

MR JAMES ROBERTSON, FINDOCHTY, IS INTERVIEWED

Mr James Robertson, 5 New Street, Findochty born in 1910 who first went to sea as a fisherman in the summer of 1923 was interviewed on 22 June 1988 by L. Rickerby and S. Mearns, then trainees with the Balloch Trust. The following script is the answers he gave to the questions that were asked. In the main they were concerned with his life as a young fisherman at Yarmouth in the 1920's and early thirties with a mention made of an escapade during his time in the Navy during World War II. His wife was present and once or twice he would ask her to remind him of something.

"What age were you when you left school?"

"I left the school in 1923 fin I wiz fourteen, well I wiz hardly fourteen as I socht an exemption to get awa to the sea. The first summer I went awa with the crew they hid a cook but I wiz learnin, ye see. My father wouldna let me take it on till he thocht that I could, well you see you had to make food for ten men and coil 12 ropes, thick tarry ropes, and ivery mornin. Well it wiz worth weighin up. He said, "Oh no, wait till you are a bit auler". Well I wiz fourteen just afore I started tae cook and I wiz three years cook and then I went on tae be fireman. I got a step up. Ga'in the engine room ye see. Then aifter aboot three years there I wiz on the deck. I worked on the deck as a fisherman, clear o the engines, and worked there till aboot '35 or '36. We hid the twa boats, the *Courage* wiz built in 1933 and I went awa on her after that. I spent five years on her and then I went on the *Christmas Morn* as engineer. This wiz tae Scapa Flow where we were called up by the Government. We wiz there a good file and then we got a shift roon tae Loch Luxsford and syne frae there tae Greenock. We came back efter aboot a year to get a refit and they widna lets go, they said everything was in order. Because of this the mate went up to the office in Scapa Flow and he created an he says we wiz telt we wid get the sack if we didn't keep there. He says no we're going for a refit. So I wiz silly I shouldna have left there, I could HIV been there the hale war, but you ken if you are alane WI a crew ye dae as they dae an the hale lot of us got the sack. I cam hame and I wisna Lang at hame afore I wiz called up. I think five weeks an I wiz awa tae Lowestoft in the Navy and then six 'ears there."

"What was the name and number of the first boat you sailed on? Was she a wooden boat or was she built of steel?"

"I remember her fine, she wiz the *Conie*, BF937 wiz her number. She belonged tae ma father and his brithers. She wiz a widden boat."

"What was it like on board the Conie more than sixty years ago?"

"Oh she wiz a good boat, a good sea ship. They looked after her well. If she wanted repairs they gave her richt awa. There wiz nae dilly-dallying about it. That wiz your livelihood. We fished maistly at Wick an Stronsay that wiz the twa favrit and we hid a ear that we were fishin there an we were roon at Scrabster an Stromness. An that wiz opened that ear an we hid £50 for three week's gross, aye that's gross and my father says, "This is nae gan tae dee". We went hame. You had to tak on good gear for Stornawa cause it wiz big herrin that you got there, pit on a new fleet o nets an went awa there. We hid niver been tae Stornawa in the summer time, an a'body wiz dreadin it. I mine we geed aff – there wiz a Tiumpnan Heed or a lichthoose an there wiz a great big English boat lying there an he jist shot his nets ye see, an we cam up an spoke tae him. He says was there anything doing" Yes", he say, "we had a hundred and forty cran today from this water." An we shot awa jist at the stern, ye see, that wiz on the Thursday and we his £440 for oor twa shots on Thursday and Friday. Afore we got oot o there, an that wiz a big fishin, we hid £1850 for six weeks that we wiz in Stornawa Big money then! Oh it wiz a fortune then. So that jist lats ye see the difference between ga'in tae the sea. We tried Wick roon aboot Scrabster, Stromness, aroon that waters the backside o jist nithin. It wiz a hard time for my father ga'in to Stornawa cause he didna like it. He says sure's' death that's made oor day. Of coorse I wiz only a cook at that time."

"What did you do about stores, did your have to bring them with you?"

"Oh yes you had to go up every Saturday. I'll tell you fit we did. We took awa two or three week's stores, like jam an a that kind of things, but loaf an all that, bread ye didn't go"

"Did you get it in bulk?"

"No. When you went tae Yarmouth you got fourteen or fifteen big loaves aboot this size (showing with his hands) an that did ye for a fortnicht. Then you got hard biscuits. But no, no you went up each day for fresh food. You were in nearly every day, an they cam doon like vultures wi runners you know them that wiz workin for the butchers an the bakers to get orders ye see. But maistly you wid tak a herrin basket an go ashore yersell. You always hid provision awa fae hame. The like o the jam, plenty sugar an box biscuits. Grannies eest tae bake that bread, bit maistly it wiz fresh. In Yarmouth lads took down yer grub for ye cause it wiz awkward, it wiz pretty far fae the river. They took it doon in vans to you. Oh they were eager. When you went up the first day you were doon tae Yarmouth you could hiv heard them miles awa comin doon. Runners, ye see, young people jist wantin tae trade, ye see. But oh you got plenty of feed."

"Can you remember the cost of things, such as the price of bread?"

"Oh the bread. You got a loaf for eleven pence. An am safe to say that it wiz 18 inches or mair in length. Fin you go tae Jimmy Taylor's they eest tae bake them, aye the auld father, an ye eest tae tak fifteen, some times twinty or maybe mair awa to Yarmouth an then ye got that box biscuits. An my granny she eest tae bake the oatcakes. Boxes of them, you always this tee. I'll tell you couldna tak too much meat for you hid nae fridges in them days. It wiz jist

a wee sup ice that you pit on it. It wiz fresh meat practically ivery day. You were comin oot an in ivery day ye see at the sea fae the herber an it wiz fresh food ivery day. You got a fry of herrin noo and again.”

“When you were a fireman how many tons of coal did you go through?”

“Ah well that boat wisna jist too hard on the coal but I’ll tell ye she got 12 ton a week, I believe, an that’s two f you doon the stokehole that’s one on watch, a four hour watch, ye see. That’s steamin in an oot ivery day. Maybe ten to twelve ton. As I say coal then, we used tae take in jist enough tae tak us tae Shields on the road doon tae Yarmouth. You went in tae Shields, aye North Shields, 13/ the ton, best English coal, and they filled up the bunkers an I’ve seen roon the wheelhoose an a wi it. In they used to put in what they called the pond boards an that made jist like a big box on top o the bunker lids. This wiz a extra cause 13/-. An some of them used tae go intae Shields efter the fishin gan hame an tak a ton or twa each for the hoose. Thirteen shillings a ton. What a difference now eh? Thirteen shillings a ton that is what it wiz costing us. It wiz great min.”

“What was the procedure if you ran into a gale? Did you receive radio forecasts?”

“No we niver got anythin. That wiz the first time we hid a wireless I wiz tellin you aboot when we were caught in that gale. The cook wiz supposed to tak the forecast an tell us afore we shot the nets an he didn’t. He forgot, I suppose. He told us efter it wiz too late but there wisna a breath o win. But my father, I can aye mine on him sayin, he wiz lookin intae the north. “I dinna like the look o that sky”. An ye ken this afore nicht, I hid jist turned in efter we hid pullt up the ashes, got the stokehole clean an the fires, an I went awa for’t tae my bed in the foc’sle, I wisna weel in there when she took that sea. My uncle Dod was there sleepin for’t aside us an he says, “Oh my I doot she’s awa tae the bottom”. It wiz comin gushin doon the hatch, ye know the companionway which you went doon tae the foc’sle. Of course we hid a bit of an alleyway afore ye went intae the actual place far ye slept. It wiz full, it wiz a torrent comin doon, It wiz nine hoors afore we got her roadit and fin we startit tae haul there wiz nithin but corks an nane o the nets left, they wir a gone. The corks an the buoys that wiz a that we got.”

“If anyone took ill, what was the procedure?”

“Oh well jist go tae the doctor. Get the doctor doon tae the boat in port like you couldna dee anything. You cwid dee nithin, you hidna wireless or phones, there wiz nithin to phone ashore in them days.”

“Did you have to pay for the doctor as well?”

“Oh aye, maistly.”

“How much would that have been?”

“Oh it wisna much. Ten bob at the maist, ken tae see them. But they usually cam doon tae the boat, the doctor, if you were ony bad. They were very good. There wiz a Mission, the Deep-Sea Mission an wiz nurses in there if a man hid tae come ashore they wid jist gang intae the Mission an they wid look efter him until he rallied. They were very good at that. There wiz a Deep Sea Mission an they wint roon a the different coasts, Yarmouth, Shields, you name it. Up in Scotland an a. They all hid a Deep Sea Mission and they attended tae the boats and the men. Then some o them eest tae hae a meetin on Sunday nicht and they eest tae collect in a place an hae a sing song. They wir awfa good to you the Mission fowk. Qualified nurses an everything there. It wiz hard in them days. Ye hidna the money, this wiz it. You werena makkin the money they eest tae dee. Well you wiz drivin a drifter, two pounds five shillings you got the week and you had five shillings mair for a stamp. The firemen got thirty five bob, thirty five shillings and five shillings for his stamp for his card. That wiz the wages. But them that hid a share of the nets on the boat they went jist on sheer chance. If they got it they made it. If they made onything they got it but it wiz a chance. They hid nae guaranteed wage. They couldn’t get the brew, what we ca the dole, because them that hid the nets didna qualify for it. But we got it. The cook wid get it. the engineer wid get it and the fireman would get it ye see cause they wir stampin their cards they hid a wage. But it cam till’t that they eventually got £2 a week and the woman hid tae go from here tae Buckie tae collect ower tae the fishsalesmen’s office. £2. It wiz hard, hard. But still we wiz as happy as Larry, happy as lords. Oh no they hid hard times. Fin they cam hame fae the fishin up that stairs throw tae the far en, it’s a bedroom noo, bit it wiz full o nets. Mendin, mendin. The woman was mendin fin we were awa tae the sea. I’ve seen ma fathers cryin tae my mither, “Come Doon oot o they’re for the luv o goodness, bidin up there till twelve o’clock at nicht”. Mendin nets, this fin we were ashore. Then efter that a lot o the boats didna go tae the winter fishin, some did and some didna but there wiz niver nithin, maistly debt. You wiz aye landed in debt. Then the simmer time cam on now, twelve weeks riggin oot the boat either here or ower in Buckie. Finechty wiz famous at that time ye ken, for the sail for the boats but eventually went tae Buckie. Well they widna even pey yer fare tae Buckie. Ye hid tae tak a bike or a bus. Twelve weeks riggin oot a boat, paintin, niver a sausage for it. Not a thing. Ye hid tae dee that tae keep yer berth. Not a thing for riggin oot the boat. I’ve seen us twelve weeks gan tae Buckie ivery day, hame at tae time an hame at denner time if ye cwid get a lift. Some wi bikes wir aricht bit the auld boys jist stuck it oot till tae time wi a saft biscuit or a bottle o dazzle. Aye twelve weeks we niver gied oot afore the simmer fishin an that wiz riggin oot richt fae top tae bottom, paintin, cleanin. In far they kept the very coal, it wiz cleaned and reid leeded. You ken that reid oxide fae the bunker aside us. The boat wiz widden bit a the stocks aroon wir iren, oh we hid rare fun I’m tellin ye. Bit still we enjoyed it Setterday nicht wiz worth it a when ye got tied up at Gorelstone or Yarmouth. Of coorse the auld fellas didna bather the same bit we wiz aye awa ashore forgot about the rough.”

“What did you do in your time off?”

“Oh some gied tae the picters. There wiz a lot o amusements in Yarmouth, a roon the sea side, especially at Gorleston. I remember we went tae Scarborough ae ear, sometimes we went tae Shields afore Yarmouth, sometimes we fished three weeks at Scarborough afore we went sooth. Aye the amusements an a’thing wiz going fae simmer time, ye see. It wiz great. There wiz twa or three jetties. One o them wiz for skatin. There wiz a big skatin rink in

there and then the ither ane wiz for the picters, dancin the Wellington Piers. The scenic railway wiz there. Oh there wiz a lot o amusements in Yarmouth. We enjoyed that bein young lads. Bit oh me there wiz a thoosan boats fishin oot o that river at the time an there wiz a strong current flowin and ebbin an ye wint tae see the men manoeuvre that boats in that river an not one hardly got touched. They wir masterful at using boats in that days. It wiz a deen wi the skipper an the engineer. He got the werd for gan ahead an astarn ken an the skipper the skipper gied rich in. It wiz miraculous. I remember we wiz richt up tae the bridge, my father didna like that, he cwidna get tae the sea seen enough. We cwidna get a berth this Setterday an the mannie he says we are gan tae tie at fit they ca the Toll Market. "Oh ye lie here, ye can't lie here go away up the river." We wiz richt up tae Tom's hoose. He didna like awa up there. We let go twelve o'clock Sunday nicht, I wiz doon the engine room takin aff ma tie, for bein ashore, an you ken the time we got to the moo o the river for boats? Six o'clock in the mornin an it wiz only a couple o miles. They a let go at ance an if the tide was wi ye it wiz astern ye hid tae cam if the boat wiz cairred by the tide. Goodness kens why there wisna accidents. There wiz a thoosan there, that's coontin English an a and the only day they got ashore wiz they didna go tae sea on a Sunday. They bade in and then they got. No they went oot on Sunday an they got Monday in, that's fit it wiz. They hid a hale free sea an athing on the Sunday. If ye were catch't at the sea on Sunday that wiz different but ye widna gang tae the sea on Sunday."

"Were there lots of superstitions?"

"Aye I remember ane we did as a trick. We wiz fishin in Stornowa an there's lovely grounds in Stornowa that we eest tae gang intae on a Sunday for a walk and of coorse we hid a little doggie, ken James, we pickt her up in the grounds, of course he catch't a little rabbit, a wee thing like this. (Showing the size with his hands) We were lying aside this boat, the *Heathery Braes* fae Portknockie an we took the rabbit doon tae the boat. We lifted the ropes, ken the nets wir pullt up at the sides ower the weekend an we shoved this little rabbit in ablow the corks. They are layin on the nets in the Monday mornin an this lad, Arthur the ca'd him, he niver lat dab it wiz his an he says layin doon the nets intae the hold, "Mechty! It's a rabbit. Look it's a rabbit. There's nae eese in gan tae the sea wi a rabbit at the nets." See the superstitions, they near jumped oot ower her. I think it wiz Arthur Mair ye ca'd the man. Ye see they widna mention rabbits on a boat for nithin. Oh no no. They widna gang tae the sea on a Friday or nithin like that. they were awfa superstitious. An if they met a minister that wiz worse. Some lads cairrit it awfa far. My father wisna sae bad bit I think they were dubious kine o a lot of things

As I telt ye we were on the *Christmas Morn* and we a gaed hame. I wisna twa days at hame fin I got ma callin up papers. Way doon tae Lowestoft in September 1940 an I wiz there till the war ended in 1945/46. I wiz at the invasion in 1944 an a ower the place. I got throw it, I niver thocht I wid get throw thon lot. We wiz makkin smoke for the landin, the tarra minches, an then we went up to far the Yanks landit richt intae the beach, five or sex boats richt in a line, jist staggered kine. We hid a great big smokin machine aft far the sma boat eest tae be. Great big eight cylinder engine, tanks jist obliterated athing fin they made the smoke. We hid three Yanks aboard wi us an there wisna ane o them cwid work the smoke machine, well there wiz mebbe ane, but he cwidna work the thing himsell. I says to oor lads, "Boys if he disna learn tae work that thing himsell ye'll niver mak smoke." The wye they cwidna dee it wis cause they wir a seek, cam awa a gale o north-east win. Oh they wir jist deed. The hale haul wiz made up for them tae wi lovely bunks an iverything far the fish room eest tae be. It wis a converted trawler ye see. An we hid fit ye ca ten in one rations. The Yanks were provided wi athing doon tae toilet paper, great big tins of biled ham, onything you cin mention they hid it. We scored though they cwidna eat them ye see. An the trouble wiz if they felt ony good they wir awa amon the lemon foam an mixin up this kine o stuff that wiz bad for them. They wir jist as bad again. Oh we scored aff them bit I wis gled I got throw that lot, that wiz very very bad. I dinna ken how we got oot of it they wir richt intae the beach, baith sides the first twa days an then up at that Yanks landing. I wiz on the deck, I wiz mate at that time. I wiz in the wheelhouse that time."

"Did you ever go as skipper?"

"I hiv ma ticket bit I niver got a chance wi ma father an his brithers. My father gied lang skipper after I gied awa tae the war. I mine comin hame on leave afore the invasion. I cam hame an I says tae her we'll go awa doon an see the old lady, that wiz my mither, an she says yer father is jist hid 139 cran the day oot o Gamrie Bay. I says are they shottin as far in as that? "Aye", she says, "there is nae a limit noo that they have tae work tae." What a fishin they hid. Made their fortune. Thirteen, fourteen hunner pounds that week. That wiz the time o the war. That wid hiv been about 1942, I wid say. Mine they hid a drifter. "What did you call it, that Drifter?" "It was the Lord Zetland." It wiz an English boat." I wiz demobbed in September 1945. I cam hame an I wiz still on demob leave an ma father cam up an says, "Are ye ony inclined tae gang tae the fishin?" I could hiv chased him. I wiz only new hame. He says, "We wint a cook." Oh I says I'm nae ga'in tae cook. "Ach!", he says, Ye can cook fine noo. Ye'll get the same as the deckies an them a noo." I says, "I'm nae stoney, I've jist got my demob money an a'thing." That wiz jist afore Christmas. I wisna intandin tae dee much. Ach bit I went awa. Ken this they hid a richt good fishin. A big fishin. It wiz only five or sex weeks. But that wiz changed days, the time o the war they made a fortune at the sea an they still dae it noo at the seine net. But they'll kill the fishin wi the mode of fishin they hiv got noo. Like o this purse seiners an that. I wiz watchin on the TV the last nicht the Tait's of Fraserburgh, great big boats, an if ye hid seen them, mackerel, thoosands and thoosands o them. Nets as big as a fitba park. The length twice as lang as a fitba park. An it's about sex huner fathoms deep. Nithin can escape it. Bit they'll ruin themsels. They'll cut their ain throats, I would think so onywe. An they are gan in for bigger boats a the time. Oh it taks somethin tae run a boat noo."

"When you were aboard what were the washing and drying conditions like for your clothes?"

“ You jist hid tae gang doon tae the engine room, tak a bucket an sweel oot yer sark. Well we eest tae dae that iver y watch ablow wi the sweat an the heat. Bit they didna even hiv a place tae pit their ileskins an the cook eest tae gang wild. There wis a railin inside the gailley far they made the grub, they eest tae hing them on there an the scales, the herrin scales wir ower athing. He eest tae gang wild. Some cooks widna lat them go doon the cabin wi their big beets, their seabees, till they hid washt them thoroughly, cause it made a mess ye see. An it wiz some job keepin a cabin clean wi ten men. Herrin scales awye, bit I enjoyed it. I canna understan noo fit wye we did it, awa ashore on a Setterday as prood as punch, efter maybe jist a richt gale-beaten week. It wiz very seldom that ma father missed a gale in Yarmouth. He wiz a stormy petrel, I wid say ga'in tae sea. He wid aye feart ye. Noo his brithers were feart. James thoner for as broad as he wiz, fin it cam tae coorse wither he didna like tae gang tae sea. Old James he niver lived that wye. I've seen him, especially wi the boat if it wiz decent wither or half decent, he wid gang intae the wheelhoose on Monday mornin an he wid tak the boat tae sea. He wid tak her ashore an if we were getting out an in everyday, which was sometimes impossible in Yarmouth, but as I say if the wither wis half decent in the moon an you were getting maybe nae too much big shots that wid keep you in, I've seen him a hale week working oot an in, wi naebody relievin him. I dinna ken how he could dae it. Jist that wee whiley when the nets wir shot we got a couple o hours afore you startit tae haul ye see. The only lad that got tae his bed wis the fireman. The fireman, ye see, he took the boat tae the sea, and the engineer took her ashore, so you got tae yer bed gan ashore. The driver he gied tae his bed gan tae the sea. That wiz the only twa that got a decent sleep. Oh it wiz a hard life but we enjoyed it. Happy times. You forgot it all when you were ashore on a Setterday night. Doon tae the drives an the amusements, wax works an work a forgotten. Oh yes we wiz happy, we wiz as pleased as punch. Skipper gave ye three pounds an he says well boys fit aboot the present money, fa is needin this an fa is needin the next. Some wid say six. “Oh ye canna get sex”, he wid say. It wiz their money tee. We got three pounds each an ye wir lauchin at your father's . Bit they cwid dee things that we younger lads cwidna dee. Ma father an me wir ashore this time buying presents. We wiz in Woolies, ye see my father wid go tee an ask anybody aboot onything an es time it wiz little knickers for the bairns ye see, an Tom he says, rubber knickers. I says fit's that ye're buying? That's a bag tae tak hame. Knickers an that rubber knickers tae the bairns . God I says I'd better tak some tee. I ging tee the coonter an wis tae speak to the quine, an English girl too, bit cwidna. . She looks at me and says , “Would you like the same ?” I says, “Aye the same as Tom.” She said , “Who is Tom?” I dinna think she kent fa Tom wiz.. I says, “ My mate there.” What a lauch the quines hid aboot that. I wid niver hiv bocht them masell, bit ma father he could ging tae an say fit he wantit.