


**Kelp Making Leads to Riots in Stronsay**  
**By Jim Cooper of Cleat, Stronsay**  
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Kelp making was introduced to Orkney by James Fea of Whitehall round about 1720, though historians don't all agree with the exact year. Three thousand Orcadians were employed in the industry, providing profit way beyond the wildest dreams of generations of lairds. Grain had been the main export from the islands up to this time, with seaweed the only fertiliser available. Farmers and crofters were now encouraged to dry and burn the seaweed, as kelp was worth far more than grain. The laird could sell the kelp for from £10 to £15 per ton, from which he paid the kelp maker who had done all the work about £1 a ton, though this later rose to £1.15.

There were three types of seaweed used. They were tang, which grows between high and low water mark; ware, which you only see at a big ebb; and tangles, which grow out in deeper water. Tang had to be cut by hand when the tide was out and would give a good yield every third year. Ware generally came ashore during gales in late spring, while tangles got uprooted and driven ashore during winter storms. The type used depended on the end produced in demand at any given time. In the early years, tang and are were used. The kelp was shipped to North-East England for glass making and soap manufacture, also producing soda and potash. In later years, especially during World War 1, when iodine was needed, tangles were used, though ware was still needed to burn the tangles.

All went well until 1739, when there began three years of famine in Orkney. The crops failed, cattle did not thrive, horses died, even the fishing failed and people died of starvation. It was believed by many that the cause of the trouble was the smoke from burning kelp, which had affected the crops and all forms of animal life. Even the limpets, the food of the poor, had all fallen off the rocks through lack of seaweed to protect them from the sun, and from want of ware, the fish had all gone from the shore. There was much unrest throughout Orkney -- even the parish of Harray, with no coastline, blamed the smoke from neighbouring parishes.

The trouble came to a head in Stronsay on Sunday, 16th May 1742. Peter Fea of Doonatoon went to church and asked Edward Miller, the beadle, to tell all concerned as they left the church that a meeting would be held next morning at the Mill of Millfield to try and stop kelp burning. Over fifty people left the meeting next day and headed first to Clestrain, where they expected to find kelp making in progress. Finding none, they broke all kelp-making tools and then headed for Huip, vowing to set all kelp workers adrift in an open boat. By the time they reached Huip, all workers had been hidden in a secret room and could not be found. Only the woman in charge and her maid were there. Finding no one else, they beat up the woman and the maid, then moved on to Whitehall and Hunton, throwing any kelp or dried seaweed back into the sea, then carried on around the rest of the island doing the same.



When word of the riot reached Kirkwall, steward substitute John Riddoch was issued with a warrant and told to take as many armed men as might be necessary and go to Stronsay and arrest the leaders of the riot. Thinking to take Stronsay by surprise, he landed at St. Catherine's in the early hours of the morning, and in order to prevent the people in St. Catherine's warning their neighbours, they tied them in and then headed for Doonatoon to arrest Peter Fea.

When they arrived at Doonatoon, the Feas were in bed and had every intention of staying there, so they took Peter by the legs and dragged him out, doing the same to Mrs Fea. Not having enough men to leave some on guard, they told Fea that he was under arrest and not to leave his house. They then headed for Cleat to arrest Peter Fea's brother John. Meanwhile, at St. Catherine's, a child had been pushed out through a small window and managed to warn the neighbours. Messengers were sent to the south end to warn them that Riddoch was on his way. The south end people went to meet Riddoch and his men, meeting up with them near the house of Sound, which, at that time, stood between Holland and Scoulters, now only a field name.

The story is told that when the two sides met, the couple in Sound were at their breakfast, so the woman went out to fight while her husband finished his breakfast. They then changed places. During the fighting, Peter Fea suddenly appeared over the Stebb Hill with about sixty followers gathered from Rothiesholm, Aith and Grobister. Riddoch and his men fled and sought refuge at Holland. Riddoch had some time earlier been shot while out of Orkney, which had made it very sore for him to sit down for some time and he was not wanting anything similar to happen again. The story is also told that one person died during the fighting and was buried in the bottom corner of what is now the three-cornered field on the west side of the road below Midhouse.

In the end, only the two Fea brothers were arrested and taken to Kirkwall. John was fined £60 Scots and had to keep the peace for three years. Peter, on a more serious charge, was fined £140 Scots and remained in prison until he had appeared bareheaded at the church door before morning service with a placard round his neck on which was written the verdict and sentence. He had to appear at the churches in Kirkwall, St Andrews, Deerness, Firth, Orphir and Stronsay – all kelp-making areas. The following years were much better. The weather improved, the crops were better, the animals began to do better, and there was enough food for everybody. Kelp making continued as before and the bad years were soon forgotten.