



# SCOTLAND

# FISH



# The Fish We Eat

People who live by the sea have enjoyed its bounty for thousands of years. We know that people have gathered and eaten shellfish in Scotland from long before they could write about it as the archaeological evidence is found in shell ‘middens’ (piles of shells found near living quarters). Later, fish were hunted or trapped by humans for food and the idea for this may have come from fish being trapped naturally in tidal pools. The significance of fish in the diet continued even with the advent of farming from 4,000 BC onwards as it was a reliable source of nourishment in the event of weather-related crop failure.

In medieval and early modern times people ate fish during Lent and on Fridays for what were considered to be religious reasons (though this practice may have originated in an earlier pagan tradition). Indeed, the whole of Catholic Europe relied heavily on herring to replace the meat deemed unholy on certain feast and fast days of the religious calendar. As formal religion plays a steadily declining role in British society, this practice has become obsolete except perhaps out of habit in some households.

Fish was enjoyed by all classes of society. In inland areas, freshwater fish were caught or were reared in ‘stews’ (ponds) to grace the tables of big houses. Fish was eaten at the majority of mealtimes along with meat courses and could be found in a range of exotic dishes such as elaborate *Jellies of Fyshe*.

Salt-water fish, however, in its various preserved forms (such as smoked, dried and pickled), remained popular from the Middle Ages through to the middle of the twentieth century, particularly among the poorer classes. In coastal regions it was common for a barrel of cured herring to be kept over the winter to provide sustenance when meat was scarce. Fish featured heavily in the traditional rural Scots diet, padded out with dairy products, potatoes, kale, broth, meal, oats and turnips.

Fish would be enjoyed by the families of fishermen on an almost daily basis. Many children remember their father bringing home fish (that was the wrong size for sale) to be roasted on the range. Species such as cod,

ling and plaice were popular. The now ubiquitous mackerel and prawns were not. Most of the salmon caught in Scotland's firths was destined for the London markets though in Perth the backbones were kept behind and picked at for flesh.

In industrial Britain and its empire, fish (particularly salted herring) was a source of fuel for the human cogwheels of the revolution. It was eaten by mill workers, coal miners and slaves. The nineteenth century brought industrial developments in fishing gear and in the transport networks across the country which greatly increased the availability of fresh white fish.

In different circumstances, munitions workers enjoyed fish and chips (a filling, 'off the ration' staple) during World War Two and haddock suppers were brought out to the harvest workers of Lothian as recently as the 1980s.

In recent decades the British consumer has become increasingly reliant on ready-to eat products rejecting the fish sold whole in the past. It is difficult to imagine our friends and family today preparing what were once quite common traditional dishes such as Hacka Muggie (the stomach of a fish stuffed with a hash of meat sounds and livers) and Crappit Heids (haddock heads stuffed with giblets and oatmeal)! It all started with the arrival of the fish finger in the 1960s. At that time fish fingers cost as much per pound as beef. They were seen as novelty in the revolution of convenience but are now a cheap and easy way to get children to eat fish.

Recently, along with Farmer's Markets and various Slow, Seasonal and Local Food movements, there has been a revival of interest in produce such as the Arbroath Smokie. Now seen as artisan products, these were once, in coastal communities at least, daily staples. A challenging economic climate and rising costs of fuel and food may yet force us to examine wasteful practice, conquer our squeamishness and dependence on convenience, and reclaim old classics such as stuffed fish heads and bone broth.

Fish consumption is on the rise globally as populations increase. In western countries the seafood market has benefited from the ascendance of "Nutritionalism" and recognised importance of the Omega 3 oils and

vitamin D found in high levels in some species. There is a movement towards encouraging consumers to seek out sustainable products and the demand for these has surged with encouragement from environmental agencies and government-backed schemes such as the *Eat More Fish* campaign.

## The Fish We Catch

Legislation imposed upon the fishing industry impacts upon what we eat because it controls, to some degree, what species are caught and, therefore, available for the consumer to purchase. Despite concerns about demersal (white fish that live close to or on the seabed) stocks being voiced as early as the nineteenth century (coinciding with the arrival of steam trawling), the pelagic fisheries (for mackerel and herring and other fish that shoal up to the surface) were considered, even by scientists to be inexhaustible.

When a crisis hit the North Sea herring stocks in the 1970s, an emergency measure was taken, closing the entire herring grounds for six years. A fish that had played a leading role in the Scots diet for so long could now barely stage a cameo. However, despite restrictive measures, if the consumer demands a product which cannot be supplied by Scottish fishermen they will source it elsewhere – primarily in the supermarkets where imported fish are now commonplace. In the past the fishmonger or fishwife could talk her customers through natural changes (such as seasonal availability) in stock and push the “catch of the day” but as anonymous supermarket shoppers we seek convenience and are less answerable for our choices.

After a decade of debate, the Common Fisheries Policy was hammered out in 1983 but aspects of it have proved problematic. The most worrying of these is the discarding of perfectly edible dead fish at sea as fishermen are only allowed to land designated quantities (Total Allowable Catches or TACS) at market. In the days of the drifters, a surplus catch for an individual boat would be passed to another boat that had room in its hold - when fish were in abundance and before the days

of TACs, there was a less competitive, less regulated and more independently governed system of dealing with the catch. There have been moves recently under the Marine Bill (which seeks to bring clarity to current legislation) to reduce waste through improvements in gear technology.

Seafish (the authority on seafood) have reported that most fishermen have a “deep-seated desire to do the right thing...” and that “...voluntary schemes such as real time closures in Scottish waters have demonstrated amply the willingness and enthusiasm of the industry to engage in constructive conservation measures.” The Marine Stewardship Council are helping fishermen who are engaged in sustainable fishing practices promote what they do to consumers with their official “seal of approval”, the Certified Sustainable Seafood logo. In 2010 Peterhead received the first landings of MSC certified North Sea Haddock as fishermen and members of the Sustainable Accreditation Group celebrated the sustainable status of this stock. This is the first fishery of its kind to be certified in the North Sea and in 2010 Marks and Spencer’s were the first retailer to stock this fish in their stores. In the same year Sainsbury’s Shellfish became the MSC’s 7000<sup>th</sup> stockist and said that consumer interest in eco-labelled products was, on average, doubling every twelve to fifteen months.

There are, however, controversial issues related to European legislation that require resolution. In recent months salmon and mackerel stocks have been at the heart of a bitter dispute between British and Nordic fishermen echoing the Cod Wars of the 1950s and 1970s. There can be no doubt that ensuring the survival of all species, safeguarding the integrity of the industry and meeting the satisfaction of the European consumer will prove to be a significant challenge to our politicians, scientists, environmentalists, producers and retailers for many years to come.

While some species have responded well to the recovery periods secured by the closure of particular fish grounds, no claims for long-term survival can be made with total confidence. No matter how earnestly man attempts to manage the resources of the seas, we mustn’t lose sight of the overriding and unpredictable forces of nature that have resulted time and time again in the seemingly random disappearance of certain

species from certain places. This phenomenon can perhaps be attributed to changes in migratory routes and changing sea temperatures (as a result of global warming) as much as to over fishing. We can't ignore, either, mankind's threat to the survival of marine species through our ongoing polluting of the seas. Even with legislation aimed at achieving sustainability, when it comes to long-term assurances about what fish we can expect to find on our fork in the future, we are ultimately at the mercy of forces which cannot be politicised.

## Who Catches Our Fish?

The Scottish fishing industry has long relied on migratory workers. As the Herring Industry expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly reliant on such workers (sourced largely from within Scotland itself) to deal with large catches being landed around the coast. Shore workers were required to be on hand wherever the fish were being landed by the fleet which followed the annual herring season around the British Isles. Hebridean women were employed by East Coast curing businesses at the early summer fishery around the Western Isles and later in the season up at Shetland where the local women simply could not cope with the amount of labour required. Aberdeenshire was a notable source of migrant labour with unmarried girls (it was easier for them to leave home) from Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Aberdeen itself. Eyemouth and Wick districts were also major sources of labour.

From the late nineteenth century onwards East Anglia became the focus for the autumn fisheries and the Scottish curers who operated there recruited most of their labour from the experienced female Scottish workforce. The 'Scotch' girls were given space in lodging homes down south but were used to much more rudimentary living conditions when in Scotland in the form of basic, wooden huts. Prior to World War One this migratory workforce was largely unregulated and the girls worked long, irregular hours often without the guarantee of a minimum payment. A review of this arrangement by the Fishery Board in 1911 led to improvements in rates of pay and, despite harsh working conditions, many fisherlassies look back fondly on their time 'at the guttin'.

A new and recent phenomenon seen in the Scottish Fishing Industry is the introduction of an immigrant labour force, largely from one country on the other side of the world – the Philippines, which, until recently made up the majority of the fishermen in the Scottish fishing industry. As many as 1,000 Filipinos are estimated to have been crewing Scottish fishing boats since around the year 2006, with many more around the UK.



*Filipino fishermen visiting the historic fishing boat Reaper, April 2009*

Why from this country in particular? The Philippines is an archipelago of around 7,000 islands and has a strong maritime tradition, with many nationals working overseas in the merchant shipping and fishing industries. Whilst in Scotland some earn as little as £270 a month for over 200 hours work. However, the more experienced skippers can earn up to £1,000, well above any wages back home. The trawler owners also pay a 'catch bonus', depending on the amount of fish they land, as well as return flights home and board and lodging on the boats. The Filipinos are generally regarded as hard-working, honest and reliable crew members.

Up until the past few years, a lack of regulation has led to some cases of exploitation of this workforce as cheap labour. Although the Scottish Fishermen's Association argues that most are treated well, the system protecting their employment rights has some loopholes. While most boats have modern comforts and up-to-date facilities, a report by trade unionists in the International Transport Federation (ITF) has highlighted instances of exploitation, poor pay, abuse, intimidation and physical attacks on Filipino fishermen. The practice of workers from outside the European Union (and holders of transit visas) sleeping on board was called into question, along with other working conditions, following a fire that killed two Filipino fishermen and a Latvian crewman in Fraserburgh Harbour in August 2008.

Since then, the Government, along with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and ITF have worked together to establish an appropriate Code of Conduct for employers of overseas workers, however, the Chief Executive of the SFF has expressed concern about how the new rules will affect skippers hiring labour from outside the EU. With a career in the industry looking like an increasingly poor prospect compared to one in the oil or gas industries for young Scottish men, the issue of labour shortage remains.

Despite there being a strong tradition of a skilled native workforce in Scotland it is not currently of the size or scope needed to meet the requirements of Scottish skippers and processors – this is particularly true on the West Coast. The future of the migratory workforce who have been filling this labour gap is uncertain and the challenge for the industry may be focused in the future on making a career in fishing more

appealing to the men of the Scottish coastal communities who have, for centuries, played a significant role in catching the fish that finds its way to our plate and for which we may be guilty of taking for granted.



*Tourists eating fried fish at Anstruther harbour, May 2010*



*Gauge for measuring lobsters*

