

ALEX HARPER FORMER FISHERMAN AND MEMBER OF THE M.N. TELLS THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

Mr Alex Harper, 33 High Street, Portknockie was interviewed on behalf of the Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society (the last name later to be changed to Museum) by two trainees from the Balloch Trust on 4th of July 1988

"What age were you when you left school?"

"Fourteen"

"What did you do then?"

"Well I was too late when leaving school to get what you call a berth at the sea as the boats all start fishin in May and June when we got our holidays so my first job was in the bakers. It was some job, I can tell yi, three in the mornin gan till seven at night and my pay was 2/6 and a 4lb loaf. You would hardly believe that would you? Of course there wis nae restriction in the bake-hoose if you wir hungry yi could HIV got a biscuit or onything like that, bit that wis the wages, 14 or 15 pence a week.

I stuck that for a year and then the next year I went tae sea in a sailboat, so that wis anither oot o the frying pan intae the fire sorta job.

In the sailing boat yi hid tae cook for eight men, yi hid also tae keep steam in the boiler an when haulin the nets yi hid coil the ropes, yi hid tae ging intae the coilin boat, pit on coal an keep the hale job goin a' the time. It wis jist --well they wouldn't do it now bit that wis the sailboat days. Some days were terrible. I remember comin intae Fraserburgh harbour, it wis mainly Fraserburgh we fished, we wis jist a mile aff the pier, yi ken who lang it took us tae get in – five hoors – flat calm, nae a breath o win an that wis the kind o life they hid in sail boats. You depended on win, solely depended, unless some good-hearted drifter came along and gave yi a tow.

My earliest recollections Lang afore that of going tae sea wis when I was four years old. It eest tae be the custom in this part o the world that the fish-curer eest tae come up afore the season an they ust tae contact skippers o boats an employ sae mony boats tae land all their catch tae this one curer. Fit happened wis that the whole family went tae Peterhead and of course everybody went tae the boat, fit they ca bag an baggage, that wis beds, all the utensils, pots and pans and everything went tae Peterhead. They went and booked a room and yi all lived in that one room for the summer season. The hale season - that wis the kind o life they lived.

Sometimes if the boat thit yer father wis in wis fostrate yer certain amount wid be landed a then yi wis free a yi could fish for the rest o the season independent, instead of the open market. This wis good because instead of comin back in the boat yi got a journey in the train.

That wis how the sailboats went an I wis in two sailboats, the first one was the 'Treasure' an the second one was the 'Gowan'. That wis, I think the last boat that sailed oot a here the 'Gowan'. She wis selt tae Stornoway, they continued fishin after that but that was the time.

The worst fishin o the lot wis when they finished the Yarmouth fishin, we ust tae come hame here a go tae whit they cawed loch fishin, the West Highlin lochs. If iver there wis slavery, that wis it. Yi ust tae pit doon twa lots of nets, say fifteen tae twenty in a row an ging tae the ither side o the loch wi that an fin darkness come doon yi piled some nets in the same boat an went oot an hauled them in wi fitiver herrin there wis an took them back tae the boat an yi di this all night lang, right through the nicht the you hauled the ither nets durin the day, the same performance, night after night, day after day. I don't know how we stuck it, it was really slavery and when you had fower nets in the boat an four men and sometimes up tae half a ton o herrin and yi ken the water wis jist comin ower the boat and that went on. I think that wis finished afore the war broke oot. Naebidy gangs their noo and it's a good job tae.

The drifters fin they came along that wis a different mode o fishin all together. It wis quicker, much quicker, wi speed, yi went tae sea where yi liked. In the sail-boat yi depended on the win and very often fin yi wis going out there wis nae win yi didna get any distance off and of course yi couldn't lie all night an cast yer nets and chance yer luck which wis very often nithin.

Later on as they got better on with the job you knew what you were doing, you knew what you had to do and you carried on that way, the only difference was that you were sometimes longer away from home.. One boat I wis in just ust tae fish Stornoway regularly and you'd come home one weekend in the summer out of sixteen weeks. When you came home that week-end the nets were all bundled up you had to take them of, get a lorry, in the park spread them out in the park on Saturday, get them in on Monday. The women folk ust tae come and gather up the nets on Monday, bundle them up, get them all back on the lorry, down tae the boat and laid on. That was yer weekend, yi wis practically workin a weekend except Sunday and that wis supposed tae be yer weekend oot of the simmer. That wis the dra' back on the drifters, bit latterly that wis all stopped, they didna bather spreadin the nets in the parks or anything like that. Just sometimes after you came home from Yarmouth instead o spreadin the nets in the field you put them on the fences an sometimes you had to wait two weeks, sometimes three weeks afore you got them dried to take them in again. Then it was the women's job tae mend all the nets. They ust to have them in the house and dust flyin everywhere. That wis my experience o the herrin fishing.

The Merchant Navy really was the best job, a lovely job, if it hadn't been for the war. You knew everything you had to do and you hid certain hours. They were tedious hours as well not so now, I don't think, but in that time you had two watches, four hours on and four hours off. In that four hours you had to eat your food and everything so that that meant you only got three hours, so that was that lot.

But as regards the fishin it's different altogether This nets they've got now one boat will catch as many fish in one day as the whole fleet would catch in a season, that's the present day fishin. It's no' what we called crans, that's four baskets of herrin tae a cran an seven cran tae a ton, bit nowadays they'll scoop up three or four hundred tons and perhaps fill three or four boats with the one haul, but its goin to kill the trade. The herrin's getting scarcer, mackerel

getting scarcer, and the white fish is getting scarcer as well, but it's certainly on the down grade meantime, there will come a day, it will dry up. Peterhead is two million pounds down on last year's earnings and that's a big drop but there's always the boats that do well and boats that don't do well and that has always been the line in the fishin. Some o the boats, even in the sailboat day's ust to do well, while others ust tae manage to scrape through and nothing more. It was the same on the drifter days, but with the drifters as time got on the expenses began to kill everything, so I don't know how they do for expenses now with this oil, but I think the oil is going to be dearer than what the coal was. The mode of livin for people livin ashore is very, very much improved. The women folk now have nothing to do with nets or anything like that now its nice clean houses now besides when you ust tae come home and find dust everywhere."

"Di yi mine yer first pay when yi wis cook?"

"The first year that I wis in the sailboat, oh aye that wis monotony that, one o the crew would learn yi what to do then after the first week yi were entirely on yer own an yi hid eight men tae feed an I can say it wis some shambles. Some o the young fellas went in and they made a real good job but other fellows they got disheartened and didn't finish the season perhaps, then if they did finish the season wis glad tae see it over. It was really a tough life. There wis eight o yi sleepin in not half the size of this, (room) eight o yi hid tae sleep an yi kin jist imagine havin a boiler stuck in that corner an my bed was at the side of the boiler an every night I wis jist saturated. Well yi did really sleep yi wis dead tired, 'n yi slept a certain way bit yi wirna rested. It wis different in the drifters, some o the drifters had fit they cawd the fo'c's'le, forecastle, four men would sleep forrit there and that wis six and the others, it wasn't so bad then. I don't know what the boats are like now because I haven't been in any of the modern boats, but I don't think I would like tae, because they work day and night and that's a bad thing because there's no person can work day and night and go on for a long time. They go tae sea on Sunday night and they steer long distances, twenty seven hours perhaps, start tae work, the next time they go tae bed is when the boat's comin in tae land. Well whose gaun tae be able tae stand that. I don't see them able to do it, in time it will tell on them, but that's the present day. Of course the boats are more up tae date, for all the electric gadgets and everything o that kind, there's no, there's every comfort in them compared tae what we had. "

"You hid nae depth sounders or nene o that, hid yi, or radio?"

"Oh no there was nothing o that an our bed wis jist fit they ca' a bag o chaff but now they've got all their own mattresses and everything far different from what we had I don't think it's a right thing to say, it's a good job that past off because the people today wouldn't do it, they just wouldn't do it."

"Fit did yi dee for wither forecasts?"

"Oh yi niver bathered wi wither forecasts yi jist hid a barometer. Some skippers were good some wee not so good. I wis we one skipper he could read the weather jist like readin his chart, it wis unbelievable. I remember one night in Great Yarmouth, it was a Friday and it was a howlin gale o wind not a boat at sea and we went out and they said, 'He's mad, must be mad!', but we went off tae the grounds, we lay for about two hours and the wind started to quietin down, got the nets out hauled them in and had sixty crans and came in. The only boat that wis out in Yarmouth and we got a perfect day tae pull in the nets and everything and we had just finished haulin when the storm broke again. He could read the weather that man but the majority o them jist look at the glass give it a tap 'n if it geed back wid say, 'Oh well that's not good ' but if one went tae sea the rest were sure tae follow, they were like a flock o sheep. That wis the bad thing about the fishin if one went the rest would follow. A' that days are over now though, Great Yarmouth fishin has petered out. The last time I wis in Great Yarmouth was on holiday and we went down tae the beach in the wife said, 'What's the boats doing out there?'. I said, 'They're fishing for herrin.' She laughed. I said, 'They are, that's what they ca' long shore boats.' They ust tae fish inshore and if the herrin was too many in the net they just poured out on the beach, but now what they do now, they take the boats in and they have a cradle that goes down and takes the boats right up out of the sea. They don't put them in the water at all now. I spoke to one of the men there, the herrin is completely taken off there he had twenty or thirty herrin for his catch that wis the entire catch he had for that day so it is finished off, so you can hardly v believe it. When we ust tae fish at Yarmouth it wisna thousands o crans it wis hundreds o thousands o crans that we landed every year. Well yi kin imagine, one year there was seven hundred boats in Yarmouth fishin so yi may ken the quantity o fish that wis landed. "

"There must have been an awfa lot o quines guttin there at the same time?"

"Aye there was a lot o girls. I tried tae get that woman across the road tae come over 'n tell yi aboot her she was the youngest that ever went. When she went tae the guttin if any higher up ust tae come in the yard she ust tae hide out of sight because she was under age., but she said, 'No, no', she wouldn't come. Oh yes they had a hard life the girls. They ust tae get 10 pence , old money or a shilling for one barrel a herrin tae divide between three o them, and in that barrel o herrin there wid be over a thousand herrin in one barrel so yi may know the work they went through tae get their pay.

When they went tae Lerwick they went by steamer. Why they went I don't know because there would be up to four hundred women on board. Married women went as well. They had to stay on deck for the journey as there was no room below for them and that was what I was telling yi about Oddessy. That's what you would have got a laugh with this woman. She was one of the few that wasn't sick and she ate all the others , what they call pieces, sandwiches and everything and when she was going ashore at Lerwick the captain o the boat called her, 'Hey I want tae speak to you.' She wondered what he was going tae say and when she went up, he said, 'The next time you come back take a mouth bag (like horses used to have) with yi.' You see she's worth listening to, really nice. The home life and everything is different now from fishin. They go away on Sunday night the women has nothing to do anything except wash the dirty clothes when the men come home at week0ends abut apart from the manual labour o mendin nets, that's all away, all gone and good riddence."

"If you got stuck in a storm what procedure did you take?"

"Well, there was a lot o things, some would stick it out, what we call dodge, put head to the wind and dodge, others would make for the nearest port and usually the majority of the boats would always make for the nearest storm but since this radio came on now they get the gale warnins they are better prepared. In the old days there was just the barometer, but the barometer was far better than any forecasts that yi can get, if that glass started to go back you knew there was something on the way but if they give you a forecast now you don't know if it is going to be right or not. I wis just laughin at one fella that wrote in the paper a few weeks back, 'n he wis askin the commentator that gave the weather forecast when he was going tae give a correct forecast. Yi get fellas like that can always get it a dead right. . Of course in the fishin industry now it's always, completely change altogether now there was one o this boats, I'm 'o going to say any names because it's not right to say names, you what he had for his week's earnin a thousand pounds per man. Could yi believe that? If we got one thousand pounds gross for a whole crew we would have thought what a big fishin we had, one thousand pounds for a week.

In that time a day some boats that went away tae Yarmouth jist hid enough tae pay expenses, older boats because yi got a lot o bad weather at Yarmouth and they daren't go out in the bad weather, some o the better boats ust tae tak a risk in the bad weather, then of coorse if yi did take a risk well there wis a shortage o fish and you got a good price. There was a lot o things tae consider in the fishin but not so now, it's the case o the man that's a good brain, he can pick out this they all work this echo sounders and everything now, they can even tell you what kind of fish swim under the boat.

Oh it wis great that tape Oddessy yi can hear a' the girls at the guttin yards in Yarmouth singin, all that sorta thing it's really worth it if you could get to hear that, it would be worth puttin in. It was a great tape, this woman who wis the spokeswoman for them she called the girls out on strike at Great Yarmouth one year. There was a man questioned her, he said, 'How did yi get on?' She said, 'I was put in the jail'. She then added, 'I went tae the pictures WI the bobby.' So there wis some laughs attached, they wir a happy lot. Then in the week-ends in Yarmouth yi though Yarmouth belonged tae Scotland because all the men were ashore an all the girls were on the street 'n everything but now it's all quiet, there is nothing in Yarmouth now as far as the fishin's concerned, it's all oil, all that things. "

"Wis there a lot goin in entertainment in your days?"

"No jist the pictures and that was all that was but that time that we were down in Yarmouth an I thought I'm going to have a look round where all the guttin girls ust tae work. I don't know if it is still there it's a few years since we were down and what we called the curin yards have still got the curer's names kept o for this, what you call conservation. There's Woolcock & Son, Wm. Slater and Sons, the curer's names are all still on the yard but they are all factories now but all these are kept for conservation so it's a changed world nowadays."

"How did you go about ordering your food and the coal?"

Well you always had fish-salesmen; they would order the coal for you. The cook had to order all his own food and sometimes they had long treks wi a big herrin basket on the shore tae get beef, vegetables, loaves and everything and carry the lot back."

"How did you manage to keep your beef fresh?"

"Yi got fresh supplies every day, yi see, drifters landed every day, well sail-boats as well if they could get in. They never took away big loads o anything like that. The only thing was there was a few boats here and all along the coast as well when they started out in summer, it was stupid, they ust tae give the home grocers a great big order for jam and bread and all sorts o things and packet and they were only goin about twenty-for hours away, that wis old-fashioned."

"How did you get on for washing and drying your clothes?"

"Oh you didn't wash any, yi took them home tae the women folk, you had no time to do that but in the Merchant Navy you had to wash your own clothes 'n its amazing how you got adapted to that things. I wid say that wis the best years o my life, at sea, wis the Merchant Navy except for that five and a half years of war, it wis terrible

There wis three boats chartered by the government for stores for the troops and we eest tae leave London go down and anchor in the Downs and wait till dark then set off for Le Harve. It was the first port of call then up to Rouen tae discharge oor cargoes and come back without an escort. We did that for eight months until the collapse of France and we must have been one of the lucky ones. When we went intae Rouen that time they didn't want tae discharge our cargo for some reason or other but the other boats had so much cargo out and they had to stay then the Jerries broke through. We got out another two boats were captured, some o the crew landed in Spain. I wis lucky. I'll always remember that cargo it was a beautiful cargo of brand new fridges. The Jerries didn't get that lot."

"What was the first aid procedure if somebody took ill on board? What happened?"

"Oh well you had to wait till you got tae the nearest port, but there was very, very few, I canna remember any cases in the fishin line when men were taken off boats, one or two perhaps, but not many, they seemed tae be a healthy lot or hardy. But oh the Merchant Navy wis a different life altogether, I wis on fit they ca' the coastal section, Spain, 'n France, Holland and latterly after the war ended, Germany. I wid say this there's nobody in the world tae compete wi the Germans for workers, far above anybody yi ever saw, no work was any bother to them, they would all the same. That time when was going there cigarettes wis very scarce, I didn't smoke but I got my share along wi the rest we were allowed a hundred cigarettes at eight shillings for the hundred."

"Wis that Woodbine?"

"No, Players, so I ust tae gee the German boys a packet o cigarettes and they wid HIV lifted the boat- a' for a fag, eh? Aye a great prize at the end o the war, it wis the same WI whisky, I could have been drunk every day, eight shillings a bottle, that wis duty free, yi see."

"Fit wid a ton o coal hiv cost noo when yi wis on the drifters?"

"Twenty seven tae thirty shillings. It's nae real. A hundred weight wis jist over a shilling."

"Hoo lang did it tack yi tae get up steam when yi were settin oot?"

“Well when yi started the fishin the boiler wis filled up wi fresh water you didn’t push it you gave it about twelve hours just in case it would blow any joint or anything like that. Yi had tae be careful because the boats were tied up between the season, well sometimes atween the winter and the summer yi got three months that wis the only good thing about the herring you had a long spell at home between the winter and the summer.”

“Did yi nae hae tae scrape her bottom at that time?”

“Aye we’d tae check her right round fae stem tae stern, three week’s workin. Di yi know what I got for my three week? Twenty shillings! That’s incredible! It’s unbelievable, but it’s true. Naebody hid the money tae give yi, ‘n if yi didn’t get the boat ready then there wouldn’t be a job.”

“Did yi haul them up on the beach?”

“Aye haul them up on the beach, chip all the rust off and paint them all around.”

“Di yi remember any o the drifters yi were in, ‘n di yi remember any o their names?”

“A wis in several drifters one o them was the drifter the ‘Celocia’. I always ust tae wonder what that name was till one day we were on holiday I went tae Belle Isle Park in Ayr there was a flower growin it was like a feather duster, the name was Celocia, the first time I ever got to know what it was. The first drifter I was in was called the ‘Hearty’ then I was in the ‘Dexterity’, the ‘Celocia’, the ‘Exarantheim’ and I finally finished up in a boat they called the ‘Fisher Lad’. That was one of the latest, a real class boat that. Of course they are improving a’ the time. If yi went tae the herrin fishin there was some o them that jist went ae fishin then away tae another boat. They didn’t get any better than anybody else you were just as well to take your chance with the same boat didn’t. You had the same opportunity all the time but that’s all by-gone days now, no more nets to mend and I’ll tell you this much you speak about sneezing when that nets were being mended everybody was sneezing. It ust tae be in the summer time especially. I don’t know what they call them we ust tae call them scalders, stingin jellies when that got in the nets stand by when they were dried then you would sneeze you couldn’t stop. That big things WI the red tails at them, that wis the stingers, the blue ones you could pick up in yer hand they didn’t sting. Some o the fishin yi liked and some that yi didn’t like. I never liked Lerwick, because in Lerwick all the curers did have a wharf till themselves. When you went tae that wharf tae land you had tae put yer baskets on a bogey and push them uphill to what they called a forehand where they emptied the fish in and afore yi got that done yi was practically on yer knees. It was murder. It wis fine if two boats got there then you would have got two crews. You would put on four baskets and they would put four baskets, eight men tae push up instead of five. There wis lots o snags in the fishin industry could have been ironed out but I don’t think the herrin fishin would work now. Nowadays there’s too much traffic on the sea, you see in our day you wid hae great expanses o watter far yi wid niver see a boat but you wouldn’t go far now without see ‘n ships. There’s all that boats that attend the oilrigs but there’s one thing I don’t agree with and it’s this automatic pilot that they’ve got for steerin the boats now. It’s a very, very dangerous thing. My nephew has a boat. I went to see her out in Buckie there wis a launch she wis new they got an arm chair and I said, ‘Yer not allow to have that. What are you doin with that?’ He said, ‘Sit down and you’ll see.’ So I sat down just a few seconds, a burrr made yi leapin. I said, ‘Yi winna fa asleep there.’ But I said, ‘That doesn’t help, yi can’t look out sittin in a chair,’ This automatic pilot ‘cause she steers the same she niver alters that’s why that, wis it a Buckie boat that got sunk a few years ago? No the Buckie boat hid an automatic pilot, hit another boat, the fella went down tae make a cup o tea, the time he went down he smashed intae another boat. There should always be a man on watch. The seas different fae the land. On a road you can see everything that’s comin and everything that’s behind and all around yi but on the sea yi’ve got a big expanse of water. You might be lookin there and see an object comin this way there’ll be another object comin this way that you don’t see so you need somebody on watch. It’s been very, very lucky that there hasn’t been an accident, it will come because it just can’t go on for ever and ever with just one man on watch.”

“Did yi find that lang ago hale famelies seemed tae go in the one boat?”

“Oh aye, oh aye, they ust tae be father and sons, uncles and their sons, that ust tae be the entire crew o some boats.”

“It wis a bad thing in a way?”

“Oh aye it wis a bad thing. I remember the first accident in my lifetime here, wis a boat they called the ‘Evangeline’ it wis the winter fishin that boat wis wrecked.”

“She wis run doon, wis she?”

“No it wis about Stronsay, no she went ashore and crashed. The whole crew was drowned, I think, unless I’m mistaken. That wis the first burials in this cemetery up here. The whole crew was lost. That wis a sailin boat, the ‘Evangeline’ they called her. I don’t know the boat but I’ve heard so much about it.”

“I’ve heard stories that some o the sail boats got motors in them eventually?”

“Oh aye. Jist before the first war finished what we called converted intae motors bit it wis laughable, the biggest engine wis a 75 horse power Garner, the next wis 60 horse power Kelvin in yi kin jist imagine een o that big boats being driven by a 60 horse power Kelvin.”

“Fit did they rin on, wis it paraffin?”

“Paraffin, aye it wis all paraffin.”

“There wis nae ony protection in the sailboats, yi cwid have been easily washed oot ower?”

“Oh aye there wis nae rails, no, no rails, not like the drifters but I think myself now they’re goin too far with that now. The man that lived across the road from us he was lost in an Aberdeen trawler and I saw that trawler in I wouldn’t go in her. From the deck up to the top o the rails wis is high is that, well you can just imagine a sea brakkin in on that how is it goin tae get away. I’m sure that those boats the deck filled wi watter when the sea went tae that side it capsized. They’re too modern with the boats now.”

“Aye they’ve everything closed in noo.”

"Everything is for speed, speed, speed. Aye, speed and efficiency. I wid say this in the old days life wis far better than it is now. Yer neighbour, in the old day's wis a neighbour, a real neighbour. When we wis young, if my mother had a pot o broth on she'd be in wi a bowl tae next door, the next day the woman wid be in wi a bowl tae us, that sorta thing but that's all gone now, you hardly know yer neighbours now."

"That's a fact, that's a fact. Fit did yi dee in yer young days noo, yi ken efter school in that?"

"We jist made oor ain enjoyment. We ust tae play football until you couldn't see the ball, all night, that's why I wonder at these fellas say they play ninety minutes and they're dead beat. We ust tae play for five tae six hours at a time."

"Of course yi hid nae entertainment in the hoose?"

There wis nithin that entertained yi in the hoose unless yi hid a mouth organ or a melodeon or onythin and if yi had that somebody wid say, 'Be quiet, stop'."

"Fit wis Sundays like then, fit did yi dee on a Sunday?"

"Well Sunday wis kept is a Sunday their wis nothing done on that day. There wis no work o any kind done jist apart from washin yer dishes, some people didn't even do that. Now Sunday's jist like anither day in the week. Oh no there wis no movement on a Sunday 'n if yi went anywhere you walked."

"Jist went for a walk?"

"There wis no traffic o any kind, you'd get the road tae yersel on Sunday."

"Did yi find a lot mair folk went tae the Kirk in them days?"

"Oh aye the churches wir packed full, every church wis full now it's the other way about. I believe that when I wis a youngster I wid honestly say in this village, if you got five families that didn't go to church that would be a lot out of the village. Its mair like the ither way aroon noo. They weren't rough though they didn't go to church they were quiet folk but they jist didn't got to church. That wis the funny thing about it but if you got five families out of the whole village that wid is a lot. The churches ust tae be packed full to the doors ivery Sunday."

"I suppose that harbour doon there wis week packed o boats 'n a'"

Well the most I ever saw in the harbour wis when the war broke oot in 1914 all the boats had tae come home because most o the men were in the Reserves, the Navy Reserves, wir all called up. The harbour wis packed full inside and outside as well that wis practically the finish o the sailin boats. There wis very few sailin boats after that but oh it wis a tremendous sight all that great sixty foot masts."

"It's been a bonny sicht that."

"Oh aye it was a beautiful sight tae see one o the sail boats under full sail in a fair breeze, a beautiful sight. They can't go over like the drifters they would list down a certain amount then they would go that way all the time they weren't rolling about they were steady in the watter, a far steadier boat than the drifters."

"Di yi min fan they built boats in Portknockie?"

"Oh aye. I don't remember them all but I remember when the last one was built down in the harbour there. They called it the 'Berry Brae'"

"The 'Berry Brae', I've heard o that."

"Did Dan tell yi about that?"

"No we dug it up in oor research."

"The other one was the 'Sunshine' but I think the rest were built for people away from Portknockie."

"Its hard tae imagine that noo it's that a quait wee village there's nithin here noo."

Noo yi wid haent tae be here on Friday night their wis plenty here on Friday night, smashed windows, wi a gang that came in cars. There's plenty o that unfortunately, it's the same in Buckie. I say this 'n I mean it, they'll nivver stop this vandalism and all the murders and things if they don't bring back the birch. The birch rod would finish that overnight. I wis we a fella at school he wis one o the real toughs, there was nobody could stand up to him, he could batter anyone down and everything. He was wicked. When he left the school, well it wis that that kept him quiet bit when he left the school he was jist a real character, jist a madman but he was a fairly proficient footballer. He wasn't a professional footballer but he could play alongside any professionals today. He ust tae play for Fraserburgh and the manager ust tae take him out of jail to play the match and put him back inside again."

"He was that good, eh?"

Oh he was a terrible character, he was always in trouble but he jist seemed tae keep out of real trouble nivver got in the mix among the police but after he left school and that he was never out of jail. That's far he spent his life in the jail."

"Far aboot did yi get the birch rod, did yi get it at the school or wis it deen publicly?"

"No I don't know where they got the birch. (It was given in Banff.) There was one or two got it here, well in the main they deserved it I would say but some of them got the birch for nothing or very little. There was a fella in Cullen there, it was a sin really tae hit him because he was a softie. You know what I mean? He didn't understand things really and he stole a turnip out of a farmer's field. He got the birch for a turnip. They went too far in that case."

"Di yi mind the costs o onything in those days, like the price o loaves and stuff like that?" Fit wi yi hiv peyed for a loaf?"

"Pey for a loaf? Yi paid thruppence for a loaf and yi got a softie fit wis called an outside loaf, a long one, wi a crust on the outside for thruppence."

"Fit wid a pint o milk hiv cost?"

"A penny and if yi wanted tae walk up tae the farms yi wid get a big pail that would hold a quart or a gallon for a penny. Turnips cost a penny and carrots wis nothing, the wife gave yi them."

"Fit aboot tatties?"

"Aye they were cheap, half a crown a bag, yi kin hardly believe it now."

“Yer money wid hiv geen a lang wye then, eh?”

“Farm workers got what they called a fee that wis sign on for six months an they got six pounds for the six months.”

“That wis a lot o money then.”

“They got their food in that but it wasn’t really food they got it wis just what they really wanted tae gee them. They had them for six months and they couldn’t really leave them but I still say they’ve got a better life than fit we had. When yi think about it a pound a month, that jist amounts tae five shillings a week.”

“Fit cwid yi dee wi that noo?”

“Nothing, yi widna get nithin for five shillings, nithin, yi widna get a packet o fags for that.”

“Wis their ony superstitions ust tae go roon in those days?”

“Oh superstitions, it wis full o superstitions. We ust tae live beside where the chemist shop is now and there wis an old woman, a tiny woman, and her skirts were always trailin on the ground, there wasn’t a skipper that would pass her without given her a shillin when they were goin tae sea.”

“Gee’n her a shillin?”

Not one skipper would pass her, everyone gave her a shillin, they were afraid if they didna give her a shillin she’d wish them bad luck.”

“It sounds ridiculous that no, disn’t it? Did they go by that een, didn’t sail on a Friday noo?”

“Aye they ust tae. I remember it wis afore I left school I ust tae go tae sea in a small boat wi an old man. We’d tae go down the harbour on a Friday night because this drifter was goin away tae Yarmouth and he wouldn’t let go her rope before 12 o’clock. We’d tae stay down there until 12 o’clock before he would take his ropes off the pier so we would get along side. Friday had to be finished before he would let go his ropes.”

“I suppose it would be the same on Sunday they wid keep Sunday....”

“We nivver went on Sunday unless it was an emergency anything that just had tae be done.”

“Did they wait till Monday mornin or did they go at the back o 12 on a Sunday night?”

“Oh no now there was no goin away at the back o twelve, oh no yi hid yer breakfast and everything before yi went down tae the harbour, oh there was none o that. It was a better life in that way I would say and there was more friendliness amongst the people. Today there are people who think they’re a better class than me, and they won’t bother wi you and there’s others again that think they’re not good enough they won’t bother with you either so yer stuck in the middle. But oh there is a vast difference in the livin now besides in the old days. We ust tae get up in the mornin and you knew yer breakfast afore yi got up, it was a plate o porridge and milk that was yer breakfast every mornin apart fae Sunday. Yi might get an egg on Sunday and then yi wid hae tae halve it wi yer brother.”

“That wis a special treat?”

“Aye.”

“Fit did yi dee on Christmas’s lang ago, did yi get presents an athing at Christmas?”

“Oh no there wis no well people that were well off would have a toilet or anything like some people didn’t have a sink just a basin put it in the middle of the table and wash the dishes. It was really hard times without a doubt but it was happy times your neighbour was an neighbour if any of you was ill you could depend on yer neighbours they never let you down.”

“Probably because yi wer a’ in the same boat in them days, yi ken, abody wis the same?”

“Aye abidy wis the same, there wis very little difference. Perhaps the man that had a boat, if it was a boat that happened tae do well, they might be a step above but that wis all, they didn’t class themselves as above they were still neighbours, but it is not so now. Neighbours don’t even trust each other now.”

“Some folk have said that lang ago yi could ging awa an leave yer door open, yi didna need tae lock it?”

“Oh aye after we cam tae live on this street there wis a woman in the street there never locked her door and that wis after the 1940’s just went tae bed an left her door open you daren’t do that now. It’s funny how things happen. We never ust tae lock the door but we was sittin talkin here one night, just like we are now, and our door opened and somebody went in. She looked at me and I looked at her but as it happened it was our son in law from Findochty that was there. I never said anything, I waited till he went out and I said, ‘Now the door’s goin to be locked.’ She said, ‘What for?’ I said, ‘That could have been anybody.’ So she said, ‘I niver thought about that.’ So when it’s dark she locks a....”

“Quite right.”

“Bit this is a quiet, quiet corner here, we hardly know anything in Portknockie unless somebody comes and tells us. There is never any rowdism or anything in this part, it’s very, very quiet but if you go down past where the church is and round about there you’ll find all the trouble you want. I was speakin to a woman one night and oh, she was at her wit’s end there was a crowd threatenin to break her windows and all the rest. She said, ‘I’ve phoned the police three times and they haven’t come.’ I said, ‘Well you get on the phone tae Bucksburn and you’ll get all the Buckie police over.’ That’s the only way you’ll get them there’s no policeman here, you see, nor in Findochty but there is a difference without a policeman. Don’t tell me there isn’t because the kids go around the street as if they own the place and they can do what they like, no matter what you think and do, they think they can do what they like.”

