

AN INTERVIEW WITH MRS MAGGIE COWIE 51 YARDIE

Mr Cowie was interviewed by two trainees from the Balloch Trust on behalf of Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society on 27 July 1988. The transcript was checked over and put on to a floppy disc by Allan Fraser on May 1st 2003.

"How old were you when you left school?"

"I left the school when I wis fourteen."

"What did you do then?"

"I startit tae work in the net factory. I wis a file in it then I startit at the guttin. . Atween times at the guttin I wint back intae the net factory, Marshalls, till it closed. Efter that I wint tae the guttin steady, tae the simmer fishing, an syne Yarmouth. We wir hame a winter if ye hid naethin else tae dee."

"What about the barrels?"

"We hid three o a crew, twa guttin an a packer"

"Did gutting hurt your fingers?"

"Aye, ye hid tae tie yer fingers wi cloots fin ye wir guttin. They used saut, ye see, for saut heerin and ye hid tae tie up them for the saut wid've ruined yir fingers, cut them intae the bane. .

"It must have been very painful."

"Aye, I wid say it wis."

"How many barrels did you pack in a day, in a week?"

"Well, some weeks better than ithers, bit it wisna a weekly thing, ye hid tae mak it."

"Can you remember your first wage?"

"First wage? Nae much aefter nine shillins the week. That wis for keepin ye up syne ye made in the guttin at the hinner eyn. That wis like a wage, Nae much. Slavery!"

"Were you paid on how many barrels you packed?"

"No at that time ye hid a weekly wage, so much, I canna richt mine noo fit it wiz. Ye cwidna dee without that, for buying yer mait.

"Did you get goods on credit?"

"Some took credit. I did till I gaed hame fin I paed them then at the eine o the fishin. I believe I wid still hae a receipt in their fae Paterson, the grocer, on High Street. But then ye got fit they caad 'stoker' an it did ye a simmer, so much for stane o sugar an so much pun o tae, a that ye needed. Weel ye didna need the ready money, ye see, mebbe jist for a biscuit or onythin."

"How much did the goods cost? How much did sugar cost?"

"If I hid a linie kept ye wid hae seen it. It wis chape at the time. I dinna mine fit it wis the stane."

"Did you go away from home a lot?"

"Aye, Lerwick, simmer time, hame for a whilie, nae lang, then Yarmouth, or Lowestoft; some gied tae Lowestoft."

"Did they supply the transport?"

"Oh aye. We went on the boat tae Lerwick an I wis seek as a dog."

"Did you have to take your bedding and everything with you?"

"Aye, tae Lerwick but nae tae Yarmouth."

"What was your bedding like?"

"Well it wis fit we caad 'chaff'. We a got a seck and fult it wi chaff for yer bed"

"Did you do your own cooking?"

"Aye, in Lerwick"

"What did you have?"

"Well fitiver wis gaun, like soup. Ye took turn aboot in the yard, ye see, an ye ran up tae keep an ee on things. There wis huts ye see in Lerwick. Ye wis on yer own."

"What did you do in your time off? Did you go to any dances?"

"Oh aye, there wis dances tae go tae, bit nae much. We hid dances among oorsels, like."

"Did you work on a Sunday?"

"No, no we niver worked on a Sunday."

"Did you go to the kirk?"

"Some gied tae the kirk."

"Do you remember how many hours a day you worked?"

"We, ye wis up at sex o'clock in the mornin workin till echt on nine o'clock at nicht sometimes."

"Did you always get home for Christmas?"

"Aye I think we wis aye hame for Christmas."

"Did you get lots of presents?"

"That wisna gaun at that time."

"If anybody was injured, what was the procedure? Did you have to get a doctor?"

“ Oh weel, if onybody wiz naeweel ye hid tae git a doctor, richt enough, but there wis a hut there in Lerwick for ony slight illnesses an ladies worked in it. “

“Did you have to pay for a doctor?”

“Aye, if ye naught a doctor ye did, bit this wis for that purpose, in case of ony accidents.”

“What was the clothing like when it was cold weather? Did you have to wear lots of clothing?”

“ Oh, no, jist a woollen jersey and a woollen skirt.”

“Tell us about your outer wear – your cwites

“Oh, aye, ye hid yer cwites anaith yer skirt. Oh, ye mean the ileskin cwites. Ye wore an ileskin cwite on tap o ye, fae yer breest tae near the grun, then tied roon the middle. And wellingtons.”

“Tell us about packing the herring into the barrels”

“ Well fin we startit we selectit the herrin, sma, medium an syne large, intae different tubs. Ye hid tae cairry them tae the rosun tub far the packer wis. She hid the job tae pack them. Fin ye laid the first tier in the barrel it hid tae be wiled oot for the best heerin tae be pit in then efter that ye jist packed awa ivery tier. Contered the tiers, ye see, time aboot till ye cam tae the top, then it wis a top tier again.

“You said you lived in huts at Lerwick, what were they like? Were they near to where you worked?”

“ They wir widden huts, sheddies, that we hid. A crew bade in ivery hut wi a door tae oorsels, ye see, and a stove. Ivery day the crew took turn aboot tae see tae the denner. Ye wis workin a the time, ye see, if ye wisna fulling up ye wis gutting so if it wis your turn tae see to the mait ye hid tae run up the steps, oot o the yard, cos the yards wir a facin the river, tae gie the pots a steer an stop them stickin, afore rinnin back doon again. It wis a hard life, Nae fun, I kin tell ye.”

“Did you do some of the cooking as well?”

“ Oh aye, ye a hid tae tak yer turn o that. Syne Monday wis a kine o a slack day, fulling up, ye hid tae wash, ye hid a tubbie the piece.”

“What kind of beds had you? Were they one on top of the other?”

“ Bunk beds, Jist widden beds, ane on top o the ither.”

“Did you hae a trunk to hold your claes?”

Ivrybody hid their trunk, aye. That wiz fit ye hid tae sit on, yer trunk, tae tak yer mait. Three trunks tae the room.”

“That wis part o yer furnishings?”

“Aye.”

“Did you have to send some of your money home?”

“ Aye ye hid tae dae it. Ye wir duty bound tae dae that, if ye hid it, ye hidna a wage, ye see.

“What was it like to bring up a family?”

“Well, a hid nae faimily at that time. I wis young.”

“Aye, bit ye still wint oot tae the guttin fin ye hid yer faimily.”

“Aye, aye”.

“What was it like then, was it difficult to bring up a family?”

“ Aye, it wis that. Oor Jenny watched the hoose, fin I wis guttin here, that’s my auldest quinie.”

“Did you take any of the children with you?”

“ Oh no,no. The auldest ane looked aefter the rest. Hoo auld wis ye ? Ye wisna four!”

“Was your husband a fisherman”

“Oh aye, he wis at the sea a his days.”

“ Aefter you were merrit and hid the bairns did you gang tae the gutting?”

“ Aye I did jist tae eek oot father’s fishing because they only got £2 per week an they settled up at the eine o the fishin. Ye hid tae dae somethin tae keep the bairns fed an shod, ye cwidna live on naethin. It wis hard times that time.”

“ But happy times?”

“Aye it wis happier times bit it wiz harder times , there wisna nae brews (unemployment benefit) at that time. “

“Did you make your own clothes or did you buy them?”

“Oh, ye didna hae muckle claes, fit ye hid hid tae dae ye a lang time.”

“ Did you knit some of your clothes?”

“Aye I knitted men’s gansies, bit it wis sma needles, they widna worn them if ye did them wi big pins. Oh it wis hard times, I wite that.

(Her daughter who was present urged her mother to tell the two interviewers about when she used to mend the nets.)

“Weel, ye jist hid tae tak them in whaur ye wis for mendin, ye cwidna dae nae ither thing, if ye didna hae a laft, if ye hid ye ment them up there. A the fishermen’s hooses at that time hid a laft for menin the nets. The bairns eest tae say play tappie oot a through the hoose in the winter time. Ye ment at night, ye hid tae dee it. Aye, menin nets an rockin the cradle at the same time.”

“Did you go out mending tae ither folk?”

“No. Ye hid ower muckle wark in the hoose.”

“ Was there a lot of superstition?”

“Aye, there wis some o them. If the menfowk met so an so they widna hae gaun tae the sea. They hid their marked anes. If ye wis gaun this wye an they met ony o that kine o anes, the men wid turn back, gang intae the hoose an come oot again. They didna like tae meet the minister. If they hid a big trip they eest tae gie ye a luck penny. I mine I gave Mary’s man a luck penny, ye aye did that, an he happent tae hae, jist superstition, a big fishin an she believed in it, so the next ear she said tae him, awa an get a luck penny fae Maggie afore ye gang awa. Oh I says,”Mary, that’s jist a superstition”. I says that’s daft that, but she thocht it, ye see. Some fowk widna mention ither fowk for the worl, it wiz ill-lucket . They didna like tae mention pigs or bacon. “

“ Can you remember any funny stories?”

“Seen a lot and heard a lot”

“Did you get lots of gifts when you got married?”

“Well we got a good share o fir wis gaun. A belongin tae ye, yer ain side an his side, ye didna look for strangers. We hid a good wedding, a gran wedding. It wis held at Low Street, Bella Jappy. The first wedding she made wis oor wedding. It wis a hotel.”