



MANX SEA FISHING

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MANX FISHERMEN IN IRISH AND SCOTTISH WATERS



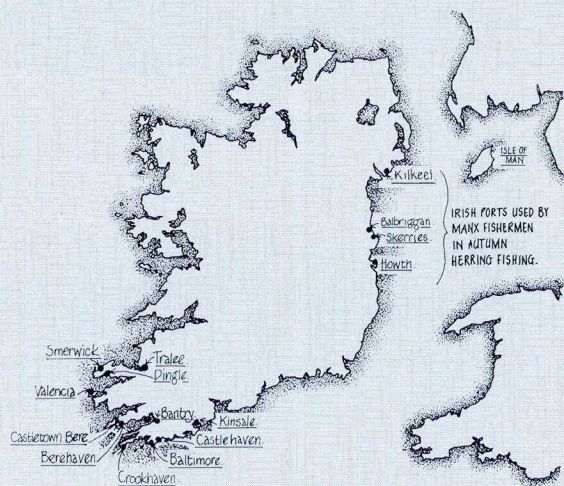
Loading Nets for the Kinsale Fishing.

UP to the middle of the nineteenth century Manxmen fished in home waters for three to four months each year. The crews of boats were made up partly of seamen and partly of countrymen, particularly crofters. Fishing was an occupation for only part of the year. Equipment was fairly primitive and not too expensive.

During the period roughly 1860 to 1914 Manx fishermen fished away from home both before the start of the Manx herring season and after it had ended. In March the luggers and nickeys would set off for the spring mackerel fishing off Southern Ireland. Kinsale was the best known centre. They would return in later June or early July, change to herring nets and fish in home waters until the

beginning of October. After the end of the 'back' fishing off Douglas, some would join the Irish fishing off the east coast of Ireland until Christmas. Others on returning from Kinsale would have set out for the Shetland herring fishing or for Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides. The boats would return from the Shetland Islands in late September or early October.

This new, more all year round fishing led to a new type of fisherman. Better boats and more expensive equipment were required as competition from outsiders on the Manx fishing grounds increased. When a bigger outlay had to be made for boats and equipment it was necessary to make more use of these than just during the four months of the home fishing.



Irish Ports Used in Herring and Mackerel Fishing.

Fishing became taken more seriously and regarded as a full-time occupation. The farmer/fisherman was becoming rarer, though some crofters continued to fish in home waters and also at Kinsale. The full-time fishermen of this period became more prosperous, often owning their boats and becoming house-owners as well. This was the most prosperous period in the history of Manx fishing. Enterprising men of this time such as Robert Corrin of Peel, encouraged the fishermen to follow the fishing outside the Island as well as at home. Corrin introduced cotton nets in place of the old linen ones and started net factories on the Island. He was responsible for the start of the spring mackerel fishery at Kinsale where Manxmen first ventured in 1861.

KINSALE MACKEREL FISHING

The spring mackerel fishing based on the ports of Southern Ireland was soon bringing together a great fleet of fishing vessels from

Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland, England and France. Fish buyers were there with a fleet of "six powerful steamers and a dozen smart Jersey cutters" in 1875. Old hulks (condemned ships) were used to store and box the fish. Norwegian ships brought ice to the hulks. The mackerel were packed, a hundred to a box, with a layer of ice on top. The boxed mackerel were taken by steamer to Milford in Wales to be transported by rail to the cities. Later in the period a Manx fishing company had its own hulk at the port of Crookhaven.

The mackerel swam near the surface and were caught in drift nets hanging less deep in the water than herring nets, and made of heavier cotton twine with a larger mesh than that used for herring. The shoals were often well out at sea – often 30 to 40 miles off the Head of Kinsale. Atlantic waves up to 30 feet high (9 metres) were encountered. Usually it was the luggers and nickeys which went to Kinsale, though the larger versions of nobbies which came into use in the 1890's also ventured into these waters. The nobbies favoured the port of Valencia where the fishing grounds were generally more sheltered and suitable for this type of boat. The nickeys, on account of their speed in getting back to port and because they could be sailed close to the wind, performed best on the Irish fishing grounds.

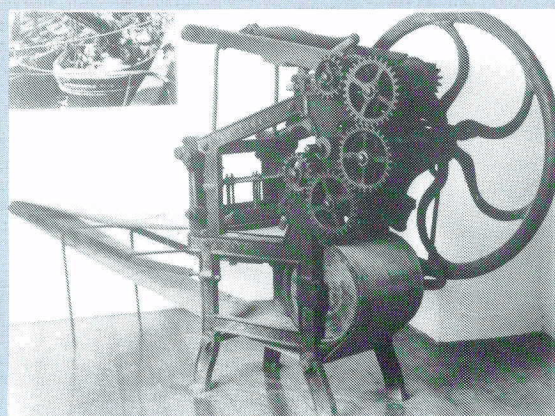
Nets would be shot about 8p.m. and hauling would start about midnight. In reasonable weather it took until about 4.a.m. to haul in the 50 nets. A fisherman who had been to Kinsale as a boy-cook, recalling his experiences, said "But the cook had to go down and coil all that four-inch rope before his



Kinsale Harbour with Manx Boats in foreground.

breakfast, pulling it down through a hole in the deck, and the water running down tooI've seen me down there for seven hours to get it in" (The rope he referred to was the heavy tarred rope-warp used to haul the nets and known as the 'spring-back'). The boy cook was then expected to cook a dozen mackerel for breakfast and wash up by the time the boat was in harbour. The cook had to be careful when he drew his bucketful of water from over the side to wash the mugs and plates as the vessel would be speeding along at 7 or 8 knots on its way to port. An 'average good' night's fishing was considered to be two to three thousand fish.

The preparations for the Kinsale fishing were often recalled by old Manx fishermen. From about the middle of February there would be activity. Sometimes countrymen would have to trudge through the snow to Peel or Port St Mary, carrying their clothes and bedding in white bags. The crew would include a boy of 13 to 15 who was the cook. He started his duties by scrubbing out lockers and cabin bunks. Boats would be painted up to the water-line, often with a dark red anti-fouling paint. They were tarred from the water line up to the deck. Masts and spars were scraped and oiled or greased. Provisions for the voyage would then be taken on board. Fresh water was carried in casks. Potatoes, barley and rice were stored in tall lockers. The sack of bread was always supplemented by ship's biscuits. These were about 12cm diameter and 1cm thick and made locally. Children along the quayside would beg the boats' cooks to give them biscuits. The quaysides were scenes of great activity, thronged with relations and townspeople and the sound of concertina music came from many boats. There were special religious services in the week before the boats left for Kinsale. They would be away for about 14 weeks on average.



A Machine for Making Ships Biscuits.

The Kinsale fishermen always expected to be home for Tynwald Fair. The heavier gauged mackerel nets would be exchanged for the finer-meshed herring nets. The train of herring nets was only half as long as that of mackerel nets, but the herring nets were twice as deep.

SHETLAND AND HEBRIDES FISHING

The Manx fishermen in the Shetlands operated out of Lerwick. English, Scottish, Irish and continental fisherman all fished off Lerwick at this time. The journey up was a long one and the skippers of these sailing vessels were often unable to read, yet they were skilled sailors. A Port St. Mary man recalled "Them old fellows would go up to Lerwick and they couldn't read or write; and all they would have would be Jefferson's Almanack, and they couldn't read it! They would give it to the boy and say, "What course is that?" and they would be getting there all right". The journey up was made in the latter part of July and the voyage through the Inner Hebrides was often remembered as pleasant. A newspaper report of July 1887 refers to 50 boats having left Peel for Lerwick the week before. The journey up would usually take a full week. Manxmen found the Shetland Islands bare and were intrigued by the Shetland ponies – "about the size of a Newfoundland dog". They also thought it strange to see the corn still green in the fields when they set off for home in September.

Shetland Route.



The Lerwick fishing went on from the second half of July to about the third week in September. The fishing grounds were usually 10–12 miles offshore, much less than those at Kinsale. The Shetland herring catch was cleaned by women, salted in barrels and sent to the Continent. Herrings in Shetland were sold by the cran and this measure was generally about nine hundred fish, more or less according to size. A good average Shetland catch was 20–30 cran, but a bumper catch might be 80–90 cran. Manxmen continued to fish in the Shetlands until about 1906. After that time the larger steam drifters were too stiff competition for sailing boats.

The return journey would be nine or ten days if the weather was good. (The record was 3 days 16 hours!) Sometimes it took three to four weeks to reach home.

Manxmen also fished in the Outer Hebrides in the early summer starting at Castlebay in Barra in May, then moving north to Stornoway in Lewis and finishing at Lerwick in the Shetlands or, alternatively following the east coast fishing out of Whitby and Lowestoft. Those who had fished at home often went over to Ireland to fish from October to December. They fished out of the ports of Howth, Skerries, Balbriggan, Criggan and Kilkeel.

PERILS OF THE SEA

Boats were lost from time to time when fishing away from home. The “Lydia” of Peel was run down by a Cunard Liner (the “Pavonia”) when lying at her nets at night off Kinsale. The Kinsale fishing grounds lay on shipping routes and the riding light – a lantern with four glass sides – would be fixed to a tall iron rod fixed in the pump behind the net room as a warning.

(One of the boy-cooks’ most important duties was to clean the riding light and see that it was ready for use). The “Damsel” was run down at Lerwick. There were others lost sailing to and from Kinsale and the Shetlands. When the “Maggie Maddrell” was driven on the rocks at Jura in 1883 a man and a boy of 16 managed to survive but the youth died of cold in the cave where they sought shelter overnight. The “Wanderer” of Peel was fishing off the Old Head of Kinsale when in May 1915 the liner “Lusitania” was torpedoed and saved many lives.



Medicine Chest Carried on a Nickey.

LIFE ABOARD SHIP

According to the *Peel City Guardian* of 1st October 1887, complaints were being made about the returning fishermen “emptying the contents of their chaff beds into the bay”. It was said that this was an annual practice of the fishermen and that the rubbish was carried into the harbour and was unsightly. For us it is another piece of information about how men lived when fishing away from home. Life was hard and primitive on these distant fishing grounds. When fishermen turned in for the night they took off their seaboots, but left on most of their clothes. A ‘mollag’ was often used for a pillow (see Card 5). One man with memories of Kinsale, when speaking of washing clothes at sea, said “... but the way they were often doing it was towing the dirty clothes behind the boat – put them on a heaving line and drag them behind the boat.”