

Holy Island's Fishing Heritage

by Katrina Porteous

Two Postcards



Sal and Bess Morris c1880, two of the last representatives of a hard and ancient way of life



Upturned keelboats, Holy Island

Several important aspects of Holy Island's fishing history are summed up by two picture postcards. In the first, a photograph dating from about 1880, two fishwives, 'Lang Sal and Fat Bess', stand with their creel-laden 'cuddies' (donkeys), fetlock-deep in mud. In the second, taken a century later, two tarred sheds curve like sea-shells against a blue sky. They are sections of upturned boats. This second image gives us a glimpse back to the 19th century, when the herring industry revolutionised traditional Northumbrian fishing villages like Holy Island. The first image looks back much farther, to an older fishing economy, which continued alongside more modern elements well into the 20th century.

Today, around five boats fish from the Island: small, modern workboats, each crewed by two or three men, who mainly catch crabs and lobsters. In addition, the tradition of oyster-farming has been revived on the Sutherland family's holdings at Ross, and mussels are harvested under licence within the National Nature Reserve. Although fishing continues, its dominance of the Island economy has declined, and the way of life that once accompanied it has almost disappeared. Yet aspects of this largely-intangible culture are as old as the abbey ruins, and as important to the Island as its more imposing monuments – perhaps more so.

The Peregrini project has operated against this background of fishing culture, and has touched on it in a number of practical ways: in its work on the pier; in the restoration, with the Island's Development Trust, of the old lifeboat house; in preserving the bark-pots at the Ouse; and in the village Archive Project. In this essay I'll provide some background to link these different strands. I'll explore, first, evidence of the Island's medieval fishing history, which I'll argue set the pattern for what followed until the mid-20th century. I'll look at its continuities in 19th century fishing activity, and at 19th century developments in markets and technology, particularly the industrialisation of the herring fishery. The transformations which this brought to the Island were important, but seasonal, and many lasted only 100 years. By World War I, many aspects of the Island's older medieval pattern of fisheries remained. In exploring these two very different strands of fishing, this essay will also touch on the role of the Island's women, and how their involvement continued well into the 20th century.

What follows is assembled from my own research for various projects over many years: oral history from the Island in 1990-93; work on the Island's herring industry for the National Trust in 2006, which drew on private papers belonging to Islanders; a community project which, together with archaeologists Chris Burgess and Kristian Pedersen, I led in 2007-8; and a subsequent paper, *Bednelfysch and Iseland Fish*, co-written with Dr Adrian Osler¹.

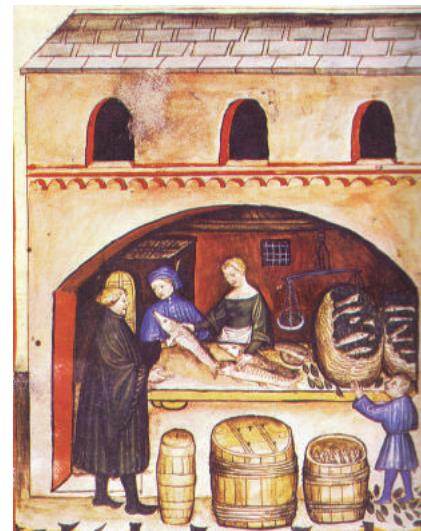
Holy Island's Medieval Fishery

We are fortunate to have an unusually early record of fishing from Holy Island in the accounts of Durham Priory. Until the dissolution of the monasteries (1536-40), the Island and the smaller cell on Farne lay within the holdings of Durham, and this administrative peculiarity continued after 1540, as 'Islandshire' remained part of Durham's 'Palatinate' until the mid 19th century. In the early 1340s, Holy Island's monastery comprised 13 ecclesiastics and 13 servants, and from that time for 200 years it recorded inventories of foodstuffs, sales of fish and purchases of fishing gear². Dr Adrian Osler analysed this data in our published paper, on which the following paragraphs are based³.

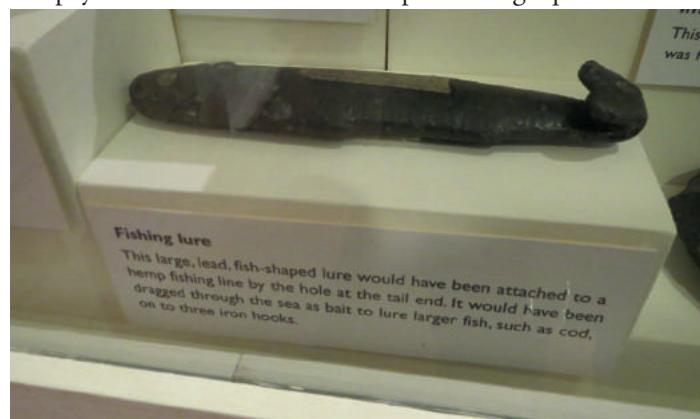
The most striking finding of our research was that much of what is recorded in the medieval accounts would have been familiar to an Island fisherman in the early 20th century. The accounts list fish caught, consumed or sold from Holy Island and Farne, and boats and fishing gear built, sold or repaired. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, fishermen on the Northumberland coast were catching almost all of the species recorded in the monastic accounts, and very few that were not.

From 1340 to 1540, Holy Island recorded twice as much locally caught fish and fishery income as Farne, receiving sea fish 'in kind' and levying tithes on landings above its own needs, as well as on oysters and salmon. It recorded large quantities of fish for its own consumption: cod, codling, 'dogdrave' (white fish), stockfish (dried cod), haddock, herring, mullet, ling, porpoise and salmon (salt and fresh). The Island cell was also involved in the direct catching and selling of fish. In 1381 it paid wages to ten men 'who fished the boat during winter'. Sales of codling and white fish appear in the cell's accounts, together with payments to carriers who transported large quantities of 'Bidnelcodlynge' (codling from the nearby coastal village of Beadnell) and 'dogdrave' to Durham.

Specific records of fishing gear in the inventories are infrequent, largely confined to the period 1350-1450, and most refer to Farne; but they are remarkably consistent with gear used in much later times. Nineteen references to lines and hooks, together with seven for nets, indicate a mix of line and net-based sea fisheries, with shellfisheries



Women selling fish 1385 (Italian)



Medieval fishing lure (Lindisfarne Priory)

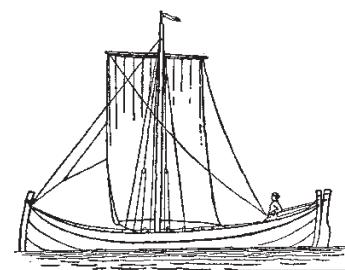
highlighted by a ‘lobster net’ (1417, Farne). Three distinct types of line fishery are suggested, including hand lines, small lines, and great lines with ‘gret huyks’. Fishing gear references specific to Holy Island indicate a dedicated herring fishery involving relatively high costs: ‘six herring nets 10*s* 8*d*’ (1397). There is also a reference to an ‘oyster dredge’ at Holy Island (1412) – an interesting link with modern times.

The traditional boat of the Northeast coast from Berwick to the Humber is the ‘coble’. This high-bowed, clinker-built, open boat was constructed without a keel, and was therefore ideally suited to launching from the sheltered havens of the Northumberland coast. Its structure, building practices and the dialect words associated with it suggest Anglo-Viking, or even pre-Anglian, origins.⁴ Some of its characteristics were probably already well-developed by the 14th century. The use of the term ‘coble’ in the medieval accounts is ambiguous: the ‘modern’ (late 19th century) coble is quite different from the vessel of the same name used for salmon fishing at the mouth of the Tweed, although the two do have features in common. In the medieval accounts, descriptions of boats acquired by Holy Island and Farne for the sea fisheries appear under three designations: ‘cobles’; ‘boats’; and single named types. The term ‘boat’ was apparently used loosely and sometimes interchangeably with ‘coble’. Prices for newly-built ‘boats’ in the 15th century usually averaged £1 to £2. ‘Cobles’ were generally bought for around 25*s* in the late 14th to early 15th centuries, with 22*s* paid out ‘for making two cobles’ for Holy Island in 1412.

The Farne fleet of the late 1360s seems to have comprised two large boats capable of prosecuting the deep-water line fisheries or herring fisheries, together with at least three smaller, less costly craft for work closer inshore. There seems to have been some reduction in fishing capability in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, when the ability to pursue the deep-water fisheries is more uncertain.

Like Farne, Holy Island’s records show two separate strands of boat usage: cargo vessels and fisheries. Fishing boats are first mentioned in 1378 with the payment of just under 19*s* to two fishermen for boat expenses and wages, whilst three years later, in 1381, ‘*a little boat or coble [was] bought and repaired*’ for 16*s* 8*d* (half the cost of a new build). Tithes were collected from two fishing boats in 1396, and again in 1398, when ‘*One boat [was] purchased, and another lost upon the sea and redeemed*’. This successor cost £1 9*s*. The 1401 inventory records a larger fishing boat, a ‘farcost... [laid up] in the stable’. Together with that year’s expenditure of £9 18*s* 10*d* on ‘*nets, depyngs and 2 sails with their necessaries*’, this could represent a single catching unit. Three years later, in 1404, another boat type, a ‘herynger’ (herring boat) was sold for £2.

The fate of Holy Island’s herynger and farcost at the beginning of the 15th century, together with the pattern from Farne, suggests a period in the 1300s when the catching effort was better capitalized and wider ranging. No revival is indicated in the early 1400s; these years show only the construction of a couple of low-cost cobles (1412) and a boat sale resulting in the immediate acquisition of a craft costing just 13*s* 4*d*, ‘for the good of the house’ (1418). While the Island’s fisheries activities may have declined to subsistence level, however, it continued to receive incomes generated through existing fishery rentals and tithes, and to handle fish products from nearby communities like Beadnell, until its dissolution. From 1417 to 1442 Holy Island was still a significant, sometimes weekly, supplier of ‘Iseland Fish’ or ‘Yselandfish’ to Durham Priory.



Medieval herring boat (Norwegian)

Post-Medieval Period

After the dissolution of the monasteries little is known about fishing on the Island for over 200 years. The organisation of the Island's medieval fisheries suggests that some individuals might have continued to depend entirely upon fishing for a livelihood. 27 fishermen were said to live on Holy Island in 1626 and in the late 18th century there were between 10 and 12 herring boats.⁵ This number seems to have remained fairly constant. Parson and White's Directory of 1828 records eleven four-man fishing boats.

But change was underway. The 18th century saw the adoption, in some Northumbrian ports, of aspects of 'industrial' fishing practice and more distant markets. First, Tweed salmon were sold to London from the famously fast 'Berwick Smacks', and soon white fish was reaching the same market. By the end of the century, John Wood, landlord in the village of Beadnell, had established 'the Northumberland Branch of the British Fisheries', an ambitious but short-lived enterprise which invested in its own smacks, and sent white fish and lobsters from that village to London.⁶ Meanwhile, in the second half of the 18th century new practices in herring fishing and curing, adopted into Scotland from Dutch fishermen, and encouraged from 1750 until the 1820s by government bounties, opened new markets overseas. The results soon reached Northumberland, driving rapid expansion down the Northeast coast which affected even the smallest villages.

Fishing on the Island in the 19th Century

The 'traditional' Northumbrian fishing year is based on 19th century accounts, although as we have seen there is strong evidence to suggest that this pattern was established in much earlier times. It was pursued using two boat-types, the small open coble, of about 25-27 ft, with a single lug sail and a crew of three or four, and a larger open boat carrying a crew of five or six. In the early part of the century this larger boat seems to have been a double-ended coble type; but by the mid-century the Scottish 'Fifie', known in Northumberland as the 'keelboat', had been adopted.⁷ By this time, most Holy Island fishermen owned or had shares in both kinds of boat.

Bulmer's Directory noted of Holy Island in 1887 that '*the little port is chiefly visited by fishing boats, and in the season presents a lively scene, if not always a pleasant odour.*' Some years earlier, Walter White (1859) described the Island in more detail: '*There is a square bestrewn with unsavoury rubbish, and the condition of the streets accords therewith, implying that public cleanliness has not yet grown into a habit.*'⁸ George Johnson, founder of the Berwickshire Naturalists, also writing in the 1850s, observed: '*A stroll through the village disclosed very sensibly the nature of the principal occupation of the natives. In every street heaps of the shells of the mussel and limpet are collected before the doors, and mixed with the refuse of fishing lines, and with the household ashes etc. They do send forth a most foul and fishy smell, evidently agreeable to the senses of the householders.*' At the haven '*The landing-place was disgusting with filth, and it was difficult to approach the boats without treading on garbage. There were a few small haddock, pouts, dabs, and grey gurnards in the bottom of the boats, with mutilated crabs, partanes, and spider crabs.*'⁹

At the time of Johnson's account, the Island's large natural harbour belonged to the Crown; but in 1874 the Crown and Manorial rights were sold to Robert Crossman of Cheswick. A few years later, correspondence was exchanged with the Board of Trade about the possibility of adapting the harbour as an official 'Harbour of Refuge.' Harbourmaster Ralph Wilson described it in 1883 as '*used largely for fishing purposes, for which it is well adapted and a considerable fishing population inhabit the island.*' Wilson explained that, while the bigger boats might fish (for herring) 50 miles from home, '*a large proportion of the fishing is done within a distance of 2 to 8 miles from the shore. These boats can always run for the harbour if caught in a gale and the facilities for hauling up boats and*

drying nets are very extensive.'¹⁰

The fishing year was divided into seasons: the mainstay was high-priced white fish such as cod and haddock, caught on long lines from October until March. Long lining was supplemented by fishing for crabs and lobsters using round hoops of net called 'trunks'. Lugworm baited lines were also used in summer to catch flat-fish. Great lines were used in deeper water and baited with fish at sea. Herring were caught between June and September, although traditionally the price they fetched was very low because they were difficult to preserve. The gear necessary for all these types of fishing, it will be noted, is already familiar from the medieval accounts.

Island women were involved in this fishing economy just as much as the men. As the land-based half of the partnership, they were occupied in the unpaid work of gathering bait, baiting lines, selling fish, and helping to mend gear and launch boats. In the industrial herring fishery, as will be discussed later, they were also involved in the paid work of gutting and packing herring. Even children did their share, frequently staying away from school during the herring season or when they were needed to pick mussels. The unpaid involvement of the whole family was characteristic of a medieval economy.¹¹

Long Lines

The Island was fortunate to have a ready supply of mussels; elsewhere, fishermen's wives often had to walk great distances to gather bait – for example, from Beadnell to Waren.¹² The women were responsible for shelling or 'skeyning' the mussels and limpets, and for baiting the 1,400 hooks which each man took to sea in the form of two half-lines. A full line was about a mile in length, making three or four miles of line for each coble at sea. The hooks were suspended from the line on lengths of twine called 'sneyds' (snoods). On Holy Island, each 'sneyd' was augmented by a length of twisted horsehair, called a 'graith', spun using a spindle-whorl called an 'empstone' or 'berreller'.¹³ In this as in many things, the Island looked north; the horsehair snood was a Scottish tradition, not found elsewhere in Northumberland.

When Johnson visited the Island in the 1850s, he seems to have found both long lines and summer lines in use: '*Men, and more women, were sitting in the sun, at the doors, occupied in baiting the lines for the morrow. The mussel was the principal bait. The lugworm was also being used, but in less quantities; and I found there was an impression against it. The women told me that it tendered their fingers and made them sore.*'¹⁴ Lugworm were particularly unpleasant when lines were 'redded', or cleaned, or if stinking bait had to be 'mucked' (removed).

A photograph taken on the Island around 1900 shows a woman and a girl baiting a long line into a wicker 'swull' filled with 'bents' (marram grass). The bents prevented the bait from drying out. The baited sneyds were arranged in meticulous, tiered rows so that they would not 'fool' (tangle) when the line was shot. It took about three hours to bait a line, and required so much skill that fishermen tended to marry within the fishing community, preferring wives who had grown up learning to skeyn and bait.



Ralph Wilson with horsehair used for long line 'graithes'



The family economy - creels and long lines, c1900

Creels

As the photograph suggests, fishermen often worked pots and lines together in the same season, due to the uncertainty of catches and prices. On the Island, pots were known as ‘creels’. Fisherman John Wilson’s diary entry for October 20th 1901 is typical: ‘*We baited our lines last Saturday Oct 12th and the plaice was very thin, and codlings not very thick, and cheap; so we put 28 creals (sic) in yesterday Oct 19th south of the Steel for lobsters.*’¹⁵ Creels superseded the older method of crab and lobster fishing with ‘trunks’ in the second half of the 19th century. Creels were made by the fishermen, using driftwood, with ash or hazel ‘skowbs’ (sticks) gathered from the mainland. They were baited with cods’ heads or whiting, shot in ‘tiers’ (strings) of about 40 or 60, and hauled by hand. The usual number of creels for a three man coble was 140 or 160.

Fishermen worked in shallow water, close to shore, for lobster; crabs were caught further out, and were best in spring. Storms often meant lost or broken gear. John Wilson’s diary entries for March 22nd and April 16th 1899 are typical: ‘*It is a very stormy night the wind NNE and any amount of snow...the sea was very heavy this morning. I doubt it will be a bad job with the creals as well as the lines, especially them that has them in for lobster.*’ ‘*A very heavy breeze from the E to ENE and a very heavy sea. We will expect everybody will lose their creals...not many creals in over 14 fathoms.*’

Sailing fishermen knew exactly where to shoot their lines and creels from lining up landmarks, knowledge of which was handed down the generations. John Wilson’s account of where he shot his creels makes fascinating reading: many of the landmarks are recognisable, and some of the ground is still used by Island fishermen today. Beblay, for example, is Beblow Crag, on which Lindisfarne Castle stands, the Herring Houses are those at the Ouse, Half a Law is Heiferlaw, a hill near Alnwick, Windgate a nick in the Cheviots, and Minstrelsey is Holy Island Abbey: ‘*We shifted 43 into Stone – the Herring Houses today, as far south as Scores – the Law End.*’ ‘*We shifted our long tier of creals in on Friday and yesterday they were from Half a Law – the Stone and Beblay – Windgate, to Minstrelsey – Mack and Half a Law – the big bank offside the castle. It has been a good place for crabs.*’

‘*There’s any amount of places in the sea I still could go to,*’ Island fisherman Robin Henderson recalled. ‘*Ye would no understand Heiferlaw – the Nettle Buses? It’s a mark for out on the Farne Islands there. When they came in line, ye see, y’d know the shoal was there. O, there was any amount of them. Swingle Trees – the Snook End. Fenham Granary over Beal Muck Midden. Aye. And any amount of names! The Beanstackses. The Broon Coo. Scar Jackie. Skelderley Pool. Well, the castle’s proper name is Beblow.*’ Ralph Wilson remembered discussing these places with his father, long after he had lost most of his capabilities: ‘*For years he couldn’t walk about, just sat in a chair. But go and ask him the marks to shoot a length of pots on a certain place, and he could tell ye exactly the marks to use, what water there was there, and when to be there and when not to be there.*’¹⁶

Salmon

From early times, catching salmon was in many ways a separate fishing activity. In the medieval period salmon fishing, often controlled by the Church, concentrated netting and trapping on rivers and estuaries.¹⁷ The Tweed was very important in this respect. It continued to be so into modern times: by the mid-18th century, the Tweed salmon net fishery was highly capitalised, organised and productive, driving expansion in other areas. Netting rights were



A bad day for salmon at Cocklawburn, 1980s.
(Photo by Jim Walker)

leased by companies, chief among them the Berwick Shipping Company, later the Berwick Salmon Company. Crews also netted for salmon using beach seines along the coast. Fervent attempts were made to control salmon netting at sea within seven miles of the Tweed mouth by the Tweed Acts of the 1850s, enforced by bailiffs and supported from 1864 by a gunboat.¹⁸ Beach netting was carried out from stations at Cocklawburn, Cheswick and Goswick, and also from Holy Island by the Holy Island Salmon Company. The Island census notes three Scottish 'sea banks salmon fishermen' in 1851 and two in 1881. Fixed 'stake nets', operated by the Goswick Salmon Company, owned by Sir William Crossman of Cheswick, were erected in the 1850s. These continued to be used on Goswick sands until the mid 20th century, and beach netting from Cocklawburn, Cheswick and Goswick continued until the early 1980s.¹⁹

Salmon traps were known from early times as 'yares': Holy Island still has an area known as 'the Yares' between Castle Point and the Long Batt. But netting or 'driving' for salmon at sea by individual fishermen does not seem to have been a significant part of the Island's fishing year until late in the 19th century.²⁰ At least one Island fisherman was engaged in salmon fishing when John Wilson recorded on May 6th 1899: '*This is Tough's last day for the crealing (sic), he goes to the red fishing on Monday.*'



Extensive salmon stake nets, Goswick c1900

Finances

Johnson described the fisherman's financial situation on the Island in the 1850s: '*The fishing this morning was very indifferent. One boat, which was said to be as well-fished as most of them, had 10 stones weight of haddock. The fishermen receive from the tacksmen 6d per stone during the summer season, which commences on Good Friday; and 11d or 1s during the winter, which begins soon after St Ninian's Fair. They receive 10s a score for cod and ling, and the fish must measure not less than 20 inches; all under this length are sold by weight at about 3d or 5d per stone. Lobsters are, during winter, sold for 21s per score, and during summer for 15s. Crabs bring 2s per score.*'²¹

At this time, the Island white fish and shellfish catch was sent to London in smacks engaged by city fishmongers '*who annually contract with the fishermen to pay them so much per score for all the fish sent during the season.*'²² Given the unpredictability of income, financial arrangements needed to be flexible. According to writer Charles Cromarty, in the mid 19th century the landlord of the Fisherman's Arms (now 'Town View Cottage' at the top of Marygate) frequently acted as banker in the share-outs, agent for the sale of fish, and to advance crews money to assist in the purchase of new boats and gear.²³

Fifty years later, fixed prices were no longer in operation, the market was competitive, but the situation was no easier for the fisherman. As soon as fish became plentiful, prices plummeted. On January 7th 1899 John Wilson wrote: '*Not much to speak of, only the fish keeps very thin, especially haddocks. Only a few codling to be got from 20 to 25 stone. But the fish is making good money and has done all this season. Codling today sold 2s 6d, haddocks and sprags 3/-.. Robertson paid this week 1s 3d for codling, 1s 6d for haddock, 2s 9d for crabs, crabs last week 2s. Figgins and them left Robertson and sent their own crabs away on Weds because he rose all the fish and did not rise the crabs.*'

Robertson was the fish merchant on the Island. Not everyone, however, sold through him. Wilson records in March 1900 that he and David Markwell were the only two fishermen 'sending

away our own'. On November 3rd 1901 he records: '*There is not very much fresh just now, no haddocks and very few codlings and very cheap; but the boats that is let is getting a very good price, viz 1/- for codlings. We cannot get much more than half, and sometimes not that much.*' The reference to 'boats that is let' suggests that some skippers still had a contractual arrangement with the merchant.

The 'share-out' for the boat's crew usually took place at the end of the week. Cromarty describes the scene in the Fishermen's Arms in the 1840s.

Islanders, in common with all Northumbrian fishermen, often shared the same name, so were known by their 'by-names'. On share-out night 'Nodding Jimmy', 'Barber Wull', 'Tom the Dregger' and 'Bassie Gull' 'sat around the bar kitchen fire and roasted dried salt cod which they then devoured.'²⁴ Drying and salting fish was an ancient tradition. Writers in the 1850s recorded that *'A number of skates were laid on the tiled roofs of many of the houses, to be dried in the sun. They were not ornamental, and sent forth a pungent smell. When fully dried they became a favourite relish to the fishermen when drinking their ale; and I was told that they were much in demand by the sailors of Scottish vessels that are driven here for shelter. They are eaten without any preparation, or simply toasted at the fire.'*²⁵



Island fishmerchant Mr Cromarty, c1900

Domestic Life in the Island Fishing Community

Much could be written about the social conditions on the Island at this time. Living conditions in every Northumbrian fishing village were primitive. Cottages were very small, usually only one or two rooms housing large families, sometimes a dozen people in all. Fishing gear such as nets and sails were stored in the rafters, and in winter, lines were baited indoors at the same table where meals were prepared and eaten. The women's domestic work was hard and relentless. Water was carried from the village wells, and firewood was collected along the shore. It is hard to imagine how women found time to knit the dark-blue woollen 'ganseys' for their men or, on winter nights, to gather to make 'hooky' and 'clippy' mats. There was nothing romantic about the poverty in which fishing families lived.

The dangers of fishing as an occupation were also all too apparent. As part of the Peregrini project, the Island's Development Trust has restored the Lifeboat House and carried out research into the Island's rich lifeboat history.²⁶ The Island's lifesaving tradition is also represented by its 19th century coastguard rocket house (still in use, next to the Popplewell),²⁷ its rocket post (formerly used for lifesaving practice drill), and its public barometer, set into the wall next to the turnstile by the Crown and Anchor. In response to the widespread loss of life at sea, Algernon, 4th



Fishermen's barometer, 1883

Duke of Northumberland, in association with the Meteorological Society of London, established 14 coastguard stations on the Northumberland coast, each furnished with a barometer, the best means of predicting weather at the time. One of these stations was on Holy Island.²⁸ The public barometer is dated 1883, two years after the infamous ‘Eyemouth Disaster’ in which 189 lives were lost. It carries the inscription: ‘*To replace the gift of Duke Algernon 20 years ago which was accidentally broken.*

Given the dangers of fishing, and its economic precariousness, it is hardly surprising that fishing families were superstitious. Islanders, in common with other Northumbrian fishing families, never mentioned the word p-i-g, and, although many kept the animals, always referred to them as ‘articles’. Although dependent upon women’s work, fishermen did not like to see a woman on the way to the harbour in the morning. A priest was similarly a bad omen, and carrying women or clergy aboard the boat was considered very unlucky. Friday, too, was an ‘unlucky’ day. Nothing new was begun on that day.

Islanders shared most of these characteristics with other Northumberland fishing communities; but in certain ways they were set apart. Within Northumberland’s fishing dialect, for example, the Island language had many peculiarities, sharing traits with the more northerly dialect of Tweedside.²⁹ For instance, Island fishermen spoke of spider crabs as ‘tyelliers’ and ‘runches’, squat lobsters as ‘goudies’, and mergansers as ‘yarrells’, words not known in North Sunderland or Beadnell – whose fishermen were known to Islanders as ‘Skyeldermen’. When Newbiggin fisherman Redford Armstrong first visited the Island before World War II, he claimed that he hardly understood a word.³⁰

The Island’s Herring Industry

Besides long line fishing and creels, the other essential part of the Island’s fishing year in the 19th century was the summer herring fishery. Traditionally herring had been a very low-cost catch, but with the introduction in the early 19th century of new catching and preserving methods, and much greater regulation, foreign markets opened for cured herring, and the fishery took off as an organised industry. It is interesting to trace its progress and decline through the numbers of fishermen listed in the Island census – the peak was 84 in 1871 – and in the size and numbers of boats operating from the Island; I have written about that elsewhere.³¹ Here, let us look at some accounts of the herring fishery in operation around the Island and the surrounding coast.

Herring is a migratory fish. Shoals travel south from Northern Scotland in the early year to East Anglia in autumn. In the mid-19th century, herring fishing from the Island began about July 20th and ended the first week of September.³² By the end of the century, it was starting several weeks earlier. John Wilson records that, in 1899, his crew landed their creels on June 19th in preparation for the herring season; and ‘*the first night we were at the herring was 5th July.*’ In 1900 the creels were landed on June 16th. ‘*The first night off was the 2nd of July and we got one basket and brought them here. Three boats off and had one basket each.*’ In 1911 The Northumberland Sea Fisheries Committee reported that herring fishing was starting too early in the year, when the fish were too small, and that August, which had once been the best month for herring, was now the poorest.³³

Between landing the creels and starting the herring lay a gap of about a fortnight, during which time much preparation was needed. First, ropes and nets were to ‘bark’. In order to protect them from rot, salt and general wear and tear, they were soaked in a tannin-rich solution. Extracts of birch or oak bark were later replaced by ‘cutch’, a resin-like plant bark substance obtained from Africa or Borneo. This brown liquid was boiled in huge iron vats above the Ouse. Nets had to be barked regularly throughout the herring season. Bark was also used to give sails better wind-holding

properties – hence the famous ‘red sails in the sunset’. ³⁴

Robin Henderson recalled Island fishermen barking their gear until the introduction of man-made fibres in the 1960s: ‘*The big sails, they used to bark them – tan them. Aye. They’d spread it out on the grass, get a hot tank going. Cutch – that’s from African bark. Boil it in the hot boiling water and throw it over with buckets and ladles, and the brush, rubbing it into the seams. That preserved it. They used to do that with the ropes and the sails. Seen us frightened to go to the whist drives or the dances – Your hands was brown! Brown! Ye couldn’t put your arm around a lass at a dance!*’

Nets were the most expensive pieces of fishing gear after boats, and preserving and mending them was a continuous task for the whole family. Nets were sometimes hung up on nails or poles outside cottages, but most were laid out to dry on the grass above the Ouse. The Bill for enclosing the Island’s Common land in 1791 let all land between the Ouse and Sanctuary Close to the fishermen for that purpose.³⁵

After barking, ropes were tarred. Ralph Wilson (Manor House) remembered: ‘*They had tar-pots down on the beach. All the ropes was tarred. Dipped into boiling tar. That was another dirty day’s job!*’ Ralph Wilson (Lilburn Terrace) added: ‘*Tarred rope was like wire. What it must have done to their hands! They put margarine on their hands to soften it. Father would come in slaiggart with tar. He would have newspaper round his hands to hold his knife and fork when he came home for his dinner.*’ The Island bark and tar-pots above the Ouse are the focus of one of Peregrini’s community restoration projects.

After several days of preparing gear and painting the keelboats, which had been laid up all winter, the boats were ready to launch. By the end of the 19th century, keelboats were so big and heavy that this was a major communal operation, even for men used to hauling for a living. George Russell Jackson has left a vivid account of the beginning and end of the herring season at Spittal from the early 1870s: *About the beginning of July the herring season commenced; and great were the preparations that were made for it. An entire day was devoted by the fishermen to launching the boats. This day was called ‘boat launchin’ doon day’ and on the close of the herring season another day was devoted to dragging the boats up onto the banks. This was called ‘boat launchin’ up day’. These were not ordinary days. They were to the villagers what the Fourth of July is to Americans; looked forward to for months. The owner of each boat paid 7 shillings and sixpence for launching. There were 28 boats, which made a sum total of £10 10s. This was distributed among the landlords of the 13 public houses in the village, and after the boats were all launched men and boys repaired to the public houses, when the ‘boat-launchin’ spree commenced...’*³⁶ Holy Island had at that time at least nine inns; but John Wilson’s matter-of-fact account in his diary, ‘we pulled our boat down yesterday’, suggests that keelboat launching in his day was a quieter affair.

Whilst these preparations were going on, small ships were bringing salt and barrel staves to the herring yards in readiness for the season. Skilled craftsmen were employed as ‘coopers’, running the yards and constructing the thousands of barrels in which the herring were packed for export. A few vessels were regular visitors to the Island. Johnson’s *Effort* or *Elford* of Berwick was one, bringing cargoes of salt and empty barrels. She made three visits carrying salt in 1882, together with the *Beatricia* of Berwick. She also put in on August 28th 1886 on her way to Beadnell, and again on



Island bark-pot before restoration

August 22nd 1888. On August 20th and 26th 1894, the *Two Brothers* and *Lady James* landed salt at the Island. Salt, wood and iron continued to be landed throughout the season.³⁷

Walter White painted a vivid picture of the Island during the herring season in the 1850s: ‘We saw the ‘towne’; he writes, ‘under its busy aspect preparing for the herring fishery – nets lay in heaps, or stretched out 50 or 60 yards, while men and boys disentangle their mazy folds and tie the loops; around almost every door lies a heap of floats, and lines, and queer-looking oilskin garments, and ample sou’westers hang on the walls. And at times a few men, wearing thick, seagoing jackets, and boots up to their hips, take their way down to the beach with a pile of gear on their shoulders. They will sail ere long, for rumour says the herrings are in the offing... On our way (to the castle), we passed the beach where the fishing boats come in, and saw the huge wooden vat – if vat it be – round which the women stand to clean the herrings, and on the other side of the road 14 hundred herring-barrels in piles and rows, and two men industrious over their final preparation. ‘There wouldn’t be any too many,’ they said, ‘nor yet half enough, if the boats did but have luck.’³⁸

Sailing the Keelboat

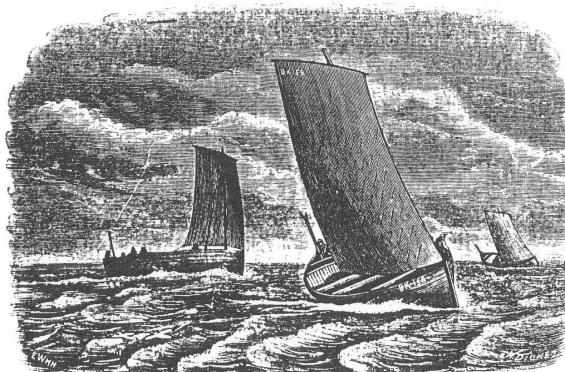
In the early 1800s, most fishing from the Island seems to have taken place using a coble-type boat, including large double-enders for deeper water fishing. From the 1830s, however, a very different sort of boat began to be used: the Scottish ‘keelboat’, built for speed. At first these boats were undocked, and around 40 ft. But over the next 70 years their design evolved, with the addition of half, then full, decks. At the same time they grew in size and tonnage. Sailing a large keelboat with a dipping lug took great skill, which has been fully documented elsewhere.³⁹

The bigger Holy Island keelboats, like George Lilburn’s *Weatherheads* BK 896 (51 ft and 40.11 tons) and Robert Lilburn’s 53 ft *Children’s Friend* BK 248 (53.3 ft and 43.42 tons), were crewed by seven men, the smaller ones by five. W. and J. Wilson’s *Agnes and Jane* BK 1007 (41 ft and 20 tons) had a crew of six. Many of the 35 ft open keelboats, like John Cromarty’s *Beautiful Maid* BK 302 or Robert Markwell’s *Georges* BK 298, were crewed by four or five men and a boy.

When the herring fishing was at its height between 1860 and ‘80, even with a population of between 70 and 84 fishermen, the Island would have been stretched to provide able-bodied crews for its 27 five-man keelboats.⁴⁰ John Wilson refers in his diary to ‘full’ and ‘half-shares’ at the end of the season. Cromarty explains: ‘When the resident crews required extra hands to handle the herring harvests, it was customary to hire the services of casual labour from the mainland and pay them half shares of the profits, thus they were called ‘half-share men’.⁴¹ These hired labourers did a crewman’s work, but unlike regular fishermen, did not provide their own share of the nets. They slept and ate aboard the boats, and were paid only half as much as full crewmen.

How the Keelboat Fished

Herring rise to the surface at night to feed, so herring fishing was a night-time occupation. The Island keelboats set out together for the herring grounds on the evening tide. Walter White



Undecked herring keelboats, c1870
(E. Holdsworth, Deep Sea Fishing)

describes them: ‘While re-crossing the herring beach, we had a pretty sight in the departure of a number of boats. The tide served, evening was coming on, and one after another they hoisted sail, stood out of the bay, made a tack, some two tacks, and then away to the open sea, perhaps for five-and-twenty miles.’⁴²

In the mid-19th century, Island fishermen caught herring very close to home: ‘Many herrings are caught in the Fare-way, between the Farn Islands (sic) and the main-land; but the principal fishery for them is generally a little to the southward of the Staples, a cluster of small islands which lie from 2 to 3 miles to the eastward of the Farns’(sic).’⁴³ Later in the century they fished further away: ‘The large fishing vessels used upon the coast and at Holy Island’, wrote Harbourmaster Ralph Wilson in 1883, ‘have a draft of from 5 – 8 ft when loaded, they go off to a distance of 50 miles in fishing...’ Various factors, including the intensification of inshore fishing, and the effects of the much-hated trawlers on the spawning grounds, combined to push herring shoals into more distant water.

Finding herring shoals at sea was a skilled task. In the summer twilight the Island fishermen looked and listened for ‘signs’, which included whales blowing, gannets diving and, most of all, traces of oil on the water, and beneath it, the white glow of ‘fire’, the phosphorescence of the herring themselves. *At last the great expanse of dark sea shows a shining spot, like a white patch in a black cloud. That is the shoal for which they are waiting, and the phosphoric light, which is speeding over the waters, marks its erratic progress through the ocean.*⁴⁴ There is no doubt that, even for the most unromantic fisherman, there was something marvellous about this.

The herring were caught using drift nets, which drifted with the tide and hung down in the sea like a curtain. The herring swam into them and were caught by the gills. Until the mid-19th century, nets were made from heavy linen and hemp, which hung down naturally in the water. Later in the century, lighter, factory-made cotton nets were introduced, which required stone weights to hold them down. The top of each type of net was kept close to the surface by a line of cork floats, known on the Island as ‘corky dookkas’. Many nets were joined together in one long ‘fleet’ by a ‘warp’ or ‘heed-rope’, supported by ‘dookkas’ made out of bladders or animal skins. Larger floating buoys, called ‘hummels’ on the Island, were used to mark the edges of the fleet. These were sometimes made of glass; more often, again, inflated animal skins and bladders were used. The whole length of net was connected at regular intervals to a ‘messenger’ rope, described by Craster fisherman Bill Smailes as ‘thick as my wrist and full of tar.’⁴⁵

As the size of herring keelboats grew, and especially when cotton nets were introduced, the number of nets in a fleet, and therefore the catching-power, increased. By the end of the 19th century, keelboats often carried up to 60 cotton nets. As each net measured 50-55 yards long and 12-15 yards deep, this consisted of almost two miles of net. Some of the bigger Island boats were capable of carrying this many; although when herring were plentiful they tended to carry fewer nets, as too heavy a catch could drag nets down and lose expensive gear.

The boat sailed slowly ahead while the nets were shot from the starboard (right hand) side, in as straight a line as possible. Once the nets were shot, the end of the messenger, called the ‘swing’, was moored to the boat, which dropped her sail and ‘rode’ by the nets, drifting with the tide. To make her lighter forward, the mast was lowered onto a support or ‘crutch’, which held it at a ‘rake’ of



W. and J. Wilsons' keelboat, Agnes & Jane, c1900

45 degrees. A lantern would be suspended from the crutch to mark the boat in the darkness. Nets would drift for two to four hours, depending on the tide and the amount of fish.

When the floats disappeared in the water, the nets were full and it was time to haul. This was a major task. Wet hemp nets full of fish were extremely heavy, and hauling was originally done by hand. The men would stand in a row, and haul together rhythmically. With every haul, the net was shaken to remove the live herring, and water and scales flew. '*Ye were heavin' an' haalin' an' shakin' the net,*' remembered Charlie Douglas of Beadnell. '*Because all the herrin' was mashed* (caught in the mesh), *the men would stand in a row an' aal haal together an' aal shake together.*' While the men hauled, the youngest member of the crew coiled the messenger. Later a capstan called an 'iron man' was introduced to help take the strain of hauling; but even so the whole process took between three and four hours.

Although very hard work, herring-fishing held a particular excitement. Every time the nets were shot was a gamble: good catches and good prices meant money in the pocket, and even in bad years there was always the possibility of a bumper haul. There were great disparities in the size of catch: '*Two vessels may shoot their nets a few yards from each other, and the one may secure 80 crans (say £80 worth), while the other may not be able to show more than 18 pence for the night's work.*'⁴⁶ Not without reason, herring fishing has been compared to panning for gold.

Herring are oily fish, which quickly spoil. To maintain quality, they had to be taken ashore speedily for processing. As soon as the catch and nets were aboard, the sail was set and the boat hurried back to harbour as fast as possible. '*It is exciting to see the boats come in,*' wrote a visitor to North Sunderland in 1906. '*You see them coming with their brown sails from beyond the Farnes, and gradually dotting over the sea, looking on a bright, breezy day like brown butterflies perched lightly on the water.*'⁴⁷ Buyers bid for the herring on the quayside, and the earlier the fish were landed, the better the price. Herring were sold by the 'cran', a measure of 37 and a half gallons or 28 stone. Depending on the size of herring (which tended to be smaller off the north Northumberland coast than further south), there were around 1,000 herring to the cran. A big catch was not always a blessing: '*As the demand for 'kippers', or smoked herrings, is limited, there is great difficulty in disposing large catches... An Eyemouth boat went into an English port in the spring of 1906 with 80 crans, but the skipper could not get a purchaser, although he offered the whole catch for £5. Herrings were so plentiful that even the chemical and manure factories had to close their gates against their reception.*'⁴⁸ It was not uncommon for a skipper to have to dump his entire catch.⁴⁹

Once the keelboats had anchored in the haven, small, flat-bottomed skiffs tied up alongside them and the herring were lowered down in quarter-cran baskets. A horse and cart waited on dry land to ferry the load to the yard. At busy times, herring were sorted outdoors on the bank-top. The Island had two herring yards; one, marked on the Tithe Award map of 1850, above the Ouse, the other on Sandham Lane, round the corner from the Iron Rails Inn. At these yards, herring were unloaded from carts through a low hole or 'bowley' in the wall, to land in long wooden troughs called 'farlins', from where it would be gutted and sorted by women workers. In most north Northumbrian villages, this labour was made up, not just of local women, but also of Scottish herring girls.

Island Women at the Herring

It has already been noted that women were indispensable to the Northumbrian fishing economy, usually in an unpaid role. Their place in the herring industry, however, was quite different. It was organised, paid and professional. It is easy to forget how much mobility there was between the Scottish and English fishing communities in the 19th century. The freedom and independence

which this gave many young women was unprecedented.

Women were recruited by the cooper before the new season began. Many unmarried girls worked for the whole season, following the herring shoals as they moved south. Some also travelled the ‘winter fishings’ in the Western Isles. They travelled first by boat and later by train, and slept in dormitories above the herring sheds. Women who ‘travelled the fishings’ cooked for themselves, and carried their belongings in wooden kists which also served as tables and chairs. In October 1901, the Berwick Advertiser lamented the departure of young women from Eyemouth: *A large number of fish workers have gone south to Yarmouth and the other southern stations for employment. Consequently the town will be dull for some months to come. It is regrettable that no other industry can be found here to keep these young women at home.*

North Sunderland fisherman Andrew Rutter recalled that, in his village before World War I, *‘There were never enough local lasses to work the herring, so girls arrived from as far away as the Outer Hebrides. There were even crews of lasses from Holy Island.’*⁵⁰ This suggests that, by that time, there was not much work for Island women at home. However, the situation was different in earlier years. It was reckoned that, on days of average catch, for every boat landing herring, a yard needed a crew of three women. If, in the early 1880s, all 27 Holy Island boats landed their catch on the Island, the yards would have needed more women workers than the Island could supply. There were also Island women who ‘travelled the fishings’. Mrs Sylvia Shell, who came to the Island when she married a fisherman in 1946, remembered three Island women who had ‘travelled’ to Yarmouth. They were Taidah Mole (born Cromarty) and Emily Drysdale, who worked together, and Daisy Gowan.⁵¹

The women organised themselves into ‘crews’ of three, made up of two gutters and a packer. The gutters stood in rows at the firlins and, using a short, sharp knife called a ‘gully’, slit each fish from throat to belly, scooping out gills and internal organs in one deft movement. On average, a herring lass would be able to gut between 40 and 60 herring a minute. One Spittal woman was timed at 65 a minute.⁵² The gutters suffered very sore hands, with the cuts, scales and salt. For protection, they would bind their fingers with rags or ‘cloots’.

The Berwick Advertiser, quoting from the Manchester Guardian in September 1906, describes women herring workers at North Sunderland: *‘The ‘gutters’, as they are called, who prepare the herrings for packing, come, some of them, from the far North of Scotland, and speak little but Gaelic. They wear over their petticoats when at work, short skirts of thick black mackintosh, which they slip out of at dinner and teatime, and hang on the walls and railings. With one deft scoop of a knife they do their work, at the same time telling by the feel of the fish which of the four baskets it should be thrown into.’* As the author of the article explains, the herring were sorted into baskets or ‘swulls’ as the women gutted them.⁵³

Salting into barrels for the Continent formed by far the biggest part of the Island’s herring trade. The fish were first soaked in brine. Packing the barrels was a highly skilled job. As the barrels were about four feet high, the women had to bend right down into them for the first layer of fish. The fish were packed in a rosette pattern, alternating one layer in which the heads pointed outwards with the next, in which the tails pointed outwards, and so on until the barrel was full. Between each layer of fish, a thick layer of salt was laid down to prevent the different tiers touching each other. Once a barrel was full, it was left to stand open to ‘crine’ (shrink), and topped up more than once.



Island women joined those working at the herring in North Sunderland

After several days the barrel was sealed. Each finished barrel held just over a cran, or about 1,000 herring.

Once sealed, the barrels were inspected by a Fishery Board Inspector and given an official ‘crown-brand’. Using a hot iron, the cooper burned onto the lid the name of the curer and the quality of the herring inside. A barrel with a good crown-brand could expect to receive a price 50% higher than one with an inferior brand. The herring were now ready for export. ‘*They are sent all over Europe,*’ wrote the Guardian’s North Sunderland correspondent, ‘*principally to Russia and Germany, and are eaten all through the winter. In Germany they mostly eat them raw.*’

The women worked six days a week and, during busy periods, extremely long hours. During a glut it was not uncommon for them to start at six in the morning and to work until after midnight: ‘*Late into the night of a busy day the girls and men are working by the glare of naphtha lights... Very cheerful they always seem, though they must know what it means to have aching limbs. From her comfortable bed the drowsy visitor hears the clatter of the boots and the peculiar dull flapping of the mackintosh skirts as the girls tramp home to their lodgings at any time between midnight and 5 o’clock in the morning.*⁵⁴’ The Island industry was small scale compared to North Sunderland, but similar conditions applied.

In spite of the hard work and long hours, the girls were well-rewarded: ‘*They earn good wages when herrings are plentiful, for they get 1/- a barrel, and it is possible to fill from 15 to 20 barrels in a day.*’ The amount of money each woman earned depended on the speed, skill and experience of her crew. Andrew Rutter recalled one North Sunderland crew which held the record for the number of barrels packed in one day: ‘*If I remember rightly it was 24, but how many working hours this represented, I do not know.*’ Because it was piece-work, the amount of money earned also depended on the catch: ‘*There is the risk that few or no herrings may be caught; and the season at best is short.*’ The herring girls were not paid their full wages until the end of the season. In addition to their pay, each family was given a barrel or ‘kit’ of herring and a sack of potatoes. This was known as ‘*winter beef*.⁵⁵

An old method of preserving herring was to smoke them for many days (‘red herring’). ‘Kippering’, or splitting the herring before smoking for a much shorter time, was only introduced in the mid-19th century. Within a few years, smokehouses could be found in fishing villages throughout north Northumberland. Charles Cromarty mentions the smell of kipper smoke as part of the summer scene on Holy Island. The Guardian’s correspondent described the kippering process: ‘*The herrings are split and opened, and after a brine bath of 25 minutes are hung on tenterhooks, row above row, over oak sawdust fires and are smoked for 12 hours. They are then packed in boxes and sent off by train, and will keep, according to the fishermen for 10 days, according to the shop-keeper for longer.*’ Unlike the gutters and packers, who were paid by the barrel, the women who worked in the smokehouses were paid fixed wages: ‘*18/- a week whether they work or not.*⁵⁶

Kippering was a small part of the Island’s business compared with cured herring. Naturalist Richard Perry, writing in the 1940s, describes the scene on the Island in the 1860s: ‘*A man could walk on upturned herring barrels for half a mile from the great red-brick curing house on the green above the Ouse to the castle*



Converted herring smokehouse, Sandham Lane

*jetty.*⁵⁷ Even in the years before World War I, Islanders remembered, herring barrels were lined up from the huts on the south side of the Ouse all the way to the fish merchant's hut near the castle gate; as children, they would get into trouble for running along the top of them.⁵⁸

The End of the Herring Season

The big keelboats could not be safely moored in the Island haven over winter. So at the end of the herring season, the fishermen would anchor them at the Chare Ends and float them onto the beach on the high September tides. There they would lay them up for winter. From North Sunderland, Andrew Rutter recalled, the larger keelboats were laid up at Waren Burn. '*They lay with their headropes fast to the trees... Local farmers and carters were hired out to haul the boats up with teams of horses, while beer for the thirsty 'hauliers' was provided by the boats' owners.*'⁵⁹ In September 1899, John Wilson writes: '*We brought our nets home on Weds the 20th and got our boat hauled up on Fri 22nd September – quick work.*' Squaring-up day took place at the end of the season. '*The share-outs were frequently paid over in the twelve taverns that flourished on the Island; it is not surprising therefore that much of their hard-earned money was spent on the spot.*'⁶⁰

The Island Herring Business

According to William Beattie, writing in the 1830s, '*Most of the herrings caught by the Holy Island fishermen are taken to Berwick to be cured, and are thence chiefly exported to London, Hull and Newcastle.*'⁶¹ However, by mid-century, Holy Island had two curing yards of its own, run by curers from Spittal. Perry records that, when the Island herring fishery was at its height in the 1860s, '*the entire catch*' was '*bought by two Spittal curers for the Stettin market.*'⁶²

Throughout those years, the whole East Coast herring industry operated on an extended chain of credit. German buyers advanced money to Scottish and English curers; and curers in turn contracted agents and coopers, who ran the yards, and fishermen, who supplied an agreed weight of herring to them for a set price. Fishermen were paid 'arles', a sum which guaranteed the use of the boat for the following year. As we have seen, curers often advanced money for boats and gear for fishermen, who paid for them by instalment; and some curers took a share in the boat themselves. As equipment continually needed to be updated, curers maintained a direct financial interest in the fleet.⁶³ It was typical of this chain of supply that the two Island yards were run by agents of curers from the bigger yards at Spittal.

The Island's arrangements seem, however, to have been complicated. The 1861 census mentions a female herring curer, Jessie Smith, in Crossgate. Whellan's Directory 1855 records four fish curers on the Island: Ralph Holmes, Chapperton Landreth and Co, George Steel and John Whillis. Holmes was a well-known Berwick fish merchant, whose premises stood on Bridge Street. He, Steel and Whillis were still operating out of Holy Island 24 years later in 1879.⁶⁴ By 1887, however, none of these names appears.⁶⁵ This change probably reflects the severe slump in the curing industry in the mid-1880s. When the German market collapsed in 1884, the chain of credit disintegrated and banks foreclosed on many East Coast curers.

In Bulmer's Directory of 1887, only John Robertson and Ralph Wilson are listed as 'fish merchants' (rather than curers) for Holy Island. Robertson's family continued in the fish business on the Island for many years, although it is not clear whether this was in herring as well as white fish; the two were quite separate markets. Wilson also refers once to a 'Robinson', whose ship exports herring for the Island. Three years later, a George Robertson is listed in Kelly's Directory of 1902, along with James Brigham of the Crown and Anchor Inn, as fish merchants for the Island. The 1906 and 1910 editions list only John Robertson, fish merchant.

Cromarty remembers an agent named Boston supplying herring barrels to the Island: ‘Often there was a shortage of barrels and frantic appeals were made to Boston, the agent, to repair the deficiency.’⁶⁶ This refers to Boston Brothers of Spittal, a long-established curing company, founded in 1844, which survived the 1880s crash. By 1894 Boston’s employed about 100 people and exported thousands of barrels of herring to Germany and Russia. Branches also operated from North Sunderland and Yarmouth. John Wilson records a late herring landing delivered to Spittal on September 25th 1900. His son Ralph remembered strong links between the Island and Spittal continuing after World War I, when Island women would travel there to buy ‘Spittal toon boots’ – second-hand sea-boots discarded as the salmon companies replaced them.⁶⁷

On September 25th 1899, John Wilson records that ‘The last shot we had we delivered them at Spittal on the 12th of September.’ On July 6th 1900, he writes: ‘The first night off was the 2nd of July and we got one basket and brought them here. Three boats off and had one basket each. Us and Grocer sent ours away and cleared 9s 8d for 2 baskets’. These entries are ambiguous: ‘We brought them here’ suggests that Wilson could have landed his catch elsewhere. On June 24th, for example, he records: ‘The Lilburns was off on Tuesday night and got 2 baskets, they went to Shields on Thursday’.

The Harbourmaster’s ledger records shipments of herring from the Island at the end of a season.⁶⁸ On September 17th 1880, for example, three ships departed from the Island carrying ‘salt herrings’, and one just with ‘herrings’. On September 16th 1886, the *Christina*, 90 tons, brought a cargo of herring to the Island (presumably to augment it before leaving for the Baltic). On September 29th 1890, the *Olympus* of Leith, 93 tons, came in to the Island under ballast and sailed out again to Stettin loaded with herring. On October 10th 1891, the *Sweet Home*, 36 tons, sailed from Newton to the Island laden with herring, and presumably picked up more. On October 10th 1894, the *Marie*,



Robert Lilburn’s keelboat, Brother’s Pride, and a steam boat, possibly shipping herring, c. 1900

79 tons, left Holy Island for ‘Stateen’ (Stettin) loaded with herring. In 1895, on October 30th, a bigger ship, the *Annette*, 159 tons, left the Island for ‘Stateen’ with a load of herring; and in 1896 on September 25th, the *Zetalois*, 180 tons, left the Island for Danswick (Danzig), also with herring.

By 1897, it was a steamer, *SS Edwards*, which took a cargo of herring from the Island to Leith on October 7th. *SS Edwards* made a return visit to the Island in 1898, while carrying herring from North Sunderland to Leith. She presumably took the Island herring with her. John Wilson records in his diary that, on October 7th 1900, ‘Robinson’s ship went away today with a strong North wind with 700 barrels, and 100 she could not take is on the beach yet.’ The last reference to ships dispatching herring from the Island appears in the Harbourmaster’s ledger on September 5th 1909, when *SS Ixion*, 35 tons, put in on a voyage from Beadnell to Berwick with a cargo of herring. By 1911 the two big herring boats still fishing from the Island seem to have landed their catch at Spittal.

The number of boats herring fishing from the Island, as from other Northumbrian ports, fell year on year from the late 19th century. In 1900 the Island seems to have had four vessels at the herring fishing: the Wilsons’ *Agnes* and *Jane* BK 1007, Robert Lilburn’s *Brother’s Pride* BK 152,

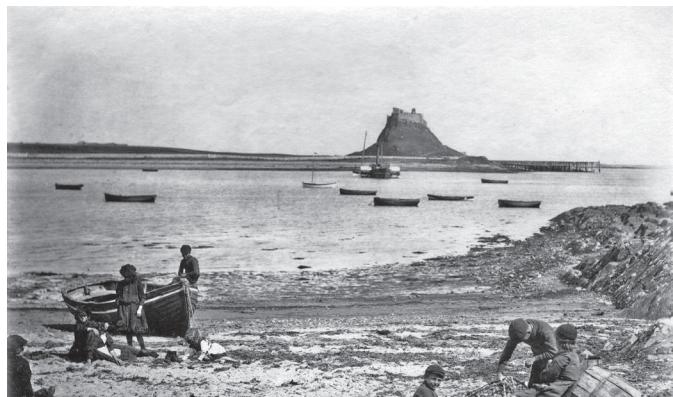
Robert Cromarty's *Mary Ann Jane* BK 1008 and probably also George Lilburn's smaller lugger, *Gem* BK 890. On October 7th that year, John Wilson wrote: '*It has been a very good season on the whole. A few herring and a very fair price. We got squared up last Saturday. We had £350 clear money after paying everything. £53.14s.6d each, 28-odd for half share, 49.17.6d for boat...*'

The years which followed, however, were mostly failures. On September 30th 1901, Wilson reports: '*It has been a very poor herring season this season. Very few herring and very poor prices. We only had £70.12s 2d this season, which is very poor indeed. We got squared up on Friday night with only £10.6s.0d each, half share £5.12s, boat £10. Sorry it was such a poor season.*' According to the Northumberland Sea Fisheries Report, only 227 crans were landed at Holy Island that whole herring season, considerably less than had been landed in one week the year before.⁶⁹ Even more alarmingly, the Berwick Advertiser of August 23rd reported that: '*Even should a good fishing come in, merchants can give only very moderate prices for fish to cure, owing to the state of the Continental market.*' The average price per cran was just 16s.

In 1906 fortunes changed briefly, but the general trend was downwards. By 1913 there were only 16 boats fishing for herring between the Tweed and the Coquet, and Holy Island seems to have had just two boats at the herring, James Markwell's *Markwells* BK 69 and Robert Lilburn's *Children's Friend* BK 248.

Controversy raged about the decline in the quality and number of herring. Many blamed steam trawlers, fishing from ports like North Shields. It was reported at a 'great meeting' at Yarmouth in October 1912 that '*tons of small fish too small to pick up were thrown overboard by the trawlers.*'⁷⁰ Others claimed that shoals were being driven further out to sea as the result of early fishing. In July 1911, the Northumberland Sea Fisheries Committee reported that boats in the region were using too fine a mesh, and starting to fish in May, when the herring were undersized. '*Mr Purdy said the fine meshes used nowadays caught herring as small as sprats.*' In the opinion of curer James Ewing of North Sunderland: '*there should be no herring landed on the east coast before 1 July.*' Ewing, however, was a realist. '*He did not think anything short of an Act of Parliament would cover the matter.*'⁷¹

Steam technology, meanwhile, was changing the herring industry beyond recognition. Sailing boats could not compete with steam drifters, and herring fishing was becoming increasingly concentrated in bigger ports like Eyemouth. No steam drifters were owned locally in north Northumberland. Small ports like Holy Island, already suffering from proximity to North Sunderland, could not afford the necessary investment; and, in any case, did not have harbour facilities for steam drifters. Some Northumbrian fishermen attempted to keep up with changing times, adopting motor boats in place of sail. In July 1911 the Berwick Advertiser claimed that fishing in the Berwick district was equally distributed between motor and sail boats, with sail boats doing slightly better in terms of catches. The Island did not acquire its first motor fishing vessel, Richard Collins' *Kathella* BK 337, until 1914.



Summer scene at the Ouse c1900. Beneath the castle
a steamer and herring keelboat are visible

In the 1958 film, '*The Magic of Lindisfarne*', Ralph Wilson (senior) from the Manor House explains why herring fishing finished on the Island: the price, he says, was simply too low. £1 for a barrel was a good price. Sometimes they got just 2s 6d. This price did not even cover the costs of transportation. Another Ralph Wilson, Harbourmaster in 1892, records in his ledger that, on August 19th, the last visiting herring boat of the season, Richard Anderson's BK 985, was obliged 'to throw his fish away.' *'No money to pay dues'*, the account reads, starkly.⁷²

The industry seems already to have come to an end on the Island when, on August 12th 1914, The Berwick Advertiser reported: *'Curing for export is impossible... stocks on hand cannot be disposed of. There is very little outlet for cured herrings in the home market. Any further supplies will be kippered or sold fresh.'*

With the end of the herring fishing and the limekilns last fired in the 1890s, the Island's century of prosperity was over. Perry gives a moving description of the scene: *'One by one the big sailing boats were laid up in the Ouse, to be drawn up on the beach, inverted, and their bows sawn through, to serve as commodious boat-houses for the creel-and-line gear of the new generation of long-line and lobster-fishermen, with their 25-ft paraffin-driven flat-bottomed cobles, or 33-ft 'mules', whose crews of 2, 3 or 4 men fished no further offshore than 10 or 12 miles between dawn and noon.*

*The last owner of a big boat, Robert Lilburn, father of James, laid up his boat in 1914.'*⁷³

Robert Lilburn's 57.4 ft, 53.34 ton Eyemouth-built keelboat, *Thrive*, BK 257, the biggest keelboat ever to fish from the Island, was sold to Hartlepool in 1917. This

is the boat which Robin Henderson so vividly describes: *'I can remember when the last herring boat left Holy Island during the First World War. She went down to Hartlepool. She belonged a Robert Lilburn – that's me father's relation. Lived in the cottage there. And I always remember – all the women and the people of the village went out to see it go, to the hill looking over the harbour. Two big sails, ye know, and a gale of North West wind. She put up a record journey down, the speed she went, with the sails. She averaged 10 knots, I hear. It was the fastest speed a boat had ever run because of the half-gale from the Nor'west; following wind, flood tide – put a couple of knots on. The Thrive. I don't know what it means, but that was the name, the Thrive. And I can always remember. I think it was 1916 when she went. I was six year old. Just a boy.'*⁷⁴



Visitors in front of disused herring houses and boats at the Ouse, 1939

The Keelboats and the Castle

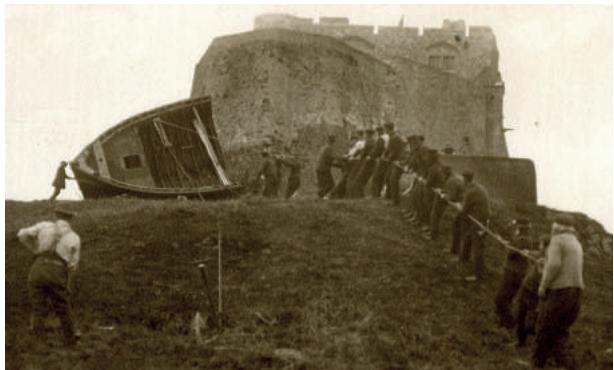
The laying up of the herring keelboats coincided with another development in Island life. In 1902 Edward Hudson bought the near-derelict Holy Island Castle and Sir Edwin Lutyens began to restore it. Heating such a large building required huge amounts of firewood. Robin Henderson remembered the custodians of the castle, Jack and George Lilburn, buying keelboats from ports such as North Sunderland, Berwick and especially Eyemouth, to break up for fuel. Ralph Wilson recalled his father's stories about this: *'Jack and George Lilburn – they were two old characters. They had a fella, Ralph Kyle, worked for them at the castle. At that time all the fires was old keelboat wood. They would carry it up the hill on their backs. They used to buy the old keelboats, fetch them to Holy*

*Island from wherever, and break them up.
And the great massive fires was always litten
burning this old keelboat wood.*⁷⁵

In the diary which Jack Lilburn kept before World War I, he records that, on November 15th 1909, he ‘started to break up old herring boat... Paid £4.00 for it.’⁷⁶ On January 11th 1911, he writes: ‘Bought old herring boat £4.5.0. Breaking up etc cost £10 in all.’ Jack and George did their demolition work in a tidal inlet beside the limekilns to the east of the castle. Ralph Wilson recalled that, ‘when they were finished, boats were floated right onto the grass on the East side of the castle.’ Elfreda Elford, born in 1915, recalled old herring boats being laid up in this tidal bay, which has long-since silted up.⁷⁷

Old keelboats also had another use, already traditional on the Island and, indeed, all down the East Coast: they were used as sheds. Photographs from 1906 show two upturned keelboat-halves serving in this way beneath the castle, and by 1911 a third had been added. This shed remains to this day, as a National Trust visitor attraction. Research has shown that it was probably about 40 ft long and built in Scotland around 1875.⁷⁸ Visitors can still admire its classic ‘wine-glass’ shape, characteristic of the deep keel that gripped the water, preventing it from being pushed sideways by the wind. Inside, its skeleton of oak ribs, or ‘frames’, with larch planks laid over them, is clearly visible.

Photographs from Hudson’s album show the half keelboat being manoeuvred into position by a team of about 30 Island men, using only ropes, a block and tackle, a mast as a lever, and their own strength. The pictures are a powerful statement of community. Islanders were used to such group effort, as can be seen from photographs of them hauling the lifeboat. An entry from John Wilson’s Diary for Sunday, February 10th 1901 reads: ‘We had a hard spell last night with carrying ‘Grocer’s’ fish house from the beach to where it is. He gave 25s for beer (5s to every house).’ ‘Grocer’ was Robert Cromarty, listed in that year’s census as ‘fish merchant and grocer’; he was also a fisherman. Ralph Wilson (Lilburn Terrace) recalled being told that the Islanders carried this upturned boat from the east side of the castle to where it stood, acting as the fish merchant’s hut at the castle gate.



The Castle’s herring keelboat being turned by islanders, c 1908
Permission of National Trust



Inside the Castle’s herring keelboat, showing its oak ‘frames’



The herring keelboat beneath the Castle, showing its deep keel, in contrast to the newer, motor-powered boat behind it

In 1980 the National Trust replaced two of the castle's original boat sheds with a converted sailing lifeboat from Norway, the *Logresund*. Later, in 2005, these two sheds were destroyed by fire, and were in turn replaced by a 20th century boat found awaiting demolition in Leith dock. The sheds made from this boat differ in several ways from the older boat beside them. They are the bow and stern sections of a steel-framed vessel, which was designed to be driven by a motor rather than by sail. Unlike the older boat, which was constructed entirely of wood and by the eye, this vessel was built in a shipyard, to a draughtsman's plan, using composite materials. It was probably used for harbour duties in Scotland rather than for fishing. Its stern is shaped to accommodate a propeller.

Because it did not need to grip the sea in the same way as a boat powered by the wind, the new boat does not have the older boat's deep keel and wine-glass curves. It is functional rather than beautiful.

The Boat Sheds and the Fishwives

Lutyens probably intended the castle boatsheds to be seen in the context of the upturned boats now used as fishermen's and yachtsmen's store-sheds above the Ouse. Among them are examples of different kinds of fishing boat in use on the Island at the end of the 19th century, including a clinker-built keelboat, larger carvel-built keelboats, cobles and mule cobles, and a ship's lifeboat. Boats have come and gone from this group over the years. Although many are in poor condition, they form a unique collection of late 19th and early 20th century fishing vessels, and show the variety and development of boats in use on the Island at that time.

The two northernmost keelboats feature on the picture postcard mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Like the remaining old keelboat beneath the castle, their shape has much in common with the ancient Scandinavian longship. Designed for sail and speed, it represents both the pinnacle of the herring industry and the end of a boat-building tradition that stretches back more than a thousand years – one whose final years left an indelible mark on the Island.

With the end of the herring industry, Holy Island returned to an older pattern of fishing, based on long lines and shell fishing from its traditional boat, the coble. This lasted until World War II brought the line fishery to an end. Reliance on the coble as the basic boat-type from the medieval period to the 20th century is a highly significant feature of Northumbrian fishing history. It was almost certainly this boat which helped to preserve the status-quo and the long continuity of tradition which we have seen from the Island records. Although manoeuvrable and versatile, it could not carry much gear or large quantities of fish. In other words, as Adrian Osler has shown, it was a vessel ideally suited to a small artisan fishery which changed little over time.

Throughout this essay, constant reference has been made to the work of women, both in a paid role in the Island's herring industry; and unpaid in the continuous artisan economy of the long line fishing. As we have seen, all Northumbrian fishermen relied on their female relatives for the unpaid, land-based tasks which kept the boat at sea. Although the extent of women's involvement in the medieval period is not recorded, I have argued elsewhere that this 'family economy' is a second feature which helped ensure the continuity of tradition in communities like Holy Island.⁷⁹



A Beadnell coble at the Island c1920.
Use of the coble helped maintain a sustainable way of life
over hundreds of years

To return to the first picture postcard: the photograph of Sal and Bess, taken around 1880, tells a sad and revealing story.⁸⁰ The two women, Sarah ‘Cromarty’ and Elizabeth Morris, are sisters-in-law. They are returning from selling fish on the mainland. Life has not been easy for them: its harshness is etched in their faces. Sal’s first husband, farmer James Dickinson, left for America and never returned: there is still a Dickinson’s Field on the Island. Bess, meanwhile, was born in Burnmouth in 1830. She was the daughter of Thomas Morris, the Island’s ‘Preventative’ (Coastguard). Her relatively prosperous father had been banished to Scotland for marrying within the Island community that he was supposed to oversee. He subsequently drowned in mysterious circumstances while on duty. Bess’s widowed mother returned to the Island, and the census shows the impoverished family living ‘on the parish’.

Bess never married, but bore four children, two of whom died. She lived into her 60s, and is described in the census as a ‘fish-retailer’. This role – that of the itinerant hawker who carried fish to customers in the countryside in return for money and sometimes bartered goods – is an ancient one, essential to the old, medieval economy which we have seen persist on the Island for centuries. Hawkers and fish-sellers – often female – helped the economy to function by absorbing gluts. Sal and Bess are two of the last representatives of this very ancient way of life, and their cuddies are the direct descendants of the ‘fysh horse’ of the medieval accounts.

- 1 *The Bonny Fisher Lad*, ed. K. Porteous, Seaham, 2003; *The History of Holy Island’s herring fishing and castle boat sheds* K. Porteous, National Trust leaflet 2006; John Wilson, unpublished diaries 1898–1902, private collection; *Mariner’s Mirror*, vol. 96, No. 1 Feb 2010, 11–25.
- 2 J.T. Fowler, ‘Extracts from the Account Rolls of the Abbey of Durham’, *Surtees Soc.* 99, 1898; J. Raine, *The History and Antiquities of North Durham*, London and Durham, 1852.
- 3 *Mariner’s Mirror*, *op cit.*
- 4 A. Osler, *The Salmon’s Kingdom*, Maritime Life and Traditions No. 25, Winter 2004, 28
- 5 S. Linsley, *Ports and Harbours of Northumberland*, Tempus 2005, 52
- 6 K. Porteous, *Limekilns and Lobster Pots*, Windmillsteads Books 2013, 10.
- 7 E.J. March, *Sailing Drifters*, David and Charles, 1969.
- 8 Quoted in R. Perry, *A Naturalist on Lindisfarne*, Lindsay Drummond, 1946, 36.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 NRO/683/10/103 Crossman family papers.
- 11 *Mariner’s Mirror*, *op cit.*
- 12 Interview, Maisie Bell, Beadnell, 1990.
- 13 Interview, Robin Henderson, Holy Island, 1990.
- 14 Perry, *op cit.*
- 15 John Wilson, *op cit.*
- 16 Porteous, *Bonny Fisher Lad*, 37–8
- 17 Osler, *The Salmon’s Kingdom*, *op cit.*
- 18 M. Cullen, *Later Victorian Spittal*, Berwick 2006, 43.
- 19 J. Walker, *A Wake for the Salmon*, Berwick 1988.
- 20 Osler, *op cit.*
- 21 Perry, *op cit.*
- 22 W. Beattie, *The Ports, Harbours, Watering-Places and Coast Scenery of Great Britain*, vol. I, London 1842.
- 23 C. Cromarty, *The Lindisfarne Story*, Frank Graham, 1971, 15–16.
- 24 Cromarty, *op cit.*
- 25 Perry *op cit.*, 36–7.
- 26 See also B. Chandler, *Holy Island Lifeboats*, 1996.
- 27 K. Porteous, *The Rocketeers, Northumberland’s Volunteer Lifesaving Companies*, Archaeology in Northumberland, vol. 18, 2008, 84–86.
- 28 The Alnwick Journal, October 15 1860.
- 29 A. Rutter, *A Seahouses Saga*, Stockport 1998, 32.
- 30 Interviews with Island fishermen, Robin Henderson and Ralph Wilson (Manor House), 1990, and Redford

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- Armstrong, Amble, 1990. Where Ralph Wilson is referred to in this essay, it is this interviewee unless otherwise indicated.
- 31 K. Porteous, *Holy Island's Herring Keelboats*, unpublished report for National Trust, 2006, drawing on BRO.1047, fishing vessel registers 1869-1902, 1902-1918.
- 32 Beattie, *op cit.*
- 33 Berwick Advertiser, July 21 1911.
- 34 K. Porteous, *Know your fishing heritage: Bark Pots*, Archaeology in Northumberland vol. 17, 2008.
- 35 Perry, *op cit.* 34.
- 36 Quoted in M. Cullen, *Early Victorian Spittal*, Berwick 2005, 126-7.
- 37 NRO/683/10/103; NRO/683/13/13; BRO/539 Crossman family papers.
- 38 Quoted Linsley, *op cit.* 53-4.
- 39 Porteous, *Holy Island's Herring Keelboats*, *op cit.* I am indebted for much of the detail of the procedure of herring fishing to D. McIver, *An Old-Time Fishing Town: Eyemouth*, Edinburgh 1906.
- 40 Census, 1871 and 1881; BRO.1047, fishing vessel registers 1869-1902.
- 41 Cromarty, *op cit.* 23.
- 42 Quoted Linsley, *op cit.* 53-4.
- 43 Beattie, *op cit.*
- 44 McIver, *op cit.* 236.
- 45 Interview, Bill Smailes, Craster 1991.
- 46 McIver, *op cit.* 238.
- 47 *A North Sunderland Sketch*, Berwick Advertiser, Sept 14 1906.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 McIver, *op cit.*
- 50 Rutter, *op cit.* 21.
- 51 Interview, Sylvia Shell, 2006.
- 52 M. Cullen, *Later Victorian Spittal*, Berwick 2006, 60.
- 53 *A North Sunderland Sketch*, *op cit.*
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 Rutter, *op cit.* 49.
- 56 *A North Sunderland Sketch*, *op cit.*
- 57 Perry, *op cit.* 40.
- 58 Interviews, Tommy Douglas and Ralph Wilson (Lilburn Terrace) 2007. I am greatly indebted to Ralph Wilson for the use of private papers, and for the photograph of keelboat Agnes and Jane.
- 59 Rutter, *op cit.*
- 60 Cromarty, *op cit.* 24.
- 61 Beattie, *op cit.*
- 62 Perry, *op cit.*
- 63 Cullen, *op cit.* 48.
- 64 Kelly's Directory, 1879.
- 65 Bulmer's Directory, 1887.
- 66 Cromarty, *op cit.* 22.
- 67 Ralph Wilson (son of John), unpublished memoirs, private collection.
- 68 Crossman papers, *op cit.*
- 69 Northumberland Sea Fisheries report, Berwick Advertiser, Oct 25 1901.
- 70 Berwick Advertiser, Oct 25 1912.
- 71 Berwick Advertiser, July 21 1911.
- 72 Crossman papers, *op cit.*
- 73 Perry, *op cit.* 41.
- 74 Quoted in Porteous, *Bonny Fisher Lad*, 50.
- 75 Interview, Ralph Wilson, Manor House, 1990.
- 76 Jack Lilburn, unpublished notebook, National Trust collection, Lindisfarne Castle.
- 77 Interview, Elfreda Elford, 2006.
- 78 R.G.W. Prescott, D.E. Atkinson and S. Liscoe, *Lindisfarne Castle: Archaeological Survey and Recording of a 19th Century boat portion*, unpublished report, Headland Archaeology 2006.
- 79 Mariner's Mirror, *op cit.*
- 80 I am indebted to a conversation with Mrs T. Dunn for information about Sal and Bess.