

RICHARD SOUTER, A RETIRED FISHERMAN, IS INTERVIEWED

Mr Richard Souter, 11 Sutherland Street, Buckpool, a retired fisherman, was interviewed by two trainees from the Balloch Trust, Buckie, on the 12th May 1988. They were working on behalf of Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society, as it was then called.

“When did you leave school and what did you do once you had left?”

I left school in 1926, the year of the General Strike, when I was 15 years of age and went to sea on a fishing boat.

“Can you remember the name and number of the boat?”

My first boat was a Fifie. She was named the ‘*Orcadia*’ and at the time was only one year old. The two partners who owned the vessel split up, however, and the boat was re-named the ‘*Swiftwing II*’ BCK 82. The ‘*Swiftwing II*’ was a wooden boat measuring 52 feet overall. She was powered by a 60 hp Kelvin petrol pump paraffin.

My first job was cook. You had to start at the foot of the ladder when you went to sea and probably you had to do for four years. They didn’t let you on the deck until you knew something about the work. You had to learn the secrets of the deck in your spare time. There was no quick-made deckies then as there is now. You had a good idea before you left your people, well you had to take notice. There was usually in a boat somebody that was interested to help you, but they were in the minority, but I’ll tell you something.

My stepmother made a duff, she showed me how, and I took that duff down to the boat the first day I went to sea and we went up the canal. It was a good duff, I must have picked it up right enough because they were always crying for duffs, but it was very, very simple food that was made for the simple reason you didn’t have the facilities to do very much. After you got into the drifters the cooking facilities were much better, you see. You would try your hand and there was maybe a competition with cooks alongside. There was one thing about the cooks, you see, and you rose in the morning you would look to see if you were first up, his fire would be on as you went by the reek, for it was coal-burning stoves that we used.

And you had a man to coil the ropes, that was the cook’s job, at least in the Buckie boats. Then you had to discharge the herrings you had to guide the basket ashore with the guy rope and you had to pull the basket back to the boys to fill up again. That was about the amount of your work. You were employed nearly all the time as regards you were trying to do this and you were trying to do that. You were cooking, you were coiling the ropes and you were minding the guy ropes when we were discharging the herrings, this was the main things you did.

“Tell us about how much money you made when you started to work.”

We were twenty weeks at the fishin, I was on half share and I had £30. I would think that and that was supposed to be a good and average wage, and that was an average wage even when we went into the drifters. If you were a first year cook you might have got twenty-five bob and maybe you would have got thirty the following year, well before if you fully did your four years if you were in a good boat. What I mean by a good boat is a boat that is earning well, because there was a lot of boats maybe that wasn’t for a long time but you finished off with two quid, which was a lot of money, but that wasn’t for fifty-two weeks a year that was only during the voyage.

“How long were you away from home when you first went to sea?”

We went away to the west coast and you can’t tell you how many weeks but I know it was a lot of weeks, we went to Mallaig, we were mixed up with the strike like, but eventually we got to Stornoway, there was fishin there. We came back through the Firth (Pentland) and was fishin off Wick (Wick) and Stronsey before we went home and shifted our nets. This would have been probably half way through the summer season that was the time we were away.

After the nets were shifted we went to the Isle of Man like and we finished our season there, see. So I would say at least ten weeks away. Half of that time like twenty weeks was the summer fishin because I’ve minded, twenty weeks at £30 wasn’t a bad thing.

We had a long weekend, it was a long weekend, when you were shifting nets, but you were away on Monday morning again, and during this time you were spreading nets, taking aboard your gear, sometimes barking nets. - I suppose somebody has told you about barking nets - you were lucky if you were clear on Saturday afternoon like. It wasn’t a case of looking for spare time like, it was get the job done like.

The only thing we appreciated then was we never went to sea on a Sunday, that didn’t start till after the war. I’m speaking about boats in this area, that was the way we were brought up. Well the situation as regards religion and Christianity has changed a lot, to mean to say, first I was a youngster everybody went to the Kirk, everybody went to Sunday School, what I am saying is everybody, that was the majority of people and so as regards the fishing community. The kirks were filled, or mostly filled, you see and you were going to church. You see I bade in the east side of the town, you had to step off the pavement

for people comin tae their ain denomination. That wis the highlight o fishermen's work, it wis feenished a Sunday, the Sabbath Day.

I've seen this in Yarmouth but that wis a siven day job there, nae rest for us, an I've seen us landin herrin until late on in Setterday. When yi wir sooth like yi hid tae lay on the nets like, that means preparin for shootin on the Monday an they hid tae saut them doon if there wis ony herrin, yi see. I aye remember a sooth firth man comin forrit, a skipper o a Peterheed boat, he wis settled in Peterheed, an at a quarter tae twelve, an he said, 'Doon tools boys, it's a quarter tae twelve'. Of coorse we worked on, we feenished the job in han, we feenished about one o'clock like an I suppose in this man's eyes we wir the sinners. That wis the attitude they hid towards Sunday. That wis a day o rest.

"Was accidents common on board ship? What had to be done to keep the boats safe and seaworthy?"

The boats got a good do up afore they went tae sea, of coorse accidents did happen, as regards engines. Well I'm speakin, am getting mixt up atween motor boats an drifters, bit it wis jist the same thing applied. There were good engineers, people maybe who hid served some time ashore then there wis chaps who hidna bit jist hid a wye wi engines 'n cwid keep things going only, onything big hid tae be deen ashore.

Well athing wis deen afore yi startit, that wis in the simmer, well say, sorted, curtailed as yi wint along. Say yi wir twinty weeks at sea in the simmer, I've seen them scrubbin, aye ebbin the boats, an then scrubbin the bottoms, then paintin them. Afore yi went sooth tae Yarmouth, the East Anglian fishin, they got an ither do up, yi see, maybe nae sae a thorough going over. The bottoms wir aye kept clean because as you ken if yer bottom wis clean it meant a less fuel bill an yi wint faster. Bit the main times o maintenance wis afore the simmer an they spent quite awhile, a lot o time chippin and paintin, scrapin and getting the boats ready. During my time, winter fishin wis aye quite a bit o a problem and it wis only a reduced fleets that went tae sea. I've spoken tae some folkies tae see how well back these drifters were, them that wirna gaun tae the sea laid up for the winter. Of coorse Buckie wis a good herber. There wis one thing aboot it. The fishermen in these days wir very particular aboot moorins, there wis nae slackness as regards tyin up boats an seein they were secure, because the tying up at the back o Yarmouth, as we say, that wis the words we used, an some niver moved till springtime again. I canna mine ony serious accident, maybe we wis mair careful or there wir less things tae ging wrang like. I canna remember seein a first aid box aboard the first boat we wis in, no nithin at a. If somebody hid gotten a severe cut they wid hiv tae cut oot some o their claes or towels or something. No I think they were affy lucky as regards that. I've heard o men getting their legs broken an things like that on the sailin boats like, bit my memory disna serve me for ony accidents like that."

"How did you wash and dry your clothes?"

"Well we niver did. There wis a black squad, there wis a fireman or stoker, fit iver yi like tae be caad and a driver. These people hid tae wash their claes an athing cause yi imagine workin wi coal, cleanin fires, bit the cooks an the rest o the crew they didna bather, It wis heavy underwear that we used, yi see, and they hid fit yi wid ca broon baggies bit it wis canvas an they wir barked wi the same stuff as they barkit their nets and this wis the procedure. Some lads kept their claes on maybe langer than ithers like, their underwear, and sent it hame tae wash and they got them back in return say like fin yi wis stationed at Yarmouth.

Here am speakin aboot things in general because I went intae the drifters the following year, in 1927. A jist remember the date we sailed oot o here, the 27th o April an we went tae Ayr. We bunkered there and the next stop wis Dunmore in the sooth o Ireland and then we cerrit on tae Kinsail an we fished there for a number o weeks. Efter this fishin sorta feenished we went tae Killybegs an did nae bad there. We returned tae this side and bunkered again at Ayr. Of coorse we cwid cerry a lot o coal. She wis a sizeable steam drifter. Fae Ayr we steamed north an startit fishin in the Stronsey water, so forth. Well in that particular boat we feenished again at the Isle of Man.

There wis one thing aboot drifters there wis aye plenty facilities for washin a vest or onythin like that, or troosers, ootside dungarees, onythin like that. It wis nearly a serge troosers at the fishin, that the deckies, in that wore. Yi didna wash a jersey, fin it wis filed like, bit onything that wis washable like. Of coorse it wis the same thing noo, there wis people that wis mair particular than ithers, the same as there is today. Funny enough there wisna mony cases o diseases for lack o hygiene or onything like o that. Maybe we wir a mair healthy lot or wis it the water that washed o'er yer heed.

"Can you tell us what you did about stores and bedding as you prepared to go on a long trip."

The stores wis a bit o a ritual tee, well food wyse onywy. Well I'll hae tae go back tae the start. There wis a larry came, it wis horse-drawn. Fin I startit the sea first, it picked up ony of the crew's personal effects. There wis nae mattresses, it wis, fit may yi say, big, well we caad them a caff seck

like. That wis the lower pert, that wis instead o a mattress. Yi wis up against the reef o the cabin fin yi startit, yi see, bit yi wis on the bare boards afore the fishin wis up. That wis the beddin. Blankets wir maybe a couple o blankets an a quilt. There wis a cover and a couple o pillas. A this personal effects I'm speaking about wir loaded on this larry and they called in at the grocers in they hid a month's, maybe mair o dry stores. Yi wis oot an in ivery day and cwid get fresh meat and ither perishable stores on a daily basis. At the weekend the cook, sometimes accompanied by one of the deckies, went up an yi hid yer weekend stores. This sorta supplemented fit wis gin doon on yer dry store.

As time went on I went tae Yarmouth an there there wis nae parade tae ging for grub. There wis aye is mony runners, grocer's runners, butcher's runners and yer stores wir sorta brought aboard for yi, ye'd aye this supply. Different people hid different ideas about how much stores yi wid tak ower, bit stores wis niver a problem.

"Did you have any way of forecasting the weather?"

I wis in a ship, as I say I startit in 1926 in it wis 1928 during the Yarmouth season, well afore we went tae Yarmouth, we got a wireless, that is a receiver an that wis a great thing, yi see. We cwid tune in an get the wither forecast. That wis a we listened for. They wir situated in the cabin.

"Did you listen to music or anything on the wireless?"

There wis very little socialising as I've said afore. It wis a 24 hours aday in I dinna think yi wid be very popular if yi switched on the wireless because if there wis an hoor tae spare yi hid yer heed doon an if yi didna hae yer heed doon somebody else hid.

"What did you do in you leisure time as in Saturday night or Sunday?"

If yi wir in a place that hid a picture hoose, the like o Lerwick, Week and of coorse Yarmouth wis somethin different, yi see, there wis a lot mair entertainment yi micht hiv geen tae. If yi hid a night in throve the week yi aye geed somewye and on the on the Setterday and is I said afore maist people went tae different denominations o the church on Sunday.

"Can you tell us any stories that you may have learnt about the sea and the life of fisher people, men and women in earlier times."

The earliest story I learned about the sea wis that my grandfather belonged tae Lossie and was married tae my grandmother who came from Buckie. They had two sons, the elder being my father. When he was only two years of age my grandfather sailed from Lossiemouth, as skipper of a sailing ship, and never returned. She and her two boys returned to Buckie and settled down. She eventually re-married a small-line fisherman. He was one of the last of the fishermen who prosecuted that particular trade, I can well remember the work my grandmother had to do as well as run the home. The clearin of lines, the shellin of mussels for bait and the baitin of lines was all done by my grandmother. Her husband would have cleared the lines in preparation for the baiting when possible. The skulls, as they were named, containing the baited lines wir loaded on to the creels on the wimmen's backs and carried to the boats. Before the harbours were built the boats were brought in close to the shore and the lines put on board, this was the reason that fishermen's houses were built close to the shore. In fact I've heard it said it was the custom for the women to wade through the sea wi the their men folk on their back to keep them dry. The coming of harbours would have ended this. Earlier on the wimmen wouldve collected the fish in their creels from the boats and gone intae the country and bartered their fish for other necessities of life, like meal and tatties. The fishermen from time tae time his to go west with their boats an load them with mussels, which were in abundance there. On return the mussels were placed along the shore in convenient places, called scaups, to keep them fresh. This is where the women came for the fresh mussels, which were carried in their creels back home for the baitin operation. This type of fishing started to phase out with the coming of the steam drifters, in the first years of the century and I cannot remember any small-line fishing after the first world war, in Buckie. Before the advent of the steam drifter, the fishermen graduated from the small-line boats to bigger sailing boats, called Scaffies, Fifies and then Zulus tae prosecute drift net fishing.

The name Zulu might have had something to do with the war in South Africa since they came into vogue about this time. The builders and fishermen in the south of Scotland favoured the Fifie. The Zulu incorporated parts of both the Scaffie and the Fifie, the first one ever built being for a Lossie man and was named the Nonsuch since there had never had been a boat of this design ever built before. The Zulu became very popular with fishermen over a wide area.

During the life of the sailboats they advanced by installing steam boilers tae drive capstans, to facilitate the working and hauling of the gear. In my time petrol and paraffin engines were installed in some of these sailing boats and the large masts and sails became to be discarded. Few sailing boats were still in operation by the end of the twenties, especially in Stornoway and the Orkneys. The

'*Paradine*' of Portgordon was the last sail boat in operation working out of Buckie. I can remember the '*Choice*' of Buckpool being broken up in Buckie.

The era before the 1914-18 was a lucrative time for Buckie, with steam drifters prosecuting the herring fishing and following the different shoals. The normal procedure was to start in the summer, in the Shetlands, where there were herring curing yards on the islands of Balta, Whalsay and Bressay and the port of Lerwick. Some drifters from Buckie, but mostly from Lossiemouth, Hopeman, Burghead and Nairn favoured Stornoway, Castlebay, Mallaig and Oban. The curing yards in the east coast had residential huts, where girls from along the coast from Peterhead to Wick lived. They had the arduous job of gutting, salting and packing the herring into barrels for shipment to the continent, especially Spain and Russia. The coopers, the men who made the barrels, supervised the curing of the herring and came mostly from the Nord-east coast, Lerwick and Wick. There were also, of course, local coopers and fishcurers. Drifters from Yarmouth and Lowestoft joined Scottish drifters operating in Shetland waters.

The Scottish fleet usually moved south near the end of July to Orkney, Stronsey or Wick or some from Fraserburgh and Peterhead and others would go back to their home ports to change their nets to a wider mesh and go to the west coast where the herring were of a bigger variety. By the end of the summer most of the Buckie drifters had made this transition to the west coast and some eventually went to the Isle of Man and the ports of Ardglass, County Down and Howth, near Dublin.

When the so-called summer fishing ended the drifters returned to their home ports where all the nets were put ashore, the drifters painted and made ready for the East Anglian fishing.

At the end of the so-called summer fishing some drifters would leave early and fish off the ports of North Shields, Hartlepool and Grimsby before continuing further south to Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth for the start of the East Anglian fishing. Other drifters that spent more time in the summer fishing had just time to prepare for East Anglia and sail direct to Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft, without spending time fishing enroute. It was normal to bunker in the Nord-east English ports on the way south.

The herring curers from the mainland had stations on Shetland, Stronsey and on most of the east coast ports. Girls and even men from the west coast and Outer Hebrides augmented the gutting girls at these stations. The gutters formed themselves into crews of three, which consisted of two gutters and one packer. They worked together and lived together, mostly two crews to a hut, that is where huts were available, At Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Isle of Man and Ardglass in Ireland they lived in lodgings.