

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MRS NANIE KACZMAREK

In September 1988 Mrs Nanie Kaczmarek of 31 Mid Street, Buckie who spent part of her working life as a fish worker during the period when herring was being caught in large numbers in the waters between the Shetland Isles and off East Anglia was interviewed on behalf of Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society by two trainees from the Balloch Trust. The dialogue was recorded first on tape later to be typed up.

*"Well Nanie how old were you when you first started working?"*

"I was 15."

*"Where did you work first?"*

"At Lewis Duthie's yard at the far end of the harbour, then at Downie Flett's nearer here, then at Merson and Gerry's in Low Street."

*"Were you doing the same job a' the time?"*

"Yes, among the herrin but at Merson and Gerry's I was packin wee 'Garvie' herrin."

*"Far did yi get that Garvie herrin – off Buckie?"*

"Yes off Buckie an Burghhead and that kinda wyse – that's far they came fae."

*"Can you describe your job packing? How many of you did the packing and how many girls were in a crew?"*

"Well there wis three girls in a crew, two gutted and one packit. I wis usually the packer."

*"Can you remember how many herrin you could pack in a barrel in a hour?"*

"If you did three big barrels in an hour that wis nae bad going, but that wis divided amang the three o yi."

*"How much did they pay yi for a barrel?"*

It wis about ten pence a barrel divided amang three o yi."

*"After yi wis there did yi move around the different ports wi the same curer?"*

"Well fin we wis a bittie aller we went tae Lerwick. That wis wir first adventure of going away. We went in the steamer frae Aberdeen tae Lerwick."

*"Describe how yi left Buckie."*

"We left Buckie by train to Aberdeen and got the boat tae Lerwick."

*"Did yi take your luggage wi yi?"*

"Yes we hid wir trunks a' wi's. They were a packit and came on the boats wi's. Sometimes the fishermen took herrin baskets we hid packed wi pots and pans an a' that. Then we hid wir bed and the drifters they took them and it wis big ticks and they were full a chaff."

*"And that a' went ower fae Buckie?"*

"Aye, wir beds and pots and pans."

*"Wis yer beds waiting for yi when yi went ower there?"*

"Maistly, maistly, aye."

*"When yi came off the boat describe when yi got up tae Lerwick."*

"Yi got a taxi or something right oot. It wis about three mile far the boat where we eest tae work and we eest tae get a cup of tea. Then we got wir messages and then we went oot tae the huts. The cooper used tae open the doors o the huts. There wis nithin ready, the barrels wir a' inside the hut that they hid left fae the season afore. After we got the hut empty we hid tae pit on a fire, a coal fire, and git going. We used to get, fin we wir in Aberdeen, to go intae a shoppie and get a few rolls wallpaper, thrippence a roll, and you put that on and got crackin. Yi got yir trunks unpackit and yir good claes wir hung up on one side o the wa and they wir covered up wi two big shawls. Then yi got a the rest o yir stuff a' ready an sorted oot. A' the furniture that yi hid wis six trunks and a table. That wis the lot."

*"Did you go with the same crew every year?"*

"Maistly until they gradually started gittin mairrit, then yi startit gan wi ither girls."

*"When yi were in Lerwick did yi get up early in the morning?"*

"Oh yi hid tae be on yer station at six o'clock so yi wis up at five if yi hid herrin tae dee. Yi hid tae tie yer fingers then, before yi went oot on tae the yard."

*"Hid yi ever sair fingers?"*

"Oh well, plenty holes, sa't holes they ca'd them – still got them yet."

*"What did yi dee for entertainment when you was in Lerwick?"*

"Oh well we wis three miles fae the toon and some of them went intae the toon tae the dancin and picture. We jist went tae the Mission, jist up the road."

*"What did yi dee when yi went tae Yarmouth? Did yi work wi the same fishcurers there?"*

"Yes the same fishcurer when we went there, or Gorleston, the same man there."

*"Far wis Gorleston?"*

"Across the river from Yarmouth."

*"An' hid yi tae cross fae Yarmouth tae Gorleston every day?"*

“Oh no, no, wir working places were in Gorleston and fin yi went tae Yarmouth your working places were at Yarmouth.”

“*Did yi stay in digs at Gorleston?*”

“Yes Gorleston and Yarmouth.”

“*What kind of digs had you there?*”

“Nae bad digs there, we did a lot o’ jobbies wirsels, yi ken.”

“*Same digs every year?*”

“Maistly, aye.”

“*Fit kind of food did yi get in Yarmouth?*”

“Yer landlady cookit yer food, you took in yersel and she cookit it. At the weekends yi did yir cookin yersel.”

“*Home food cooking?*”

“Aye if yi wis afa weel acquaint wi some o’ the fishermen yi geed tae the boats for yer denner on a Sunday.”

“*What sort of entertainment had you in Yarmouth?*”

“Oh there was lots of entertainment in Yarmouth. Lots and lots. We a’ maistly geed up the toon because there wis lots of shops and hid a hake aroon the shops.”

“*Buying presents?*”

“Pickin fit we wir gan tae tak hame wi’s because fin yi went away yir freens a gave yi a cake or a currant loaf so yi aye likit tae tak back something tae repay them. An’ we got Yarmouth rock doon at the store and they had rejects of sweets an’ a’ that. We got them cheap and we took them hame.”

“*I mind on the Yarmouth rock, we used to look forward tae getting it ---*”

“Aye a’ the bairns had rotten teeth in Buckie wi’ it.”

“*Did yi ever need a doctor when you were away in Yarmouth?*”

“No, oh no.”

“*Were ever any o’ yi injured at your work?*”

“Well nae the crowd that I went we.”

“*How did you spend yer Sundays in Yarmouth?*”

“Oh yi wis that tired you took a lang lie on Sunday and in the afterneen yi geed oot for a walk, it wis lovely, yi wid go doon the drive and it wis bonny in Yarmouth. In the evenin’s yi wid go tae the Deneside Kirk; it wis really packit. Yi hid tae be away hours afore the time to get into it. Yi hid a good sing song there.”

“*Somebody said there was a ‘Revival’ wi a man called Jock Troup. Can you remember it?*”

“No, he wis afore my time.”

“*Religion must have played quite a big part when yi wis working and that?*”

“Oh aye, they were aye singing.”

“*What did yi sing?*”

“It’s totally different noo. What dae yi ca’ that things? Transistors?”

“*They dinna sing like they did at the fishin noo?*”

“Oh well then. It’s just a’ changes noo, I suppose.”

“*Can you describe your claes that you wore at Yarmouth tae keep yi warm?*”

“A’ the thick claes yi quid get a hud o’. Sometimes an aul’ jersey fae the fishermen, yer freens like, tae keep yi warm and then yi hid things tae keep yer sleeves clean, fit they ca’d stockin’ ’legs. That’s the aul’ stockin’ ’legs, yi ken, and yi tucked them in at the top tae keep yer sleeves clean.”

“*And your oilskins?*”

“That’s fir they ca’d oilskin quites lang ago and yi hid an apron. Yi got a bit oilskin fae a fisherman and yi cut it intae an apron and then yi hid a hoodie fin it wis rainin.”

“*Did yi work oot in the open in Yarmouth?*”

“Workit oot in the open a’ the time and at Lerwick an’ a’.”

“*Yi wore boots as well?*”

“Yes we hid wir ain boots. Aye.”

“*That wis Lerwick and Yarmouth. Far else did yi go tae?*”

“Lerwick and Yarmouth and ....”

“*Were yi ever in Ireland?*”

“No I was never in Ireland. Stronsay, that’s the same area as Lerwick and Orkneys.”

“*An did you like there?*”

“Oh no, I didna like there. It wis afa bleak. Nothing there, jist one street, that wis a’. There wis a lady there – hid a Mission, Church of England and it was Sister Ray. We aye went up to her Mission, it broke the monotony.”

“*How did the curer sign yi up? Did he employ you or did you go to him?*”

“Oh no, they came up and askit you if you wanted to work for them and you got arles, fit they ca’d arles, maybe that wis aboot ten shillings each. That wis thirty shillings for the crew.”

“*Were you guaranteed that for the season?*”

“No you got that tae fix yi up wi this curer, then fin he came up tae tell yi fit time tae go awa’ you got tickets for gan away an a’ that. Then yi hid yir weekly pay aifter that. That wis maybe aboot ten tae fifteen shillings a week and that wis a’ pooled the gither at the end of the week and then yi paid yer messages wi’ that. Well

the first of the time we used tae tak away a lot of stuff, sugar and tae an a' that kind of things so we aye got something back aff wir pay, that's fin you paid yer bookie. But, before the end of the time yi didna get much, but what yi gutted and workit for was an hourly rate. That wis divided among the three o' 'yi"

*"Piece work?"*

"Piece work – three tae a crew."

*"Yi had tae work for that?"*

"Yi hid tae hing-in tae keep up wi' the next folk."

*"Did somebody come and check on yi fin yi were doing yer work?"*

"Oh yes, your barrels wir a' marked and it depended on how much crews there were. Then there was numbers, one, two, three, four, five, if yi cried for a barrel you just wrote this number on your barrel. When it came to the time, the buyers, Russians and a' that kind o' lads come ower to buy the herring. They eest tae coup up the barrels fae the bottom and gaed down through the barrel tae see if the herring was right."

*"Is there a certain way to pack a barrel?"*

"The bottom tier, yi hid to mak them bonny. Yi hid tae cry at a cooper tae look at the bottom tier tae see if it was a'right. Yi gradually came tae two tiers tae hae bonny, then three tiers. Yi hid tae call them tae look at them then yi packit awa' aifter that. Yi packit them first then yi reversed every tier till yi came tae the top."

*"A layer of salt in between?"*

"Aye a layer a' salt every tier."

*"Did the cooper finally put the top on the barrel?"*

"Well we eest tae pit on wir ain lids when the barrel was full but then the barrels used tae stand for a few days or maybe a week or so and the herrin sank and they ran aff the pickle and then yi hid maybe three tiers tae add again on to the top of the barrel. "

*"Where did that herring go to?"*

"Oh to Russia and a' that kind o' weys and Estonia."

*"Were they ta'en away by boat?"*

"They wir put away in a boat."

*"Direct fae Lerwick?"*

"Fit yi ca'd a float boat used to come ower tae the stage far we workit and far the boats eest tae land the herring at, and the barrels were put into this float boat and they took them ower tae Russia. "

*"There wis a strike one year at the fishing, can you tell me about it?"*

"I think it wis about 1936. We were in Yarmouth that year. The girls were wantin more on the barrel. There wis a wifie ca'd Jessie Whyte, she wis the heid ane, she came roon about a' the fishing yards and yi had tae come oot wi her."

*"Was she like the Union?"*

"No yi hid nae Unions. She wis the agitator, spokeswoman, tae help the quines. Yi a' gied doon the river and the boats were a' tied up, they quidna get oot. Yi see this wifie wis tellin them yi canna get oot, yi canna get work, yi canna gut, so we geed back tae the curers and he wisna keen on this so he said go home to your digs and we will send for you when the strike is over. So we went back to wir digs and I think a day or two after that somebody came up and said, 'Yi better come down yer farlins are full o' herring'. So we wis back tae guttin and we got tuppence or thruppence extra on the barrel, so that ended the strike."

*"Was there some of them nae oot on strike? Had everybody to come out on strike?"*

"Everybody had tae come oot on strike but there was some yards in Yarmouth that were intae the back of places and they werna oot. They still gutted, little yardies that wir away intae the back of beyond."

*"It wis a hard life yi had when yi wir younger."*

"Och no, it was great, oh aye."

*"Its very good o' yi tae say that it was great. Yi were all healthy too,"*

"Aye well we considered that as a holiday when we were away at the fishing in a' the different places."

*"Did yi dae ony ither job other than gutting, in between times, when yi came hame fae a season until the next season?"*

"Well I used tae work at Mrs Legge's in Low Street. She took in lodgers so I used tae go down there and I used tae go oot and clean tae ladies o the toon until the next fishing came roon. Aifter the Yarmouth fishing my pal and me used tae go to Aberdeen tae a job as a domestic servant."

*"Did you enjoy that?"*

"Oh aye, it wis a'right. Yi jist got yer time aff."

*"Was it a long day there?"*

"Oh yi wis up in the mornin at six o'clock and hid a' thing ready afore the folk came doon the stair and got a' thing ready for their breakfast."

*"What sort of folk were they? Hid they businesses?"*

"Big businesses that fowk had. They wir builders and there wis another place I wis in up at Rubislaw Den. Big houses, lovely houses, plenty servants, and cooks and housekeepers an a' thing."

*"Did you go through in the train weekly?"*

"No no we bade there. Yi niver got hame bit maybe once a month. When yi came back fae Aberdeen tae Buckie the fare was five shillings return, something o' that kind. Then we used tae ging tae the pictures, my pal

and me, sixpence for the pictures, tuppence for a quarter o' sweeties. That wis a' the luxuries we hid. Then we came hame at the end of May and then gied away tae the fishing but we just got two pounds the month for that domestic service, general."

*"And your food?"*

"Two pounds a month and your food. Then if yi got on tae cook/general yi got two pounds ten shillings or three pounds a month. We kept ten shillings to ourselves and sent the rest home."

*"Well that was what happened long ago?"*

"Aye it happened – quite happy."

*"Comparing it with nowadays what's your summing up? What do you think is the biggest difference you have seen in your life when you were young and nowadays? What's the thing you have noticed the biggest difference in?"*

"The young ones dinna appreciate the money they get now. They don't. Especially that young fishermen don't appreciate it and I say and other folk say, 'It winna last.'"

*"There was a lot of boats in Buckie long ago. I think more than what there are now."*

"Aye in Cullen in that ways. I have seen old photos, Portknockie hairbers packed in drifters."

*"How did yer parents manage to bring up a family in your young days?"*

"Well my father was a cooper and he used to follow the herring, the same as us. Then in the winter time they made barrels. Then my mother used tae go to the gutting in Buckie, that's when we were younger and then at the Yarmouth time they used tae go to Yarmouth and you was left wi an auntie. A'budy was left wi' their aunties. When yer mothers were a' away at the guttin yi aye got a boxie sent, maybe every week or second week with a rock and a' the rest o't in't."

*"Did your mother mend nets?"*

"No. When my mother was younger she worked at the net factory at Marshall's."

*"Over in Cathcart Street?"*

That wis up in High Street – no Cathcart Street."

*"Well you ken a' aboot nets."*

"Aye."

*"Dae yi mind getting Christmas presents when you were young, or was it New Year that yi held?"*

"Oh no nae Christmas, it wis New Year. Yi jist got yer stocking – an orange, an apple, an' odds and ends in't."

*"Your schooldays, do you mind on them?"*

"Oh I went tae Lady Cathcart School. Mr Fowlie was the headmaster."

*"What was the most important thing at school - Reading, Writing, Arithmetic?"*

"Geography, I think, I liked travel. Well, the girls that lived down in the Seatown they a' took up us younger anes tae the Lady Cathcart School. Naebody doon here went tae the Public School."

*"Yi didna go tae the High School after?"*

"No when yi wis fourteen that wis you finished. Oh it wis education yi got at that time. You mind on a' thing yi got."

*"Seeing yi liked Geography, have yi travelled a lot?"*

"I've been tae Denmark and Whitehaven, Cumberland."

"Well that was very interesting and thank you very much for giving us all that information. "