

MRS MAGGIE BARRIE, A FORMER 'GUTTIN' QUINE' IS INTERVIEWED

Two trainees on work experience with the Balloch Trust interviewed Mrs Maggie Barrie in her home at 5 Merson Street, Buckie on behalf of the Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society in June 1988.. One of the interviewers was Sandy Mearns.

"How auld were yi fin yi started working. Where did you work at?"

I was fourteen. I went tae Lerwick. The first year I was wi Eddie Gordon, fishcurer, from Fraserburgh. I didn't get south with him that year but I went south with another firm, the Bruces, that wis my first year away.

Then the following year the crew broke up an' we met in wi another crew an' they asked me if I'd like tae join them so I did. I went awa wi a firm, W. S & S, that wis Slater of Hopeman, which wis a big firm that went tae Shetland fae the end of May till September. Then that year I went home and went south to Gorleston, I think.

All winter months we took domestic service. We left that in early summer and went to Lerwick. The work was the same again, six in the morning till twelve at night, when the fish wis there yi hid tae work non-stop. The wages were three pence the hour. Six pence for the barrel an' that barrels were divided between the crew of three, that wis yer wages. The more barrels yi had went in tae three at the end of the season.

We got thirty shillin's the week, I think, that wis for our board and lodgings but then we paid for the huts. At Shetland we lived in wooden huts.

Once I had started at the guttin' the year went like this. I went off to Shetland on the 1st of June fae there it was tae Hartlepool, then fae Hartlepool tae Gorleston. I was away from the end of May and didn't get home until the first week of December. Then it wis domestic service the winter time again."

"When you were gutting fish, how did it affect your fingers?"

"Oh we had our fingers all wrapped up, but then yi had tae go at it because it was all piece work and the knife was always so sharp that you would cut your hand very easily. The salt then used to make holes, the holes became so big that we used tae chew bread and pack it in to the hole not to let the salt in. We didn't have the sense to know that this wis like a poultice and instead of healing the hand it made it worse. We got no time to go up tae the 'rest', tae where the nurse stayed at the time and she would have bandaged up your fingers. If you got holes in your fingers it took a long time before they healed."

"It must have been very painful?"

"An' when you put them in the brine, when you were filling up the barrels, it was just sheer agony, but then you could do nothing about it."

"When you went away from home, did they supply the transport?"

"Oh yes, oh yes, they didn't cause you any expense at all, your fares were paid, an' they collected your box, your trunk, that held all your possessions, your clothes an' everything and they were sent off. You got your fares paid by ship. No expense whatsoever in that line."

"How many of you went?"

"Well there were three in a crew, two gutters and a packer but you always lived in six for economy, yi see. So that was it."

"Did you have to supply your own food?"

"Food, oh as I tell yi the curer gave yi some money. I think that it started off with thirty shillings, but we went on strike an' got another ten shillings and just as the year's went on it went up but when the pay went up so your landlady put the cost of the digs up too."

"When you were in the huts did you take it in turns to cook the food?"

"Oh yes everybody had what they called their 'day on'. On your 'day', the foreman allowed you to leave your work about five minutes to eight in the mornin' an' that wis tae go up an' get the breakfast ready for the rest comin in, same for dinner. You prepared your dinner while you had your breakfast hour. Then again the one that had the day 'on' went up tae prepare, but when it was gutting, that was when we wis filling up, it was the packer that had to do it because the gutters had to go, the more you gut the more you got."

"How many barrels did you fill?"

Well it usually worked out from three to four an hour, three to four was an average. Of course there were some that could really do five or six, you know. Some turned out five or six barrels but the average was three to four an hour."

"That's a lot."

“Yes.”

“What did you do in your time off when you were away from home?”

“Well in the huts there was nithin’ really to do. You just had to use your own entertainment, you know. We went visiting other girls an’ went wi them or went up tae the ‘rest’, as I say Sister Reid had a ‘rest’. We went there it was like a Church Guild, you would have a social evening which wis tea an’ we knitted. The Shetland girls were knitting and you brought your knitting along an’ we just sat an’ put in the night like that. There wis no entertainment, we couldn’t afford tae go tae entertainment. Then the same in Yarmouth, when yi went tae Yarmouth they went tae the ‘rest’ again. In Yarmouth it was different because they hid come from Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Wick. Lossiemouth and all over, an’ you met a lot of different girls there, oh that wis yer pastimes.”

“Did you do gutting on a Sunday?”

No, no, no, you niver worked on a Sunday.”

“Did you go tae the Kirk?”

“Oh yes, the Church of Scotland had a great place in Yarmouth. They bought an old building, an’ eh I’ve a photo of my father there at the opening of it. It was packed, if yi didn’t leave the house at five o’clock an’ be there yi didn’t get a seat for six. They started community singing when you went in, it was really marvellous.”

“When you were injured or if somebody took very ill what was the procedure of getting a doctor?”

“I was very fortunate in that I never had any illness, but if onybody took ill they sent for the doctor in Lerwick an’ there wis a hospital an’ the ‘rest’ if it wis a minor thing. I remember one girl, she had appendicitis so she landed up in the Gilbert Main hospital then they put her home.”

“Did you get home for Christmas?”

“Oh yes, about the sixth or eighth of December we were finished in Yarmouth but it was ever so cold.”

“Did you get lots of presents at Christmas or...?”

“Oh we spent half of our fishin’ on presents to other people. You were always taking home presents from Yarmouth.”

“When it was cold what type of clothing did you have to keep yourself warm?”

“Well we hid woollen jerseys, in fact we used tae wear oor father’s jerseys because they hid the top necks cut the sleeves off an’ they were always very warm. Then you had the oilskins over the skirt and brace an’ then you had an oil-skin jacket on top for rain so you just had them piled on, woollen scarves an’ everything.”

“What was it like with the washing facilities.?”

“Well, on Monday you were usually finished at dinner time. It was like a half-day unless you were very busy and you just had to heat pans of water on a stove in the hut an’ wash your clothes in a tub.”

“Aeften the herring in the barrels hid settled doon hid yi to top them up?”

“Well as I say yi had the filling up, that wis topping up the barrels after they hid sunk. Usually overnight they would have sunk, less than a fourth the way down, well you had to top them up an’ put on a top tier. You had to go out at six in the morning tae do this. The herring would start tae come in aroon nine or ten o’clock in the mornin’ when you started tae gut them. Monday was always a day for filling-up, all day, that was your hourly paid and you just topped up until the herrin’ started tae come in when you stopped doing that an’ got on wi the guttin’. If there was no herrin’ comin’ in an’ there was days fin there was no fish so we wis fillin’-up all day.”

“Wis there pickle pit in tae the barrels?”

“There wis brine. That wis the big tubs o’t, that’s fit made all the holes in your hands. Salt brine. They jist emptied the barrels in tae this big tub and the girls used tae go an’ just fill up a tub. Two of you worked together, the ane that carried the tub filled up the barrel.”

“Hid yi a special wye o’ packin’ the heerin’ in tae the barrels?”

“The bottom tier wis always like the top o’ a box o’ chocolates, the best were selected an’ you put two an’ one. Then the top again, you had to flatten them oot and make them very nice at the top because the inspector came and took off the lid.”

“Fit aboot the barrels, fa took them awa fin they were fult?”

Well the coopers came an’ put on the lid an’ then they tumbled them on tae their side an’ rolled in rows an’ then made a hole in the barrel an’ put in the pickle to make it tight.”

“Aye they geed wrang if yi dinna?”

“Aye so it wis fully packed.”

“Far did they go, ah oor?”

“Russia, Germany, an’ that wis the buyers there.”

“Aye they geed awa’ in boats didn’t they?”

“They geed awa’ in boats. The stock boat used tae come in an’ they geed awa’.”

“I suppose you would have seen a lot o’ boys fae hame fin yi geed awa’?”

“Well a’ the locals an’ then yi met ither anes, fae Lowestoft, an’ a’ them fishin, they were always fae different places there.”

“Yi met yer man there they tell me?”

“Aye, there’s a chum, her husband’s burying today and he was the skipper of a Lowestoft boat an’ that was where she met her husband at Hartlepool. They used tae come up tae Lossiemouth. I see his death in the paper.”

“Fin yi went tae Yarmouth how did yi get there?”

“The train. There wis special trains laid on for yi an yi’ travelled at night time. It was a straight through train, yi niver stopped anywhere, yi went straight on.”

“I suppose that train hid been packed?”

“Packed! Yi didn’a get room tae lie doon or anything, some used tae lie on the racks.”

“The luggage racks?”

“You brought your own eats with you.”

“It must have been difficult bringing up a family in those days?”

“Well I went back tae the guttin’ after I was married but an’ I always took them back with me because my husband, we lived at home. I worked at home and then you see they wanted you to go back an’ I aye took one with me. We jist went intae digs for ourselves, husband wife and that. Managed fine. “

“There wis digs at Yarmouth?”

“Digs, aye, there wis aye digs in Yarmouth.”

“Huts elsewhere, aye?”

“Digs in Yarmouth and Hartlepool but huts in Lerwick, Stronsay an’ that places.”

“When you went to Lerwick did you have to take your own bedding?”

“Oh yes you had to supply a chaff bed. Yi geed tae the farm for a bag o’ chaff. Syne yi hid yer blankets. You took away your own potatoes an’ oor father’s took away our potatoes an’ biscuits an’ bags at fit we cawd our guttin’ clothes.”

“Do you remember how many fish, roughly, that you personally could gut in a day. It must have been a lot?”

“I quidna jist exactly tell yi the amount you quid gut in a day bit it averaged out tae three to four barrels in an hour.”

“They were big barrels in a’ weren’t they?”

“Oh yes it was halves, what you call halves, big anes.”

“Fit aboot, wis there coopers up there an ah like?”

“Oh aye, there wis a foreman an’ there’d been aboot four or five coopers.”

“Fit were they mennin barrels or fit?”

“No that wis their winter-time work. Fin we were finished in December the coopers made their barrels and their stores fae December on tae the summer and the cargo boat’s took the barrels awa’ tae Shetland.”

“Did you ever repair any of the nets at all?”

“Oh no, my father and mother repaired nets. I never learnt. I niver ment the nets in the house but I did work in a net store between fishin’s, an’ down in Marshall’s down in the harbour there. I got in there between service an’ got a job in between times.”

“Fit wis yer hours in domestic service?”

“Well yi got a half day in Thursday and a day off every second Sunday, that wis my”

“Fit wis yer wages for that?”

“Two pounds the month..”

“Caww! the month?”

“Aye.”

“Terrible, isn’t it? Slave labour.”

“Well it wisna slave labour because yi would get your keep there yi see in the service.”

“Oh you lived in?”

“Oh aye, we lived in. I tell yi hid a day off in Thursday and every second Sunday.”

“Hid yi jist a’ thing tae dee, a’ the hoosework an...?”

“A’ the hoosework and cookin’. It was a monotonous life because yi didn’t get out, far I wis at yi didn’t get out. I w was up at the manse at Fochabers. Well there wis nithin’ up there tae go out for, but ither lassies that went tae Aiberdeen I think they could have got off, got out after tea-time. A lot went to Aberdeen, Edinburgh, all over durin’ the fishin’s.”

“When you did go out at night did they like you to be in at a special time”

“Well I wis niver in that situation I tell yi, I wis at Fochabers. I went up there in Monday mornin’ when I had a Sunday off. I stayed in the house overnight. I went up in the eight o’clock bus an’ that

was me there till Thursday when I got my half-day. Then I stayed a weekend then got my Sunday off the following Sunday. “

“Did yi come hame in yer Sunday off, noo, aye?”

“Oh aye, bit yi niver thocht nithin’ of it because yi really didna hae the money tae spen’, yi didna hae the money tae spen’.”

“No an’ I suppose abody was the same in them days.”

“Aye, an fit yi got fae the cooper tae keep yi every week wis nae very muckle. We hid tae tick yer grocer and yer butcher an’ go down wi yer line ivery week. When you went to pay them yi jist met your expenses yi never hid nithin’ hardly left at all an’ we got enough to get three hae’pennies for a stamp tae write home. Yi hid no money left, none at all.”

“What were the prices like for bread, meat or anything?”

“Bread wis fourpence the loaf an’ I think thrupence hae’penny for sugar. Aye, well yi only had thirty shillin’s, that wis like four pounds ten, that’s why we always declared the landladies ticked it two and put two on the book see. They wis always short o’ money.

“Still abody seemed happy enough an’ ah, didn’t they?”

“Oh we wis happy as the day’s lang. Everybody wis the same see, everybody was in the same boat, there was no envying or anything among anybody.

Well we were older an’ we had our first year in away, then the young ones went away for their first year then the mither’s used tae say, ‘Now be sure an’ see that they take their food, make a dinner for themselves’. We went up one day to see fit they were ha’in’ for their denner an’ they hid a packet a’ Woodbines’ an’ a cake o’ candy.

“That was their dinner.”

“That was them!”

“How much did ‘Woodbines’ cost then?”

“Tuppence!. Five would have been in a packet. That wis their dinner.”

“Can you remember any funny tales, anything that happened or superstitions?”

“No we were nae superstitious, no.”

“Any funny stories?”

“there is one funny story I could tell yi about after settlin’ up our boat in Hartlepool once. There was six of us an’ we discovered that we wis in debt. Ah well I think it was somethin’ we were tickin’ hame so we went in tae the grocer an’ asked if we could get back six shillin’s an’ that wis tae each of us, so six six-pences came up an’ we got six pence each. Nancy one of the six, put her sixpence on tae her thumb and flicked it up intae the air, it came down bit it landed on the floor and went doon a crack. It was lanolium in those days an’ it went doon between the lanolium of course it stuck down between two boards. We got a knife noo to see if we could prize it up but we couldn’t instead of taking it we pushed it further down. there wis nithin’ else for it so we went and asked the grocer to take back the five six pences and give us thirty pence so we landed up wi five pence each instead of a six pence each. Then another time at the curer said that he quidna manage tae pay us a’, he hidna got the cheque fae Aberdeen to settle us up for our Hartlepool fishin’. Well fin we went there we hid sent back home fit we hid made in Shetland an’ hid jist kept back jist a few pounds. Fin we landed in Hartlepool yi see we went tae pick a dress in a shop an’ we said we will get that fin we got oor money at the end of the season. One of them went in an’ booked a perm, an those days yi were strung from the roof. Do you remember the old fashioned perms? Well, he said he hadn’t the cheques sent from Aberdeen but he said he’d give us two pounds each to take us from Aberdeen to Gorleston. My sister an my packer, we were safe enough we could send on the price o’ the dress but this lady an’ this loon are sittin’ in the window, an’ we’re signing in to the window that we’d nae money tae pay it. us, So they told us, you’ll HAVE to give us the price of a perm or she’s goin’ tae be stuck so we got the price of a perm. “

“How much was that?”

Twenty-five shillin’s. A lot o’ money that time. Yi did get a lot o’ laughs

“How much was the dress?”

“I think it only was two pounds. Aye.”

