

Herring Fishing in the 1930s in Port Isaac Bay

John Billing Milne spent half his life in the vicinity of Port Isaac - he recalls herring fishing in Port Isaac during his school holidays in the 1930s

For a period in the early 1930s the herring schools were practically non-existent in Port Isaac waters and it was considered hardly worth putting nets in the boats to test if the herring schools had returned. Then, for a brief spell, the situation changed very much for the better. Five ‘crabbers’ stayed on moorings in 1935 and in November loaded up nets and tried a bit of drifting. A distant cousin of mine, Walter Billing, asked me if I would be a member of his crew. I was at school at the time but on holiday in Port Isaac so I accepted the offer, not really anticipating that I would need a course in ‘galley slave training’ to qualify!

We left harbour at 11.00pm – Walter Billing (skipper), his brother Bill and myself as ‘trainee’ fisherman, aged 15. Reaching the selected spot and with the motor off, we began ‘shooting’ the nets evening over the ground as we drifted slowing with the wind towards the shore. The boat was then moored to the last net. As the nets had not been in the water for over a year, they floated horizontally – a strange sight to see with hundreds of yards of netting lying flat on the surface of the sea. After a short while they soaked up enough water to take up their correct position vertically from the buoyed head-rope. The nets drift with the tide and the positioning of them is vital. One either drifts towards Tintagel on the flood or down towards Pentire on the ebb. After about three hours of inactivity in freezing conditions, Walter Billing decided to haul the nets. With one crewmember on the head rope and the other dealing with the foot, the nets came in evenly, the crewmember of the footrope having the heavy end. The first haul of the season was distinctly encouraging as there were a lot of fish netted. The amount of water that came aboard with the fish was an eye-opener to me and the bilge pump had to be kept in continuous operation as the nets were hauled in.

On return to Port Isaac harbour the boat was ‘sued-in’, bow up to the beach and made fast to the mooring stern rope. We all went home then for a few hours sleep and then back to the beach to shake out the catch. With the boat grounded and the moorings cast off, a tarpaulin was spread on the beach from the side of the boat to about ten feet from the gunnels before commencing the ‘shaking-out’ procedure. Two lads hauled the net, one each at the top and bottom ropes. As the nets were hauled over the tarpaulin, the fish were shaken free, dropping on the sheet and the nets were piled into a mound on the beach. Wear and tear on the fingers was considerable – industrial gloves were unheard of! At the end of the operation the catch was counted in maun baskets (with a handle on each side). The fish were loaded into the baskets in ‘threes’ called ‘casts’ but I cannot remember how many ‘casts’ made up a ‘basket’. There were certainly more than a hundred fish in each basket. As the baskets were filled they were carried up the beach to Pawlyn’s Cellar to be sold. There were herring scales everywhere! The last job was to stow the nets back in the boat again ready for the next night’s fishing. The nets were ‘flaked down’ evenly across the hold, from side to side, whilst the boat was drained of water. When this was finished the boat was moored up again and left for the tide to lift her.

It was surprising how soon it was before we put to sea again, feeling less than bright-eyed and bushy tailed! Had we but known it, we had already completed the easy part of the operation! The hard part was when our engine – a Kelvin 6 – decided to die on us. Being familiar with the Kelvin, I can only imagine that the magneto was, in modern parlance, ‘clapped out’. Usually a spell of ‘cooking’ in a domestic oven would dry out the insulation and restore life to the faulty component – but not on this occasion. It was not possible to obtain a replacement and to remove the old one was impossible as it had been last installed with wrong size spanners and the ‘flats’ on the nuts were nicely rounded off! Walter Billing decided that we would put to sea without the engine, using sail and ‘sweeps’ to reach the fishing ground. ‘Sweeps’ are the big heavy oars, in this case about 15 feet in length, operated on the top strake between thole pins. After a while we reached the spot and carried out the procedure as before. We had a surprisingly good catch, the ‘silver darlings’ having made Port Isaac Bay their holiday destination that year! By the time the nets were aboard again the ‘Willing Boys’ crew could reasonably be called ‘cream-crackered’!

Sailing and rowing the boat back to harbour, low in the water with the catch and pumping all time was no fun event. When her forefoot hit the beach we moored up and, feeling like death, plodded home to bed for a few hours sleep. I could fully appreciate the need for fishermen to live near the shore – I had to get up to ‘Hillside’ on Front Hill and then climb to my room at the top of the house!

Having no engine meant that for the remainder of the week we continued our fishing the old fashioned way and I soon appreciated the hard graft that generations of fishermen had endured before engines were available. On our final night we shot the nets off Port Isaac on the ebb, drifting down past Varley and Kellan Head and into Lundy Bay before hauling. We had a remarkably good catch and it was an experience to see a silver band of fish, the width of the net disappearing into the depths. Skipper Walter had timed things nicely as the tide turned and we had some help to get back home! The boat felt as lively as a waterlogged tree but, after sweating blood on the sweeps, we eventually made it pack to Port Isaac. We could not take advantage of the wind, as the boat was so low in the water it would have been dangerous to ‘list’ under tail. Mr Plimsoll would have been unhappy had he known where out waterline appeared on that occasion!

Sufficient to say that a week’s fishing under these conditions made me look elsewhere for my life’s work! Olive Billing’s favourite (and only) son was, for the first time in his life, glad to go back to school! The bright ending to the week was payday. Shares of the week’s proceeds were split in the old way – one share for each of the crew and two for the boat. I got £6 9s 6d (old money) – astounding when you consider that in those days a top tradesman’s pay was £3 per week. Returning to school probably saved my life as another week would have crippled me! The unremitting ‘graft’ inherent with this activity, even with an engine, makes the job no sinecure, but without a motor, my advice, gained from bitter experience, would be either ‘The Army Way’ – go absent without leave – or ‘The Navy Way’ – jump ship! The choice is yours.

My admiration for fishermen generally, and my ancestors in particular, knows no bounds. They truly were, and are, magnificent. Fishing is probably the hardest and riskiest job currently available, even with the modern electronic aids to help navigation and fish finding, made even harder these days with regulations.

John Billing Milne, Your Man in the Scottish Highlands