

FISHING AND SHELLFISHING ON LOUGH SWILLY

(Fisherfolk – Modern Hunters)

Fishing on Lough Swilly has a long history, going back much further than the medieval fishtraps described elsewhere in this book. However this chapter deals with relatively modern history and the current fisheries.

In the 18th century the Government was keen to encourage the herring fishery in order to compete with the Dutch who at that time had control of the European herring trade. Subsidies were given on herring cured for export and laws were enacted giving fishermen the right to pull up their boats and spread their nets on unused land at the foreshore. William Alexander, a merchant from Derry, established a herring fishing and curing enterprise centred on Inch Island. On the small peninsula which now holds Inch Fort he employed boatbuilders, netmakers, coopers and herring curers. He hired or sold his boats and nets to fishermen on condition that they sold their catch to him. He then cured or salted the herring, packed them in barrels that his coopers had made, and shipped the fish off to markets as far away as Russia in his own ships.

Some of the knowledge gained at that time survives today – the best months for herring fishing in this part of the Lough are November to February, some of the best areas for drift netting are Ray (south of Rathmullen) and Ball Green between the Leannan and Swilly rivers. If you catch herring on the ebb tide in Mill Bay, Inch Island, it's a sign that the herring are leaving.

Drift netting for herring was carried on by boats from all around the Lough – from Castlegrove in the River Swilly to Doaghbeg near Fanad Head and from Inch Island to Leenankeel on the Dunaff side. The fishing started in June or July and employed around 200 boats.

A different herring fishery was carried on in springtime in the 1920s to seaward of the Swilly by Scotch steam drifters who landed into Buncrana, they called it the "May fishing".

Herring drift nets are vertical curtains of netting which drift with the tide. They can be set at various depths as the herring swim at different levels in the water according to weather conditions and other factors. The mesh size must be suitable for the particular herring stock being fished and the amount of net set depends on the abundance of fish in the area – if fish are scarce, set more net. If fish are plentiful, you may not be able to handle all you catch. If that happened, it was common practice (still today) to give the extra nets and fish to another boat. They would return the net the next night after extracting the fish.

The Swilly herring have always been small but with a distinctive flavour and so were always in demand. A local team of pair trawlers landed up to 700 tonnes of herring a season in recent years, finding a ready market in the fish processing plants of Killybegs. (Photo Shenandoah / Christina?)

The herring entered Lough Swilly to spawn on the sweetgrass (*Zoostera*) beds around Inch Island, Fahan, and the estuaries of the Swilly and Leannan rivers. They were followed by cod who gorged on the herring and their spawn. A useful line fishery was pursued after the herring fishing until the cod had their fill and moved out of the Lough, following the shoals elsewhere.

The typical boat used for herring fishing at the time was the "drontheim", so called because they were originally imported from Trondheim in Norway. They were double ended, clinker built traditional Scandinavian multi purpose boats bearing a strong resemblance to a Viking longship. Propulsion was by three or four pairs of oars and one or two lugsails, a very simple sailing rig. Eventually "kit boats" were imported consisting of the keel, stem and sternpost which were then finished off by local boatbuilders. In time, Donegal builders learned how to construct the complete boat, adding features which made them more suitable for local conditions. With the addition of

engines, these vessels have become the well known "half deckers" used extensively for salmon and lobster fishing around the coast. (Photo of Violet / halfdecker?)

Rathmullen had the biggest concentration of fishing boats and boatbuilders in the Swilly. From the 1800s and possibly earlier boats were built not only for Lough Swilly owners but also for crews in west Donegal, a tradition which continues today. Many places which now have no sign of commercial fishing were at this time important centres for the herring industry – Doagh Beg, Portsalon, Killygarvan on the west side, Port Ban (Dunree) and the mouth of the River Crana on the east side. There were no piers or harbours in those days, the boats had to be emptied of the catch, nets, oars, sails and ballast and were hauled up on the shore for safety until the next trip – a backbreaking task for men tired and wet after a night's fishing in an open boat with no shelter and no means of making hot food or drinks. The fishermen would dig out "nests" for the boats above the shoreline to protect them from winter storms. It is still possible to see them around the Lough, there are two at the north end of Port Ban (Dunree) which are quite accessible. (Photo?)

Rathmullen regatta, established in the 19th century, gave fishermen and their families a break from routine and an opportunity to test their skills and strength against crews from other areas around the Lough. There were sailing and rowing races specifically for fishermen, some for fishing boats and others for boats built specially for racing. These hotly contested races were a matter of pride and honour for the fishermen and their supporters from the home ports and townlands. Winning boats and crews often had poems and songs composed to celebrate the occasion.

In the 18th & 19th century whitefish was never as important as herring in the Swilly but it filled in the quiet times and was useful for domestic consumption. The Ordnance Survey memoirs for 1834 list a wide variety of fish landed, mostly caught by lines from drontheims. At this time a cod cost 6d (2 ½ p), mullet 6d (2 ½ p) per lb, and 10lb of flounders could be bought for 6d (2 ½ p). Among the other varieties available were haddock, sole, turbot, ling and skate, all today still to be found in some abundance.

Although stocks were comparatively plentiful there was recognition that some protection had to be in place for the future. Some enlightened legislation was enacted, such as the law banning "steam trawling" south of the Hawk's Nest on Inch Island. This safeguarded the important spawning grounds of the herring, skate and plaice which were known to exist in this part of the Lough. Trawling is a method of fishing which involves towing a large cone shaped net along the bottom of the sea. The net is kept open in the correct shape by "otter boards" or trawl doors which are rigged to shear outwards by the action of being towed through the water. Boats driven by steam engines had much more power than sailing trawlers and so were able to tow heavier nets with the potential to cause damage to the spawning grounds.

In the early years of the 20th century there were a number of sailing trawlers at work in the Lough, based at Rathmullen, Lehardan, Buncrana and Fahan. They fished mainly in the sandy inner part of the Lough as it was believed, in those days before echo sounders, the rough sea bottom north of Swilly Rocks would tear the trawl to pieces. However, from the 1920s onward, younger more adventurous fishermen equipped with the new petrol / paraffin internal combustion engines in their boats proved that it was possible to find tracks through the rough ground. Of course these areas were very productive as they had previously only been fished with lines. It was much easier to capture fish with a trawl than to entice them onto a hook! With an engine, a much smaller boat had the same catching power as a larger vessel, leading to savings in crew numbers, capital outlay and maintenance. The sailing trawlers gave way to the new technology of the day.

1939 – 1945 was a bonanza for the trawlers of the Swilly. Steam trawlers from Fleetwood and other English ports were unable to fish the offshore Donegal grounds, as they had done for many years,

because of the U-boat menace. The result was that fish stocks boomed in a very short space of time and no matter how hard the small trawlers worked, fish became ever more plentiful. The sheltered nature of the Lough meant that very few days were lost due to bad weather. Britain needed food, especially protein, and the UK Government introduced a transport subsidy to encourage Ireland to export food to the industrial centres of England, Wales and Scotland. For the first time, fishermen had access to major markets with no cost for transport. Agents were appointed by the British Government to co-ordinate the buying and transport of fish. Prices were sky high – a seven stone (43 kg) box of haddock sold for 30 shillings (£1.50). For comparison, in Killybegs in 1970, a year of reasonable prices, a seven stone box of haddock was still selling at 30 shillings!

After 1945 some fishermen invested their earnings in bigger, fully decked boats of up to 50 feet. With these vessels they were no longer confined to the Lough but could brave more severe seas to take advantage of the excellent stocks which lay to seaward. These boats periodically fished from ports as far away as Kilkeel and Howth on the east coast and Killybegs on the west coast. However no fisherman moved his centre of operations permanently to one of the major ports – they all kept their homes on the Swilly. Today very few trawlers are based around the Lough, one of the last was sold from Inch Island a couple of years ago. Visiting Greencastle boats are scarce now too, a consequence of EU policy and quotas.

Most whitefishing is done now by well equipped halfdeckers, mainly tangle netting for skate, a generic term which includes the ray species- thornback, blonde, cuckoo are the most common here. They come inshore in great numbers in May to lay their egg cases in shallow water, leaving in late July. The newly hatched young may be seen feeding on the food rich banks in late summer leaving to follow their parents when they are strong enough to face the open sea. Tangle nets consist of a line of large mesh netting set on the sea bottom. As the fish forage for food they come against the net and get tangled up. The mesh size of the netting is chosen so that smaller fish can pass safely through.

The halfdecker fleet now count shellfish as their mainstay. The boats at Leenan started to fish crab in the early 1970s in the outer part of the Lough and now roam up to twenty miles offshore in search of a quality product. The best time for crab is from August onwards as they get into condition for breeding. Peak condition coincides nicely with peak consumer demand in France and Spain in the weeks running up to Christmas when vivier lorries take live crabs in tanks of continually oxygenated seawater directly to the continental markets. The fishermen select the crabs extremely carefully as weak or diseased specimens quickly die from stress and could cause the loss of others in the same tank.

Lobsters, fished mainly in the summer months, used to be regarded as a poor man's fishing as prices were not good and fishing methods were very labour intensive. Pot frames had to be made from scrap timber for the bases and hazels cut for the bows. The netting cover then had to be knitted by hand including the all important "eye" – the spout through which the lobster crawls into the pot. Making pots was a winter long job and limited the number any one boat could fish. The pots had to be baited with small fish and set close to the rocky shoreline where the lobsters lived but if there was a sudden gale, all your pots could be lost or destroyed in a single night. A lot has changed with the advent of metal frames and factory produced netting. Hydraulic haulers have done away with laborious hand hauling and the discerning continental market is prepared to pay ever higher prices for fresh, live Donegal lobster – up to £10 per kilo before the global financial crash. In the Swilly, the water is too brackish to encourage many lobsters to live south of a line from Macamish in the west to Ned's point in the east just below Bunrana but stocks increase as you travel towards the open sea. There are also good stocks of velvet crab (*Necora puber*) especially on the west side of the lough and they are in demand commercially but so far they have not been targeted by pot fishermen.

For many boats, shrimps are providing a livelihood during the winter rather than battling the open sea for crab. Most of them now fish from Fahan Marina where they are safe from winter storms and can lie afloat at all times – a far cry from their grandfather's daily toil of launching and pulling up, loading and unloading, digging boats into nests and tying them down in bad weather. Shrimps are caught in small plastic baited pots which catch best when free to move with the motion of the water, simulating the movements of the seaweed which the shrimps like to live amongst. The market for shrimps is the same as for lobster and crab and the same care must be exercised in selecting specimens for shipping. On the day when the French or Spanish lorry comes it is wonderful to see big, hard handed fishermen handling tiny shrimp with such loving care!

There is no record of mussels being harvested in the Swilly in earlier years, either for sale or for domestic consumption. It is hard to believe that an such abundant food source was neglected – perhaps there were plenty of superior alternatives. In the winter of 1986 there was a shortage of mussels in the UK and merchants came to the Swilly asking fishermen to harvest the abundant natural beds north of Inch Island. A “Klondike” ensued with boats from as far away as Malin Head making the most of the opportunity to earn some money at a quiet time of year. Thousands of tonnes of wild mussels were dredged up and landed at Bunrana and Inch Island. Timing was critical as the beds could only be accessed by boat for a few hours at high water, then the mussels had to be landed before the tide left the landing places. Despite much lobbying and many reports and feasibility studies being completed very little has ever been done to assist fishermen by providing safe, deepwater landing places. Gradually, for some fishermen over the subsequent years, fishing wild mussels during the winter quiet time has developed into an alternative enterprise of mussel aquaculture.

A few fishermen tried to exploit whelks (*Buccinum Undatum*) when there was great demand from Korea in the 1990s. While there were stocks found off Kinnegar, near Rathmullen, and off Ray, near the Leannan estuary, they were insufficient to maintain a specific fishery. Whelks are caught in pots made from 25 litre plastic drums with the tops cut off and replaced by a sheet of netting with a slit in it. The snail – like whelks climb up the side of the drum and fall through the slit in the net to get at the bait which is secured in the bottom of the pot. They can't get back out again because of the net at the top of the pot.

Oysters have been a feature of fishing on the Swilly for many years. In the 1800s there was a major fishery on the Ballynakilly shoals west of Inch Island but the stocks were overfished and have never recovered in that area. All that is left is a mass of dead oyster shell over a wide area which gives some idea of the scale of the fishery at the time. Oysters at that time sold for 3d (1p) per hundred. The Farland Channel between Inch and Burt also held good stocks of oysters and is nowadays used for the aquaculture of native oysters. When they reproduce, the spat can travel quite long distances with the tidal currents and, if it finds a suitable area to settle in, can create completely new beds. Recently oyster beds have been found south of Rathmullen all the way to the mouth of the Leannan river. There is a longstanding and productive oyster fishery just to the west of Newtowncunningham, near Ballybegly Point, which is exploited by about twenty small boats using the traditional Irish dredge, an iron triangle about three feet (1 metre) long with a blade on its lower edge which scrapes along the bottom and scoops the oysters into the netting bag attached to the frame. (Photo of dredge?) A tradition of hand gathering of oysters exists among some families in the Ball Green area, near Ramelton. Conflict has arisen between fishers of native oysters (*Ostrea edulis*) and aquaculture interests because the same areas of seabed are prime spots for both activities.

From the 1950s until 2006 the main quarry for Swilly fishermen was salmon. In the spring, Atlantic salmon (*Salmo Salar*) make their way from their winter feeding grounds off Greenland towards the Faeroe Islands and down the west coast of Scotland to the rivers of their birth. Although the peak

season was mainly during June and July the abundance of salmon and the prices paid combined to give fishermen the bulk of their annual income during this period. Draft netting consists of deploying ("shooting") a semicircle of net from a suitable sandy shore near the mouth of a river. When the net was pulled in it contained any salmon which had been swimming towards the river. In popular fishing spots, crews have to await their turn to shoot their nets, something which can give rise to frayed tempers if the salmon are running well. Salmon do not arrive neatly spread out over the season – rain coming down from the river will make them more anxious to enter it, dry weather will make them lie back, calm weather may make them stay at sea in deeper water – the draft net fisherman has to wait for the salmon to come to him, a frustrating business. When they do come, the fisherman needs to work 24 hours a day if need be. Then the weekly legal close time (no fishing) from 0600 on Saturday morning until 0600 on Monday morning must be observed in order to guarantee enough salmon safe passage up the river to spawn. The most popular areas for draft netting are near the mouth of the Crana river at Porthaw and on the Leannan estuary.

A very ancient form of salmon netting is practised in the River Swilly near Letterkenny. It is known as "Loop netting" and consists of a large frame about 15 feet long and tapering from 6 feet to 4 feet deep. A loose bag of netting is fastened to the frame which is held upright in the water across the current by the fisherman. The netting flows back with the current to form a bag. Any salmon moving along with the current passes through the upright frame and is trapped in the bag of netting. Many hours are spent standing up to the waist in cold water, possibly for small returns.

Drift netting for salmon has been practised for many years from drontheims, sailing and rowing fairly close to the coast. The advent of engines in the 1920s meant that fishermen could venture further to sea instead of waiting for the salmon to come to them. The cotton or hemp nets had to be landed and dried daily to prevent them from rotting. These nets only caught salmon at night when the fish could not see them. Even so, on calm nights salmon refused to mesh in the nets. It took a little wind to oxygenate the surface of the water and stir the salmon into action. This meant that fishermen always tried to stay at sea in as much weather as possible – a fine judgement in an open boat with a low-powered engine.

The new nylon nets introduced in the 1960s did not have to be dried every day and their smaller bulk meant that boats could carry more nets, leading to an increase in salmon landings. With the introduction of nets made from finer twines in the late 1970s fishermen discovered that they could catch salmon in daylight – initially in rough weather, then as netting technology progressed fish were captured even on relatively calm days. In the old days of night fishing there were only about three hours of darkness – now, fishing could take place 24 hours a day. Successive governments failed to enforce the laws designed to protect future salmon stocks and predictably landings fell steeply. This stock decline was exacerbated by EU funded arterial drainage and forestry schemes which damaged the spawning beds in the headwaters of the rivers. Other environmental factors affecting the survival and growth of young salmon at sea have yet to be identified and solutions found. After many nudges from the North Atlantic Salmon Fund, led by a farsighted Icelander, the government banned drift netting for salmon in 2007. A way of life which had sustained many coastal families for generations is gone, perhaps forever.

The versatile halfdecker has made the transition to other fisheries, as it has done many times in the past, proving that the fishermen's trust in this tough little workhorse is well placed. Continuing in the tradition of drontheim builders of earlier years, many sturdy halfdeckers were built for the Swilly and also west Donegal by a self taught boatbuilder from Bunrana, John Flanagan, before his untimely death in 1981. Rossreagh Boatyard near Ramelton still provides an invaluable repair and modernisation service to fishermen and yachtsmen alike. There is also a long tradition of fishermen who are as skilled at repairing and maintaining their boats as they are at fishing.

The years have shown that Lough Swilly fishermen are resilient, resourceful and adaptable. Today seafood from the Lough is landed for consumption not only in Ireland but in all the countries of the EU and further afield. The vivier lorry taking live crabs, lobsters and shrimps to France and Spain is the twenty first century's version of Mr Alexander's ships carrying cured herring to Russia.