

## Dog Bowies: the Use of Dogskins for Fishing Floats

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Buoys for floating the nets consisted of inflated skins or bladders. Many a good 'dog' served his master after death as well as in life (SA 1965:135).

The use of dogskins for fishing-buoys ('bows', or 'bowies') in some Scottish fishing communities seems to be poorly recorded. The *Scottish National Dictionary* (SND 1971:8. 280) notes the term 'bow' as in use in Banffshire in 1926 and in Moray in 1933 describing a buoy made of calf or sheepskin. But there is no explicit mention of the practice of using dogskins for floats either in *SND* or its precursor, Jamieson's *Dictionary of the Scottish Language*. However, an incident in Paterson's tale *Behold Thy Daughter* (Paterson 1973:18) supposedly describing life in Banff or Macduff during the middle of last century, concerns a little girl worried about the disappearance of her brother's dog, Davy: she hopes that he is 'too wee for the fleshers', and is reassured by her sister that she has never seen a buoy of Davy's size. This suggested to the writer that enquiries along the Moray Firth coast might lead to some information about the use of dogskins for 'bows'. Moreover the term 'doggers' referring to fishermen in the Seatown of Lossiemouth, and in Burghead the fisherman's tee-name or nickname 'butcher' commonly heard in the first three decades of this century, possibly indicate such a connection between dogs and fishing. Information gathered by the author during conversations with retired fishermen in 1976-7, shows that P. F. Anson's statement—that in the nineteenth-century Buckie men bred dogs specifically for use as buoys, whereas Fraserburgh men used bullock bladders (Anson 1974:166)—can be seen as part of a pattern of using dog 'bows', which until the 1920s was concentrated on the south side of the Moray Firth. This custom is attested by informants in Burghead, Hopeman, Lossiemouth, Portessie, Portknockie, Sandend and Whitehills.

### Preparation and Use

The dog was sometimes killed by dashing it against a board or a rock—in Portknockie a dog was taken by its hindlegs and its head dashed against a rock down at 'The Creeks' east of the harbour. It was important to keep the skin intact: one retired fisherman said that a method used, when boats used to be pulled up by rope to be beached, was to attach the dog's head to one end of the rope that fitted into the boat, and when the boat was pulled the dog was killed instantly.

The method of preparing the 'bows' appears to have been uniform. The animal was skinned, and the feet and head removed; then, according to a very old fisherman in Sandend, the skin was soaked in urine for a time to remove the hair: fishermen in other villages said the skin was soaked in salt and water or rubbed with dry lime on occasion, as in the case of sheepskin used for buoys in Shetland up to the 1920s. When the hair was removed, the skin was oiled, and Archangel tar was applied to both sides of the skin to make it waterproof and to prevent it from hardening or cracking in the water (Fig. 1). The tarring of the interior surface lasted for the lifetime of the buoy, but the exterior was coated with tar, or sometimes paint, about once a year. After being tarred, the skin was dried, a process which the fisherman in Sandend emphasised took from one to two months. Both he and a fisherman from Lossiemouth mentioned that the skin was turned inside out for smooth handling.

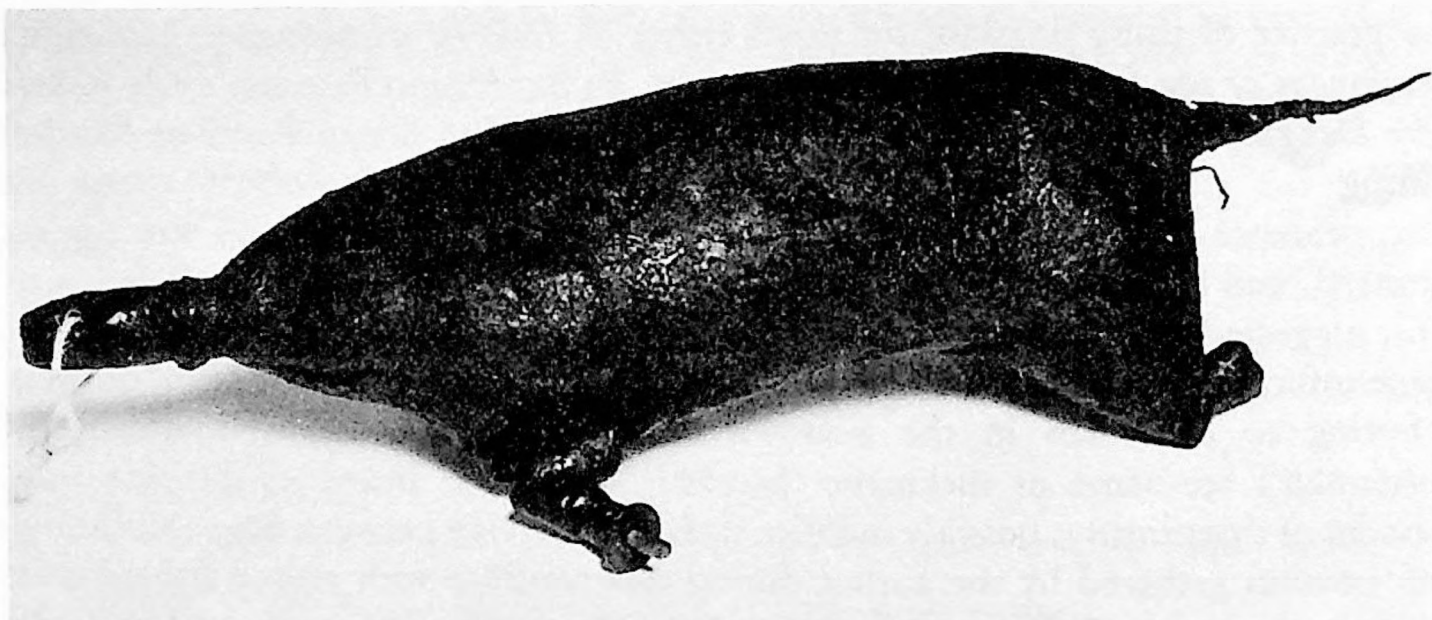


FIG. 1 Dogskin float ('bowie'), Portknockie 1978 (overall length 300 mm).

Wooden splints were generally fixed into the leg pieces. These were then sewn up except for one which had a wooden peg or pinn, well-tarred, inserted at the end. The skin was inflated by blowing air through a small hole in the pinn which was then plugged with a piece of wood or oakum (Fig. 1). Some fishermen said that occasionally splints were set in all the legs and sewn up, and instead the neck cavity was stopped up with a wooden stock. A rope attaching the buoy to the net was run from a hole in the neck stock. It was explained that the legs and neck were prepared in this way so that the skin would float with the back legs uppermost, making the position of the net readily seen in the water. Size too played its part: in Lossiemouth, a large skin was used as a float for herring nets and a small one for lines. As far as could be ascertained, and despite Anson's statement quoted above, no special effort was made to breed an ideal 'bowie dog'. Nor could any evidence be found of the animals being killed at a fixed age: rather it appears that when the need arose the most available one was taken (often from the fisherman's household).

The preparation of a 'bow' took a long time—from 2 to 3 months—but it was considered well worth while since it could last ten to fifteen years, and give a much better performance than a cow's bladder or sheep's paunch. One fisherman maintained that the dog bow was also much better than either the canvas or plastic ones that followed. Dogskins, then, were used both because they were effective and because they cost the fisherman less than sheepskins which had to be bought from the butcher.

### Evidence of Use in Other Areas, and General Decline

The writer has been able to glean little information on the use of dog 'bows' in other parts of Scotland. A correspondent in Caithness remembered a relative in Staxigoe had used dog 'bows' until 1910 or 1911. There is, however, no reference to them in the interesting account of life in fishing villages near Tain by J. Macdonald and A. Gordon (1972), nor in the story *Dauvid Main, Seaman*, set in Nairn and Mavistoun, by G. Bain (1927). As for southern Scotland, there is no mention of them, for example, in the detailed study by C. L. Czerkawska (1975) of the fishing industry in South Ayrshire; on the other hand, a correspondent in Kintyre (Mr Angus Martin, personal communication), stated that dog 'bows' have been referred to by retired fishermen there—although none have been used within living memory; and in Fife, according to another correspondent, the use of dog 'bows' was known, but ceased before 1900.

On the west coast Dr I. F. Grant describes herring drift-nets supported by home-made floats of inflated sheep- and sometimes dog-skins 'that had been peeled off the carcass of the animal so as to be almost whole and bound to a plug of wood' (1961:267). A few were still to be found when Dr Grant was collecting in the 1920s (*ibid.* n. 3). Dogskins may also have been used as floats at a similar date by fishermen on Eriskay in the Western Isles (Dr A. MacLean, personal communication).

Further afield, and traditionally linked with the Scottish west coast and Northern Isles, Mr Megaw tells me that the nineteenth-century Manx herring-fishermen were very familiar with the use of the *mollag* (? cf. Irish, Sc. Gaelic, *bolg* 'belly, bag, bladder', *etc.*) explained in 1795 as the Manx Gaelic for 'a dog's skin blown up as a bladder, and used as a buoy to float herring nets' (Kelly 1866, *s.v.*). He also tells me that the Manx Museum not only has actual examples, but also some old photographs of Peel and Port St Mary showing buoys hanging from the masts of Manx 'Nickeys'. Memories of cheerful 'Mollag Bands' still linger amongst old folk in that island.

On the Moray coast again, A. Mackilligan, writing in 1930, notes the disappearance of 'the lines of dogs' skins, dried and inflated, used for buoys', from old Stotfield, Lossiemouth: in Buckie it appears that the change to canvas buoys came earlier than in the villages to the east and west of the port.

By the end of the 1920s in Moray it would seem that both dog- and sheep-skins

ceased to be used as fishermen changed to canvas buoys: no longer was there occasion for the comment, heard in Portessie earlier in the decade: 'He's a coorse mannie that, he uses doggie bows'.

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