

Curing the Herring

When the British herring fishing industry was at its height it was reckoned that for every drifter that went to sea about a hundred jobs were provided on shore. We do not know how accurate that statement was but certainly the herring fishing provided a lot of jobs ashore, not least the thousands of herring gutters in every fishing port round the coast ever since large scale gutting began in Scotland early in the 19th century.

It was the Dutch who originally devised the technique of removing the gill and long gut from the herring before curing them in barrels with layers of salt between each tier of fish. That secret enabled them to monopolise the whole European herring trade throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

The main market for Scottish herring before the 19th century was in the West Indies where fish was in great demand as a cheap food to feed the Negro slaves on the plantations and the quality of the cure for that market was not important. When slavery was abolished by the acts of 1807 and 1833 the West Indian market for herring declined and eventually ceased altogether, hence the necessity to seek new outlets for Scottish herring.

The main alternative outlet for cured herring was to be found on the European Continent but the Dutch, with their superior method of curing herring had complete control of that market for a long time and it was not easy to win a foothold there.

Nevertheless, steady progress was achieved in Europe since the beginning of the 19th century and the discovery in Scotland in 1819 of a new way to cure herring called the 'Scotch-cure' was one of the main factors that enabled the Scottish fishing industry to break through and very quickly capture the Lion's share of the European market.

In addition to the discovery of the 'Scotch-cure' several other things happened in the early part of the 19th century that helped the Scottish herring fishing to expand rapidly, and bring great prosperity to the country. In the early years of the 19th century the duty on salt was forced up because of the Napoleonic wars, and salt was costing £44.50 a ton in Glasgow, which was a penal system of taxation at that time. The regulations governing the supply of salt hampered the herring fishing greatly in the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly the small fishermen. In 1825 the salt duties were finally abolished and the price of salt thereupon fell from £32 to £1 a ton within the next decade, and to 12/- (60p) per ton by 1880. The bounty system of subsidies was also abandoned in 1830 thereby freeing the small fisherman from yet another set of restrictive and harassing regulations. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards greatly improved harbour facilities were provided for the fishermen in the north of Scotland and the discovery about 1850 of machine-made nets greatly improved the catching power of the fleet and enabled the fishermen to acquire bigger and better boats.

Each one of these events were very important and, taken together, the effect was far reaching. Once the industry was freed from the restrictive Government interference and they realised the potential of the rich fishing grounds on their doorstep, the herring fleet expanded rapidly, making it possible for the fishermen to deliver large quantities of fresh herring to the Quayside, ready for curing to satisfy the great demand for 'Scotch cure' herring in the European market.

While these things were taking place the Dutch were losing their long-standing hold on the European market, partly because of the destruction of their fishing fleet during the Napoleonic war as well as the new British competition. As the Dutch influence in the European market place was declining the British filled the gap.

The rapid expansion of the herring fishing industry brought numerous enterprising shore businessmen into the curing side of the industry and that provided work for women herring gutters in ever increasing numbers until the industry peaked before the First World War. At first the fishermen of the west coast of Scotland did not share fully in the increasing prosperity but before the middle of the 19th century they participated fully.

Unlike the Dutch who remained at sea for many weeks and cured their herring secretly onboard their large fishing vessels at sea, the Scottish fishermen, with their traditions of fishing for herring with small open boats near the shore or in the numerous sea lochs and sheltered bays round the coast, organised the curing of their herring catch on-shore.

The Scottish herring fleet lay in the harbour all day and in the evening they all left the harbour together. They shot their nets at sunset and hauled them at sunrise, and delivered large quantities of fresh herring to the curers on the quayside in the morning within a few hours of being caught.

The custom in some countries was to douse their herring catch in salt at sea to enable the fishermen to stay out at sea fishing a little longer; whereas the Scottish curers would not accept any herring that was touched with salt. Scottish herring had to be absolutely fresh and only exposed to the minimum handling so that it would remain firm and not be scaled, because the curers maintained that it was not possible to cure herring to the high standard demanded by the 'Scotch cure' for the export market unless they were delivered to the curer in a fresh condition.

The combination of quality and quantity enabled the British herring industry, in time, to secure a monopoly of the large European market. The herring was cured and packed to the specifications of the 'Scottish cure', laid down by government regulations, and the quality was guaranteed by a system of branding the barrels. The branding system was originally adopted earlier in connection with the bounty or subsidy paid by the government to the fishermen. Eventually the 'Crown' brand stencilled on each barrel by the fishery officers came to be recognised all over Europe as an official British Seal of Quality.

As time went on more and more curers came into the industry and to enable the curers to process the increasing quantities of herring the market called for, they employed women gutters in increasing numbers. Until the end of the 19th century it was fully recognised that the sea around Scotland was a goldmine, with the largest fishery the world had ever seen.