

## **LOBSTER FISHING IN BERNERA FROM THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY**

Until the beginning of the 19th century most fishing of any kind was for domestic consumption. Boats large enough to work offshore were not available and markets were out of reach. The only fishing with any commercial aspect was for herring, cod and ling. This was done largely by men from the mainland. The herring fishing was cyclical with periods of abundance followed by barren years. There was a good trade with Sweden and quantities of dogfish were caught for their oil which was used for a variety of things including fuel for cruises - primitive oil lamps.

In the report for the Old Statistical Account for 1796 no mention is made of lobster fishing, but in the report for 1833 it was stated that 100,000 lobsters had been sent south from Loch Roag. Until the 1st World War three kinds of fishing were in operation out of Bernera: great line fishing, small line fishing, and shellfish

### **1. LOBSTER FISHING IN BERNERA**



Loch Roag, the large sea loch in which Bernera is situated, was famous for its shellfish, and lobster fishing has been a major livelihood for Bernera men. Although the scale of fishing, size of boat, number of creels etc has expanded over the years, the basic method has remained the same.

Agents from outside Lewis began to take an interest in the lobster fishing in the early 19th century. The industry developed rapidly - to such an extent that 60,000 lobsters were

sent to London in 1827. These agents had access to markets on the mainland, and sent the live catch south in smacks with wells of sea water in the hold.

Some present day boats have had a 'vivier' system fitted. This fulfils the same function as the welled smack but has the sea water pumped through, so re-oxygenating the water. Lorries transporting the lobsters to markets on the Continent also have these 'vivier' tanks fitted.

#### **Boats and Line Fishing**

Small boats, under 20ft keel, were used for lobster and small-line fishing. The small line was 150 fathoms long and had up to 250 baited hooks suspended from it by snoods. The bait was lug worm for flat fish, and mussels or limpets for haddock and whiting. What they caught on the small line was either for local consumption or as bait for the lobster creels.

These small boats were built and owned locally. John Maclennan of Kirkibost (Scoddie) was the most prolific of the Bernera boat builders. At first the boats were undecked and propelled by sail and oars. There would be a three or four man crew, using 10 creels for each man. The crew would sail to the fishing grounds and use the oars to manoeuvre the boat while lifting and setting the creels.

There were larger boats up to 35ft keel, but these could not be worked in shallow water close inshore and were therefore unsuitable for lobster fishing. They were engaged in great-line fishing. The great line was worked on the same principle as the small line but was made of heavier material. The catch was primarily ling, using conger eel as bait. These boats would

be at sea from Monday till Friday. On Friday evenings they would fish with rod and line for saithe. The Great Line was baited with saithe on Saturday to catch conger eel.

The larger boats were mostly owned by Stornoway fish curers, notably one Kenneth Smith who was married to a Croir woman. The skipper and crew would be paid on a 'share' basis. The ling was dried and salted locally before export. The main market was Eastern Europe. The Great Line fishing began to decline at the beginning of this century and collapsed entirely in 1914, due to the loss of the market.

In the late 1880's local men took advantage of a loan scheme set up by the Fishery Board to buy larger boats for themselves. The Guiding Star was the first local boat to use motor power. She came from Greenock and was bought for Shonnie Barabel by his son-in law Napier. The next was the Rhoda, which had a petrol/paraffin engine installed locally in 1934. The advantage of motor power was obvious - no tacking with sails and no rowing on a calm day! A small boat 'geola' was towed behind for use in lifting and setting the creels.

After the 2nd World War many of the smaller boats had outboard engines fitted. The Mairi Dhonn (reg.1950) was the 1st boat in Bernera to be fitted with a pot hauler. This enabled them to set the creels in 'strings' i.e fleets of up to 20, in the same way as a small line with creels instead of hooks. This is the method used today.

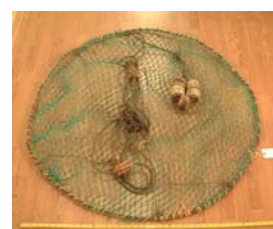
### **Baiting the Creel**

Traditionally bait had to be secured in two distinct operations. The preferred bait for the creel in the old days was flat fish, either flounder or plaice. These had to be caught on 'small lines' The small line was baited with lug worm which was obtained by digging on a muddy shore. To bait the small line took about two hours depending on the number of hooks on a line. The line was set on a sandy bottom on a flood tide and enough for two days lobster fishing was caught. This was done twice a week early on Monday morning and again halfway through the week.

Lobster prefers flounder to be fresh and plaice to be 'sour' i.e. slightly rancid. Nowadays pickled mackerel is used and is either caught during late summer or bought from Stornoway and stored in bins on shore.

### **The Creels and the Catch**

Before creels were introduced a 'sguil' was laid on the bottom. A sguil (pictured right) is a large net hanging from a circular frame. Working with a sguil was a very skilled operation - lobsters can move extremely fast when danger threatens. To raise the sguil to the surface with the lobster still in the net needed quick reactions.



The familiar creels then came into use and were made by the men with driftwood and hand made netting using a flat stone as a weight. At first, creels were set singly attached to a sisal rope with a cork float. This was called a 'single end' Then the creels were set in 'strings' with up to 20 creels on a line. (Creels are now steel framed and the net is made of courlene.) The boats used in this area generally had a 3 man crew and each man had 10 creels

The bait was tied into the creels which were then set for about an hour, lifted and any catch removed and re-set. They were set along a rocky shore and around skerries - exactly where to set a creel was more an art than a science, a combination of memory, observation, and knowledge passed down from previous generations. The best fishing was on a moonlit night, lobsters being more active through the hours of darkness. The tendons of the big claws were cut to prevent crushing wounds to other lobsters. (Strong bands are now used to immobilise the claws.) The catch was kept in a keep net slung over the side of the boat or on an anchor.

The working week was from midnight on Sunday until midweek when the catch was brought ashore, then the whole operation - lug worm, small lines, baiting and setting creels was

repeated on Wednesday and they came home on Saturday. The season began on the 1st Monday after the 12th August until bad weather made it impossible to go to sea. Working so close inshore made the small boats very vulnerable in a swell. There was in any case a closed season for two months in summer, partly because the lobsters go into moult and also because of the high level of death during carriage south in humid weather.

Lobsters can be kept for up to two weeks in a box left floating in the sea. For longer periods a cage is better - they can move around and feed. The 'vivier' system (as previously, a seawater well in the hold of a smack) allow for live transport to market. Working with creels is the same all over Britain. Bait is left in the pot and the lobster crawls in to get it and then has difficulty getting out of the creel. Inshore, on a smaller scale, single pots are hauled by hand; offshore, 40-100 creels are worked in one line and from 400-2000 pots overall.

### **Life on board**

Life on board any fishing boat was very basic. In an undecked boat there was no shelter at all, and little enough in decked boats. There were 6" planks for sleeping on and seats were a pile of peats or an upturned bucket. Any personal hygiene was performed over the side of the boat using salt water.

The peat fire was in an old 3 legged pot standing on the stone ballast, and there was 1 pot for all cooking. Sometimes a plate was used but otherwise a good flat peat did service, with a bowl for everything liquid - tea, brose etc. Stores taken included a 5 gallon piggy of fresh water, oatcakes, crowdie, potatoes, salt herring, eggs and tea. They caught fish from the boat and roasted crabs in the peat fire. (Crabs have only been marketed in recent years)

The boats used at the present time have all modern conveniences - stoves, fridges, good sleeping accommodation, television and short wave radio.

### **Selling the catch**

The first agents that we know of were a Mr Ritchie from Ayrshire, and Captain Robertson.

Ritchie bought lobsters from the fishermen and sent them live to the mainland. There are two places at Loch Risay named after him - Port Ritchie and Rudha Shassunaich. (Sassunach means English, but anyone from across the Minch was called a Sassunach!)

Captain Robertson had an agreement with the local men which ran for 7 years. He bought their catch for 2½ pence each and provided boats which had to be paid off out of the men's earnings. He was in Bernera during the late 1820's and early 1830's and built the house Tigh a Chaolais overlooking the Sound of Bernera.

In the second half of the 19th century a series of stone ponds were built in various places around the shore. These were enclosures to keep live lobsters. The prime season for catching was late summer, but this was the worst time to send live catch away with humid warm weather causing the death of the lobsters. It was a long journey to Southern markets. By boat to Breasclete or Callanish, by road to Stornoway, by steamer to the mainland railhead at Kyle of Lochalsh and then by train to London. The lobster would therefore be stored in these ponds until cooler weather and better prices obtained.

The men would sell their catch either to an agent or send the catch themselves to Billingsgate. They were totally dependent on the honesty of the London buyers as they were only paid for live lobsters. It was not uncommon to receive a telegram saying 'all dead on arrival' Various packing materials were tried, seaweed, straw and sawdust. Much later they were sent by air to markets in London and abroad. The minimum size for sale is 85 mm length of carapace.

The first price we know of is in the 1820's when they fetched 2pence each. They were sold for 4pence later in the century and if they were undersized the fisherman had to sell two for

the price of one. Nowadays the price can vary from £6 - £18 per kilo depending on the season.

## The Lobster Ponds

The structure of a pond was based on the need to allow an interchange of water with the ebb and flow of the tide. This enabled the water in the pond to be re-oxygenated, essential for the survival of the lobsters. They can live for weeks without eating, if they are kept in water with sufficient oxygen.



The first and most impressive pond was at Loch Risay (left). It was built by Murdo Morrison, a Croir fisherman. No-one knows now where he got the idea, but he marked the site for the dam with a large stone at either end and emigrated to Australia to make enough money for the construction. He was only away from Bernera for two years - he worked his passage out but was able to pay for the return journey and to employ local men to work on the pond. The dam is a unique structure - semi-circular and tapering. It was built by Norman Macdonald (Snapper) 8 Tobson

and Angus Macleod (Aonghas Griassaich) 11 Breacleite, probably with other men and women carrying the stones to the site. (Norman Macdonald also built some of the stone walls around Bernera)

The first lobsters were sold from here in 1863 and the pond was in use by the same family until the 1930s. After the Second World War it was taken over by the Crofters Supply Agency and managed by Malcolm Morrison (Calum R), a grandson of Murdo Morrison. They gave it up in 1960. The last lobsters were put into the pond in 1960 by Murdo Morrison (Murchadh Dhani), another grandson, and Kenneth Macdonald (Coinneach Dochert).

Another pond was built in the 1870s by the Croir fishermen at Pabbay, a small island off Valtos in Uig. This was not as successful as the Loch Risay pond, possibly because the inlet was too narrow to allow sufficient flow of water. Another disadvantage was that the lobsters could not be loaded into boats at the pond, but had to be carried across the island to where the boats were moored. It was used by various groups including the Uig men. It was owned at one point by Hugh Macleod, the Earshader farmer - his widow gave it to John MacNaughton 23 Kirkibost. It was used intermittently for several years.

At Caolas Luingam there are a series of ponds. The first was built in 1875 by Norman Maciver (Tormod Tharmoid) 8 Tobson, Norman Macdonald (Tormod Aonghais) 7 Tobson and Murdo Macaulay (Murchadh Mhurachaidh Caulay) 9? Tobson. In the 1880's Angus Macdonald (Snaggan) 16 Tobson was allowed to build an adjoining pond for himself. Snaggan and his brother and later his sons were buying lobsters there until the 1930s. There was another separate pond called Tob Valasay, owned by the sons of Kenneth Macdonald (Clann Choinnich/Clann mac Aonghais Mhoir) and their brother-in-law Angus Macdonald (the Bodach Beag).



There were also four curing stations at Caolas Luingam owned by:

1. Malcolm Macdonald (Calum Ruadh) he employed as salters Norman Macdonald (Tormod Aonghais) and Norman Macdonald (Tormod Dhomhnuill Dearg)
2. Kenneth Smith the Stornoway fishcurer. He was married to a Croir woman
3. Murdo Morrison of Bragar. He was a nephew of the Murdo Morrison who built the dam at Loch Risay.
4. Roderick Maciver (Ruaraidh Aonghais Oig) of Breasclete. This Roderick Maciver had what is called the first travelling shop in Lewis - a boat, which he took as far as Brenish, the furthest village in Uig.

There were also small structures called Top Decks, built for use by one or two people. There are examples of these in most villages

## 2. THE EUROPEAN LOBSTER

The European lobster is found from Scandinavia to Morocco but commonest around the British Isles. Their average size is 2 lbs but they can grow up to 15 lbs or more. Their colour is typically a very dark blue-black with reddish brown around the claws. Some can be light blue. In deeper water they have less colour and are more speckled. Lobsters only turn red when they are cooked!



The male has larger claws, especially the crusher. The tail is narrower, without the longer protections pads that females have. The female has smaller claws but is faster. The tail is wider, with protections for the berries (eggs) and they are berried most of the time. The eggs attach themselves to the small flippers under the tail.

### Habitat

Lobsters are mostly found on rocky shores, where they hide in crevices. They can also dig burrows in sand. They enter these hiding places tail first checking their way with their long feelers, and are then ready to defend their home with powerful claws. Lobsters are usually found at depths of less than 35 fathoms (210ft) and move into shallower water in the autumn.

### Predators

Due to their hard shell and vicious claws, lobsters have few predators. Seals will take them when they come across them in the open. Cod will also eat them when they are in moult and vulnerable before the new shell hardens. Crabs and other lobsters are the only creatures able to break through the shell.

The main predator is man and his success has made the lobster now very scarce. Modern lobster boats have up to 2000 pots which they haul day and night, covering the seabed with a blanket of traps. Once an area has been cleaned the boats move on to another.

### Feeding

Lobsters feed mostly at night and they roam up to half a mile in search of food. They concentrate on carrion and other shellfish including other lobsters. This is why they are so difficult to farm. They can also be inactive for long periods especially in cold weather. They can stay in their burrows for months sifting plankton from the water.

### Movement

Lobsters crawl along the seabed on their eight legs in a forward direction, with their tails propelled by the flipper underneath. They only swim backwards when they are threatened. Although they are quite fast they cannot sustain this for very long.

## **Growing**

Due to the hard external skeleton, the lobster has to moult in order to grow. Every time it moults it increases its weight by 20%. To cast the shell the carapace splits along the top and the lobster pulls itself out of its claws and tail. It then eats the old shell to obtain the necessary minerals. At this stage the lobster is very soft and vulnerable and wisely stays in its cave.

The shell is cast 3-4 times during the first two years, but only once or twice subsequently.

## **Reproduction**

In common with other crustaceans lobster have to mate rather than spawn. The female lies on her back while mating. She will lay thousands of eggs which attach themselves to the underside of her tail. She will carry them for some months until they hatch. The tiny lobsters - the size of plankton - spend the first year swimming freely in the ocean before settling on the seabed as a bottom dweller.

## **Seasonal Activity**

Lobsters are active all year round but tend to be more lively in the autumn when the water is at its warmest. They can also moult at any time but tend to do so in June/July. They are hungry after the moult so August/September is the best time to catch them.

A lobster can live up to 50 years or more. They reach a marketable size after 10 years.

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