

# Broughty Ferry's Fishing Industry & Community

By Charles Webster

As in the case of most coastal villages and hamlets, fishing was a way of life in Broughty Ferry from earliest times. This practice developed from primitive methods such as hand lines thrown out from the shore to large wooden vessels using great lines and drift-nets. Sail fishing was carried out from Broughty Ferry at least as far back as the 1750s, but the town's greatest period for commercial fishing was from the 1840s to the First World War. During the heyday of the 1880s there were 180 fishermen and over 80 boats.

The more common boats sailing from Broughty Ferry were of classes known throughout Scotland as Fifies (more locally called "*Baldies*") and also Zulus. These vessels could be over 75 feet long and were equipped with large lug-sails as their means of propulsion. Boats up to 30 feet in length usually had only one mast and the larger vessels had two. Most boats up to twenty feet long were undecked or half-decked and were employed in the estuary of nearby. The larger sea-going boats were fully decked. The advent of steam-powered capstains in the larger boats made life easier for the fishermen when hauling in their herring nets.

White fish such as haddock, whiting, cod, plaice, dab and sole were caught on long lines of some 1,200 hooks, often several tied together, end to end, and stretching for miles. Bait such as lug and rag worm were dug from the beach by the women (fishermen's wives and daughters) and this activity, being tide-dependent, was done if necessary at night using hurricane lamps for illumination. Mussels, the other common bait, were dredged from beds in the estuary by the men working in boats equipped specifically for that purpose. The women baited the hooks and carefully loaded the long lines into specially made baskets. The baited hooks were kept reasonably moist by being laid on broad blades of '*bent*' grass. The process from digging the bait, to baiting hooks, to catching the fish, to landing the catch was usually completed within 24 to 48 hours, thus ensuring that the baited hooks and the caught fish were kept as fresh as the standards of that age would allow – refrigeration was almost non-existent on these vessels. Broughty Ferry's line fishing took place mostly in the area stretching from Scurdiness in the north to near Dunbar in the south, and to the Bell Rock at the east.

Herring fishing was quite different. Broughty fishermen like their colleagues and competitors from other communities on the east coast, had to follow the seasonal shoals of the '*silver darlings*'. This requirement meant that the men would be away from home for considerable lengths of time and travelled large distances, ranging from Peterhead to Shetland in the north, from Northumberland to Great Yarmouth in the south, and via the Forth & Clyde Canal, to the Irish Sea at the west. The village of Kilkeel in County Down was a port in which our men landed their catches when working in the Irish Sea. Herring nets were '*shot*' in the evenings and hauled in early morning and then a race was on to land their catches to get the best market prices.

Broughty Ferry women, following their fishing fleet, were employed gutting, cleaning, salting and packing the herrings in barrels for transport and also for export. Via Dundee and Tayport, Broughty Ferry exported salted herrings to Murmansk in North Russia and Archangel in Russia's White Sea. The large cargo vessels that carried the salted herrings brought back barrels of Archangel tar which the fishermen used for preserving some of their gear. Cotton nets were also preserved by dipping them in a mixture of boiling water and Burma cutch, a powdered tree bark. This process was known as barking nets; they went in white and came out dark brown. The term '*barkit*' meaning dirty has its origin in this process. Little boys in particular would be chastised by their mothers for getting their clothes barkit.

Sprat fishing from decked boats around the 30 feet length also took place in the Tay and the Ferry men like their colleagues from Tayport and Newburgh would be engaged in this activity during the appropriate seasons. Sprats were caught from boats anchored in the tideway with a bag-net suspended beneath the boat. The tide streamed out the long bag and the sprats in their naivety simply swam into it. This fishing was done at night, and the fish measured in '*crans*' were landed in the morning. A similar method was used for catching whitebait and sparlings. A cran, from around 1796, was a unit of measure of landed uncleaned herring used in the North Sea fishing industry. It was approximately 28 stones in weight, or four standard baskets in capacity. The number of fish in a cran varied according to the size of the fish.

Poaching, or illegal fishing, for salmon and sea trout also took place. By its very nature it was conducted in a clandestine manner and the thought of out-witting the water bailiffs and the police spiced-up the activity, making it more exciting for those who participated. In November 1900 John Gall of David Street was fined 6 shillings for poaching four trout and a salmon near the Stannergate!

Scottish fishing communities were usually close-knit with a small number of families intermarrying with each other. In Broughty Ferry the original fisher surnames were Anderson, Ferrier, Gall, Knight, Lawrence, Lorimer, Norrie, Ross, Sturrock, and Webster. Others associated with the local fishing community included the Bell, Cant, Craig, Donaldson, Dorward, Fyffe, Mill, Robertson, Sievewright, and Smith families. Because of this narrow pool of surnames, many people shared the same names. According to the 1891 census there were fifteen John Lorimers, ten Mary Galls, eight Ann Knights, and seven James Norries living in or around Broughty Ferry! To distinguish between individuals by-names or nick-names were widely used.

Examples of the local by-names include: Annie the Tweenie, Bomber, Blackie Knight, Blue Lippy, Carver Robbie, Catty Tam, Chae Bow, Chicky Ning, Coco, the Daddler, Daddy Dorrit, Daft Jeemie, Dottle, the Happer, Jellico, Jergen, Jeemy Peh, Johnny Aye Aye, Kitty Cogie, Lollipop, Nanook, Quack, Parrot Aggie, Penter, Powerful, Prince Chairlie, Tappy, Tipperary, Tripe Jean, Seckle, the Swift, Wullsie, Woot, and Wuckie. Another unusual custom among Broughty's fishing community was to give daughters surnames as first names.

Anderson, Graham, Lanceman, Liddell, and Webster were all used as female Christian names. When Webster Ferrier married Thomas Webster, she became Webster Webster!

The fishing community was housed mainly in the area enclosed by Gray Street at the east end to Church Street at the west and Long Lane at the north, but a number of fishermen lived beyond these boundaries. As was common in those days, families were large and often a couple would have seven or eight children living in two or three roomed '*houses*' as their cottages and flats were called.

During the later Victorian period some tenements were built, including Mars Land at 19 David Street and Tayview Buildings at 2 Church Street, both of which remain today. Waverley Buildings at the junction of King Street and Dundas Street has long since been demolished. On Chapel Lane, where Bell Rock Square now stands, there used to be a tenement known within the fishing community as Paraffin Land. Its official title was Littlejohn's Land.

In nineteenth century Scotland it was customary to rent one's home, and many fishermen were tenants paying weekly rent to their landlords. However a significant number did own their homes. During the 1850s Charles Norrie in Gray Street, David Knight and John Lorimer in Fisher Street, and George Kidd and Thomas Webster in Bath Street, were all owner occupiers. The four daughters of Agnes Ferrier (Mrs Bell) each owned a house in David Street.

Some prosperous fishing families possessed several properties and rented these out to others, usually their relatives. John Webster owned cottages in Ambrose Street, and Alexander Gall was the proprietor of houses and a tavern in Fisher Street. Margaret Bowman (Mrs Norrie) had considerable property in King Street and Miss Margaret Ferrier owned houses and a shop in Fort Street.

Domestic lighting was provided either by paraffin or gas lamps, and cooking took place on the main coal fire. Some homes had internal plumbing providing a cold water supply. Toilets, known colloquially as '*cludgies*' or '*watterys*' were outside and often shared by a number of houses. Laundry was done in washing houses – also shared on a day-appointed basis - and drying took place in back greens or on the beach at Fisher Street, dependent on the state of the tide, of course.

The main Presbyterian denominations in Scotland had several congregations in Broughty Ferry: Church of Scotland, Free Church, and United Presbyterian. The Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Baptists also opened churches within the town during the Victorian era. Fisher families were associated with a variety of those churches, and with the Salvation Army and Plymouth Brethren.

The West Free Church operated a mission hall in Dundas Street. A Sunday school and gospel services were conducted there, as well as a Bible class attended by local men. This hall was

donated by James Guthrie of J & A Guthrie Jute Spinners Ltd, who lived at Hope Park, Victoria Road, West Ferry.

Evangelistic services were also held in a hall on the corner of Fort Street and Fisher Street owned by Janet Lownie. This gathering led to the formation of the Beach Mission, which opened a school in Ambrose Street in 1865. William Peebles, gardener at Balgillo House, ran Bible classes for fishermen in the school buildings prior to his death on the Tay Bridge disaster. In 1890 the Beach Mission Church (now St James Church) opened as a place of worship, particularly for the fishing community, and was built on the site of Mrs Lownie's hall. To this day many of its members are descendants of the original fishing families.

Superstition, common in small communities, was also found in the local fisher families, but largely diminished as a result of the influences of the evangelical revivals of 1859 and 1920-1921 when many Scottish fishermen were converted to faith in Jesus Christ.

Commercial fishing has always been a perilous livelihood and Broughty Ferry's fishing community suffered its share of losses. Old newspapers record an incident from November 1827 when four Broughty fishermen drowned off the Stannergate while sailing with their catch of fish to Dundee. Two members of the Lorimer family had been lost near the same spot only four months earlier. The previous year three members of the Webster family perished when their fishing boat capsized near the Buoy of Tay. A 5-ton yawl called the *Fox* overturned during a windstorm in St Andrews Bay on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1858; her entire crew drowned. Brothers Thomas, James, and William Gall met a watery grave along with two other relatives and as a result of this tragedy ten children were left orphaned. Twice during the twentieth century trawlers carrying Broughty Ferry fishermen were destroyed by German sea mines. The *Primrose* was mined off the Kincardineshire coast in February 1917. During World War Two the Dundee trawler *Ben Attow* was blown-up near the Firth of Forth.

Calamity at sea invariably left widows and orphans. Often charitable collections were gathered up to provide for the dependents of lost fisherman. Eight men drowned at the Bar of the Tay in March 1831 when Ramsay Sim's fishing boat was swamped by heavy seas. A benevolent fund was set-up with Broughty people making charitable subscriptions for the relief of the wives and children.

During a gale in December 1891 the Broughty fishing boat *Osprey* ran aground opposite Buddon Ness, and her crew of five perished. J G Orchar, Provost of Broughty Ferry, started a Relief Fund for the widows and dependent children. He donated £50 of his personal money to launch the fund. Within a month a sum of over £1,258 and 3 shillings was raised by subscriptions from Broughty residents.

Some fishermen paid into insurance policies so that their families would have an income in the event of fatality. William Knight was a member of the Shipwrecked Fishermen & Mariners' Benevolent Society. His widow Marjory Annandale was awarded a pension of £1 and 10 shillings in July 1844. The Fitzroy Barometer, placed in the Ferry in 1859, was a valuable asset to the local fishermen for weather forecasting. Following its warning the

Broughty fishermen were spared the disaster that decimated the Eyemouth fishing fleet when 129 of their men perished in a sudden gale on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1881.

The fishermen gave their boats a variety of names. Some were called after their wives or daughters such as the *Margaret* belonging to William Norrie, and Alexander Knight's *Ann Craig*. Some vessels were given biblical names including Lawrence Gall's *Lily of the Valley*, and the *True Vine* owned by Thomas Webster, while others had occupational names like the *Gleaner*, a quarter-decked vessel owned by Robert Webster. Still other boats were named after flora and fauna such as the *Rose* owned by James Craig, Thomas Mill's *Sparrow*, and the *Heather Bell* belonging to David Lorimer. Most fishing boats were registered in Dundee. For example Thomas Webster's *Smiling Morn* bore the registration number DE 606, and Robert Ferrier's *Mary Ann* was DE 370.

There were boat-building yards beside Broughty Castle and on the site of James Place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but with the construction of the railway line these yards had closed by the 1840s and Broughty Ferry had no boatyard during the most prosperous period for its fishing industry. Local fishermen purchased their vessels from boat builders in other towns along the coast. John Gall bought the carvel-built *Louisa* from a yard in Gourdon; Scott Brothers of Montrose built the *Catherine* for Thomas Gall and the *Thistle* for David Knight. Some boats were built just across the river in Tayport.

Broughty Ferry ceased to be a commercial fishing port around the time of the First World War. There were a number of reasons for this fact one of which tends to be overlooked by historians. Sailboats were dependent on wind and this was not always favourable to the fishermen. The advent of steam drifters made a huge improvement in the livelihood of fishermen, but sadly, Broughty Ferry did not invest in this new technology and so became uncompetitive. Hence, our fishermen, with a few exceptions, took jobs with Dundee's developing steam trawling fleet. Local men, usually on a part-time basis, continued to fish for herring in the Tay estuary up until the end of the 1950's. One bonanza year, 1936, is still talked about as the year of '*great herrins*' when a huge shoal entered the Tay much to the joy and delight of our local men. Nets, stored away in garrets and unused for decades were brought out and re-commissioned for the occasion, but sadly it was not to last.

**This paper first appeared in the booklet “The Memory of Broughty Ferry” prepared by the Broughty Ferry Community Council in 1913 to mark the centenary of the incorporation of the Burgh of Broughty Ferry into its neighbour, Dundee.**