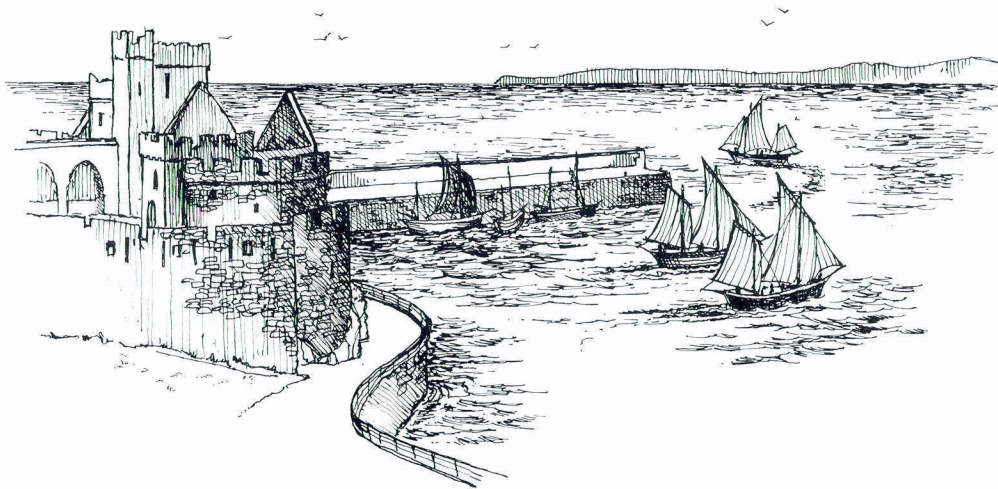




MANX SEA FISHING

10

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS OF THE MANX FISHERMEN



A Pair of Boats sail together so that none goes Third.

CHOOSING THE CREW

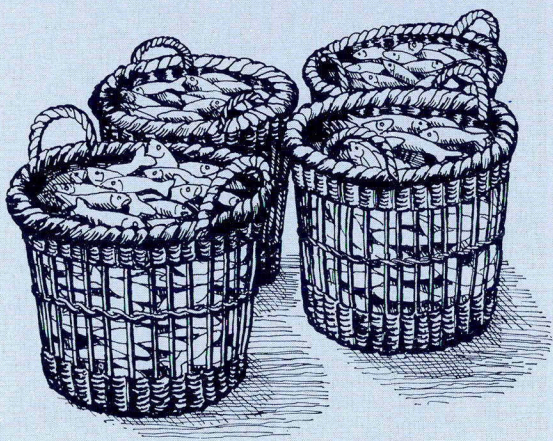
A **SKIPPER** would hire his crew at the annual boat supper in olden days. This event often took place in January. There was always a good supply of pies, puddings and drink. Each fisherman brought along his wife or sweetheart. The skipper commenced the crew hiring ceremony by passing a shilling coin to the man he considered best and as he did so he would name the conditions of hiring. The first man to receive the coin passed the coin to the next, and so it went round the crew. The last man to receive the shilling put it into a quart measure and tossed it up. If the coin turned up heads it was supposed to mean a lucky herring season. The man then handed the coin back to the skipper and made a short speech. In his speech he would always remind the skipper that the crew expected him to behave properly towards them and honestly to the owner of the boat. The skipper, in later Victorian times, received £3 a season outside of his share, in return for sailing the boat.

PREPARING FOR THE FISHING

The fishing boats were usually taken off the banks where they had lain all winter at the time of the high tides at the spring equinox in March. (This had of course, to be done earlier for the Kinsale boats). We hear of the boats crew all pulling together to get the boat afloat and calling out in Manx: "Lesh ee! lesh ee!". After launching the vessel would be painted inside and out and the gear overhauled and repaired. In the earlier times paint would be made from ochre occurring naturally in certain rock outcrops. There were special local ways of painting boats. At Port St Mary, for example, a blue stripe was painted on the bulwarks if any of the crew's relatives had recently died. The crew came aboard carrying their clothes bag and chaff-filled mattress. Ballast had to be brought on board as the boats would otherwise be very light and unstable after their nets were shot. Sometimes stones were used, at other times ironstone or pieces of pig-iron on a large nickey. White stones were never used as ballast.

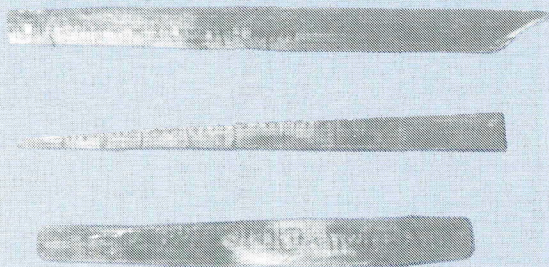
COUNTING FISH

Herring were counted into a basket by two men. The fish were counted in threes, or 'warps'. Forty 'warps' (120 herring) were counted into the basket. (Counting was done in Manx until the early twentieth century). Then one of the men would cast in another 'warp' and extra herring, saying: "Warp, tally". This made up the Manx 'long hundred' of herrings which consisted of 124 fish. The skipper stood by marking each tally of a 'long hundred' either by chalk on a board or a knife notch on a stick. Every fifth notch crossed the other four and this made a mease. A mease was 5x124, or 620 herring. In later times fish were shovelled into quarter cran baskets. Four of these filled level made up the cran. Normally there would be two to three mease in a cran, but the number varied according to the size of the fish.



Quarter-Cran Fish Baskets.

The quarter cran baskets held roughly as much as could be lifted. The contents of the baskets were to be level with the top, not heaped up. Baskets would weaken with use and sag and the fishermen were always eager to have new baskets. Can you see why? Today herring are sold as 100kg units.



Tally Sticks for Counting Catch.

WEATHER LORE

In days before modern weather forecasting, fishermen relied upon observing the sky, the sea and the behaviour of birds etc. Weather-heads were noted and great importance was attached to the direction in which they lay. A 'cock's eye' or small halo round the moon was a sign of approaching bad weather, as was a mock sun. Other signs of bad weather included 'dogs' or double rainbows where the inner one did not touch the water. A great calm was an almost certain sign of coming storm.



Moon With Halo.

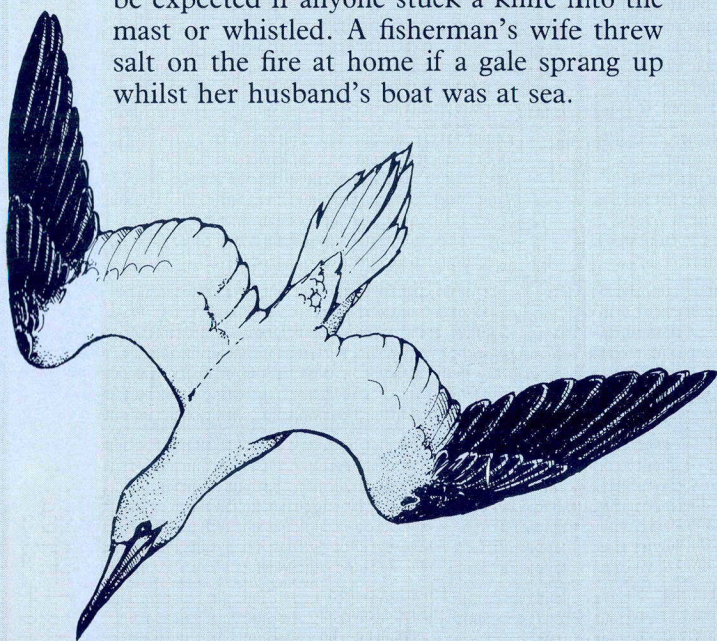
Gannets flying in short circles foretold wind, in large circles, fine weather. Gulls flocking in the pastures and making a great clamour meant storm. Signs of good weather were oily patches on a calm sea and the appearance of 'perkins' (porpoises) in Peel Bay.

SUPERSTITIONS

Fishing before the development of sonar echo sounders and depth recording equipment was a chancy business and great importance was attached to luck. There were many things to be avoided. The normal names of cats, rats, mice, hares, rabbits, dogs and horses were not used at sea. A cat would be referred to as a 'scraper', a hare as 'the one with long ears'. Mention of women, priests or bishops was also considered unlucky. A woman would be referred to as 'the long haired one'. The boy cook who might not yet have learned which

words to avoid would be made to touch a piece of cold iron if he used one of the taboo words.

Turning the boat should always be done in the same direction as the sun appears to move. It was unlucky to be the third boat to leave port and normally two boats sailed together to avoid anyone being third (see the illustration at the top of this card). Care was taken not to give anything away when your boat was having good catches, as this was thought to give away the boat's good luck. The boy cooks were encouraged to steal the dishcloth from a lucky boat so as to transfer the good luck to their own boats. Wind would be expected if anyone stuck a knife into the mast or whistled. A fisherman's wife threw salt on the fire at home if a gale sprang up whilst her husband's boat was at sea.



Diving Gannet.

There was a variety of ways to ensure good luck. The skipper usually brought a "crosk keirn" (a cross made with mountain ash twigs) aboard on May Eve and hid it in a secret place until the following year. After the nets were shot on May Eve a torch was carried all over the boat – net room, fish room and cabin – as a precaution against witchcraft. Sometimes this was done at other times of the season if the boat was having poor catches. George Woods, who wrote an account of the Isle of Man in 1811, mentioned the burning of 'dry heath or furze', i.e. ling and gorse for the purpose of overcoming witchcraft. The herb vervain was much sought after by fishermen, who carried a sprig of it around. Vervain was also boiled in a little water in the boat's pot and the water sprinkled on each net as it went over the side at 'shooting' time – sometimes also on the 'mollags'. The first

herring of the season to be caught on the boat was known as 'yn eirey' ('first son') and treated in a special way. It would be boiled whole, unlike all other herring, which would have heads and tails removed first. All the crew were to take a 'pick' of this first herring, perhaps as a reminder that they would all share the takings from the season's fishing.

RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS

In ancient times one tenth of the catch of herring, mackerel, cod, ling, etc was paid to the Church. Sometimes the fish were left on a special 'tithe rock'. The Church in return, provided religious services for the fishermen. In earlier times the vicar of the parish was obliged to go every morning and every evening to read prayers for the fishing at his local harbour. If the vicar did not turn up he lost his tithe of the following night's fishing and his dues were given to the poor instead. One of the old duties of the Admiral or Vice-Admiral of the Herring Fleet was to hoist his flag in harbour as a signal to attend the religious service. By the late eighteenth century the payment of fish tithes had ceased and prayers were said on the boats by the crew themselves. It became the custom to kneel and pray after the nets were shot. Sometimes prayer was said silently; at other times a religious member of the crew prayed aloud. In early times fishermen had called on St Patrick to help them saying in Manx.

"Dy bannee Noo Parick shinyn as nyn maatey"

meaning "St Patrick bless us and our boat"

The yearly arrival of the herring shoals was thought of as a blessing for the Island and a special prayer that this blessing might continue was composed by the famous eighteenth century Manx bishop, Thomas Wilson.

Manx fishermen did not fish on Sundays. There was a tradition that they had fished on Sundays sometimes in the past, but that a disaster to their boats on a Sunday evening taught them to observe the Sabbath. According to the story a storm came on and the boats went in close to the foot of some cliffs in the 'Big Bay' between Niarbyl and Bradda. As they were sheltering part of the steep cliff collapsed and the surf from the falling rocks swamped their open boats.



Disaster for the Sabbath Breakers.

INFORMATION ABOUT FINDING FISH

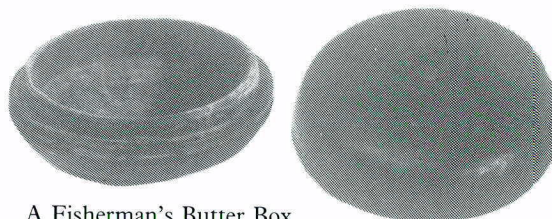
When the drift nets had been shot for an hour or so the fishermen would test or 'prove' the nets to see if they were 'creeping' i.e. contained many fish. If there were fish in the net they would count how many fish there were in a 'pair', that was the distance between one float and the next. If other boats were near the other crews would enquire how many 'warps' of herring they had taken out of the 'pair'.

An old law of 1738 required fishermen who had located a shoal of herring to inform the next boat. They often used a horn to let the others know of their good fortune. Horns were also used to call for assistance in hauling in a particularly large catch.

SHARES

The takings were divided up amongst the owner of the boat, the owners of the nets and the crew. The boy cook's share was half that of a grown-up crew member. The boat might belong to the skipper and the nets to the crew. The shares system clearly varied at different periods. John Feltham, writing in 1798 said that there were 9 shares: 2 for the boat owner, 1 for the net owner and 6 for the crew. In 1864 there were 20 shares: 2 1/2 for the boat owner, 7 1/2 for the crew, and 10 for the nets. Before about 1846 fishermen brought their own supply of food, after that time the cost of the provisions came out of the gross earnings. When money was divided up any odd amounts of shillings and pence were set aside as 'God's portion' and given to the poor. In recent times all expenses for gear, tackle and

provisions would be deducted, then the remaining money divided half to the owners of the boat and half to the crew.



A Fisherman's Butter Box.

THE BOY COOK

Boys aged 13 to 15 acted as cooks on the boats. At the age of 15 they came to count as men and received their full shares. When the boat was fishing in home waters the cook would prepare a meal which was usually eaten on the way to the herring grounds. Cooking was done on an enclosed coal-burning stove with a long pipe going up from it. Tea was often made in a kettle. Fresh herring and bread would be eaten. The mugs, plates and dishes would be placed on the deck in the cabin. The crew would sit on the lockers running round the cabin. Each man would state his wants – how many fish he required. Some would eat four or five fish. After the nets were lowered there would be supper. This might consist of cold mutton. Breakfast would be eaten on the way back to port in the morning, often about 6.30 am. The boy cooks on the Kinsale and Lerwick boats had to produce much more in the way of cooking. When beef or something special was being eaten one man would be asked to stand with his back to the server while the portions were being cut and as each was ready asked "Whose is this?" Each time he would call out the name of one of the crew. When potatoes were served the 'aunee', or liquid in which the fish had been cooked, could be poured on to them.

As well as cooking, the boy had other duties and one of these was to coil the heavy tarred rope known as the 'springback' used to haul in the nets. As the 'springback' came off the capstan, the cook would be down below pulling it through a hole in the deck and coiling it. At Kinsale mackerel fishing where 'springbacks' seven or eight centimetres thick were used and trains were twice as long as those for herring the boy cook would be down below in the dark and wet from about midnight until 4.30 am on a typical night, and an hour or two longer in rougher weather. The cooks used to attach pieces of the rope at intervals on the 'springbacks' so as to know how many nets had been hauled and there was a special mark to show when half were on board.