

MR JAMES MAIR , PORTKNOCKIE, IS INTERVIEWED

Mr James Mair, 19 New Street, Portknockie was interviewed by two trainees from the Balloch Trust in Buckie on behalf of Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society on 7 July 1988. The transcript was put on to a floppy disc for the organisation now known as Buckie District Fishing Heritage Museum by the secretary, Allan Fraser, during May 2003.

“ At what age did you leave school?”

“I was born in Peterhead on 11 July 1895 and I left the school at 14. I went Tae Sea that time WI my father in his ain sailboat, the ‘Challenger’, BF194. I wis there for two or three years like and then, well she wis ane o the aller kine of boats, ye see, an ye jist gied tae the summer fishin an then they a gied aboard the larger boats gaun tae Yarmouth. Then the war broke oot of coorse”

“Fit kind o stuff did ye cook on the boat?”

“ Oh! a kine of things. Och aye we hid good grub. An there’s some again fa wir niver pleased. The drifters burned plenty coal in a week, withoot being grudged, an yet there wis some wid hae grudged tae tak doon a saftie or a biscuit for yer tae. They grudged the grub, bit yet it didna metter a damn hoo much expenses there wis. I mine hearin aboot a Portessie chap, he got a berth on her , ye see, ye maybe ken her, BF1069, I think wis her number. The watch wis set an it wis aye the case that the man that did the last watch made the tae, tae call the crew tae haul. An this chap thocht it wis the same as a the rest o the boats an he hid the hin- maist watch an made the tae an they cam oot o their beds an the skipper mannie comes oot an mumps an groans, ‘See fit ye can dae wi yer tae afore ye haul’ Some o them wir awfy bad wi grub, bit maist o them wir good.”

“Did ye hiv tae order a the stuff?”

“Well fin ye wint awa tae the fishin ye took aboot thirty pounds worth of stuff wi ye. That wis a kine o groceries, butcher meat an athing. If ye went tae the fishin then ye wid ken that ivery boat hid a cogey, an they wid taen them ower 40 pun o beef cis ye couldna git credit in Stornawa. Bit as things got better ye cwid go onywy ye liked an sea pit the bill intae the fish salesmen, which wis a far better wye.”

“ How did you store the food, keep it fresh?”

“Well there wis nae wye tae keep it fresh. There wis nae fridges or ice then, it wis the same afore the drifters came. Ye went tae wi the sailboats and the wither wis fine an ye got aff tae sea and then the winter came an the herrin wid be scarce an a o a sudden it wis fair wither an ten tae one the herrin wid come on in shoals an ivery sail boat wid maybe hae aboot ten tae a hunnar cran an they either hid tae dump them or land them ower days, which wis very much at a reduced price. Then aefter a while the freshers cam on the scene, that wis men that bocht fish richt awa an they spiced them in boxes. They wantit the fish tae go in the train an they wid aye pey the best prices. An there wis an assistant curer in Peterhead an he didna buy herrin the same as a the rest o the curers bocht them. He wid see the boat comin in at nicht an he gaed doon and startit sayin, ‘Oh, the herrin wis so an so, I’ll gie ye so an so for them.’ Well they didna tak it, either that or dump them. Aefter he got a start, he began tae fix prices, he wid pit his han intae a barrel an say, ‘Look at this or look at that’, somethin o this kine, ye see and then say, ‘Och well, I’ll gie ye five bob the cran.’ He cairred on like this that ae time wi a boat , an the skipper hid this afore, this man cam in wi a good shot o herrin an he startit his biddin wi the rest o them, an they wir knocked doon tae him an the skipper said, ‘No, no, no , nae sale, he fixed them.’”

“Do you remember your first wage?”

“Oh, my first wage wis nithin. I wint the hale simmer fishin an the hale o Yarmouth an jist hid a poun or twa. Bit it wis like that , ye see, there wis good times and bad times. It a depended on the Russian markets an the Channel markets. Fin the first war feenished the Germans built their ain and the Russians built boats an they pit a tarrif on herrin so that knocked the bottom oot o there. Then the German mark went burst an that wis the beginnin o the end o the herrin fishin. “

“Dae ye mine the first drifter ye wis on?”

“The ‘Avirine’ BF179, Alex Coull’s boat. She wis built in Macduff by Jones & Innes in 1910.

“ What did you do when you had a gale, because you wouldn’t have had a radio , would you?”

“No, no, The fishermen that time wir a good wither forecasters, bit the present day fishermen are nae. They depend ower much on the forecasts that are gaen oot.”

“What did you do on your off duty time?”

“Well, yer off duty time wis spent menin nets for the next season. Ye see, the simmer fishin ye startit wi a net wi a sma’er mesh then as time advanced it changed tae a net wi a bigger mesh. Ye hid very little spare time afore ye got the nets ment.”

“Did you paint the boats atween times ?”

“Oh aye we wis paintin at the eyn o each fishin. Oh ye see some rare paintin doon there. Ye see some o the numbers on that boats. There wis a boat oot of Lowestoft, belongin tae Portknockie , they traced it tae the ‘Fertile Vale’ an her number wis BF52. Then on the Saturday at Yarmouth they wir paintin the number an the painter, ane o this chaps, oh he wis the best they hid in Portknockie, he wis aboard the boat, an he says tae hell wi this, an he oot the paintbrush an he gied doon the ither side paintin BF52. Fin the bosun gied doon the next mornin, he asked, ‘Who did this number?’ Afore the fishin startit that chap hid different boats askin him tae paint their numbers for them. That last boat that

wis built here, the 'Blade', I mine she wis lyin in Portknockie hairber an the boat that I wis in at the time, we shifted alongside. I mine the crew, Hebridean men, they cairrit tins o paint an that aboard an if they wir alongside the jetty they jist gave her a rub wi paint. "

"What did you do on a Sunday?"

"Fin ye wis at hame, ye see, ye didna fish on Sundays. Nae on the herrin boats."

"Hoo did ye spen yer Sundays, maybe at Yarmouth fin ye wir doon there?"

"Oh, ye hid the picter hooses and the theatres tae ging tae. An there wis a this concerts on the pier an a this. Ye see, it wis a great place for visitors, Yarmouth, there wis a sorts o entertainment. Oh, it wis a richt Yarmouth."

"Did you meet the local girls?"

"Oh aye, oh aye. There wis two or three marriages. There wis one married here, an she died last year, I suppose it wis. A bonny woman she was, she stayed up in that hooses there, an she hid the cleanest children that ye iver seen in yer life. Her man wis drowned the time o the war."

"What was living conditions like aboard?"

"Oh quite good. It wis bunk beds and fin an fin abody wis in the cabin ye eest tae see the different wyse people eest tae sleep. Some eest tae lie on their side, some wi their knees up, bit there wis twa brithers they wint tae their beds an ye wid think they wir deed, they wint in ower their beds an slept till time tae tak up the anchors.

In the boats o the day the cabin are forrit different frae oor anes. The steam bilers on the taps o them for drivin them.

In the simmer time they wir over heatin an that. Bit on the ither han fin they wir sailin at nicht ye wis handier if ye hid a nap. That wis a handy thing about the cabins being aft faiver wis on watch jist shouted tae the boys tae get up an reef

..... The sailboats hid an awfy time gaun tae Yarmouth. They hid nae propulsion, jist the sail. That boat that my

father hid wis a fast boat an there wis anither boat, the 'Activity', they wir aye blawin aboot fit they cwid dee bit they

cwid niver look near ma father's boat. It wis an unwritten law wi the sail boats that fin ye wis sailin in the daylight

with three sails up jist afore it cam doon dark ye took the jib that pult in the boat because tae work it at nicht wis

dangerous, ye see. An this time gaun sooth the 'Challenger' wis awa in the lead an fin they got tae Yarmouth next

mornin the 'Activity' wis there afore her an ye ken this that secret wis kept for 50 ear how it happent. The men that

hid the 'Activity' wir carpenters an they wir a sworn tae secrecy, fit they did wis this time, they pult in their jibs

and then they pult oot their one an aboot 50 years aefter that I wis wi the boat caad the 'Activity' an he wis a

carpenter an he got speekin aboot my father's boat ye see. Oh I say, 'I know what she can do'. He says, 'Ye've heard

about the time the 'Activity' beat her,' I says, 'Aye'. 'Well,' he says, 'Dae ye ken fit happent?' 'No,' I said, 'I dinna'.

So it wis him that telt me. He says, 'We pit up the jib'. So that wis kept a secret for years an years.

Oh it wis great races doon tae Yarmouth. There wis twa Stornawa boats in Yarmouth ae year an I wis wi the skipper

o ane o them an we were speekin aboot boats, ye see, ane of the crew wis speekin aboot boats an he says this boat is

faster than the 'Monig'. 'Oh' he says, 'Do ye think so.' He says, 'Aye'. 'Well', he says, 'I'm the skipper o the 'Monig'

an we both left Yarmouth at the same time and do you know how long we were in Stornoway before him?' 'No', He

says, 'Three weeks' an he burst oot laffin, ye see. Oh he widna believe that. 'Well, fin we left Yarmouth', he says,

'there wis a free wind an we were both sailing aside each other and the wind started tae grow an it grew that strong that

he dropped his sail and reefed. The Monig carried on a bit an he couldna get a reef, his sail jammed, so the 'Yowel'

wis three weeks in Bridlington afore he came hame.

I mine fin I wis a young lad there wis a fleet o small boats in Portsoy. Portsoy wis an important thing before the

steamers came bit it hid a shallow hairber it couldna tak bigger boats. When the steamers came, ye see, ye got

cheaper freight, aye the coal an that, an this ane wis gaun up the Firth tae Cromarty, the Tempest Fusion wis her

name. The wind wis northeast hand and all of a sudden it backed roon tae northwest and blew jist a proper gale. He

wis aboot three mile aff o Portknockie an he says Portknockie is the nearest hairber we'll go in there. Bit at the point

at Portknockie there's a bust o shalla net, ye see, an she went on there and he lost her. I wid jist hae been a loonie o

five or siven ear auld at the time. Jist doon at the Hythie there wis a boat gied in there, and then ower here atween

the rocks there's a shalla bit and there wis a French sailing boat comin up, he went in atween this twa rocks an

grounded on this shalla bit. They pit ropes ashore frae the rocks bit the maist miser able bit aboot it wis the

Frenchmen took a their gear ashore, stored them in the quay and Lady Seafield charged them rent on them"

"Fit wid hae happened if there wis an accident on the boat.?"

"Well, ye hid ane o that speaking machines, ye jist called up the doctor. He gave ye fit he thocht best."

"How did you manage to wash and dry your clothes?"

"Oh ye niver did that. Ye packed up yer claes in a parcel and sent them hame. Ye hid a spare shift wi ye, ye see

and fin it wis time up tae change like, ye jist sent them hame. Ye hid nae facilities for washin them."

"Did you have leather boots?"

"Aye, the shoemaker made them tae yer ain measurements."

"How much would they have cost?"

"Twa pounds. That wid be aboot twenty five pounds noo." Ye wid hae geen an got a pair o hame made beets, they

wir twenty-one shillings, an if ye got a pair o wellingtons again hame-made, they wir the same twenty-one. There

wis a shoemaker here, see."

"What did you do when you first went to sea?"

"Fin ye go tae sea first of a ye aye went as a cook. It wis amazin hoo good cooks some o them wir, makkin a kinds o

puddings, duffs an stews. As I say ye went awa wi thirty pounds worth o stuff, ye see enough for five or six weeks,

ye see, till ye got hame an got stored up again."

“Hoo wis yer stores delivered tae you? Wis it wi horse an cairt?”

The stores wir here, ye see, this shop up here. That wid hae been the busiest shop. He started, his father hid a fairm an he didna fancy the fairm so he startit a shop here. He wis nae time in business fin he startit that nice shop. Aefter he built that ane he bocht this hoose opposite. He hid a big grocery shop below himsel an upstairs he hid his tailors an at the ither side he bocht this ither hoose an he made a drapery bit. He eest tae sell beets an that type o thing, ye see. In the shed ye wid see big rolls o cleth an great big barrels of paraffin He hi an affy trade. He hid 30 or forty boats himsel three times the ear, ye see. He selt ropes, nets, athing, an fin he deet he wis worth a lot o money much o it left tae his second youngest son, bit he wisna the same as his father .”

“How did you preserve the oilskins?”

“Thes wis deen wi linseed ile. Fin they wir made they eest tae pit on the linseed ile wi claes brushes tae brush it in recht, ye see. Maybe three or fower coats o that. They wir fairly waterticht.”

“How many sets did you have?”

“Generally twa. It wis ileskin troosers an ileskin jackets. They wir made by the likes o Logie o Buckie, he wis aboot the best. Wi Logie's ileskins there wis aye plenty cleth in them, ye see, same wi bows for nets an a kine a gear for the sailboats. Some firms got good names. Buckie men eest tae say, if ye wir getting a new boat, gang tae McIntosh the builders in the Sloch - a Tosh boat an a Logie outfit, that wis aye the cry. A’thing wis good that Logie hid. I dinna ken if it wis ony chaper or ony dearer bit he wis aye the leading man for ropes and things o that kind. And then say , the boat’s blocks, some o the blocks wis widden an been hivvy , ye see, well, there wis a man in Peterheed caad Milne he hid the best blocks for boats. He hid awfy little wid in the blocks, an great big sheaves, bigger sheaves.”

“What about superstitions?”

“ It jist gradually died oot. In Europe an that places its nae auld fishermen that’s on the boats, it’s maistly a fairmer's sons and the owners pit the bill up in the windae showin amounts for the boats. There wis this Yarmouth mannie fa wis aye playin tricks on newcomers . He played a lot of tricks on this newcomer fa wis on a certain boat., so much so that the some o the crew got on tae him aboot it and ane o them telt the skipper fa gave him a telling off. Onywe he played a trick on this fairmer chap an one of the chaps said I’ll pey him back. He took his seabeets an pit a fork intae it wi the prongs up the wye. He got his seabeet on awricht, ye see, bit he couldna get it aff.