



# MANX SEA FISHING

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RICHARD TOWNLEY'S *JOURNAL* (1791) – EXTRACTS ON FISHING

**1st August, 1790:** When we got into Laxey bay we met great numbers of herring-boats that were going to their respective harbours, bays, or creeks with the produce of their last night's fishing in order to supply the country people with a few, and stay there till Monday morning. We saw great numbers going into Douglas harbour as we came through the bay.

**4th August:** About 10[a.m.] the herring boats began to move and it was a noble sight to see all the water closely covered with them, from the pier head to the point. They appeared at a distance, like a grove of young trees (that had been half weeded) bowing their heads together in obedience to an eastern breeze, which blew smoothly and soon sent them round the Head.

No sooner had the Douglas fleet cleared the south side of the bay then another appeared entering the north side, collected from Laxey, Ramsey and other little fishing places quite to the Point of Ayr; extending (in a long straggling line) as far as the eye could command.

**10th August:** ... Very soon afterwards all the herring boats were in motion, as well as several wherries and smacks, their purchasing attendants, to the fishing bank.

**15th September:** The harbour is filled chuck full with boats, smacks and wherries, and the whole bay is entirely covered with the same. It is supposed the whole number cannot be less than six hundred. The pier head is amazingly crowded with people, to behold the beautiful moving picture of the bay.

**16th September:** The last night proved a noble fishing night. All the boats, some few that were bewitched excepted, have returned quite full of fish. About forty maise was the common, or medium, quantity per boat. Some considerably exceeded that quantity. The generally received calculation was, That upwards of four thousand

pounds worth of herrings were sold within the bay and harbour, this morning.

The unloading of the boats, and carrying the fish from thence to the respective herring-houses, where they are thrown down under large sheds, built for that purpose, are done by women. There are two men ready to shovel them up in layers, as they come in, and throw a proper quantity of salt over every layer. In that situation, they remain for several days till it is judged they have imbibed a sufficient quantity of it, for curing, and also preserving them for exportation. The next operation is washing them, which is done in large open baskets, placed within very large tubs of water, where the buckets are briskly worked about, till the fish are thoroughly cleansed from the loose salt and slime that are adhering to them.

The washing is very hard work; requiring much strength; therefore allotted to the men to perform. The women, however, take the baskets from the men, and carry them into the drying houses, where they throw them down in heaps, there to drain awhile. The next procedure is called spitting the fish. A vast quantity of split hazel-sticks (well dried and hardened by fire) is ready prepared for the purpose. The herrings are fastened, or strung (if no incongruity in the expression) upon those sticks, by running them through their gills. The next operation is putting them up, in those large drying houses, which are fitted up with proper framings (like to so many stout upright ladders) from the bottom to the top of the building: Those framings being fixed at such a distance from each other, that a man may easily ascend betwixt them, in order to convey those spits, to the highest ranges; which they fill the first, and so keep descending, till the whole of that partition is filled to near the bottom. The sticks are handed up (when past easy reach from the bottom) from one person to another, standing across the opening, with one foot on each side; and, in the same method, they proceed till the whole house is filled.

Wood-fires are then lighted up, to dry, harden, and smoke them sufficiently. When that is done, they are taken down, in the same manner they were placed up; then taken from the sticks, and put down very close, into large casks; which finishes the business of curing.

Every operation is gone through, in a very quick, ready manner, and with wonderful adroitness, by all employed.

N.B. The drying-houses are very lofty buildings; from twenty to thirty yards long, and upwards; with proportionable width. The cleansings of washing-tubs are esteemed a very first-rate manure, for land; so are the sweepings of every out-house, or room, where any part of the business is carried on. It is too valuable an article, to be obtained from the herring merchants; who wish to distinguish their grounds with it, by a verdure uncommonly rich, and uncommonly lasting.

Douglas now exhibits a kind of daily fair and market. The butchers slaughter beef and mutton every day; hucksters stalls are seen in abundance; hawkers and pedlars swarming, in the place; to entice the fishermen and their wives, to buy bargains.

I took a walk up to the Head, about eleven; the whole hill side was covered with nets, spread out to dry, and also to be mended. The dog-fish had made terrible havock, the night before. Some of the men were industriously employed in repairing the monstrous breaches, made by that horned, voracious species of the sharktribe: others were laid fast asleep, upon the cold ground, resting their weary limbs. Some few were pulling dry ling, by them called heather, to exorcise their boats with, or burn the witches out of them.

Their mode of doing it, is as follows: they set fire to a part of the heather, in the centre of the boat; then make wisps of the rest, and light them; one going to the head, another to the stern, others along the sides, so that every part may be touched by the flame. This is in fact well known to all here; and would be attested by hundreds, nay thousands. Such is the still wonderful ignorance and superstition of the lower ranks, in this island.

**22nd September:** The last night perhaps the best fishing night that has been known at Douglas for some years. Almost every boat was quite full of fish; many had above sixty maise in them; some very near seventy.

... The evening turned out very fine; the herring boats went to their work, at the entrance to the bay, except twenty, whose crews were either too lazy, or too intoxicated with spirits, to go out. It was a noble sight from the pierhead to see them all ranged in order, and shooting their nets.

**25th September:** ... Though such very great encouragement to the fishermen to be very active and industrious for the remainder of the season; yet all, except a very few, returned into the harbour without shooting their nets. Those that had spirit and resolution to continue at their station came in this morning nobly loaded. One had considerably above fifty maise. The Ramsey and Laxey fishermen had very good success too, whilst the looby louts belonging to this port were spending their earnings in the most shameful intemperance.

There was another burning of the witches out of an unsuccessful boat (last night) off Banks' How. The flames were very visible to the top of the bay.

## EXPLANATIONS

Colonel Richard Townley's *Journal* includes sections telling of his stay in Douglas during 1790. These extracts give information about the 'back fishing' out of Douglas during that year.

The first extract was written on his return to the Island by ship from Maryport.

'Maise' = five 'long hundreds' = 624 herring  
'Banks' Howe': the hill between Onchan Head and Groudle

## QUESTIONS

1. Can you find a clue which tells you which day of the week 1st August fell on in 1790?
2. What did Townley call the fish buyers' boats

which sailed with the herring boats?

3. About how many fish were reckoned to be an average catch during the 1790 Douglas fishing? (See 16th September).

4. What was Townley's estimate of the total number of fishing and buyers' boats at Douglas?

5. What problem did the fishermen have when fishing off Douglas?

6. In later times fishing became more specialised than in Townley's time and most boats were based at Peel or Port St Mary. Can you find any evidence in these extracts that fishing was a more widespread activity in Townley's day?

7. What superstitious custom of the Manx fishermen is mentioned?

Do you know of any other Manx fishermen's superstitions?

8. What were being produced at the Douglas 'herring-houses'? What were the different steps in this process? Why were 'herring-houses' so important at this period?