



Sea Fish & Shell Fish - The Herring Industry

The main markets for red herrings from Berwick were Newcastle, Hull, London and Glasgow.

Until the 1830s, most of the white herrings went to Ireland, or to the West Indies where they were fed to slaves. Following the abolition of the slave trade, Europe became the main market for white herring.

The period from the 1850s to the 1880s was the heyday for the North Sea herring fishing industry.

In 1884, Berwick was the fifth most productive East coast herring port, employing over 300 fishermen in 80 boats. In addition, there were 47 coopers, 317 gutters, packers and kipperers, and 155 carters and labourers. At that time over 700,000 barrels of white herrings were being packed in Spittal each year, most of which were exported to Russia, Germany and the Baltic States.

By the end of the 19th century, the increased catching capacity of the steam-powered fleets meant that prices for herring fell. In 1900, 36,733 crans of herring were landed in ports from the Coquet to the Tweed, valued at £42,289. The following year 26,950 crans were landed, worth only half the price.

Larger and more efficient fishing vessels meant that the North Sea herring stocks became rapidly depleted and by 1908 the number of herring boats operating out of Northumberland ports had halved.

The great days ended with the collapse of the German and Russian markets for cured herrings after the First World War. Many of the fishing boats were laid up. The hulls of some of the old herring drifters can be seen today, upturned on the beach beside the harbour and the castle on Holy Island, now used as sheds for storing fishing gear.

The Herring Girls



The curers employed teams of women, known as herring-girls, to do the gutting and packing in the herring curing yards.

A team was usually allocated to a particular boat for the season. The women worked in teams of three – two to gut the fish and one to pack the barrels.

The herring-girls received a small sum on engagement at the beginning of the season and were then paid per cran, or 28 stone weight of fish packed in the barrels. The amount the women received depended on how efficiently the whole team worked and how quickly they could fill the barrels.

They worked six days a week, outside and in all weathers, often starting at 5.00am and continuing until all the catch was gutted and packed, sometimes late at night.

During the season, the women followed their fishing boats as the shoals of herring migrated along the coast. They started in May in the Shetlands, Wick or the West Highlands, then moved round to Fraserburgh and down the East coast of Scotland and England. The herring-girls arrived in the East Anglian ports of Yarmouth and Lowestoft in September or October and stayed there almost until Christmas before returning home.

They often travelled between ports in special trains and their luggage was carried in wooden or tin chests, known as “kists”. In the larger ports, accommodation was provided for the women in dormitories near the harbour.

Information taken from <http://www.mouthofthetweed.co.uk/foodheritageherringindustry.html>

More detailed information available on the following aspects. Thanks to Derek Sharman for allowing us use of this information

Sea and Shell Fishing	Tweed Salmon Fishing
The Fishing Fleet	Net & Coble
Cadgers & Curers	The Salmon Catch
Barrels, Coopers & Crowns	Close Time
White Herring	London Salmon Trade
Red Herring & Kippers	Ice
The Herring Industry	Domestic Ice Houses
Winter Fishing	Poaching & Policing
Human Cost of Fishing	Feasts & Kettles
Crabs & Lobsters	