

MRS JEANNIE INNES FORMER HERRING PACKER /GUTTER AND NET FACTORY WORKER WAS STILL WORKING AT THE AGE OF 85

In July 1988 Mrs Patsy Murray, called on Mrs Innes at her home, 8 Yardie, Buckie, and interviewed her on behalf of the Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society. The dialogue that took place between the two women was recorded on tape to be later typed up.

"How old were you when you first started work Jeannie?"

"I left school at fourteen."

"And where did you go to work?"

"In Marshall's Net factory in West Cathcart Street."

"Then after you left Marshall's?"

"Well the war was here and there was no herring fishings started till after 1920. The war finished in 1918, November, and it was 1919 afore the boats got a manoeuvred the gither, wi fit wis lost, getting new boats, it wid hiv been intae 1922 afore they could hiv started gan back tae Shetland."

"How old are you now?"

"85"

"Can you tell me about your early years at the gutting?"

"Well we went awa tae work for Slater. I wis niver in Lerwick afore and it wis after a big fishing when we got tae Lerwick an' instead of going in June it wis July. During wir time working for him we did very well. We met a Wick curer, J. Q. Cordiner of Wick, he signed us up. We signed an agreement and accepted arles of a pound each to go to Yarmouth. I later worked for him all round the Irish coast, Ardglass, Kinsail and Peel in the Isle of Man and down to Yarmouth. Fin we came home in November it wis back in tae the net factory till the Spring fishing started again. Then this curer, called Cordiner of Wick, took a place in Kinsail, 20 miles to the seaside of Cork and we wis there for 16 weeks. We were there for a few seasons and did very well. We went from there to Shetland, then from Shetland to Yarmouth. It wis an advantage tae us because we hid full time work. There wis no unemployment benefits till 1919. It wis originated in 1918 bit only became payable in 1919. It wis the first unemployment benefit that was paid up north here, bit yi hid tae get the equivalent of stamps or such like."

"In a' the different ports yi went tae, where did yi stay?"

"In Lerwick, the curer hid huts on the plots of ground thit he owned. We hid six in each hut; no water facilities or toilet facilities etc. and yi hid tae heat your water on a stove. Yi hid tae tak away all you're cooking utensils and cutlery and china for eating and using."

"An' yer blankets?"

"An' yer blankets and an empty tike tae hold the chaff or the straw which was procurable tae go intae the beds."

"An the tike is just a big bag for holdin' all yer....?"

"Yes, a bag for hudin the chaff or the ..."

"Fit about clothes, what did you take them in?"

"We hung them on the wall an' we covered them wi' table cloths or suchlike, old curtains stitched the gither, an' drew them in and covered them up there an' fit wis precious tae ye, yi kept locket up in yer trunk, yi'd a trunk each and that trunks had to do for chairs tae sit on; there were no chairs!"

"How many girls lived in a hut?"

"Six wimen, three in each bed, and we hid bunks, lang double bunks. That's how the beds were laid out an' ye'd a curtain on at the bottom o' that thit kept the cooking utensils an' athing in tae orange boxes, wooden boxes, no cupboards."

"An' wis it usually the same girls you went wi' every year?"

"Yes I worket wi' my sister an' a friend the whole ten years we wis wi Cordiner o' Wick."

"Did yi tick turns with the cleaning?"

"Yes."

"An' the cooking?"

"Yes yi took turns. Fin it came tae your day yi wis up in the morning and hid the tea ready. The rest, one from each crew, as yi wid call it, yi took yer day an' yi finished scrubbing oot the hut for the next two takin on the next day."

"Who woke yi up every morning?"

"Yes we started at six."

"Aye bit who woke yi up?"

"Well a cooper came round an' knocked on all the doors till he got an answer. Whither you'd an alarm clock or no, he came round all the doors till he got an answer."

"He wis makin sure yi were...?"

"Yes thit yi wis ready tae come."

"Now when yi went tae Yarmouth, far about did yi bide?"

"Well yi got digs. Yi tried tae go tae the same digs, well I wis about seven years in the same digs in Crown Street, Great Yarmouth and the landladies got to know yi, yer likes and dislikes. We showed them how to make Scotch food and we always landed very lucky. Then there were pictures at night. It wis a' pictures at that time, no television, The Sunday morning was church an' it was huge crowds that turned oot. In 1925 there wis a big Revival with a John Troup, a cooper from Wick. It was really good, I can mind on it fine."

"Fit about the hours that yi workit at Lerwick an' ither places?"

"Well, Lerwick wis strenuous hoors. We worket fae six in the mornin and we hid wir tea, breakfast tea at nine o'clock and dinner at one. Then tea in the afternoon, then tea at five, and when you went out again, you wis lucky if you got a cup of tea. Ye'd tae finish if it wis 12 o'clock or a little later, occasionally sometimes earlier but if it wis a good season there wis very little early nights off. Yi didna get off on Saturday if there wis herrin', ye'd tae work on as they were fresh stuff."

"You must have been tired?"

"Oh, yi wis tired, yes."

"You had slept well, had a good sleep when you did get to sleep?"

"Aye, bit then yi were young, yi see, nae like the day."

"Fit about when yi were in Ireland, did yi hae the same hours then?"

"I liket Ireland. I liket Ireland affa weel. We hid nice folk."

"The folk were nice, you say and the Boss?"

"Yes there wis a hotel keeper who got us good lodgins. He was well-acquainted wi oor boss and he got good lodgins for us and we niver interfered with no religion. There was a small Salvation Army hut there, oh it wid have old holded a dozen people an' they were affa good till's. Bit we niver interfered with their religion or their ways o' livin or nithin, we jist got wae wir work."

"Fit about Yarmouth, describe the scene in Yarmouth with the gutters."

"Well in Yarmouth there wis hoards o' people going down in the mornin because, well, train loads o' workers came in tae Yarmouth frae Scotland, an yi wis nae afraid a' nithing. It wis 'Good Morning' tae abody, six 'clock in the morning, it wis quite dark an' that. What you had to lat yi see to do your work with was a can, like a big tea-pot, an' it wis full o' paraffin an waste in telt and pulled oot where the stroop of a' teapot would be and hit wis set alight an' put higher up so it could shine in to show yi hoo tae dee your work. That's hoo we workit, torches we ca'ed them and then later on they got electricity, yi see, bit it wis a' torches fin we went first tae Yarmouth."

"An fit wis yer job mainly – packing barrels o' herrin wis it?"

"Well yi wis in threes an there wis two up at the back o' yi, lined up, an' they took the guts oot o' them and cleaned them an' separated them in tae small first, medium, an' large an' the Margie herrin. The margie herrin' wis only Shetland herrin'. They were expensive herrin'. The herrin were packed in tae barrels, half barrels an' whole barrels, but I did used tae ken hoo much gied in tell each, maybe five hundred in a whole barrel."

"Can you describe how you packed a barrel – the different layers an' that?"

"Yes, yi picked out the best herrin' for the bottom tier and then the second tier. You wis very particular wi them. Then packed them in an' we didna pack any more till it wis examined tae see if it wis a'right, bit all the time yi were workin there wis a cooper goin' round each selection so thit there'd be no flaws, bit only they could trust the people, the wimen that wis workin', they widna deen any inferior work."

"They were good workers fae Buckie?"

"They were good trustworthy workers that's why they got the brands; they'd a' their own brands an' markets in the Continent for their herrin'. The brand that we had with Mr Cordiner wis the herrin' brand, oh they were particular an' the bosses got to know the people an' hung on tae the ones thit wis aye steady. Mr Slater and Mr Cordiner were very friendly and very good tae their workers."

"When you were workin' did you sing a lot. I mean did yi like tae sing fin yi were workin'?"

"Well there werenae sae much tunes fae the music halls, there wis nae pop music like today. There werenae much string music, it was mair melodeons. The fiddlers in Shetland are great fiddlers though, by art an' nature. Apart fae trainin' or being learnt tae play it's born in them, but its melodeons, button melodeons, nae piano accordions, button melodeons that the fishermen hid. They hid them in the boats an' a' thing. Oh yi wid hiv heard them singing in a fine night an' the hymns an' a' thing. We lived a mile an' a half to two miles oot o' Lerwick an' yi wid hiv heard them singing in tae Lerwick."

"Bit did the girls sing durin their work?"

"Yes they sung durin their work."

"What kind o'.....?"

"Well it wis hymns thit they sung in oor place cause there werenae, well yi ken, everybody wisnae trained in music and they jist hid the so-fa learnin', they kent a' the hymns, they didna ken sae muckle ither songs."

"An' hid yi iver any time off in any o these places for enjoyment o' any kine?"

"Well wee made oor ain enjoyment. There wis a mission belonging to the Church of Scotland. There wis a Church of Scotland minister, James S. S. Wood came tae Yarmouth at one time, bit they hid various other ministers. They got the name o' the church thit ye wis a member of an' they looked after yi. Yi geed up there

an' had a singsong, an oh yi did enjoy yourself, we'd parties an' bus runs if yi were off on a Monday afternoon.

Our boats didn't go to sea on a Sunday that time, it wis a crime tae go tae sea on a Sunday. The ropes wis niver loused till Monday, they niver geed oot. Yarmouth boats went out on Sunday an' cam in on Monday, bit the Scotch boats niver went oot on Sunday at Yarmouth, niver tae my knowledge."

"Can yi mine ony season that wis a disaster o' ony kine, fishing wyse or?"

"No, there his been a boat ae time, a Peterhead boat it wis lost, bit apart fae that durin the winter cod net fishing off o' Buckie there wis twa, three boats lost the winter time."

"Now were ony the girls or you....were you ever ill when you were away fae hame?"

"No, I've niver been ill in my life, bit, I shouldna be saying this bit I've niver hane the doctor in here bit eence or twice in my lifetime. It's funny, I tick that off the maternal side, my mither an my granny lived tae a' ower 80's. My mither had five brothers, there wis ane lived tae 89 an he went tae New Zealand an' he niver hid a doctor, bit I widna say the parental side. "

"Would you put it doon tae hard work?"

"Pardon?"

"Would you put it down to hard work or just that you've been lucky?"

"Aye, we wis young an' we widna been able tae dee that work noo, cause yi hid tae cairry the tubs o' herrin an' teem in tae big tubs because yi hid tae cover them wi salt an roose them up an' that wis ... it's a' freezers now yi see, bit then each curer hid tae dee that tae keep the fish fresh in brine, that's fit they ca' pickle. It wis pickle thit kept athin fresh that time, same wi fish, white fish."

"There wis nae such a thing as make-up an' that kind o' thing in your days for yer faces, ye'd a' bonny weather-beaten faces."

"No, no there wis nae make-up for yer faces nor nae perms for yer hair."

"An' yer hair wis a' bonnie."

"Yer hair wis fit yi made it yersel'. That's ae thing I've been blessed wi', good health, good eyesight and a good memory. I aye thank God for all the good bits we've got, it reminds yi thit there's some higher powers than us looking aefter us. "

"You've had a very long workin' life an' you've seen many changes, what would you say are the biggest changes you've seen?"

"Well, I would say the biggest changes I've seen is macheenery takin' the place o' man. The employer that I have in the meantime is Charles Eckersley; this is in tae my fifteenth year there, a better boss you couldn't find. A good boss, did a lot for this town an people, mony hiv cars an' houses an' a' thing they saved well off what Mr Eckersley produced. He has automatic machines for filling 11b scampi bags that we used to do when we went there first an' that machines would do more in a day than we would do in a week."

"Far better workin conditions than before?"

"Oh yes, oh yes, best sanitary and health an' everything an' a better standard o' livin' now. Mr Eckersley started in the late 50's wi a handful of employees in the same street as he's in now. Today he's over 300 workers and he owns the whole street. An' he's a canteen an' I don't know how they do it. I'll give yi one item. Today we'd lentil soup, the first course, we'd beef-steak pie, home-made, cabbage an' all the trimmings with it an chips and a sweet. The soup only cost 30pence a plateful and the pie 60p. "

"If you had got food like that when you were guttin you would have thought you were?"

"We would have thought that we were at Buckingham Palace!. We wid!"

"What sort of food did yi hae when yi were at the guttin?"

"Well it wis jist a case o' soup every day."

"Home-made soup?"

"Yes, hame-made soup – broth."

"Porridge in the morning or?"

"Well, we didna hae time sometimes, so it wis tea an' a roll. Bit nooadays doon there they've bacon rolls, ham rolls, egg rolls. The two cooks in Mr Eckersley's there have been through the 'Do School' (a name formerly given to the Domestic Science College in Aberdeen) - first class cooks. He's done marvellous, I couldn't praise him enough for what he's done. He cam from Manchester, I think, bit he's real Buckie now because he's got an Elgin wife, a complete lady she is, Mrs Eckersley. He recognises the workers an' you couldna praise him enough. I ken thit a' that I hiv, well yi see, in the olden times we hid tae work tae keep's goin, bit we can save money now since we geed tae Mr Eckersley. Oh yes, he's deen an awfy lot for Buckie an' a few weeks ago, two months ago, he got the Industry Award, the first one to be awarded the Industry Award in the Grampian Area. I said you should have got the Industry Award lang ago, he'd done that much for this town, cause I said we're there an' we see it. An' I says, we start at half past eight an if there's plenty work yi work away tae half past four, if there's nae plenty work they'll tell yi, ye'll be finished at so and so, come back tomorrow if yer part time workers. There is this crowd thit's workin on this automatic machines etc. an' that they're eight hour, forty hour week. They're a' gaun oot wi abeen £100 a week an' he's a team o' men, yi canna compare wi naebody, young men an' merriet, they're that good workers.."

“Willing workers?”

“Oh gran’ workers. They’re nae only workers, they ken the quality as well as the quantity. That’s a great thing tae be deeing tae find folk thit ken they’re wi’ a good boss.”

“Bit in your opinion, in your young days and now, do you see a difference in contentment an’ that wi’ the folk; are they more content than you were when you were?”

“Well, I’m speaking fae my auld folk thit wis in this hoose and their forbearers, they were content, they didna look for great things, they hidna a’ this new fashion food stuffs or things o’ that. Now today there’s mair temprement among the people that’s growing up. Oh if I don’t want this, I’m away somewhere else because they’ve a lot o’ money. They’ve money tae spend, we didna have money tae spend fin we were going tae school.”

“No cars, no ?”

“No car, ten toe cars, ye’d tae walk. No, an’ there wis a great Christianity among auld folk.”

“Do you mine back tae yer school days, what school di you go to?”

“The Buckie High School. I wis up there. I hid a clever family, two sons they were engineers. I’ve a granddaughter, she’ll be 25, and she’s been four years with Grampian Hydro Board, works as a computer analyst. She is an Honour’s Science Graduate of Aberdeen University. The other one’s a secretary, bit through ill-health she didna get tae the University bit it might come later. So I believe in Education, giving them what you can an’ I believe in them it’s helped.”

“Bit you must have been clever yourself in your young day but you had to go out to work at fourteen, you said?”

“Well I mine I got Dux in the Elementary School an’ Buckie High School an’ my mither says yi needna bather wi Dux’s here there’s a hale hoose o’ nets tae mend an’ being the eldest o’ four o’ a family, it wis a case I hid tae work. “

“Did yi work when yi come oot o’ school tae help yer mither?”

“Oh aye we wis aye oot. We wis aye deein somethin, bit we didna get oot tae ren the streets the wye they dee nooadays, there wis nae discos or nithin thit we got, there werena such a thing. Oh no, it wis a different life. The young anes his mair entertainment today. When we had a pay packet it wis handed in tae yer mither’s han’, it wisna a case o’ pay yer grub, but today, now the pay packet’s their’s an they pay so much an’ whither it’s the parent’s or the child I couldn’t tell yi, it happened that way.”

“Do you remember when your mother used tae mend nets what she?”

“Oh aye.”

“A lot o’ work?”

“Mendin till a’ the hours o’ the nicht an’ my father used tae buy a sheet net, thit I’ve woven them on tae big looms, very hard work!. An’ he eest tae munt them wi corks an’ the ozzles an’ the ropes hisel’. A sheet net then cost £3, fin I wis gaun tae the school. It wid be three hundred pounds tae, four hundred pounds noo. A shrimp net costs £8000 now.”

“When you were in the net factory did you make a net, the complete net?”

“No you made the sheet nets, you couldna make a complete net on a loom, its got to have eight meshes, a double cotton at each end.”

“What size wis the mesh o’ a herrin net ?”

“Thirty one inch ordinary, sometimes 32 yi see the Board of Trade gives yi the different mesh, a different size an’ the different seas thit yer fishin in, you’ve your small mesh an’ yer bigger mesh. Then the cod fishing they hid a bigger mesh again, bit we knew all the meshes an’ we had to be very particular with the meshes an’ that an’ we did the sheet net, it wis £2.40£2,00.”

“A’ piece –time basis?”

“It wis a’ piece work. The herrin an’ the fish - athin wis piece- work, no wages at that time.”

“No work – no pay.”

“No work – no pay! At the net factory, yi hid eight shillings per net in 1936, bit afore 1936, in the twenties it wis three and six an’ four shillings for doing a sheet net 31 inches, 55 yards long. All herrin nets were 55 yards long.”

“When was that?”

“1925”

“Did you say that in 1935 there wis a strike when you wis at the guttin?”

“Yes at the fishing there was a strike thit they wanted mair wages an’ they waited till the wharf’s were full o’ herrin in the baskets in Yarmouth an the police were out on horseback that time. But we wis wi Cordiner o’ Wick an’ he wis an employer thit hid everything closed in, his piece of ground wis dyked in, so he jist took down the shutters and we worked away.”

“You worked during the strike?”

“Yes. Well we wis satisfied we had been with him all our workin days awa fae hame an’ a good boss so we didna want tae strike.”

“What were they striking for?”

“More wages. Bit the Peterhead wimen an’ the Buckie wimen they werena wantin strikes.”

"No?"

"No it wis mair fit came along fae Ireland an' that thit got them idled up an'..."

"Outsiders?"

"Aye."

"You've got a fine strong fisher house here, it must have a lot of memories for yi?"

"This house was built for my granny to come into as a bride. She married John Black, his people had a blacksmith's and engineering place along here. They had a' this corner an' the boats were there for a' the engineering bits and pieces, it was no blue print then."

"Is it over a hundred years old?"

"No, it widna be over a hundred but it would be, aye, coming up for that."

"You've a lovely view. You must see a lot of activities oot the window."

"I can see the cars gan intae King Edward Terrace, Portknockie and I can look out at the front and I can see Lossiemouth like a brooch. The different lights reminds you of a big brooch wi' diamonds. The front, I look oot I can see the boats comin in through the sea, fit they ca' Skate Hole ' and the different areas they fish in and when I go to the gable windae I see them going intae the harbour, green light up."

"When you see their lights going out on Sunday nights yi hope that they hiv good weather for the week?"

"Aye and bring them hame safe, that's the main thing."

"I bet that you've seen a lot of storms?"

"Oh aye, and this hoose his niver been shaken or nithin wi' a' the storms."

"Do yi mine ony really bad storms?"

"There wis ane in 1953, the worst storm in my memory. The pylons for the electricity wis blown doon at the harbour and the tide wisna up tae this hoose bit it wis roon that ane."

"Did yi watch the boats makin' for the hairber fin they were going in the storm?"

"Oh aye. It's born in us watching, finiver yi see a licht ye're up at the windae. And that Craigenroan rocks that come roon tae the Mucks, the boats his tae tick a straight course."

"You can see the lighthoose at the top of Cliff Terrace that guides the boats in?"

"Aye, that guides them in tae, there's twa lights, yi see. There's the lighthouse there and then there's the red light at the harbour mouth and yi see the boats that guides them in. A miner and a fisherman, they have the worst jobs, a miners under the ground and a fisherman's at the peril of the sea."

"The fisherman are glad tae see that light."

"Oh aye, mony a time, mony a time. We've niver even seen the storms that's oot far the rigs is, some howling storms there but then they dinna affect us. My grandfather built this hoose tae is near the harbour; he married intae a fishing family. He wanted, well, fin we were here, young, we could walk in the back tae the harbour bit today wi the boatyard building wi their launches an' that it wis uprooted."

"An you've been born in this hooses."

"I wis born in this hoose. There's a' new windaes, new roof, an' athing deen, inside sanitation, it used tae be ootside across in that big shed, bit a' things at my hand. My mither, my father, four o' a family, my granny, my auld granny lived wi's"

"No piped water?"

"Nae piped water, nae nithin, we'd tae ging across tae the shed and hae a rooser wi a rose tae pit in the water an a' thing, bit eventually I've sinks up the stairs noo. And it's easy cleaned."

"Happy memories in it and I hope yi get a lot o' years in it yet."