

James Flett, 15 McKenzie Street, Findochty was interviewed on behalf of Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society on the 15th of June 1988. Both the questions put to Mr Flett together with his answers were recorded on tape

"What was the name of your first boat?"

"The Lizzie Birl."

"Oh, you were on the Lizzie Birl, were yi? We've got some research material on the Lizzie Birl. What was the number of it?"

"I was away on the Lizzie Birl fin I wis fourteen, the week efter I left the school, during the first war. Yi were fourteen!?"

"Aye."

"Fit wis yer job in it?"

"Cook, for a start."

"An who learned yi tae cook?"

"Well it wis really an uncle."

"Fit kind o things did yi cook?"

"Jist the usual, porridge tae yer breakfast, broth tae yer denner an' stew."

"Did you dae that fin yi were fourteen?"

"Well I wis being learned."

"How many hours a day did yi work?"

"Ah well, yi kind've been on duty a day, the time of the war. Yi see yi wis in Harbour Duty in Scapa Flow. Yi wis up at six makin the breakfast an yer last meal wis aboot nine o'clock, eight or nine o'clock it nict. That wis yer tae afore yi set to watch."

"How much pay did yi get?"

"Oh now I canna mine."

"It couldna've been a lot."

"It wis about seven or eight pown a month."

"Wis that fin yi were workin. Wis it durin the war?"

"Aye, I wis workin for the Navy."

"An how old were yi when yi went tae that?"

"Fourteen."

"Yi went tae the Navy fin yi were fourteen?"

"Aye fin I left the school. The week efter I left school."

"What were the workin conditions like?"

"Well they were a right. It wis jist the time o the war an the Navy wis a there an we wis attending the Navy wi the drifters. There wis a doze a drifters there; aye attendin the battle-ships wi food and mail and such like."

An fit like were the conditions aboard the ship?"

"They were a right. That was a modern drifter, yi see, for that time. "

"Did yi hae any other duties other than bein cook?"

"Aye. I geed on fireman after a year or so."

"An who taught yi tae be a fireman?"

"Well yi kinda learnt yersel. Being cook goin up and doon the engine room it jist kinda fell tae yi."

"An how long were yi in the Lizzie Birl?"

"Oh now, it hid been a year, I suppose. Then we shifted into anither drifter cawed the Lily of Yarmouth. She was an old drifter. The Lizzie Birl wis taken awa doon tae Dover."

"An what kind of job did yi do in that Lily?"

"Fireman."

"And how long were yi in it?"

"Oh I believe it wis another year."

"Were your duties the same in it as well? Were they?"

"Aye."

"Did you haul the nets?"

"Nae net hauls, that wis during the war."

"Well aefter the war, did yi go tae the fishin?"

"I came home and went tae the fishin the last year o the war. Left Scapa Flow fin I wis seventeen and came home and went tae the fishin the last year o the war."

"And fit boat were yi on wi it?"

"I wis on the Hosanna and the Enterprise."

"And were they Buckie boats?"

"The Hosanna was, the Enterprise wis a Peterhead boat. She wis on hire here. "

"Oh aye. Wir yi a fireman wi them in a? Whit were yi on them?"

"They were motor-boats."

“The Lizzie Birl, wis she a fishin boat before the Navy took her over?”
 “Yes, she wis fishin a year before the war broke oot.”
 “So really you were at the war fin yi were fourteen?”
 “Aye. I wis in Scappaflow over the New Year.”
 “So yi left the school at fourteen an yi jist went straight tae that?”
 “Aye.”
 “That’s incredible that. So yi’ve hid a hard life; yi’ve hid a hard chauve?”
 “Aye, I’ve hain a hard chauve right enough.”
 “So then yi went on tae a motor-boat. Whit kine a boat is a motor-boat?”
 “They were a sail boat wi a motor engine installed. When the sails wint oot o date they got propulsion.”
 “Aye. Noo the next boat yi were on , no the third boat. Oh I’m getting ravelt. Fin yi were in that Hosanna did yi go away fae Buckie? Did yi fish oot a Buckie, Findochty or Portknockie?”
 “Well we come fae Edinburgh and aye the cod net fishin wis oot o Buckie.”
 “An yi were a fireman in it as well?”
 “No, no there wisna nae fireman. They were motor boats, yi see? They were driven by motor.”
 “How did they work? Fit fuel did yi use for a motor-boat, petrol or paraffin?”
 “Paraffin.”
 “How much paraffin did yi use?”
 “It hid been a gallon an hour.”
 “An how far did yi go away in them?”
 “Oh we didna go far the time o the war. We jist hid a limited area. It wis sealed off for fishin only and it was patrolled by the Navy.”
 “Oh aye. Far wis that?”
 “Well it stretched for forty , fifty mile fae Fraserburgh right across tae Wick and that wis patrolled by the Navy tae keep away the submarines from harming you.”
 “An fit wis yer duties in it?”
 “Deck-hand.”
 “Yi hauled the nets and that then did yi?”
 “Aye.”
 “How many hours a day did yi work?”
 “How many hours?2
 “Yi very near worked all day. Yi left the harbour say between dinner time and tea time an yi started tae haul yer nets at one o’clock in the morning. And yi would have been done haulin then aboot five, four tae five and then yi steamed away wi yer catch.”
 “An when yi came in wi yer catch did yi then go home?”
 “No, no.”
 “Yi jist stayed in the boat?”
 “Yi jist went away tae sea again, everyday.”
 “When did yi get ony sleep?”
 “The time when that yi wis lying oot yer nets, after yi shot yer nets, say aboot seven or eight o’clock it nicht. Yi set watch, and there wis a man on watch all the time durin the nicht.”
 “An how much did you get paid for that?”
 “Well it wis accordin tae yer catch.”
 “And the catch wis shared among all the crew at the end o the day?”
 “Aye , expenses paid first.”
 “Did yi hae any other duty, other than haulin the nets? An did yi tar the ropes?2
 “Aye , afore yi started, aye.”
 “An did yi mend the nets?”
 “Oh aye.”
 “How long were yi away fae home for, how long wis yer trip?”
 “Oh durin the war yi wis home every week, fishin oot o Fraserburgh. But after the war yi went away down tae Shetland and fished oot o Shetland fir aboot a month. Came home and yi maybe changed yer nets, better nets, came back an went tae Orkney’s and the small island called Stronsay. Yi wis there another month an then came back home, perhaps at the end of the month, and then back tae Wick an fished oot o Wick another month for Fraserburgh an that wis yer summer fishin finished.”
 “What did yi do for winter fishin, did yi go winter fishin? Where did yi go for yer winter fishin?”
 “Stornaway , Stornaway and Malliag an the lochs, Waxford, Glendhu and such like.”
 “Did yi ever go tae Yarmouth?”
 “Aye ae year.”
 “An how long were yi in Yarmouth?”
 “Aboot siven weeks, six tae siven weeks.”
 “An whit did yi dee wi yer time off in Yarmouth?”
 “Oh now, yi didna hae much time off, only the weekend.”

"An did yi go tae the kirk?"

"Aye, later on."

Now did yi have any injuries fin yi were in the boat? After the war, were any of yi injured?"

"No."

"Fit did yi do for first aid?"

"Well latterly when we got skipper's tickets, fin we went tae Navigation classes we hid tae take a first aid course. An that gave yi a little inclination o what to do if in an emergency."

"Whit kind were yer life-boats?"

"Ordinary small boats. Yi see that one there, that white one?"

"Oh aye. It wisna very big, wis it?"

"Oh it could hold aboot eight persons, seven tae eight."

"Noo wis there any rockets in yer boats?"

"Aye."

"Hid yi?"

"Nae then, bit later on we had."

Aye. Can yi mine fin rockets came in first?" "Aye, it would've been efter the first war, I suppose. No later on, I jist cwidna say the exact year. I believe I wid've been in Aberdeen when the rockets came in. 1935."

Did yi hae any radios? Did yi have radios in yer first boats?"

"These eh? We called them wireless sets. We hid one, aye, this is a lead one."

"Aye did yi hae one o them in yer boats, bit yi couldna speak oot though, could yi?"

"No."

"And fit did yi do for yer wither fore-casts?"

"We got it on the radio"

"What happened if you missed it?"

"Well yi jist hid to do what we did before they came along, judgement o the wither."

"An how did yi judge the wither now?"

"Well yi hid yer barometer and hid the sun and the elements that the older fishermen taught yi aboot the skies, the settin o the sun and the old men wis very good at that – the judgin o the wither."

"Can you remember any or the wey they used tae tell yi forecasts, any saying s, cause there's some poems aboot the forecast isn't there? I've been telt on a bit I canna mind it."

"Such as 'The red sky at night'."

"Aye I've heard that one bit there's another one, there's a line in that thing, 'dinna go out' and a line in that thing about passin yer door or something. I canna mind jist fit it says."

"No I'm like yersel."

"Yi canna mind fit they said? It wis 'pass yer door' Well did yi hae ony superstitions? Were yi superstitious?"

"Oh aye, yi were superstitious. Yi didna like tae hear the minister bein mentioned. An yi didna like tae hear salmon bein mentioned."

"If yi heard that mentioned, what did yi do?"

"Well yi jist kinda said, oh that's you're superstition."

"An yi jist carried on tae sea? I've heard o folk turnin back if yi met somebody."

"Aye and yi didna like tae turn a boat tae the left."

"How wis that noo?"

"I dinna ken. I aye mine the auld men, they niver liked tae turn the boat."

"I've niver hear a that one noo."

"They aye turned tae the right, an yi niver liket tae shot yer nets tae the port side, we liked tae shoot them ower the starboard side. I believe that came fae the Bible. When Peter was told tae cast his net on the right side, I think the Bible says."

"What did yi dee when you went out to the water and it was bad weather?"

"Well yi jist carried on if it wisna too bad if it wis yi jist hid tae come back."

"If it wis awfy bad an yi were far oot, what did yi you dee then?"

"Dodge, jist kept ahead through the wind till it ceased."

"Were you ever in a boat that hid tae dee that?"

"Oh aye, plenty times, in the trawling."

"Did it nae fleg yi?"

"Well no, tae a certain extent maybe, yi didna like it it wis jist yer job an yi hid tae carry on. That's the trawlen I'm speaking aboot. Yi see the trawlen wis a different fishin a the gither besides the herrin fishin. Yi wis towin the net fin yi wis trawlin bit yi wis shootin when yi wis it the herrin. You've seen a herrin net, hiv yi?"

"Wis that wi the wee mesh? An the trawlin his got big?"

"An the trawlin was made o nylon bit the herrin net wis a cotton."

"That wis why yi hid tae tar the rope wisn't it because it wis cotton?"

“No, no the ropes wis fit yi ca’ed leaders, nae nithin tae dee wi the nets. The nets were only fixed on tae the tarry ropes.”

“*Why did they tar the ropes and nae the nets then?*”

“The nets wis barked wi cutch.”

“*Oh of course, bark, how did you bark them?*”

“Well yer cutch wis boiled, a hundred weight o cutch.”

“*An whit’s cutch?*”

“Well we called it bark. It wis a kind o glowy stuff. It was broon colour when it was melted.”

“*Did yi jist dip yer nets in tae that?*”

“Yi wid’ve dipped aboot, well yi wid have used aboot seventy nets and this tank o cutch. They dripped all the time fin yi took them oot, The drip went all back into the the tank. It wis boilin hot.”

“*Where did you do that at? Here?*”

”Down where - Do you know where the bank is? At the back a the bank , jist aboot next tae the street.”

“*An how often did yi dee that; about once a year?*”

“Twice, three times , and that belonged tae my uncle that cutching place.”

And where did yi dry yer nets at?”

“Up on - Di yi ken Taylor’s ferm. They hid a field spare for spreadin yer nets. Yi spread yer nets, the hale breadth o the net. Every fishin they were dried, taken intae the home and mended.”

“*Aye. It wis the wives that mended them?*”

“Aye men an a.”

“*An did yi pit them oot yer windees, up the stair, up far they mended*”

“Aye, doon at my mother’s . The majority had stairs, same as this one at the back here, bit yi carried them up and down.”

“*Where did you stay when yi were first married?*”

“Up in Netherton.”

“*At the farm?*”

“Next tae the school. That wis twelve, I believe, Seafield Street.”

“*An how did yi manage tae bring up a family in that small meagre money yi got?*”

“Well yi worked in credit then. The grocers, butchers, an bakers worked in credit and they got paid when yi came home from the fishin when yi settled up yer earnings.”

“*That wis after the whole fishin, yi were settled up?*”

“Aye, and yi paid yer expenses food and fuel an eh aye that wis yer runnin expenses. Tehn the money wis put into three shares, a share tae the boat, an a share tae the nets an a share tae the crew.”

“*So there were six or seven o a crew, the crew’s share wis divided amongst?*”

“Aye.”

“*Well that hidna been a lot o money.*”

“It couldn’ve been.”

“*No it couldn’ve been.*”

“Of course it’s a different noo, wi this seine net.”

“*Whit wis yer entertainment like? Did yi hae ony entertainment?*”

“No, no yi went ashore in different places an there wis always entertainment belongin tae thelikes o Fraserburgh an Yarmouth and that places, plenty entertainment, theatres an all that sort of thing if yi cared tae go there.”

“*Ah bit comin fae this area that probably didna impress yi did it?*”

“No, nae tae a great extent, an then yi wis a kinda mixed up wi yer women friends who wir guttin. “They a lived in huts in Lerwick and Stronsay, the girls.”

“*An when you were away you jist stayed in the boat. You slept in the boat?*”

“Oh aye.”

“*What kind o transport did yi have? How did yi go from place to place?*”

“Train.”

“*There wis a train wis there?*”

“Oh aye, a train station here.”

“*Of course, Finechty.*”

“An Portknockie.”

“*Can you mine how much it cost?*”

“Well we very seldom took the train tae Buckie, we aye walked. I canna mine how much we wis tae gang tae Buckie. It hid been a boot thruppence I suppose.”

“*There’s an awfy difference in the price o things nooadays.*”

“Yer tellin me. There’s even a difference in the last year.”

Aye, a big difference. Have yi any funny stories? Can yi mine on anything funny thit happened?”

“Well fit di yi mean like? Scarey?”

“*Anything, jist stories.*”

“Well I mine one night thit we wis caught in a gale o wind this side o Cape Wrath fin we thocht that wis the last. We got in tae Scrabster more by good luck than good management. That wisna a funny story, that wis a real”

“No that wisna a funny story.”

“We managed tae get in tae Scrabster harbour. We thocht it would be the last.”

“Bit yi hid a hard life though?”

“Oh it wis a hard life.”