

Published in the Stronsay Limpet, July 2013

MEMORIES OF THE STRONSAY HERRING FISHING

Adapted from an article written by Margaret Jane Miller (nee Rendall),
formerly of Glenmanna, Stronsay

I think it is about time that something was written about Stronsay, which at one time was a great and important fishing port, to enable the younger generation to understand what a special place it used to be. I base my information on what I can remember, and also what was told to me by older generations. The Lower Village, known more affectionately as "The Station", had one of the first fish curing stations situated there. At that time there was no "station pier", and so the boats had to land their catch on the beach below where the slaughterhouse is now situated, and there, the fisherwomen, known as gutters, gutted, cleaned, and cured the fish. Before the herring season commenced, white fish, such as cod, saithe, haddock, whiting, etc. were caught, and these were salted and dried in the open air.

At that time, Stronsay had about a dozen "Zulus", open sailboats crewed by Stronsay men, and that number would have been doubled by boats from other islands. These boats were hauled up all winter and then painted or tarred ready for the next fishing season.

The "station pier" was built towards the end of the 19th century. An Aberdeen firm built several small cottages in this area, and this attracted several families from the Fair Isle, who came to Stronsay and settled. Some of these families were Leslies, Stouts, Eunsons, and Williamsons. One family named Reid came from Buckie. Men came from other islands to seek employment, and some of them married and settled in Stronsay, thus enlarging the population greatly. Some of these were Wylies, Andersons, Millers, Fiddlers, Jacksons, etc. At one time there would have been between 40 and 50 children going to school from the "Station" alone. The "Station" was like a little town when all the windows were lit up at night by ordinary oil lamps, and later by the modern "Tilley" lamp. There would have been in excess of twenty families living between Feastown and the bottom end of the Station.

Curing stations appeared all along the shore out past St Peter's churchyard and along towards Huip, but this industry later moved back along to the village when the "steamers pier" was built. The "New Pier" or "West Pier" was built in 1909/1910 by Samuel Firth (Contractor), father of the late John Firth, of Nettletar, Harray.

Stronsay was at its busiest between the 1920s and 1930s. In 1921, there were 1,067 inhabitants, but when the fishing season was on, there would have been in excess of five thousand extra people on the island. There would have been anything up to 300 fishing drifters and sail boats with nine men on each, plus fisher girls, salesmen, brokers runners, coal fillers, coopers, and all the other personnel attached to the herring fishing industry.

Coal fillers, who came from Stronsay, Westray, Stromness, and elsewhere had a busy time, as all the drifters had to be filled ready to set off to the fishing grounds. The fillers started work at midnight on a Sunday and filled coal from the coal hulks, which were anchored off the Huip shore in a place known locally as "Jack's Hole", which is opposite the house of a man called Jack Leslie. There were several coal hulks in this area. David Chalmers of Stronsay had one called the *Hebe*, Sutherland of Stromness had the *Watchful*, Duncan Jamison and Leslies also had one each, and there was the cement barge, which still lies aground in that area. Most of these hulks would have been filled three times each week by coal cargo boats, and the fillers would then set about the endless task of transferring it to the drifters.

In early June, the first of the stock boats would arrive with empty barrels. The Stronsay coopers would also have been busy all winter making barrels. The Earl Thorfinn would arrive in the middle of the

night loaded with hundreds of workers, men and women from all over the East Coast – Buckie, Findochty, Portsoy, MacDuff, Whitehills, Aberdeen, Lossiemouth, Wick, Fraserburgh, The Hebrides, Ireland, and many other fishing ports. The fisher lasses would get under way, cleaning out the wooden huts, which were used to accommodate them, six to a hut. They would fill their "ticks" with chaff, and get ready for work the next morning. Several Stronsay lasses were employed in the gutting, especially at James More's curing station, where the council houses now stand.

Farmers were engaged with their horses and long "lorries", carting the herring to the various curing stations. The noise and bustle was terrific, everyone hard at the work until Saturday evening. No work was done on a Sunday.

A wooden chapel was used for church services until a new concrete one was built next to "Dunera". The singing in this place on a Sunday evening was something worth hearing, with hundreds of fisher-folks joining in with the locals. After the service, the Salvation Army would hold a service at the head of the pier, and this could be heard all along the village. The fishermen would then walk up around past Whitehall Farm, and around past Sandybank, stopping at the various farms to buy a tumbler of milk for two-pence, or a tumbler of buttermilk for a ha'penny.

The Stronsay Fish Mart, which was built in 1910, had several offices which were rented by salesmen, curers, and any other personnel engaged in the herring industry. One of these salesmen, Alec Mair, came as a young man to help out with his education, and later became a Professor of Medicine at Dundee. He visited Stronsay on several occasions in later years.

Germany and Russia were the largest buyers of Stronsay herring, and it was by no means uncommon to see ten cargo ships in the harbour at one time, ranging from 450 tonnes to 2000 or so tonnes. Stevedores did the loading. Pilots were required to guide these ships in and out of the harbour, and this was no easy task. The competition between pilots was keen, and they would travel long distances to be the first one to get to the ship, and thereby get the pilotage. These ships would be crewed by Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Finns, Germans, Spanish, Russians, and Americans, and all were on friendly terms.

Two policemen and their families were stationed at the Stronsay Police Station during the season and kept everyone happy. Motor boats were used to convey workers to and from Papa Stronsay, where there was also a shop owned by James Stout, late of Whitehall Farm. Dances were held in the cinema which was a large hall behind "Armadale", where the Stronsay Hotel now stands, and also in the Drill Hall, and Kildinguie.

Sadly these days are all gone, most of the fishermen's houses at the Lower Station are derelict, but memories of the "Station" still remain.