women and girls. In bygone days, when line-fishing was still the principal occupation of the fishing communities on the east coast of Scotland, and the herring-fishing occupied only two

or three months in the summer, the women and girls found more than enough to do at home in baiting the lines and collecting bait on the shore. Each line had more than one thousand hooks to be baited, and this was always looked



FISHER-LASSIES THIRTY YEARS AGO

upon as essentially women's work. But in these days, when line-fishing is comparatively unimportant, there is far less work for the lassies at home, and they now find employment gutting and packing the herring in various ports all round Great Britain. The modern Scottish fisher-lassie travels over the greater part of England and Scotland every year. From June to the end of August she will be found in the Shetlands, at Wick, or out in the West Highlands. She will then have to pack up her 'kist' and move to Fraserburgh, or else to the Isle of Man. By the end of September she will be settled in lodgings at Yarmouth or Lowestoft, where she remains until the close of the English fishing, when she returns home for Christmas, spending the winter months mending nets, before

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

she starts off on her travels again the following spring.

Taken altogether it is a hard life, involving long hours of standing over open troughs exposed to wind and rain. Owing to the foul brine in which the herring is soaked even small cuts are difficult to heal, and the girls' hands are often masses of sores and wounds. When there is a big catch of herring the girls have to work overtime. There is little leisure for either rest or meals. Very often they can do no more than partake of a snack when standing at their gutting-trough, or go off for a few minutes to one of the canteens in the neighbourhood for a cup of tea.

In Yarmouth, Lowestoft, and most of the other ports the girls live in lodgings in the town, but at Lerwick, in the Shetland Isles, and at Stronsay, Orkney, they are housed in rough huts with few of the ordinary conveniences of civilization, although, thanks to Government inspection, things are better than they used to be twenty years ago.

As soon as the news gets round the town that the first drifter has arrived and that herring is being landed men and women hurry off to work. The little groups of curers and buyers break up and cease their talk and gossip now that the moment has come to start serious business.

Except at Lerwick, where the girls are living in huts close to the curing-yards and can see the boats coming in with their catch, it is necessary for them to be summoned from their lodgings by boys. In a few minutes you will see these gutting crews of stalwart lassies jumping up on a motor-lorry and being driven off to the yard where they work: a cheery, laughing crowd of girls, dressed in long waterproof aprons, leather sea-

## *Drift-net Fishing*

boots well up over the knee, shawls pinned upon their shoulders over woollen jerseys, their hair covered with a handkerchief fastened down over the head. Their fingers are rolled round with bits of rag to prevent them being cut or pierced with herring-bones.

**CURING HERRING.** The herring as they are removed from the ship are put into special baskets called 'swills,' each holding half a cran. At Yarmouth during the season you may witness the amazing sight of two or three hundred or more drifters unloading their fish at the same time.

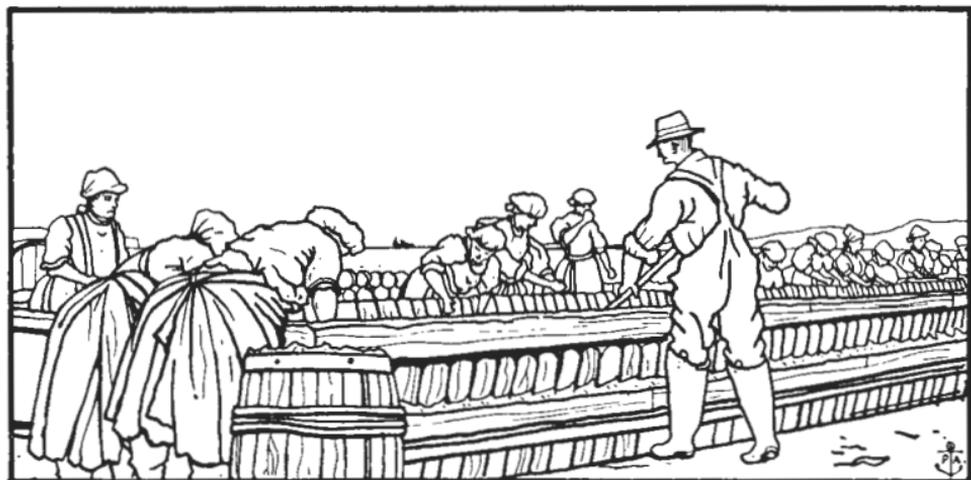
When filled the swills are taken to the curing-yards, where the contents are emptied into the gutting-troughs behind which the girls in groups of three (each three forming a crew) are waiting to start work. In order to enable them to handle the fish more easily they are sprinkled with salt; otherwise they would be far too slippery for the girls to catch hold of quickly.

Standing in rows behind the troughs, the girls pick up a fish, insert their knives just below and behind the gills, and with a quick upward motion bring away the gut, which drops into small tubs placed in front of each girl, to be eventually sold for fish manure. Three shallow tubs stand behind each girl, and after she has gutted a herring she throws it behind her into one of these according to its size and quality. Thus the two operations of gutting and dividing the herring are combined. As soon as a tub of gutted herring is full it is taken away by another girl and emptied into large shallow tubs called 'rousing tubs,' where they are again sprinkled with salt.

Taking an armful of fish from the rousing tub, the packer then drops it into one of the long rows of barrels which are arranged at some distance from and behind

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

the gutting-trough. Each time the herring is taken from the rousing tub the contents are well stirred up. They are packed in layers, each layer being well sprinkled with coarse, hard salt, coarse enough to prevent the fish touching each other, thus enabling the brine to penetrate to every part. It must dissolve slowly, so that the process of salting will take place gradually and



FISHER-LASSIES AT WORK

that there will always be enough salt left to prevent the fish from actually touching or rubbing against each other. About one hundredweight of salt is used in each barrel of cured herring. When packed the barrel is covered up and left to stand for about a week. During this time the water in the fish is extracted by the salt, which dissolves in the form of saturated brine. At the end of this period the barrels are opened, a small hole is drilled in the side, and the 'pickle,' as it is called, allowed to run out. Owing to the withdrawal of the water from them the herrings have shrunk very considerably, so more fish have to be added to the contents of the barrel, until it is full again. It is then fastened up permanently, turned over on its side, filled with

## *Drift-net Fishing*

brine pickle, and the hole corked up. The brine pickle which had formed during the time the water was being extracted is not wasted, but used again for filling up the barrels after they have been repacked. The Russians and Poles, the great consumers of salt herring, use the pickle as a sauce and dip their bread into it.

One hundredweight of salt is required approximately for a cran of herring (about 1000 fish, weighing about three hundredweights), just filling a barrel. A curer reckons that five or six tons of salt will be needed for a hundred crans of herring.

KIPPERS, BLOATERS, RED HERRING. People are often rather vague concerning the difference between kippers, bloaters, and red herrings. Kippers are herrings which are split open before curing, gutted and thrown into large flat baskets. Having been carefully washed, cleaned, and soaked in brine for about an hour, the fish are then hung on 'kipper speets'—*i.e.*, a square bar of wood with hooks along each side of it. Each speet carries about eight or nine herrings a side. They are stacked in racks over the 'loves' of a smoke house, and kept there all night, oak-turnings and sawdust being used as fuel.

Bloaters are of two kinds: those prepared for the home market and those intended for the foreign trade, most of the latter being exported to Mediterranean countries. In the case of the former the herring is lightly salted by immersion in brine for a couple of hours. It is then dried, *not smoked*, in the smoke-house for one night. The bloaters for foreign export are salted in tanks for about five days at least, after which they are removed and *smoke-dried* for two days.

Red herrings are prepared as follows. First the fish are dry-salted in concrete tanks for a period that may

## *Fishermen and Fishing Ways*

vary from five days to several months. Having been removed and washed, they are hung on speets, the fish being threaded on to the speet through the gill openings and mouth. Each speet holds from twenty to thirty fish. Oak-turnings, shavings, and sawdust are used for fuel, and the speets are stacked horizontally on racks in the smoke-houses, about six inches apart and twelve inches above each other. The oak-shavings give out a very resinous smoke which not only dries the fish, but permeates right through it. The process of curing red herrings generally takes about ten days, according to the time of year and the temperature outside. During the process of curing the fires are lit every night and allowed to burn themselves out.

EXTENT OF BRITISH DRIFT-NET FISHERIES. Without the herring the drift-net fisheries would be comparatively unimportant. Herrings spawn at various times in the year, and in this way differ from all other edible fish caught off the British Isles. But most herrings captured off the coasts of England and Scotland spawn in the autumn. Variations in the date of the annual spawning are due to differences in species and the feeding-ground. The food value of a herring depends enormously upon the time of the year at which it is caught and in what locality. In the herring fisheries of the British Isles the fish are first caught off the west coast of Scotland and the Hebrides in the spring. Then in early June the herring are most prolific around the Orkneys and Shetlands, after which they appear in succession off Wick, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, and the Northumberland and Yorkshire coasts, until by the first week in October they are off Norfolk, and the English herring season is in full swing at Yarmouth and Lowestoft. The last herrings to be caught off the

## *Drift-net Fishing*

coast of England are taken in December round Devon and Cornwall.

The largest and finest herring taken off Great Britain are those caught near the Hebrides. The Yarmouth herring is firm and hard, although not so rich and fat, but better suited for handling and curing. There are few fish so rich in fats as the herring, hence its value as a food.

