



MANX SEA FISHING

6

USES FOR THE HERRING CATCH



Herring Carts at Peel Fish Auction.

HERRING IN THE MANX DIET

HERRING had always been part of the staple diet of Manxmen, eaten with oatcakes in early times and especially with potatoes after these were introduced to the Island soon after 1700. An old writer describes the way this typical meal was eaten, as follows: "The primitive and chosen way of the Manx to take it was: to put mashed potatoes in a long wooden tray, a cup of butter placed beside it, into which all dipped, and in that manner the boiled herring and all were eaten with the fingers". The potatoes were often boiled in their jackets.

Herring were also eaten fried, roasted or 'potted'. 'Potted herrings' were made by overnight cooking in the oven with vinegar, pickling spices and bay leaves.

The following was a recipe for 'Herring Broth' – a meal relished by fishermen.

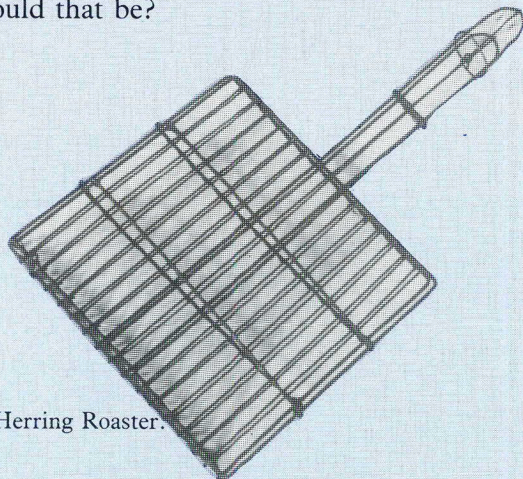
Ingredients: 10 fresh herrings, shallots or chives, pepper and salt

Preparation: clean and scrape the herring well, removing the heads and tails. Place in a pot with shallots or chives finely chopped. Add pepper, salt and a quart [just over a litre] of cold water.

Cooking: *Bring to the boil, simmer for 15 minutes. Serve the herrings in the broth, removing the bones.*

An extra quantity of herrings would be set aside in August or September for the 'stock' or winter store. These were preserved by packing them in a barrel or crock between layers of salt. They would be washed to remove the pickle during the winter and usually hung out to dry for a few days before cooking. On large farms several mease of herring would be set aside for the 'stock'. (A mease consisted of five 'long hundreds' of herring, that is 5 x 124 or 620).

In 1840 it was stated that 15,000 mease of herring were consumed annually either fresh or salted in the Isle of Man. How many fish would that be?



A Herring Roaster.

FRESH HERRINGS EXPORTED

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries 'fresh buyers' used to sail out to meet the Manx fishing fleets at sea and buy fresh herring for transport to fish markets in Ireland, England and Scotland. The 'fresh buyers' had fast sailing boats called wherries or smacks and flew a special flag to let fishermen know that they wished to buy more fish. They sprinkled the herrings lightly with salt and made for a port such as Liverpool with all possible speed.

At Liverpool herrings were sold fresh, smoked to produce red herrings or salt-cured as white herrings. By the 1860's it was to St John's market in Liverpool that most fresh herring went on export. They were now being transported by steamers as well as sailing vessels. Most herring were sold fresh from around 1830 until about the end of the nineteenth century.

RED HERRINGS

From about 1780 to the 1830's red herrings were a very important outlet for fish. Red herrings were cured, dried and smoked over wood fires in large buildings erected for the purpose at Douglas, Derbyhaven, Port St Mary and Peel. Red herrings were not split as kippers are and the process took anything from three to five weeks. They were called 'red herrings' because of the colour they turned on being smoked. The process of making red herrings had been well known for centuries outside the Isle of Man and William Blundell who had lived on the Island around 1650 marvelled that the Manx were ignorant of this way of using the herring they caught. The Yarmouth method of making red herring was finally introduced to the Island by a merchant named Woodhouse, in 1771.

By 1815 there were five red herring houses in Douglas alone and a flourishing export trade had begun as early as the 1780's with the fish being sent to Italy and the West Indies as well as to the other parts of Britain. A Leghorn merchant told John Feltham in 1797 that three cargoes of red herring a year were usually received from the Isle of Man. Venice, Florence and Palermo were other Italian ports involved in this trade. Returning vessels brought back to Britain wines and fruits from the Mediterranean. The red herrings sent to the West Indies were sold to plantation owners who used them as food for their slaves. When slavery ended throughout the British Empire in 1838 this branch of the red herring trade quickly collapsed as the freed slaves were now unwilling to go on eating a diet associated with their old condition. Red herring houses on the Isle of Man soon went out of business.

SALT HERRINGS FOR EXPORT

The other process by which herring could be preserved for a long period was salt curing. Salt cured herrings were often called 'white herring' in contrast to 'red herring'. David Robertson, who toured the Island in 1791, described the landing of herring at Douglas and went on to say: "They are then cured by the white herring merchants, the process is simple, and women are chiefly employed on this occasion. By girls from nine to thirteen years of age, the herrings are carried in baskets from the boats; and on being conveyed to the herring houses are, by the more

robust women, rubbed thoroughly with salt, after which they leave them to purify till next morning, when with a layer of salt between each row of fish, they are barrelled”.

In later times it was women from Scotland or the north east of England who gutted and packed the herring in barrels. These women with their oilskin aprons, wellington boots



Fish Workers on Peel Breakwater.

and bandaged fingers working in the herring troughs were part of the herring season scene in the Isle of Man until about 1950. A team of three women – two gutters and one packer – could clean and pack three barrels each holding roughly 1000 herring, in an hour. Coopers accompanied them, making the barrels, lidding them and reopening them after about a week for topping up after shrinkage and settlement of the fish, finally sealing and marking them.

The chief markets for salted herring from the second half of the nineteenth century were Russia, Germany and the Low Countries. As fresh fish became available with the development of railways in Britain the demand for salted herring was much reduced, but it was said that armies marched on salt herring and certainly peasants in Eastern Europe were eager to have them. Apart from the interruptions of the two world wars trade with the same countries continued until recent years. Latterly it was ‘klondykers’ from Eastern Europe who came to the Isle of Man in seasons when there was a revival of herring fishing (e.g. 1977-79) to take away the herring. These factory ships took on immense quantities, simply salting the fish without gutting.



Moving the Barrels of Salt Herrings.

KIPPERS

The least time for preparing red herrings was two weeks, but with kippering the herring caught alive in the sea at night could be cured, packed and sent off to the English markets on the next day. To make kippers, herring are slit, gutted, soaked in vats of brine, then smoked on tenter sticks above smouldering wood chippings. (Red herring were not split open like kippers and smoked for a much longer period).



Fish-Splitting Machine at a Kipper Yard.

It is not known exactly when kippering began in the Isle of Man. The idea of kippering may have developed from seeing the split smoked 'finnan' haddock. It seems that small scale kippering developed in little yards in Peel. A newspaper report of 1898 states that in that year there was not one kippering or curing establishment on the Island which exported fish, but that thirty years earlier cartloads of kippers could be seen in Douglas on their way to the morning boat. This puts back the start of kippering to at least 1870. It was really in the twentieth century though that kippering became a main outlet for the herring catch. Markets for salt-cured herring were disrupted with two world wars and kippering increased at the expense of pickle curing. In the early 1970's kippers were sold as follows:

- 60% went to UK wholesale
- 30% went as gift parcels sent by tourists
- 10% were used on the Island

One of the problems with modern kippering is that expensive equipment such as herring gutting machines is required and this equipment has to be maintained during the winter months when no kippering goes on.

To make the best kippers herring are used when the oil content in their bodies is at its highest. The oil content builds up in June to a high level for July and August, then falling in

September when spawning begins. Oil content is not as important for salt-cured fish.

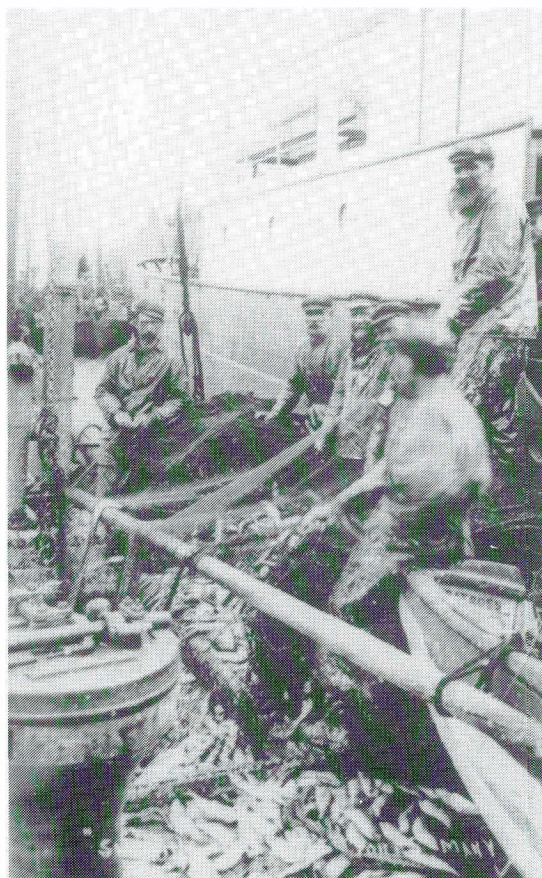
OTHER USES OF THE HERRING

A fish meal factory was built at Peel in 1955 and used until 1973. The idea was to use surplus herring to make meal for animal feed and oil which could be used for a variety of purposes.

The idea of turning fish into meal and oil has been abandoned because fish stocks have to be safeguarded if there is to be any herring fishing in the future.

Quick freezing of herring as an alternative to salt or smoke curing began in the 1960's. Frozen fish factory ships also anchored off the Island during the late 1970's.

Pickle curing, klondyking, kippering and freezing have been the main outlets for herring in recent years.



Shaking Herring from the Nets.