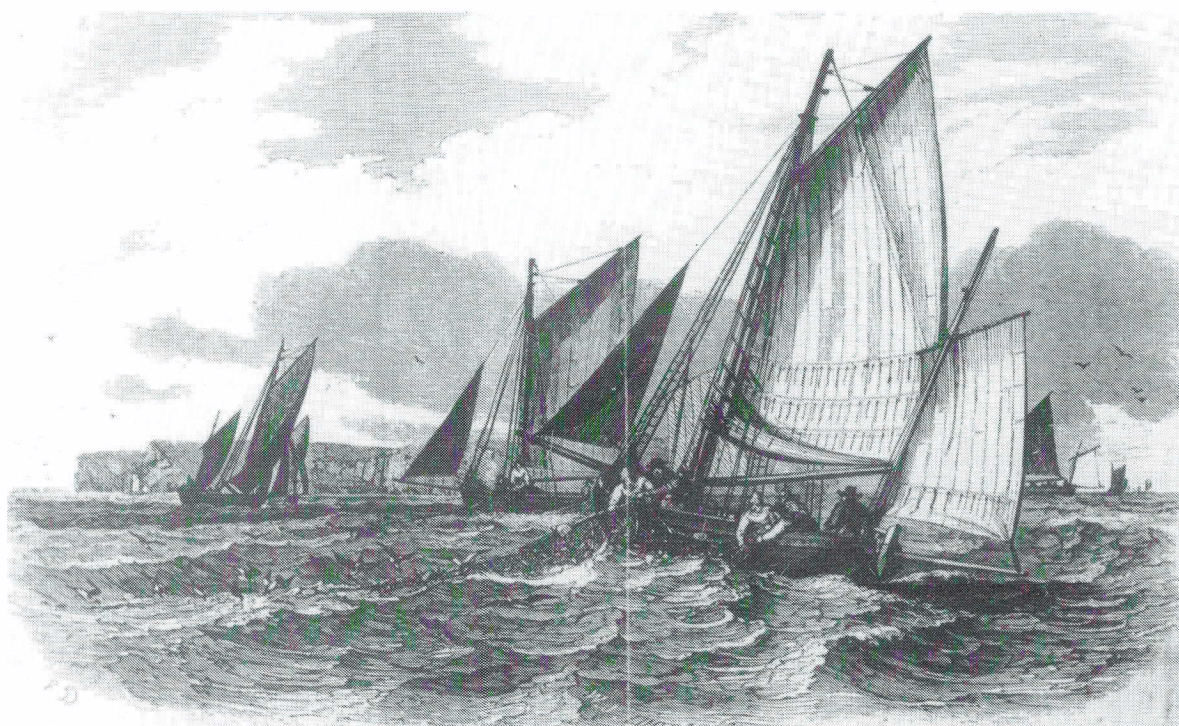




# MANX SEA FISHING

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## HERRING FISHING IN MANX WATERS



Herring Fishing, Isle of Man.

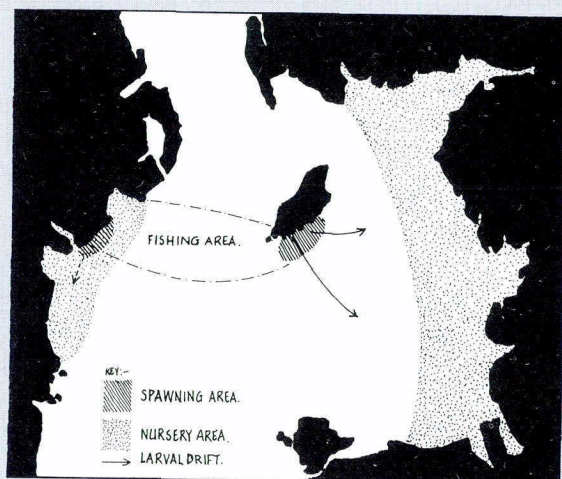
### HABITS OF THE HERRING

**H**ERRING can be found in Manx waters during almost any month of the year, but they are found in the biggest numbers and best condition between May and September. Young herrings of two, three and four years of age gather in the in-shore area from May onwards. They feed until August off the west and south-west of the Island. They then move to their offshore spawning ground to the south-east of the Isle of Man. Herring deposit their spawn on plants and hard gravelly or rocky areas of seabed. This area was known as the 'coral beds'

to the old fishermen and today is often called the 'Douglas Bank'. Spawning takes place from September onwards into the winter. Herring which have spawned are known as 'spent' herring and are in poor condition. The eggs hatch in two weeks and the small planktonic larvae float up. The larvae are carried towards the Lancashire, Cumbrian and Cheshire coasts where they live inshore and grow into what is known as 'whitebait'. Five and six year old herring are common on the offshore banks at the end of summer, but few herring older than that are found in the Irish Sea. Two races of herring (known as the Mourne and the Manx races) are found in the same shoals off the west of the Island, but go their separate ways at spawning time.



## FISHING GROUNDS



Spawning, Nursery and Fishing Areas for Herring.

The habits of the herring determined the timing of the herring fishing season and the areas to be fished. Old Manx laws laid down the time to start fishing and this seems to have been July. Gradually the season started earlier and earlier until it began in May when the fish were not of good quality. Fishing began on the feeding grounds west and south-west of the Manx coast and switched to the Douglas Bank by September as the herring moved to their spawning grounds. The early season fishing extended from north of Peel to south west of the Calf and right across the Channel to Ireland. Peel and Port St Mary were the main bases. Peel fishermen operated mostly about 8 miles offshore in depths of 20 to 30 fathoms of water (about 36 to 55 metres). Two popular fishing grounds were the 'Big Bay' (between Niarbyl and Bradda) and the 'Shoulder' which was about 6 miles W.S.W. of the Calf.

The late season fishing off the south-east coast was based at Douglas and referred to as the 'back' fishing. The 'back' fishing grounds sometimes extended from Langness as far north as Ramsey Bay. In earlier times fishermen based at Laxey and Ramsey had fished off Maughold Head and in Ramsey Bay. This fishery had declined by about 1815 and Ramsey fishermen came to concentrate on mackerel and longline fishing, instead of herring. Fishermen used their oldest nets for the 'back' fishing because of the very heavy catches and damage done by dogfish in this area. The nets had to be sunk much deeper off Douglas as the herring spawned at the sea bottom. The nets were sunk deeper by adding

more 'strap' and shorter trains (sets of nets) were used. Early writers often referred to the great hauls of fish caught off Douglas and to the 'gobbags' (dogfish) which ravaged the herring shoals and caused much damage to the nets. A newspaper account of 1860 tells of boats catching up to 130 mease (310,000 herring) during the September fishing off Douglas in that year.



A Large Catch.

The 'spent' herring caught after spawning on the Douglas Bank were sold for little more than half of the Peel fish prices of July and August. In the days when nets were hauled by hand the rough seabed material brought up in the nets – known as 'coral' by the fishermen – was apt to tear the hands and rip the nets. The nets would be stretched over a board and the heavy fragments pounded with a heavy weight.

## THE START OF THE HERRING SEASON

The old Manx laws helped to preserve the stocks of fish. A law of 1610 declared a closed season for herring fishing within 9 miles of the Island from the beginning of the year until July. By the 1820's Cornish and Scottish fishermen coming to Manx waters disregarded the Manx regulations and Manxmen also began to break with the traditional rules.

## PROVISIONS FOR THE FISHING

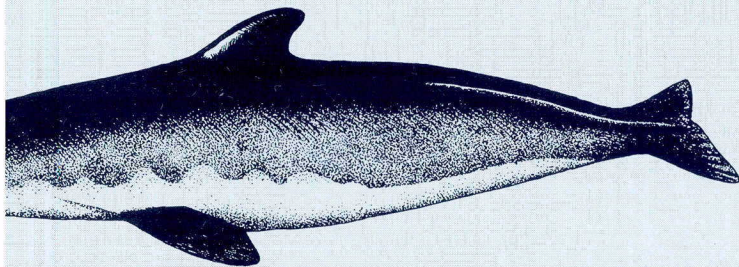
There was no fishing on a Saturday or Sunday night and fishermen would often walk long distances to their homes in the country for the weekend. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century the fishermen came back to their boats for the Monday night's fishing carrying their week's supply of food. Provisions for the week were carried in a wallet round the



neck, rather like a shepherd's purse. An old fisherman with memories of those times told that "Some would have oatcakes made in very thick quarters and baked as hard as hard over the fire. My mother would give me little 'bonnags' made of barley meal and potatoes, kneaded well together. They would be about two inches (5cm) high and from four to six inches (10-15cm) across; she would clap two of these together to keep them moist . . . For 'kitchen' (relish) fish could be had in plenty on board. We would also carry from home with us a piece of cheese, or beef, or stockfish". In early times when the boats were open with nowhere to sleep and without stoves for cooking crews boarded at a public house and had meals there.

### SIGNS AND SIGNALS

Modern fishermen locate shoals of fish with echo sounding equipment, but in earlier times fishermen had to rely on their own observations. There were many 'signs' of herring. They watched the behaviour of seagulls and where gannets were diving. (Under Manx Law there was a £5 penalty for every gull killed during the herring season). The presence of a 'perkyn' (porpoise), or a shark was another 'sign'. Sometimes there were more obvious signs of the fish themselves such as herring 'playing' at the surface or phosphorescence in the water on dark nights. Some could detect the 'smoghan', or smell of concentrations of swimming fish. Oily patches on the sea surface caused by fish oil oozing up from cut and crushed fish were another clue. As boats lay at the nets the men could sometimes feel the fish striking the boat. A thick shoal of fish was known as a "bush".



A Porpoise.

In early times when neither clocks nor watches were available on the boats the passing of a particular star over a certain point or the first sign of daybreak over a certain hill would be watched for. The height of water on particular rocks was noted to work out whether or not there would be water in the harbour. The Admiral of the Herring Fleet would blow his horn in the early morning for hauling the nets in the 'Big Bay' as soon as light showed on the top of Cronk-ny-Irree-Lhaa. Nets were not to be left in the water after daybreak.

### FISHING ROUTINE

After the nets were shot there would be supper, then prayers, kneeling on the deck. Around 10 p.m. the crew would turn into their bunks, leaving one man on watch. Turns on watch in later times lasted one hour. The man on watch had to see that the riding light was kept burning brightly to avoid collisions with other vessels. He would rouse the crew if a passing ship came dangerously close. He also watched for shifts of the wind which would affect the train of nets. On light summer nights he might do some line fishing. After about two hours the net would be tested to see if it was "creeping", that is, moving with fish. At 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. the crew would be roused with cries of "Turn out!" and hauling would begin. With a steam winch this would be finished by about 4 a.m. The foremast would then be hoisted and sails set for the return to port. The herring would be shaken from the nets into the fish pens on the way back to port. The cook would have the breakfast cooked by about 6.30 a.m.

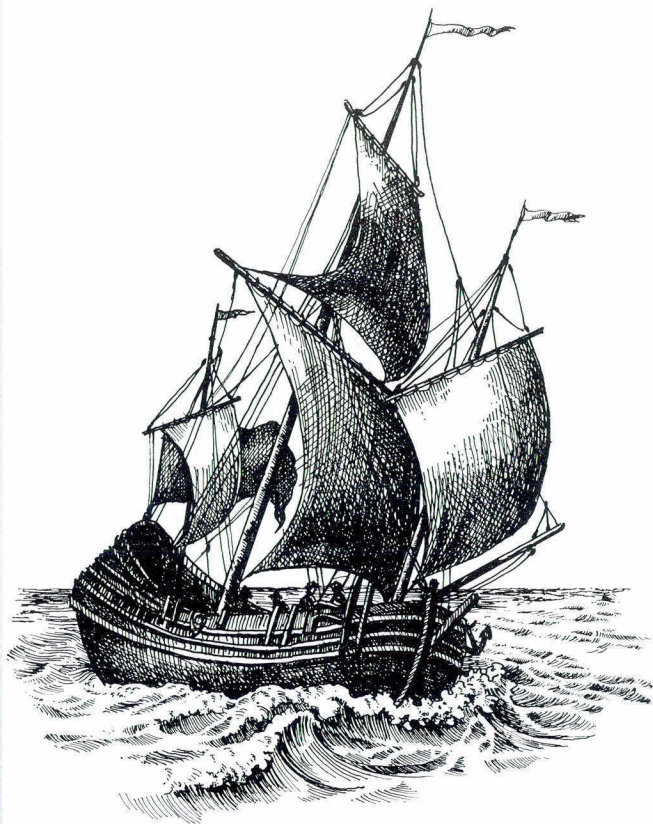
### DANGERS OF THE SEA

Although Manx fishermen knew their coastline, loss of life at sea always occurred. The old records are not very precise, for instance, an entry for 1672 merely states "This year the men were cast away at ye herring fishing, Sept 2nd". The greatest disaster we know of occurred at Douglas in 1787. According to a newspaper of 1849 an average loss of three lives per season was normal. Sometimes lessons were learned from disasters at sea. When the "Peel Castle" was lost off the Calf with all hands in 1824 due to loose ballast moving in a storm, sealed ballast became the rule.

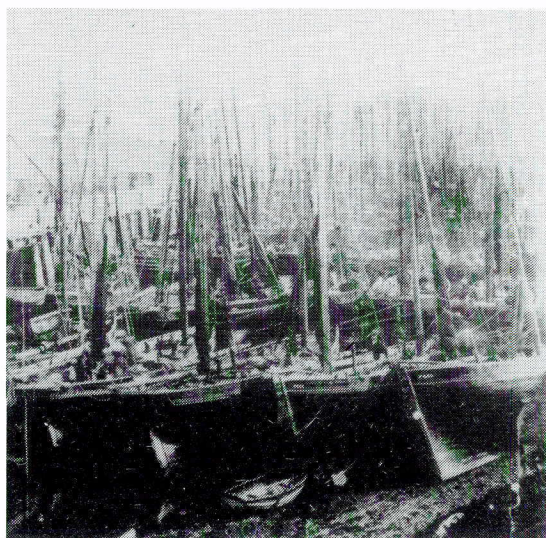


## ADMIRALS OF THE HERRING FLEET

Ancient Manx laws required all quarterland farmers – farmers of the larger farms – to have a certain quantity of fishing net, rope and floats in readiness for the herring fishing each year. Owners of fishing boats also were required to have their boats in readiness at the beginning of the fishing season and the exact date for this was also laid down. Another control on the activities of fishermen was through an Admiral and Vice-Admiral who were in charge of the fleets at sea. (In later times the duties of these officials was less important and the Admiral would be chosen from the Peel fishermen, the Vice-Admiral from Port St Mary). The Admirals carried flags on their boats to lower about sunset as a signal for the fleet to shoot their nets. Nets had to be shot from the starboard side of boats. Those who shot their nets before sunset would be brought before the Water Bailiff for punishment. In early times the Admiral blew a horn to communicate with the other boats. A law of 1738 required the crew of a boat which had found a 'scull' of herrings to inform the next boat to them of their success. By the nineteenth century, when the Admirals's duties had grown less, nets were shot when the lights of the Calf of Man lighthouses went on.



An English Herring Buss.



## NON-MANX FISHERMEN IN MANX WATERS

As early as 1613 we hear of strangers flocking to Manx waters for the herring fishing. In 1754 four large fishing vessels or 'busses' from Whitehaven were attacked by crews of the Manx herring fleet. The Manxmen resented the way the Whitehaven men could flout the Manx fishing regulations.

Manx fishermen themselves sometimes fished off S.W. Scotland and the Cumbrian coast, driven there by failures of the Manx fishing as early as the seventeenth century.

News of an abundance of herring in Manx waters in 1823 brought Cornish and Scottish boats to the Island and they continued to come for many years. New types of boats (luggers and nickeys) were adopted by the Manxmen after they had seen them used by Cornishmen.

Scottish and Irish boats continued to swell the numbers of boats on the Manx fishing grounds into the twentieth century. By the outbreak of World War 2 by far the greater part of the herring landed in the Isle of Man was from visiting vessels. English steam drifters from Lowestoft and Yarmouth joined Scottish drifters and played an important part in the 1920's and 1930's. It was Scottish fishermen who introduced ring-net fishing in the later 1930's and this method of catching herring became more important than the centuries-old drift netting.