Fisheries in the North-East of Scotland before 1800

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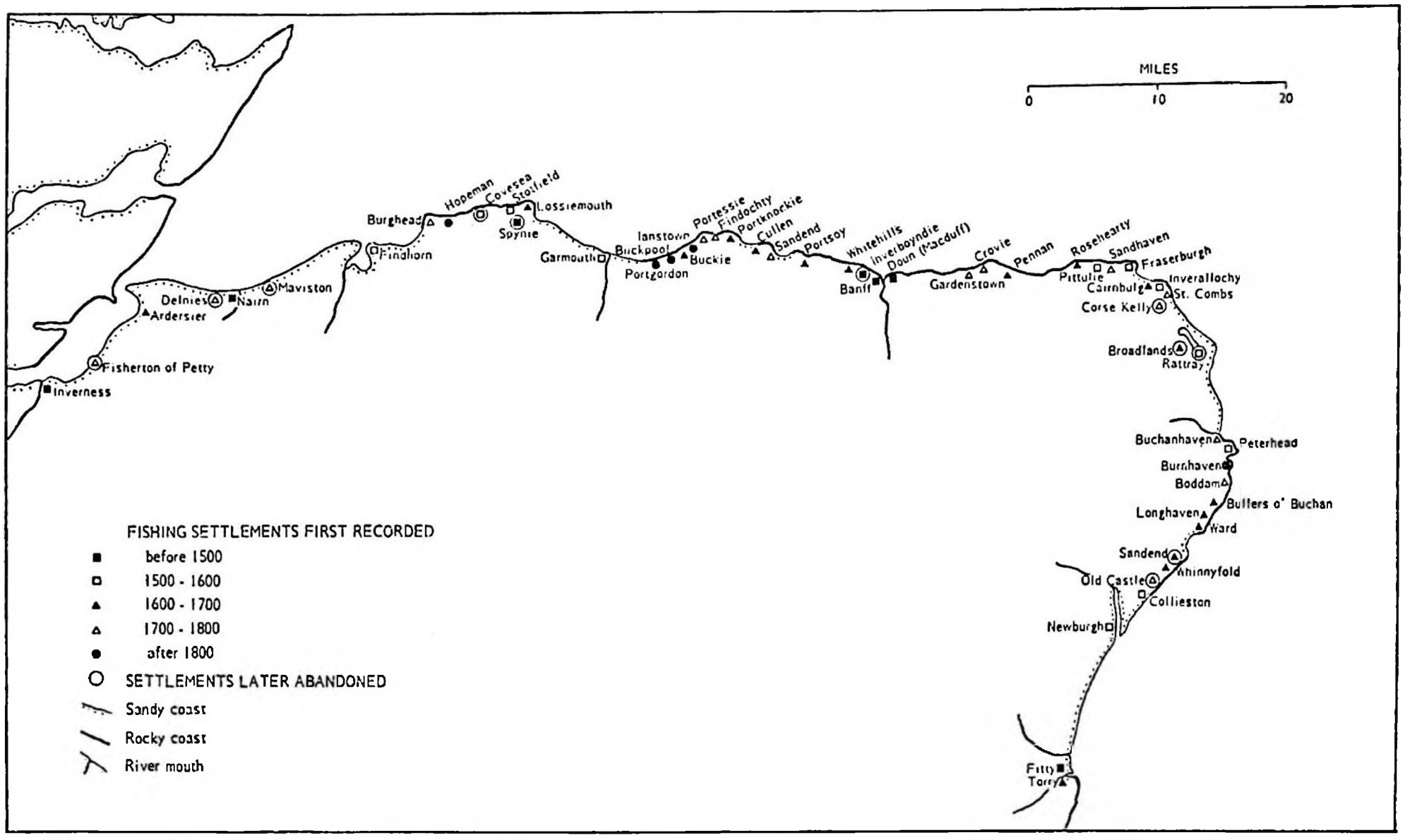
The spectacular increase in activity in fishing in the North-East of Scotland (here defined as the area north of the Mounth and as far west as Inverness) in the nineteenth century is well known to those even casually acquainted with the modern growth of the region. It is less well known, however, that this area has been involved in fishing since the beginning of recorded history, and sporadic archaeological traces suggest that fish have featured in the food supply since the earliest human settlement. The indications are that through the great part of history fishing has been practised in association with farming, and the development of it as a highly specialised occupation is a relatively modern phenomenon, not more than two or three centuries old. While the main early effort appears to have been directed at the easier goal of taking fish in the rivers, there is evidence that shell and other sea fish were exploited in the early centuries of our era during the Iron Age, and medieval documents indicate the catching of both white fish and herring. Sea fisheries become better known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which appear to have been a period of slow expansion in harmony with national economic trends; and this expansion was certainly projected into the eighteenth century, when the way of life of the fisherfolk becomes clearer, especially in the pages of the Old Statistical Account. By 1800, the foundations had been laid on which the vigorous growth of the nineteenth century, associated with the famous Scottish herring fishery, could take place. In the rise of the fisheries, the lairds of coastal estates were the prime movers as organisers and entrepreneurs, and the fisherfolk on their part eventually developed into distinctive communities separate from their farming neighbours, and in them the work was organised on a family basis.

The Evolution of the Settlement Pattern

Archaeological evidence of early activity in sea fishing is scanty. It is known that the community which lived at Forvie (on the north side of the Ythan mouth) were gathering shell fish from the beds in the estuary before the start of the Christian era, as well as catching river fish (Kirk 1953–4:170). In the area too there are several promontory forts of the Iron Age, the inhabitants of which would have had the opportunity to exploit sea fisheries, and at one of those at Dundarg (Simpson 1954:46–7) excavation has revealed fish bones which are probably those of cod. Also in a cave at Covesea have been



Fishing Settlements in the North-East of Scotland.

found bones from the head of a fish of the cod family, although their age is uncertain (Neill 1930–1:207–8).

The earliest documentary references to specific settlements in the coastal zone occur in the context of churches founded in them, such as that at Aberdour (Aberdeenshire) in the late sixth century (Scott 1928:209) and those of Fordyce (Banffshire) and Forres (Moray) at the end of the seventh century (Simpson 1935:79). These indicate a population living in the coastal area, which may have obtained part of its sustenance from fish.

From medieval times onwards, fishing is referred to in a variety of documents, although right until the latter part of the seventeenth century seldom in a manner which gives any clear indication of its importance. While rights to fishings are mentioned occasionally in the context of charters, the most frequent early mention is in trade—especially when fish were exported and customs levied on them; but it is more than likely that the proportion of the catch recorded in trade represents but a minor proportion of the whole. Evidence for coastal settlement from the earlier maps, beginning with those of Pont in the early seventeenth century, can be brought to bear on the issue. However, it is frequently not clear on the maps of Pont and Gordon (1654) whether settlements are in fact coastal or some distance inland; and even when the situation becomes clearer with Roy's map of the mid-eighteenth century, the existence of a settlement at the coast is not an absolute guarantee of its involvement in fishing. Even so, the map evidence is a useful complement to that from other documents. In several cases the existence of a settlement later concerned with fishing can be shown earlier than fishing itself; and an additional complication here is that some of the villages first come on record as 'Seatown of...' or 'Fishertown of...', indicating a later origin than the main place of the name: this occurs, for example, at Cullen, Boddam, Pennan and Petty, and on occasion it can be difficult to discern which of the two settlements is implied.

The first definite indication appears to be the right to white fish included in the charter granted by Robert the Bruce to the burgh of Aberdeen in the early fourteenth century (Gordon 1842:appendix, 30), and in the same century the ancient right of the See of Moray to the fishing in the Loch of Spynie, which then communicated with the sea, is mentioned in a letter of Bishop Bar (Cramond 1888:16). It is also in the Ecclesiastical context that mention is made of the distinctive fishing quarter of Aberdeen—the village of Fittie which occurs in the Registrum Episcopatus Aberdoniensis in the thirteenth century (Alexander 1952:58), and which is also mentioned in 1441 when both the white and salmon fishings were in the hands of the Crown during a vacancy of the See of Aberdeen (Exchequer Rolls 1882:95). The fairly frequent references to the export of 'mulones' (cod) from Aberdeen also in the fifteenth century suggest that it was the main centre of commercial white fishing at this stage, and there is also a record of stockfish being brought from Aberdeen to the King in 1457 (Exchequer Rolls 1883: 231). The involvement of Banff at the same period is shown by the custom levied on

cod in 1486 (Exchequer Rolls 1886:446), while Down (now Macduff) is referred to as a 'fish-town' as early as 1440 (Cramond 1893:2), and the tithes of white fish were included in a lease of the lands of Innerbundy (*i.e.* Inverboyndie, Banffshire) in 1458 (Cramond 1886:4). Herring fishing was also prosecuted at this time in the inner Moray Firth, as export of the fish from Inverness was recorded on two occasions (Exchequer Rolls 1882:231; 1883:469), and in the early part of the sixteenth century the importance of this fishery is also mentioned by Hector Boece (Boece 1821:xxxiii). A fact of undoubted significance is that the earliest records of sea-fishing occur at settlements located at river mouths, including Aberdeen, Banff, and Inverness, which were also involved in the salmon fisheries on the lower reaches of the rivers (Coull 1967:33): and it appears probable that the men who caught the salmon also ventured beyond the river mouths—no doubt outside the main salmon season—to fish the sea as well. It may well be that the other river-mouth settlements of Nairn, Findhorn, Peterhead and Newburgh were all involved from an early date in both river and sea-fishing, as they certainly were in later times.

However vague the earlier phases of activity may be, there are records of fishing at sixteen points on the coast in the sixteenth century, and from this time at least there was an increase in both the number and size of fishing settlements. A possible stimulus to the fisheries was the occurrence of years of bad harvests on land, which was all too well known in Scotland in earlier times. Most of the places mentioned in the sixteenth century are on the Aberdeenshire coast, although it is not certain whether this represents the true balance of effort, as the more sheltered waters of the inner Moray Firth may have been relatively intensely exploited. Certainly the fisheries of this section of the coast greatly impressed Robert Gordon of Straloch in the middle of the seventeenth century (Gordon 1907:309); but in the sixteenth century there appear to be definite records of only half-a-dozen places on the coast west of the Spey. Between Aberdeenshire and the inner Moray Firth, there was activity at Banff itself, and probably also at the burghs of Cullen and Portsoy; and in the Enzie district, which was to become one of the main centres of activity and advance, 'fishing takis' were included in a grant of tack at Rannes in 1579 (Cramond 1890:3).

With the economic growth and increasing prosperity in Scotland during the seventeenth century, activity in fishing expanded, and there was some proliferation of villages along the coast: it is, however, impossible to gauge precisely the number of new settlements created, as some which appear in records for the first time may be earlier foundations. Thus the Aberdeenshire Poll Book (1696) reveals that by the end of the century the number of communities engaged in fishing in the county was eighteen, and descriptions of the coast in 1683 (Garden 1843:100–7) and 1721 (Hepburn 1843:98–100) show an active and valuable fishery; at the latter date it was stated that every coastal parish had at least one 'fisher toun', and many of them had two. In the coastal area of Banffshire, in the same century, the granting of rights to white fishing in a number of seisins at the coast was prominent (Bell 1812:54), and by 1700 there were

eight fishing villages on this section of the coast. At the same date there were at least eight other settlements concerned with fishing west of the Spey.

The fuller records from the eighteenth century show more clearly the prolongation of expansion towards the modern period and the prominent hand of the lairds in shaping it; and by 1800 the number of fishing settlements at nearly fifty was coming close to that of today. During the century the great majority of the settlements expanded considerably and there was the founding of several completely new villages; there was also the building of more adequate cottages for the fisherfolk, and by the end of the century the appearance of villages planned on a regular geometric layout: the Improving Movement wrought changes at the coast as important as those inland.

The early 1700s saw the new foundations in Banffshire of Gardenstown (N.S.A. XIII:291), Portessie and Findochty (O.S.A. XIII:401). These had mainly the old type of layout with houses huddled by the beach, but Buchanhaven (Aberdeenshire), built from 1780 (Neish 1950:75), was laid out in orderly rows, as was the village of St. Combs which was built to a plan from 1771 (T.S.A. Aberdeen 1960:313) to replace the older nearby village of Corsekelly, and at about the same time too Collieston was rebuilt. One of the best examples of eighteenth-century growth occurred on the east side of the mouth of the Deveron, where the old settlement of Down was rebuilt and greatly expanded, and the laird's name incorporated into the new name of Macduff (Cramond 1893:1–9). The mark of planning was to become more obvious after 1800, with the grid layout of the rebuilt Burghead (N.S.A. XIII:40–1) and of the 'new town' of Cullen (N.S.A. XIII:342) which is planned around a square, and overlooks the older seatown down by the beach; at Aberdeen too, the site of the fishing quarter of Fittie was moved in 1808, and a new village built around two squares (N.S.A. XIII:73–4). On a bigger scale, this grid layout was to be seen even more prominently in the larger fishing towns, and Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Macduff, Buckie and Lossiemouth all were to have nineteenth-century expansion on a grid plan.

If expansion, both in number and size, was the keynote of the settlements, it was not so in every case. Thus the village of Corsekelly (as stated above) was abandoned, possibly because the accumulation of coastal sand had rendered it too far from the sea and made it difficult to bring boats ashore. Three miles to the south, the village of Rattray which had been erected a burgh of regality in the sixteenth century (Cumine 1887–90:118), had its outlet to the sea blocked by the accumulation of sand which closed off the Loch of Strathbeg, and disappeared from the map in the early years of the century. Sandend (on the Aberdeenshire coast) ceases to be recorded as a fishing settlement also at about the same time. The burgh of Findhorn had to be rebuilt twice with the coastal changes at the river mouth (T.S.A. Moray and Nairn 1965:328), and on the inner firth the centres of Delnies, Maviston and Fisherton of Petty were all in decline by 1800 and ultimately ceased to have any concern with fishing. A main reason for the abandonment of settlement appears to have been natural selection, the open shores and points liable to sand accumulation being rejected in favour of those with

better landing places and harbours. The changes in the Culbin Sands, which culminated with the destructive encroachment of sand at the end of the seventeenth century, are well known, and old iron fishing hooks are still to be found among them (Bain [n.d.]: 13).

In the north-east, there is prominent alternation of sandy coastal stretches with ones which are rocky, and often cliffed; and in fishing settlements there was a marked preference for the latter. Sand could be eroded away or built up over the years, and did not give good sites for house building; open sandy shores too could be difficult to approach from the sea, and a boat could bed down in drifting sand once it had been pulled upon the beach. Rocky stretches, on the other hand, gave more stable house foundations, and shelter was often available on a raised beach ledge at a cliff-foot. With these sites it was the general rule that if there was at all sufficient space houses were huddled, gable-end to the sea, at the cliff-foot, as at Pennan, Crovie and Sandend, for example; otherwise the houses would be built on the cliff-top (as at Whinnyfold and Portknockie), whence the landing beach would be reached by steep and often slippery paths. However, this was obviously less convenient as the work of baiting lines and gutting and splitting fish was done in the houses, and the baited lines had to be carried down to the boats, while the catch had to be carried back to the houses. Another advantage that the rocky stretches of coast had was that on the rocks and shingle beaches split fish could be spread to dry, and dried fish was already a considerable trade item in the eighteenth century.

The earliest houses in the villages were very simple structures, like those of nearly all the poorer classes in Scotland before the Industrial Revolution: to judge from the foundations which were cleared from the site of Corsekelly in the 1950s, and from occasional buildings which have survived elsewhere, the houses were only four or five yards in length, and had earthen floors with central fire-places and thatched roofs; and at least in Buckie there were examples with the door in the gable-end (Hutcheson 1887:64). With the Improving Movement, the houses of the fisherfolk improved with those of the rest of the Scottish people, and the usual house-style became a more substantial 'but-and-ben' with walls of stone and lime, although earthen floors and thatched roofs generally continued to the end of the period under review.

The origins of the fisherfolk constitute a problem closely bound up with the origins of their settlements. There appears to be little to substantiate the colourful tales to be heard at various points of the coast which would trace their roots to such sources as the Norse settlement. The dialects spoken in the fishing villages are, in fact, characteristic of the North-East division of Lowland Scots, and many of the surnames of the villages can be paralleled among the landward population. These constitute cogent evidence for the fisherfolk having sprung mainly from the local populace. In the matter of surnames it is an outstanding fact that each village has only a very few traditional surnames, suggesting that it was only handfuls of families from which each community was descended: thus in St Combs there were Buchans, Cowes, Bruces and Strachans;

Portknockie had its Mains, Woods, Slaters and Piries, while Boddam had its Cordiners, Sellars and Stephens; and virtually every village is similar. However, there have been incomers who have become integrated into these coastal communities: the Fletts and Slaters of the Buckie area are descended from early eighteenth-century immigrants from the North Isles, while the Murrays came from Helmsdale (Hutcheson 1887:17), and there may have been some incomers from Fife. Although at least in Portessie there are fishing families which are known to have been engaged in farming at an earlier date (Hutcheson 1887:17), most of the new foundations recorded appear to have been settled in the first instance from fishing villages already in existence. Thus the first people in Portknockie moved the short distance from Cullen, while those at Findochty came from Fraserburgh, and Findhorn provided the fishermen who commenced operations at Portessie (O.S.A. XIII:408): all these were founded in the half-century up to 1727, while at the end of the century some of the Nairn fishermen resettled in Ardersier (O.S.A. XII:388). These movements appear to reflect the enterprise of landowners on different parts of the coast in promoting fishing as a means of economic betterment; and the migration of fishermen and fishing families is a frequent occurrence when records become fuller after 1800.

The Fisherfolk and the Land

If it is not easy to state when many of the various fishing settlements originated, it is a good deal more difficult to investigate the way of life of the people in them right until the time of the Old Statistical Account. No doubt some of the distinctive practices and superstitions of the fisherfolk recorded from the later eighteenth century onwards go back a considerable time into the past. A very prominent feature of the more modern period is the social separation of the fishing from the farming population, which was certainly fostered by the very different ways of life of the two groups: 'The cod and the corn dinna mix' is one of the traditional sayings of the Moray Firth coast. But if apart at the deeper levels of community life, and with inter-marriage between the two groups virtually unknown, there were trading links between the fisherfolk and their farming neighbours which were vital in securing their food supply.

There are indications, however, that the separation between farming and fishing was at one time much less severe, and that it is largely related to the growth of more specialised commercial fisheries in the last two or three centuries. Crofter-fishers were formerly more common, and indeed examples of them were still to be found in the inter-war years of the twentieth century in the area of Gardenstown.

The early burghs, where fishing is first recorded, all had their farm-land, and the fishers certainly had some of this. Thus the first feuars of Peterhead (Arbuthnott 1815: 18), mentioned on the town's erection to a burgh of barony in 1593, were fishermen who had small plots (each about one-fifth of an acre), with the right to common pasture and peat-cutting on the town moss, while the burgh of Rattray was involved in fishing at the same period, and had infield, outfield and common land (Cumine 1887–90:18).

The first map of the burgh of Aberdeen, made by James Gordon in 1661, shows plots attached to the fishermen's houses in the village of Fitty, and in 1683 Garden of Troup referred to the farming practice of the fisher towns on the north coast of Aberdeenshire, which included the growing of oats and barley (Garden 1843:106). Significant too, is that in the entries in the Aberdeenshire poll-book of 1696, five fishers are recorded resident in ferm-touns in the vicinity of Rattray, while there are four others at Sandend in Cruden parish, and in 1759 Down (later Macduff) was a community of thirty-four crofter-fishers (Cramond 1893:5). In the Buckie area, there are several instances of families of farming extraction who took to fishing in the early eighteenth century, and in the same century every fisherman in Buckie had at least half-an-acre of ground, mostly in the 'Yardie' (Hutcheson 1887: 62), a strip of ground at a low level by the beach: but by this time most of the fishermen hired local crofters to cultivate their land. As late as 1771, the village of St Combs was laid out with plots for potatoes attached to the houses, and there are also several instances in the Old Statistical Account of villages with their cultivation plots; while in Whitehills in Banffshire, long noted for its prowess in fishing, the men had plots of $1\frac{1}{4}$ acres each as late as 1840 (N.S.A. XIII:237). The cultivation up to the mid-eighteenth century was for the production of oats and (more especially) barley for meal, although from that time potatoes were to become the main crop. In this context too, it is of significance that to this day a part of the golf course at Inverallochy in Aberdeenshire is still known as the 'Hempland', and in former times grew hemp which was used in making lines.

While there is ample evidence to demonstrate the necessary earlier connection of the fishing population with the soil, there were by the latter eighteenth century interesting contrasts. Thus in the parish of Rathen (Aberdeenshire), the fisherfolk of the villages of Cairnbulg and Inverallochy were conspicuous in being the only section of the population without land, although some of them rented potato ground from farmers (O.S.A. XI:15). In the nearby parish of Crimond, on the other hand, the only fishing was done by members of the farming community living near the coast, who went out only in fine weather to catch for domestic use (O.S.A. XI:49).

Fishermen appear to have been like a great part of the Scottish tenantry of the period under review in being tenants at will subject to the laird or to a tacksman to whom he sublet the fishings. This persisted into the latter part of the eighteenth century, as is instanced at Fraserburgh, where the fisherman was bound to serve for a fixed period in a boat (Cranna 1914:56); and at Buckie it is reported that the laird Dunbar drove the men to sea when they were reluctant to go out in adverse weather (Hutcheson 1887:62). As well as those with the formal status of tenants, squatters may have been included in some of the villages; and indeed in 1780 the first settlers in the village of Buchanhaven (now part of Peterhead) were squatters (Neish 1950:75).

The boats were usually supplied by the lairds, although in the decades before 1800 it had become usual for the fishermen themselves to own the smaller yawls which were often employed for inshore winter fishing. A usual system was that the fisherman paid

a single rent for his shared boat, and his house and yard (Bell 1812:54), and the laird undertook to replace the boat every seven years. There is evidence that in earlier times part of the rent was paid in fish and in services, as occurred in Peterhead where the original feuars of the burgh teind fish (N.S.A. XII:370), and at Cullen in 1642 four fishing skippers incurred the displeasure of the Earl of Findlater for their failure to pay their dues of 'two dissoun fishes' for each day spent in fishing (Cramond 1888:41). At Buckie, about 1800, an annual token payment of six dried cod or ling (Hutcheson 1887: 19) were still included in the fishermen's rents, although at the same time the old payments of teind fish at Fraserburgh seem to have fallen into desuetude (Cranna 1914:56); and Buckie men were still liable for the service of 'binnage' freights to the laird (Hutcheson, 1887:19), which chiefly involved the transport of building materials (stone and timber) along the coast of the Moray Firth. At the close of the eighteenth century, the annual rents paid by the fishermen were in the region of £5 to £6; at this time the value of the boats which they got every seven years was around £15 to £20, and at Buckie a boat fitted out with necessary gear for fishing cost £24 (O.S.A. XIII:402), suggesting that about half the rent was reckoned for house and ground, the other half being for the boat. At the same time, it was usual to allot a share of the catch to the maintenance of the boat; thus at Torry the boat got an equal share with each of the six-man crew (one-seventh) (O.S.A. VII:206), while at Fraserburgh the proportion was one-sixth (Cranna 1914:56).

The regulation and organisation of fishing was not, however, entirely within the hands of lay lords, as it was never the practice to fish on Sundays. This was prohibited for river salmon fishing as early as the reign of Alexander II, and the ruling of the Kirk Session of Aberdour in 1699 that the local boats should not stay out later than sunset on Saturday nights shows a similar practice in the area after the Reformation. At the same time complaints were recorded against two fishwives who had sold fish on a Sunday (Cramond 1896:29).

The Work of Fishing

The actual work of fishing was a specialist craft, and as this emerges more clearly in the eighteenth century, it shows organisation on a family basis with a considerable measure of self-sufficiency in the fishing communities, and with a pattern of activity related to the cycle of the seasons. By the later eighteenth century too it represented in total an economic effort of considerable moment, with hundreds of boats involved, and prices for fish which the Old Statistical Account shows to have been relatively high.

While there were variations from one part of the coast to another, the main effort was always directed to the catching of white fish by lines of different types, and there was an intimate knowledge of the various grounds (such as the 'Coral' and 'Hill Ground' in the Moray Firth, and the 'Castle Hard' off Aberdeenshire), and of the fish they provided at different times of year. The type of boat most generally used was from 23 to 30 feet, up to 4 tons burthen and was crewed by six men and sometimes a

boy; but even at the end of the eighteenth century there were few villages with more than six or seven of these boats. They had masts and sails, but oars were also much used in propelling them. All villages appear to have had a smaller size of boat, too, of about 17 feet long, crewed by four men and used mainly for winter fishing close inshore, but also used by boys and older men at other times. By the latter part of the century, however, bigger boats were also in use in the centres of Peterhead (Arbuthnott 1815: 42), Fraserburgh (Cranna 1914:56) and Buckie (Hutcheson 1867:17): these were over 30 feet long with two or three masts and crews of eight or nine men, but, like the smaller craft, they were open boats. The origin of these boats of the East Coast 'fifie' type is problematical, as there are no descriptions of them earlier than the mid-nineteenth century (Mather 1966:134). Most of the boats were sufficiently big to require the efforts of more than their crews to launch and beach them, and the womenfolk often helped although the work was very heavy. Bad weather not infrequently halted operations, especially in winter. At such times, the worst hazard was often coming in to land, as this generally involved approaching open beaches through the breakers. There were some harbour works from at least the sixteenth century at the bigger centres, although storms frequently caused severe damage to these early structures. From as far east as the Buckie area, boats might even run to the Comarty Firth in adverse weather (Hutcheson 1887:64), as it was easy to negotiate its wide entrance into the sheltered waters beyond. However, all the villages have their own grim record of disasters: as a single illustration, at least twenty boats were lost during the eighteenth century in the Buckie area, mostly with all hands. In some villages there were more deaths at sea than on land (Hutcheson 1887:18).

A considerable variety of white fish could be caught at most times of the year, although the 'Back of Eel' period from about January to March could be a difficult time through shortage of fish on the grounds (little else than cod being available) and bad weather. Where they were fished, herring and mackerel had a pronounced summer season, as had the dog-fish which tended to follow the herring shoals. The same also applied to the shell fish—lobster and crab.

Particular grounds could be noted for the fish they yielded. Rattray cod were much sought after in Aberdeenshire, while in the Moray Firth the 'Skate Hole' is self-explanatory, and turbot were caught off the Bullers o' Buchan. The grounds were generally located by lining up landmarks on shore, of which the most prominent were Mormond Hill, the Durn and the Bin Hill of Cullen, although reference was also made to features on the west side of the Moray Firth, such as the Sutors of Cromarty. If the practice at Fraserburgh is at all typical, there were also cases where the fishing on particular banks was recognised as belonging to particular crews (Cranna 1914:59).

The winter period, from about October to February, was generally the time for working close inshore from the smaller boats mainly for haddock and codling, although in Buckie the bigger boats were used the whole year round. 'Small lines' were mainly employed, the term indicating that the actual lines were relatively thin and light, the

hooks small and more closely spaced, and it was generally a smaller class of fish that were caught. Even so, boats would shoot up to two miles of line, with up to 3,000 hooks (Arbuthnott 1815:39), to catch cod, haddock and flat fish. February and March tended to be a less active period, and men spent a good deal of time ashore in the maintenance of boats and gear, but there followed the most important spring great-line season, in the prosecution of which Buckie and Peterhead were outstanding. For this boats would venture up to 40 miles offshore, and might stay out two or three days at a time, shooting their lines once a day. Each crew member had his own line, and at Peterhead the total number of hooks was over 400 (Arbuthnott 1815:39), but at Buckie each man in a crew of eight or nine had a line with 100 to 120 hooks (O.S.A. XIII:402). In this fishery, cod and ling were the main fish sought, but halibut and skate were also important. Great-lining went on until well into June, and afterwards the inshore and small-line fishing might be resumed, although in the Buckie area the men then prepared for the summer herring season. Another variation occurred in some years on the north coast of Aberdeenshire, where mackerel were fished with unbaited hooks if they appeared; and from at least the mid-seventeenth century (Garden 1843:100) there was also a fishery for dog-fish which might last into November. In the late eighteenth century this latter was on a considerable scale all along the coast: the fish was dried for winter food and its liver-oil provided fuel for lamps; and before 1800 it was being sought as fertiliser by farmers improving their land (Cranna 1914:58).

Lobster and 'partan' crabs were caught on the lines in earlier times, or simply gathered inshore at low tide, and only in the late eighteenth century is there any record of creels being introduced (O.S.A. VII:206). By 1800 there was an organised trade with the London market, and in 1792 two English companies engaged Buckie fishermen to catch lobsters (O.S.A. XIII:405), and at Peterhead (O.S.A. XVI:548) and elsewhere men were involved in catering for the same market.

Although there is an isolated reference to fishing for herring in Peterhead in 1733 (Anon 1907:71), and in Aberdeen between 1787 and 1797 ten boats big enough to qualify for the Government's tonnage bounty (minimum burthen 20 tons) were fitted out (*Parliamentary Papers* 1803:294–5), the only serious efforts in this field were by craft on the Moray Firth. Inverness had been sporadically involved in it for centuries, and tradition has it that men from Fife introduced the drift-net fishery for herring to Buckie before 1700 (Hutcheson 1887:34); while in Nairn a company was formed to promote it in 1712 (Bain 1928:246) with a fair measure of success. The main early fishery was in the inner Firth where most were caught in August, although in Pennant's time (1769) they were already being fished through the winter as well (Pennant 1771: 178). In Buckie the older method of working was with four-men crews, each man having a net, the nets being of linen and having stones fixed to their lower end to make them sink and requiring to be dried almost daily to minimise the deterioration caused by salt water. Here, in a six-week season beginning about 20 July, men in a good year might earn as much as in all the other forty-six weeks (Hutcheson 1887:18), and there

were specialist curers ashore who dealt with the catch. Such a situation obviously encouraged expansion in herring fishing, and to this end in Inverness twenty-two boats qualifying for the tonnage bounty were fitted out between 1771 and 1797 (*Parliamentary Papers* 1803:294–5). Greater success was still at this stage enjoyed by smaller craft, and by the end of the century there were between 200 and 300 herring boats in all the Moray Firth coasts (with crews of 7 or 8 men) (*Parliamentary Papers* 1803: 140), and the main fishery was already moving to Caithness where the Buckie fleet played a prominent part. The stage was being set for the great nineteenth-century expansion, and fishermen were already developing the greater degree of mobility which was an essential concomitant.

However, the boldest ventures before 1800 in the North-East were made from other bases. Peterhead (O.S.A. XVI:609–10) and Fraserburgh (Cranna 1914:56) had fitted out bigger boats to go to Barra Head cod fishing in summer; and, from the former, some boats actually ventured as far as Iceland, herring fishing on the West Coast was attempted, and fifty years of whaling effort in the Arctic was begun as the century ended. But these developments were less enduring than the rising herring fisheries of the Moray Firth coasts.

Essential for successful white fisheries were adequate supplies of bait for the lines: the main sources of supply were the mussel beds of the estuaries, especially of the Ythan and Findhorn, but mussels were also collected on the foreshore of the Inverness Firth, and indeed brought into the area from the extensive beds of the Montrose Basin and the Cromarty and Dornoch Firths. Prior to about 1700, they were also collected from the inlet at Rattray (Hepburn 1843:98), before it was finally closed off from the sea by the bay-bar which now impounds the Loch of Strathbeg. At the end of the eighteenth century fishermen from all the villages made periodic trips to load their boats with mussels which, on their return, they 'sowed' on scalps on their own village foreshores to keep them fresh until required. At Torry, for example, it was the practice to make two or three trips a year to the Montrose Basin for this purpose (O.S.A. VII: 205–6).

In earlier times reliance on more local supplies was usual, and as early as 1570 fish bait on the foreshores were among the appurtenances of lands granted to Alexander Fraser of 'Pettowlie' (Pittulie) in the north-east of Aberdeenshire (Aberdeen and Banff Collections 1843:101). A century later in the same area, Garden of Troup speaks of gathering shell-bait off the rocks, and of transplanting it from the outer rocks to those nearer the shore for winter use (Garden 1843:100); lug-worm and sand-eels were also used in summer, and salted mackerel and saithe in winter. Butcher offal is also recorded as having been used by the fishermen of Torry (O.S.A. VII:205).

Traditionally, the work of baiting the lines, and of gathering and shelling the bait beforehand, was the work of the women, helped by the children. A significant illustration of this is that the school roll in the Aberdeenshire parish of Slains fell markedly in summer at the end of the eighteenth century, when everyone over six or seven years

old in the villages of Collieston and Old Castle was fully occupied in baiting (O.S.A. V:280).

Till the end of the eighteenth century too, there was a large element of self-sufficiency among the fishermen in making their own gear, including their lines of hemp with horsehair snoods, and also their own hooks (Hutcheson 1887:30). Where herring were fished, the men made their own nets, and sails for the boats were also made, although the boats themselves were built at a few of the bigger centres on the coast, including Cullen, Peterhead, Banff and Garmouth.

Disposal of the Catch

A considerable proportion of the fish caught was always consumed fresh in the coastal villages and towns, and in their immediate farming hinterlands; and prior to the eighteenth century, this certainly accounted for the major part of the catch. However, storage for winter use and for longer-distance trade required that part of the catch be preserved. The main method here was by splitting and drying the fish on rocks and shingle beaches, usually with some salting to improve preservation. This process took upwards of a month, and it was the work of the women and children to spread the fish out in dry weather and collect them together again in wet (N.S.A. XIII:338). Particularly in winter when drying was impracticable fish were also cured in barrels, and smoked.

The local trade was generally the responsibility of the fish-wife, a well-known figure in traditional Scottish life. Right into the nineteenth century (and even the twentieth) a proportion of this was by barter, the fish being exchanged for meal, butter, cheese and eggs in the fermtouns, giving a necessary supplement to what the fishers produced from their own plots. The fish-wife might carry her creel a return distance of 16 miles in a day (Pennant 1771:147), and Francis Douglas noted that they came before breakfast to Aberdeen from the village of Newburgh (13 miles away) to sell their wares in the weekly Friday market (Douglas 1782:150).

Although the restriction of market privileges to the burghs no doubt hampered the growth of commerce in fish, there was some longer distance trade from early times; and the purchase of 1,000 skate by the merchant William Buddith of Inverness at Fraserburgh in 1568 (MacKay and Boyd 1911:lxxvii) is an indication of the scale this could attain. This trade increased as activity in fishing expanded, and by the early eighteenth century Peterhead was especially prominent as an exporter. The fuller records of the later part of the eighteenth century reveal a trade which had grown to quite remarkable proportions: prices were rising, and the levels instanced in the Old Statistical Account suggest that the fishermen were not without a considerable incentive. At Collieston, the bigger fish like ling and turbot were fetching 1s. or more each, while skate and cod and sole were all worth 6d. each (O.S.A. V:275), although smaller fish and those less desired by the market realised considerably lower prices; at Peterhead cod fetched between £1 and £1 10s. per dozen (O.S.A. XVI:541), while lobsters at different

points on the coast were worth 2½d. each. It is noteworthy that in Robert Fergusson's poem 'Leith Races', written in the mid-eighteenth century, the following verse occurs:

> The Buchan bodies through the beach
> Their bunch o' Findrams cry
> And skirl oot bauld, in Norland speech,
> 'Gweed speldins—fa' will buy?'

The reference is obviously to visitors from the North-East who were hawking their fish; and speldings (dried whitings) were a traditional product of Collieston especially. Regular contacts had been forged with the ports of the Forth and Tay, and also with London; and while it is impossible to assess the total volume of this trade, there are available illustrations of its scale. Thus from Whitehills the annual value of outgoing trade was between £500 and £600 (O.S.A. XIX:307), while Portsoy and Cullen between them sent away fish to a value of about £840 (O.S.A. XII:143), and about one-half the catch from the Aberdeenshire parish of Slains (*i.e.* the villages of Collieston and Old Castle) were disposed of in the same way (O.S.A. V:275). Salt evaporated on the Forth, needed in the preservation of the fish, was one of the main return cargoes, and hemp for lines is also recorded, along with the domestic requirements of wool and coal. Buckie men went in May to Glasgow, and even to Ireland with a part of their catch, as well as making shorter trips to the ports of the inner Moray Firth to sell dried fish in summer and dog-fish liver oil in winter, and a return cargo here was bark for preserving the lines (Hutcheson 1887:23–24). There was also a regular trade from Peterhead to London, which took the form of 400 to 600 barrels of salt cod and haddock (O.S.A. XVI:541); and dried dog-fish were sent from Rosehearty and Pittulie (O.S.A. V:98) to the same destination.

In sum, by 1800 there had already developed on the North-East of Scotland considerable fisheries; the numbers of the fisherfolk had increased to be a reservoir of skilled manpower despite the hardships and periodic disasters of their life, and had achieved by the standards of the time a fair measure of prosperity. They were also involved in, and to some extent backed by a commercial organisation which gave scope for further expansion. After 1800 the fishermen were finally to achieve their independence of the lairds, their numbers to continue to grow and the whole scale of operations to expand; their boats were to increase in size and become decked over. This was to be accompanied by a large-scale turn-over to herring fishing in response to further government encouragement, together with centralisation of operations as the main centres acquired better harbours and other facilities which the larger boats needed. A mobility was also to develop, which took many of the fishermen (and numbers of their dependents) as far as the voes of Shetland, the wharves of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft in East Anglia, and to fishing harbours in Ireland. There was, however, a necessary formative period of slower growth before the foundations were well and truly laid for the pattern of fishing we know in modern times.

NOTE

An important source in the preparation of the paper has been that of oral tradition. The majority of former practices recorded here are either within the memories of the older fisherfolk, or have been handed down by their forebears. Such information has been a main guide to research, and the attempt has been made to corroborate oral tradition with documentary evidence wherever possible.

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