



MANX SEA FISHING

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NETS AND EQUIPMENT FOR HERRINGS
AND MACKEREL FISHING



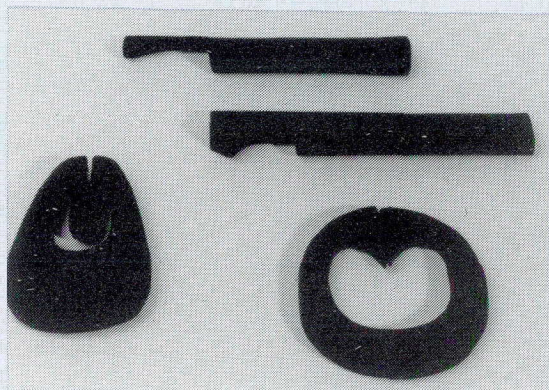
DRIFT NETS

HERRING and mackerel used to be caught entirely by drift nets. Drift nets drift in any direction that the tide may take them and act as barriers to stop swimming shoals of fish. The drift net was, therefore, different from modern trawl or purse seine nets which are moved along to trap fish. The mesh of the drift net had to be large enough for the head and gills to enter, yet not large enough for the thicker body to go through. The fish became caught when they opened their gill covers in breathing and could not escape by reversing. Manx fishermen used drift nets in preference to ring nets right up to modern times.

MAKING NETS AT HOME

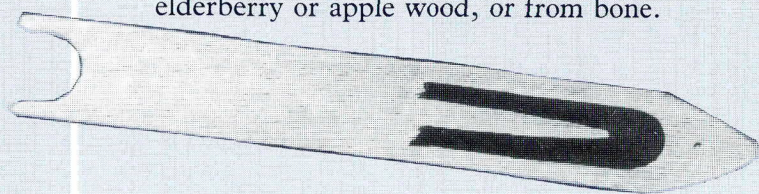
Until well into the nineteenth century nets, or 'jeebin' as they were often called, were made at home. These home-made nets of wool, hemp or linen were made in winter or spring evenings. A man with memories of net-making going on in his home as a boy described it as follows: "Each person in the household had his allotted task in the home net-making; none was idle. The thread of which the 'jeebin' was made was from hemp grown in the homestead. The hemp being put on the 'quiggal' (i.e. distaff, or stick holding the bunch of hemp for spinning) and spun by the women into thread; the old men and women threaded the needles or shuttles; the

men with the needles netted the thread into 'jeebins'. A smart man could make a 'jeebin' of net in a day, and the slowest worker could average from three to four yards of an evening. I well remember when a child going to school, having to make so many yards of 'jeebin' after school hours, and woe be to me if I failed in my tasks; my ears would probably be pulled out of all proportion".



Wooden Net Measures.

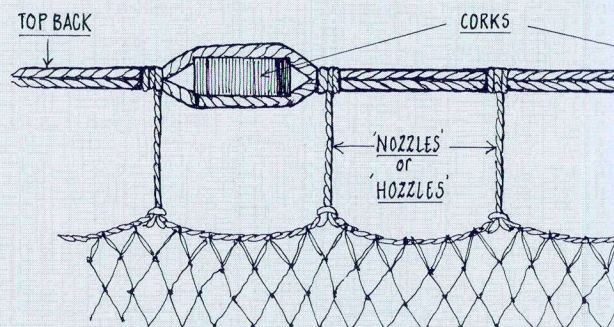
A 'jeebin' meant a deeping, or the depth in which nets were made. People also spoke of 'making jeebin' when they meant net-making. A square wooden peg with a groove in the edges was used to get the right size of mesh. Nets were inspected to see that the mesh was not too small, causing undersized fish to be caught. A quick way of checking on this in the nineteenth century was to see if an English shilling coin would pass between two knots in the net. Nets were liable to shrink with use and those which failed the task were taken away and destroyed. The 'jeebin needles' or shuttles, were usually made from elderberry or apple wood, or from bone.



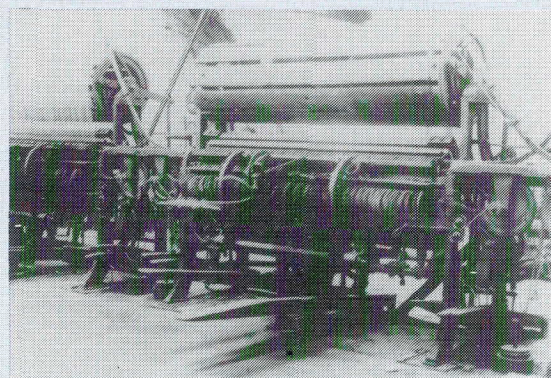
A 'Jeebin' Needle.

Before about 1850 it was common for the members of a fishing boat's crew to bring along their own pieces of net when they joined the boat. At the end of the week the owners of the difference pieces of net would take them away for drying and repairs. John Feltham, who visited the Isle of Man in 1797, wrote of Peel Hill: "Its surface, when I visited it (in July) just previous to the herring fishery, was for acres covered with the wide-spread nets of the fishermen, in order to prepare them for the ensuing season".

MACHINE-MADE NETS



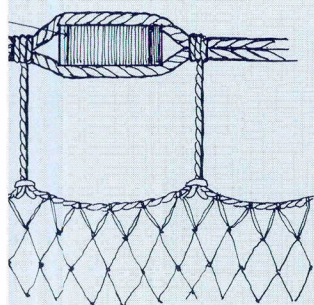
Top of a Drift Net.



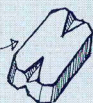
A Net-Making Machine, Port St. Mary.

The first machine-made fishing nets appeared when Robert Corrin of Peel started a net factory at Peel in 1854 (Factory Lane in Peel takes its name from Corrin's net factory). It was Robert Corrin also who introduced the cotton nets which replaced the old linen mesh. In the great days of the Manx herring fishing in the late nineteenth century Peel had three net factories and there was another at Port St Mary. The net-making machine was called a 'jumper' because it was operated by a treadle causing two hundred or more wire springs to be compressed. Women worked in the net factories, standing all day, pulling a lever and 'jumping on the throttle' to produce the rows of meshes. There was much more work to be done on the nets before they were ready for use. They had to be 'breasted', 'hozzled' and 'roped'. 'Breasting' was done at home with a needle to give the net strength to carry ropes. Men or women did this work.

'Hozzles' or 'nozzles' (known also as 'nos-sels') were short lines of cotton cord fastened along the top edge so that at the roping stage the net could be attached to the ropes known as 'top backs'. 'Hozzling' was often done by women, but sometimes by children too, as one man recalled: "I remember young Dick



detail of flat-notched cork



Crebbin and me would be making a thousand hozzles a night and doing our home lessons after that". New nets would then go to the 'Bark House' to be dipped in a preservative solution. Roping was done in long net-lofts with the piece of net stretched the full length of the room. Two ropes known as 'top backs' were attached to the top of the net by the 'hozzles', cut pieces of cork were threaded between the 'top backs' to keep the top edge of the net uppermost in the water. Thinner ropes were fitted to the sides to prevent the nets curling up when in the water. A 'Sole rope' was attached to the lower edge of the net. The 'sole rope', in turn was attached to the heavy 'spring back' by ropes called 'stoppers'. It was by the tarred 'spring back' that nets were hauled by the steam winch or capstan. Mackerel nets were made of a much heavier gauge of cotton than herring nets.

A TRAIN OF NETS

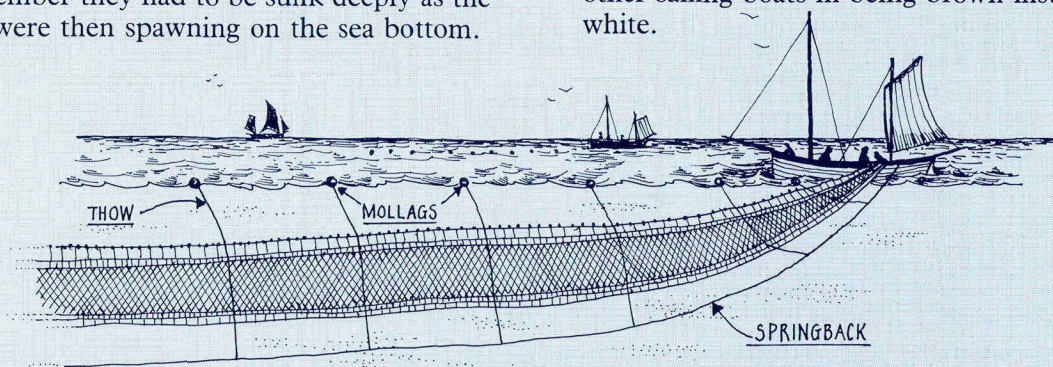
A typical fishing boat's set of nets, or 'train', of the late nineteenth century consisted of a vertical wall over a mile long and eight metres deep with half inch (c1.3cm) meshes, with the top edge of the net about four metres below the surface of the water. Nets could be sunk to any depth, depending upon the length of rope attached to the 'mollags' or buoys. The drift nets were slung high in the early season off the west coast of the Island, but for the 'back fishing' out of Douglas in September they had to be sunk deeply as the fish were then spawning on the sea bottom.

'MOLLAGS'

The 'mollags' or buoys, were made out of sun-dried dogskin or sheepskin. It was reckoned that two to three months preparation went into making a 'mollag', but it would last fifteen years. The skin was soaked in or rubbed with lime to remove the hairs, then oiled. Stockholm tar was poured inside and well shaken up, then poured out again. The outside was in turn well tarred. The tar both preserved the skin and made it airtight. The legs down to the knees were kept on the skin and sewn up except for one. A spool was placed in the unsewn one so that the "mollag" could be blown up through its central hole. The hole was then sealed with a "spittag", or bung, consisting of untwisted tarred rope or a piece of wood. Some fishermen wore a beard without a moustache, called a 'blow-mollag beard', as it was more convenient for inflating the skin buoys via the small hole. A rope (known as a "thow") attaching the "mollag" to the net was run through a hole in the neck flap. The 'mollag' at the tail of the train of nets had the boat's registration number on it.

BARKING NETS

Nets had to be regularly 'barked' or treated to counteract wearing and bacteria attacks on the vegetable fibre of the cotton or linen. A solution made from oak and birch was often used. Manx laws of 1796 and 1817 had forbidden the use of tarred nets. After 1850 a solution of cutch came to be the normal preservative. Cutch is a dark extract from trees which grow in India. The cutch came in blocks and was rather like pitch in appearance. There were special 'Bark Houses' in fishing towns with copper cauldrons for heating the liquid and pits for soaking the nets. It was reckoned that nets barked once a month and dried fortnightly in the fields would, with care, last five years. A fishing boat's sails were also barked and that was why they were different from other sailing boats in being brown instead of white.

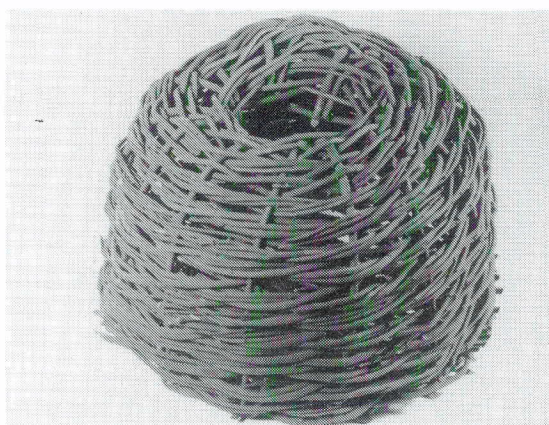


A Train of Nets.

SMALLER ITEMS OF EQUIPMENT

The corks attached to the tops of drift nets to give buoyancy used to be cut by hand. The men on the net-lofts would cut up corkwood into pieces to make the 'head corks' which were about 5cm long, 10cm wide and 2cm thick. The edges would be bevelled and the ends nicked top and bottom. Rounded corks with a central hole were later introduced from Scotland. Plastic floats have replaced corks in more recent times.

Before the days of rubber tyres fenders made of wood, old corks, bundled rope or nets were used to prevent the boats rubbing against quay walls when tied up.



A Buckie Pot.

Fog-horns were important items of equipment. A sea mist in calm still weather conditions could easily lead to collisions. Horns of animals or conch shells were blown in early times to give warnings. Metal horns came into use later.

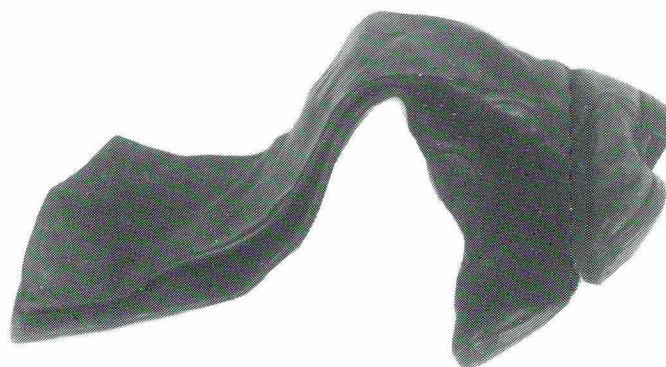
Paraffin flares were carried in case of emergency. Cabin lights and the riding lights were used when lying to the nets were lanterns.

FISHERMEN'S DRESS

The way fishermen dressed varied much over time. According to a writer of 1853: "The dress of these bold children of the deep sea in general consists of nothing more than a shirt, over which are buttoned trousers, both of flannel.... A canvas apron and tarpaulin hat complete the costume". At other times we hear of fishermen wearing varnished bowler hats, sealskin hats, and home-made knitted caps with a tassel of navy blue. Smocks of blue-grey linen or canvas down to seaboot level are also mentioned. Home-knitted 'ganseys' (guernseys) were standard in later

times. 'Ganseys' were safer to wear than coats which had buttons to catch in the nets. There was a saying that if a sailor wanted to wear buttons they should be on the top of his cap. Oilskins were also worn without buttons. Before the days of oilskins men wore tarred or painted canvas for protection against the wet. Later on oilskins made by fishermen's wives were preserved with linseed oil and darkened with lamp black. When the fishermen began to feel themselves getting damp – after perhaps three weeks work – they would take their suits home and if the weather was fair, wash them, coat them with oil and hang them out to dry. They were then stiff and waterproof. As conditions improved oilskin coats would be made to measure in the shop and it was remarked that fishermen were prouder of their oilskins than of their Sunday suits.

Before rubber boots were available fishermen wore leather sea-boots. They were made by cobblers in the towns and villages. They might last as long as thirty years. The boots were of black leather, often with a flap over the knee. They were never rolled down like wellingtons. The seaboots were treated with linseed oil mixed with archangel tar, or grease.



Leather Sea-Boots.

TRADES CONNECTED WITH THE FISHING

Providing the equipment for fishing involved a whole variety of trades. Shipyards where the boats were built and repaired, sail lofts where sails were made, rope walks where ropes were spun and twisted and smithies where anchors and chains were made were all closely linked with fishing. The grocers and butchers who supplied provisions and the tailors who made fishermen's clothing also depended on the fishing industry. So many people were involved in one way or another with fishing that it was estimated in 1883 that one person in every four in the Isle of Man depended in one way or another on that activity for a living.