

Harris Fishing Heritage Project 2007

Interview with Kenny MacKay (KMK) and his wife Jessie, Scalpay

(Translation from Original Gaelic Transcript)

NB:

...denotes pauses in speech

[...] denotes text which has been edited out

JMD: *This is Jo MacDonald in Scalpay on the 7th August 2007 with Jessie and Kenny MacKay. We are going to talk about the fishing in Scalpay. You know a great deal about the fishing anyway.*

KMK: Well, I can go back as far as I can remember anyway. I can remember the fishing as far back as the forties and fifties.

JMD: *Well, that goes back a fair bit.*

KMK: And the fishing at that time in Scalpay was done with zulas. Wooden boats and it was driftnets that they used.

JMD: *How did that work?*

KMK: Nets...they were put together...seven and eight in every fleet...and in the winter they were put in the lochs...around these lochs and down to Lewis and up...as far as Barra sometimes. And they got good fishing. And then in summer they would work out on the banks. Out on this south bank...out of Geocrab...about three miles out of Geocrab they would work on these banks. Out to the north of the Scalpay light...the place was called the *Fhadhail Cham*...they would let the nets drift...

JMD: *Did they just let them drift with the current?*

KMK: Yes...they would go with the current. And some nights they were successful and other nights they weren't...they did most fishing in the winter.

JMD: *What were the banks?*

KMK: O just the bottom getting shallow. They would go out near these shallows and the herring must have been around these banks. The drifting was done to suit the current. And they would allow for this...if the current was going north they would cast to the south...and if the current was going south they would cast to the north.

JMD: *Did the current change often?*

KMK: O well, the current changes every six hours but out there at the banks they say there is a three hour difference with the shore. The current changes at the

shore three hours before it does in the middle of the Minch. If it changed at the shore at six at night...at the spring-tide...it would be 9 o'clock before the tide would be returing out there. On the other hand, if there was an ebb-tide at one o'clock in the afternoon it would be four o'clock before it would turn out there...filling up. It was fascinating, the way it worked. Now, there were places that were totally different...in some places it doesn't take so long to turn...or turns faster. But that's how the drifters worked.

JMD: *And how long would you wait between casting the nets and lifting them?*

KMK: When they were cast in the lochs at night, sometimes they would be left there all night...you know...they would anchor them...and they would lift them in the morning. But with the drifts they would leave them...it would depend on the signs...the herring would often play...if they could hear it playing...and they sometimes caught it with darrows.

JMD: *That as well?*

KMK: O yes...if there was a sign of that they might not leave it so long. That's how they worked the drifts.

JMD: *How big were these boats then?*

KMK: They were 40 ft...Donald Ewen has photos of them in the North Harbour...they were big...they were 38ft and 40ft and some even bigger. They also worked smaller boats. When I left school in 1954 I went out in a boat...my father was on her and I went out in his place and that was a small boat. She was a 30 footer and we fished in these lochs. My first fishing was at the drifts...I was on the *Scalpay Isle*. When you went out in the boats first you wheeled...on the ball...you were down in a dreadful hole...the ball would drop down with water and jellyfish [...] and...

JMD: *What was the ball?*

KMK: A spring they had on the nets...it would come down...everything up there came down...o it was a terrible job.

JMD: *It would be cold?*

KMK: O yes, and unpleasant. You would be seasick too then and that wasn't any better! That was my first job on the boats.

JMD: *You were on the Scalpay Isle first?*

KMK: No, I was on one called the *Margot*. She belonged to a man over here...the Matron's father...MacLennan...that was who had her. But latterly it was the young boys. Myself, and Seonaidh Iain Mhòir's son and Aonghas Iain Mhòir's son and Murchadh Alasdair's son and the owner's son...o we had good fishing then. That was the first start. I was out for a while in the *Maighdeann Hearach*. For a year.

JMD: *Who had the Maighdeann Hearach?*

KMK: Cunningham. The Cunninghams that had the coasters here. I went on the coasters for a while then.

JMD: *What did the coasters do?*

KMK: They carried cargo...cargoes of coal...they carried the coal for the light-houses and the schools and they delivered the coal for the houses here.

JMD: *They weren't involved in the fishing at all?*

KMK: O no. I was at that for a few years and then I went to sea – deep sea. But I still fancied the fishing. Then in the 1960 the Highland Development Board offered grants for boats. Mosie [...] was desperate to come home and...Dollan and Iain were fishing...they were still in the boats. Well, I came home in 1966 from the sailing...and I went out in a boat called *Joanne*, in Kyle. She worked here with the *Scalpay Isle* at the ringnet and then we applied for a new boat in 1968. But you had to go to Aberdeen to get a ticket. You couldn't get onto these boats without sitting a ticket...they were over the tonnage [permitted]. Myslef and Mùma, Dàbhaidh, Eòghainn Aonghais Iain Mhòir who had the *Jasper*...five of us went out to Aberdeen together to sit the ticket. The *Scalpay Isle* and the *Jasper* came in 1969 and Murdo's *Britannia* came in 1969...and Iain had the *Ribhinn Donn* before that...she was a small boat...and our boat came October 1970. Myself and my three brothers were in her and a boy from Raasay who was married to a local girl. And Ruairidh up here...he wasn't on her that year...it was after that that Ruairidh joined her. But it was the ringnet that was used then.

JMD: *Who had the first ringnet in Scalpay?*

KMK: I think it was the *Try Again* that tried it first until the *Maighdeann Hearach* came. I think it was the *Try Again* – Muma's boat – and I think the *Choice* was their partner boat...but it wasn't that successful...they didn't have the facilities...but when the *Maighdeann Hearach* came in 1950...the *Try Again* partnered her then and then they got the *Scalpay Isle*.

JMD: *You said they weren't sure about the ringnet at first?*

KMK: No. They were against it.

JMD: *Why were they against it?*

KMK: O they thought it was going to destroy the herring. That they would catch too much of it. But then they started it. But the ringnet was a good fishing method. O yes. It was a good way of fishing.

JMD: *It was better than the driftnet?*

KMK: O yes, yes. I remember in the 1970s klondykers were coming over from the Faroes...big wooden boats coming over to Stornoway...they pickled the herring...[with] sugar spices...there were thousands of them...barrels in Stornoway...that was in the seventies. The place was thriving then. They gave a better price than locally.

[PAUSE]

O they were superstitious.

If they saw old ladies that they weren't keen on [...] I don't remember if it was the *Golden Rule* or the *Industry*...the crew were walking along the road...this woman met them...I don't know who it was or what they thought was wrong with her...but they had small boats here then and they would row out to the big boats with them...and when the crew came in the crew of the other boat were going down ready to leave and one of the boys said "Well, we're not going tonight anyway." The other one said "We met such and such a woman." The two crews made an about turn and headed home.

JMD: *They didn't go out at all?*

KMK: They didn't go out at all. They didn't go out at all.

JMD: *They believed in it that strongly?*

KMK: They believed in it that strongly. And if they wore green crotal socks in the wellies they would send you home, the old men. O they weren't for that at all, whatever it was they had against it.

JMD: *Was it because they were dyed with crotal?*

KMK: It must have been...green...they didn't like green...

JMD: *Just green?*

KMK: Green. [...] She [Jessie] was coming along the road with a green coat and this local man gave her a right telling off!

JMK: He came back when he saw me with the green coat and he made an about turn and went home!

JMD: *Because you were wearing green!*

KMK: O there were lots of stories...I don't know if Dolaidh will remember. He will remember the old boats. Dolaidh the bard – D.R. Morrison. He remembers the curing and the boats.

JMD: *I should go and speak to him too.*

KMK: O yes. Dolaidh has a good memory.

JMD: *How did they decide that these particular women were unlucky?*

KMK: O they saw something that wasn't...

JMD: *But it wasn't every old woman?*

KMK: O no, just certain ones.

JMD: *Was it that they had the second-sight or something like that?*

KMK: O it must have been.

JMK: They said they had the second-sight. Well, they said that they did here sometime...if people had cattle...they would lose their milk.

KMK: There were old women here...I'm not going to disclose their names at all...O the *Industry* that was here. There was an old man on her...and an old woman lived out here...o they weren't too keen on her...she used to potter about round the shore here...they had a house there. There was a big rock and they always used to see her going round this big rock at the shore...up and down again...I don't know what her carry on was...but anyway this boat wasn't getting anything. The other boats were getting herring and o they were fed up. This old man was in the hole one night and this big seal came up on the other side and he said "O there she is! She 's out there!"

JMD: *Ha ha! They thought it was the old lady!*

JMK: O yes. There was lots of that sort of thing then.

KMK: They don't believe in any of that sort of thing today.

JMD: *No? They will wear any colour?*

KMK: O yes.

JMD: *When did that change then?*

KMK: Well, when the big boats came latterly there was no word of any of that sort of thing.

JMK: Another thing too...they didn't believe in it...Swan matches.

KMK: O no!

JMK: Swan matches.

KMK: O they didn't like the Swan matches at all. You know, the big boxes. O no.

JMK: There was a picture of a swan on the outside of them.

JMD: *And they thought that was bad luck?*

KMK: O yes. I don't know if it was because of the picture of the swan. There was another woman here called Mòr Choinnich and she was considered very lucky if she met fishermen on their way to sea.

JMK: She was a good woman [Christian].

KMK: There was a man here anyway and he was over in the shop...Donald the Butcher's shop...a wee shop...and she was in the shop. He asked her "Are we going to get anything tonight Mòr?" She replied "You 'll be full to the hatches." She didn't say anything more. They set off and they filled the boat as she predicted. But anyway a while after that Big Finlay...he lived up here in the Caw...they were both in the shop again and he asked "Are we going to get anything tonight Mòr?" You see, he had promised her a pair of tights if they got a shot...if they filled her up... "It would be a contented person you'd promise death to." [...] He had never given her the tights. See how smart she was!

O yes, and ministers. [...] They didn't want a minister to come aboard at all.
O no.

JMD: *You 'd think they would be all for that.*

JMK: I remember Seumas Beag, Ciorstag Iain Bhig's brother was in our house once...and the boats would be going off to sea between 5 and 6. He said "I am now going to the Cnoc Riabhach..."...where Margaret and Kenny live today. He was going off to pray for them...for the boats.

KMK: That was the Avochs you see...it wasn't so bad here in that respect. But we were in Uig and Norman, James's brother had come home. The *Rosehall* – that was the name of the Avoch boat – was beside the quay and they saw him approaching. They shifted the boat out and they let the *Scalpay Isle* go alongside so he could board. They wouldn't let him through the boat at all. They wouldn't let him through the boat at all...they shifted out.

JMD: *Just ministers?*

KMK: Aye ministers.

JMK: You 'd think ministers would be the first ones [they 'd welcome].

JMD: *But missionaries were alright?*

KMK: O as long as they didn't have the collar on.

JMK: I don't know if they 'd let them on if they took the collar off?

KMK: O they wouldn't know it was them! O they shifted out!

JMD: *I wonder what caused that? Did something maybe happen involving a minister sometime?*

KMK: I don't know. I never heard. They wouldn't let on. Her skipper shouted "Is he coming aboard?" And Mùma's father or Mùma himself shouted "Yes!" "O not til we move out."

JMD: *But they weren't like that in Scalpay?*

KMK: O no. That was in Uig, Skye. But they [the Avochs] would have done the same thing here. They didn't want them to come aboard at all. But these were Avoch crews from the Black Isle. They were fishermen. They always worked around here.

JMD: *But the Scalpay fishermen didn't believe that?*

KMK: O no. But they all had different beliefs. These Avochs were very nice boys. That was how it was with the old ladies anyway. The ones they thought were lucky were accepted and they didn't think much of the ones that weren't!

JMD: *And they didn't want you to wear green in the boats?*

KMK: O no.

JMD: *Were there any other colours?*

KMK: Yes the green...the green. Green frock coats...it was the crotal...

JMD: *It was said that it would return to the rocks wasn't it?*

KMK: I don't know what the reason was but they were dead against it. They didn't want to meet someone with green at all. There were women here too...the skippers' mothers...they were dead against that sort of thing.

JMD: *To wear any green?*

KMK: Aye!

JMK: Dùthag...a man here from Scalpay...he didn't like green at all...

JMD: *Even in houses or anywhere?*

KMK: Especially going to sea.

JMK: He didn't like green anyway.

KMK: Another thing they did here...well I suppose that was a good thing alright. They worked at the lobster...the old men...o that was before our time. They

would open the creels every weekend and take the food out of them. So that the creels wouldn't be fishing.

JMD: *On the Sabbath?*

KMK: Yes...at the weekend. They would open them on Saturday...they would leave them open and even if the lobster went into them it would escape again. That stopped. [...] Now when the new boats came they were on the ringnets...and I remember one day going to West Tarbert and we had started the midwater by then.

JMD: *What was that now?*

KMK: A trawl. Two boats towing a trawl. They started that here then. It was up on the ringnet and you could work it out on the grounds where you couldn't work the ringnet...and the herring would be deep. The ringnet wouldn't get the herring unless it was above ten fathoms. Now out on the points...Cluer Point and Geocrab...it would be out at the reefs there at 14 and 15 fathoms...they started using the midwater.

JMD: *Is that an implement?*

KMK: It was a trawl. They called it a mid-water trawl. Two boats worked it...they towed it together.

JMD: *Was it a net?*

KMK: Yes, a net.

JMD: *And it went deeper than the others?*

KMK: Yes. There was a big spread between the two boats. The net was open.

JMD: *What was the distance between the boats?*

KMK: O nearly a quarter of a mile I'm sure.

JMD: *So the nets were very big?*

KMK: Some of them were as big as Hampden Park...the last ones they worked here. O yes. But, personally, I don't think it did the herring here any good.

JMD: *So they were right when they were against it at the start?*

KMK: Yes. Because they started with small nets first and that wasn't so bad. But then they started making the nets bigger and increasing the power of the boats. Now, when that happened, our boats weren't catching the herring because they didn't have enough power. The herring was getting used to the power. It was fleeing and the boats weren't powerful enough to catch it.

We were once on the West Side and the *Scalpay Isle* had a ringnet onboard and we had the midwater as did the *Jasper*. And we went into the West Side during the day. O the loch was full of herring. The *Scalpay Isle* cast the ringnet and didn't get anything. That was very unusual. Anyway, I said "We'll try the midwater."

"O" they said "You don't need to bother trying the midwater during the day." "Well, there's no harm in trying." I still remember it. We cast where Dr Wood's house is...where Rosco lives today...we cast halfway to the pier. The net rose to the surface...the herring took it to the surface as it was so full. It was full up...and at two in the afternoon which was unusual. We filled ourselves and the *Scalpay Isle*. We didn't fill the *Jasper*. The *Scalpay Isle* and the *Jasper* went out then and cast the midwater. They had to take one of the gallows off one side of the *Scalpay Isle* as you used a roller for the ringnet and you couldn't cast the net with the gallows. There was a 5ft gallow on one side and a low roller on the other and it must have put the net at an angle as they didn't get anything. When we went back out we cast from the *Jasper* and both of them had gallows and we were successful again. We were back at the pier at seven o'clock getting cigarettes and we had seven hundred crans. Seven hundred crans. O it was plentiful then.

But I remember in the 1960s here...in the mid-sixties...there was no herring to be had here...it wasn't on this side.

JMD: *What do you think caused that?*

KMK: It must have been away for a cycle. We went over to work north of the Store [...] to these places for a couple of years...that's where they worked...up by the Summer Isles as you go into Ulapool...around Loch Broom and places like that. That's where it was for these years. It came back here in the 70s. At that time the Highland Development Board was offering two crews to go into partnership for one purser...to get pursers. The boys here should have done that when they got the chance.

JMD: *What was that now?*

KMK: It was a big ringnet...these big boats. They just worked 80 and 90 footers at that time. They used to cast it like a ringnet and pull it in. They would pull two loads a day...that would be around two hundred tonnes I suppose...and more...three or four hundred tonnes in each lot. None of them went [for it].

JMD: *They didn't do that?*

KMK: They got a good chance too. But the herring here started to decline in the late seventies.

JMD: *And a quota was put on it too?*

KMK: Yes, and its price fell too.

JMD: *When did that happen?*

KMK: O in the very late seventies, I think. It was then put ashore for fishmeal. The mackerel was another fish that was about here. They fished for the mackerel with the mid-water. There was very, very good mackerel fishing around the same time of year.

JMD: *And did the quota mean you could only catch so much?*

KMK: It wasn't worth working for at the price. The price had come down so far that it wasn't worth it. [...] O they stopped it....they couldn't...

But then the scallops started. There was big scallop fishing here. We were actually working on the scallops when we first got the boat. At first we had big dredges...they worked with solid dredges...o they were very, very heavy...and we worked on them for a year.

JMD: *The scallops are on the sea-bed aren't they?*

KMK: O yes, yes. They were very, very plentiful around here. They were out towards the Shiants and Waternish...Skye...they were just solid. Then they started with the spring-loaded dredges...they worked on the rocky sea-bed. We had sold our boat before the spring-loaded dredges started. But I think that if the boys here...a couple of them got spring-loaded dredges...and some of them did very well...if the ones that had got the spring-loaded dredges had kept them, I believe they would still be there now. But the scallops had grown scarce then where they used to work on the clear sea-bed. They didn't want to take the chance...but the ones that started on it did marvellously well.

JMD: *When was the Scalpay fishing at its peak? When was the fishing at its best?*

KMK: O well, our boat came in October 1970 and I think it was very good after that...the sixties were very good too but the boats weren't so big. The boats didn't carry as much herring. But the seventies were also good.

JMK: O in the fifties, sixties and seventies the place was just...

JMD: *But it started to decline after that?*

KMK: It started to decline in the late seventies, [into the] eighties. They started on the prawns then.

JMK: They did well at the prawns too.

KMK: O they did. Our best week on the prawns...we put bobans on them...that's nets which ran along the hard sea-bed. And ourselves and Murdo up here worked in the same place and we had 399 stones...that was tails...ones we tailed. And if today's boats had that...they keep fourteen hundred stones...they keep them alive you see...far more worked on them than today...they kept them alive in baskets. They don't get anywhere near that today. If they even get 300 lives

today it is good fishing. Now there would be 1500 if you had tails. That came on. The price made a big difference.

But the Faroese made good money from the herring.

JMD: *Still?*

KMK: O they don't make it today. When they came to Stornoway...[with] old wooden boats...

JMD: *When was that?*

KMK: That was in the '70s. They came to Stornoway every year. O yes, and the klondykers. The klondykers would be over in Ulapool and Skye. At that time a man called Kenny Stewart...he had a restaurant on the pier in Uig...the big house over there was his...he started buying in Uig. Uig was good then too...the boats went over there to the klondykers...

JMD: *What were the Klondykers like?*

KMK: They were steel boats that came over from the Faroes and these places...Iceland...to buy...and they bought it and put it down in the hold and froze it...they would take it. [...] from Aberdeen also bought and there were another couple of companies in Ulapool that bought. Latterly it was the klondykers that bought most of the herring. They took most of it.

There was six of a crew in each boat at that time...at the ringnet and other jobs...and there were 12 of these big boats here then. That's nearly 70 working on the herring alone.

My brother came home and Ewen – Alasdair's brother came home – a few came home to the fishing then. I don't know...you can say what you like but I don't think over-fishing is the [main] problem, although it may be to a certain extent. These creels certainly...and the prawns... but I think the sea-temperature is to blame for the state of the fishing here today...especially the lobster.

JMD: *Is it getting warmer?*

KMK: O much warmer. I worked in a Norwegian boat carrying salmon into the lochs. The first year they came over here in the winter the water was -2 and -3 in the winter...it doesn't go below 6 and 7 degrees now. There is that much of a difference in the sea temperature in five years. And when we worked over there in the north of Norway, the temperature was always very, very low and the cod is as plentiful as ever and the other fishing. Now in the south of Norway where the temperature is higher, there is no fishing. I believe that has a lot to do with it...the sea temperature [...]

They are losing lots of salmon this year...all over. They were losing it in Norway too and they maintained it was because of the sea temperature. I fully believe it affects the lobster anyway.

JMD: *It likes the cold?*

KMK: O yes, yes. Though it has come on in the west of Uist this year. Yes, and the Gulf Stream is shifting.

JMD: *All these things will be affecting it.*

KMK: There could be cycles you know.

JMD: *When you started first, was it the herring you fished?*

KMK: When we came home first, we didn't have a partner boat. The *Britannia* and the *Vigilant* worked together.

JMD: *You needed two boats for the ringnet?*

KMK: O yes. And the *Majestic* and the *Rìbhinn Donn* worked together. There were others as well but these were the big boats. And the *Scalpay Isle* and the *Jasper* worked together. When we came home, I wasn't sure what would happen. We intended to go to the scallops...we did go to the scallops too. We were home one night and the skipper of the *Scalpay Isle* came over. I wasn't in...my father was in...and he asked if we would go out with them. Well I said "I don't want to get involved where boats are already working together. We will join on the condition that no-one complains about it." So we went out with the *Scalpay Isle* and the *Jasper* as a threesome...until the ringnet stopped. These three worked together.

JMD: *Was it always herring you caught with the ringnet?*

KMK: Yes. You could get mackerel in it too but they usually used the mid-water for the mackerel.

JMD: *Does the mackerel go deeper?*

KMK: No, but it is faster. It is harder to catch than the herring. The herring just swims in shoals. Now, the first year the herring started here after being scarce, it started up in Loch Carnan in Uist...it may have been south of that too but that was where we started. It worked its way down all the lochs. Lochmaddy, Cheesebay, Rodel and the Bays...all the way...and it came here...south of Scalpay...and Loch Seaforth and it stopped in Loch Erisort out of Stornoway. There was big, big fishing. They were happy years. The place was lively.

JMD: *I believe so.*

KMK: I remember going to Mallaig with the *Joanne*...and these old men were out on the *Scalpay Isle* relieving the young boys...two of them...o and we had a dreadful night for the crossing...there was a real gale. The herring used to move around in these small boats...it was washed. It was black you know. It didn't have scales or anything. We went into Mallaig anyway and they collected the samples. That was what we sent to the market to sell and the best was always picked for that. One of the boys told him that one of the buyers in Mallaig had died and that his funeral was taking place, but that we could start discharging the herring. O well, baskets of the black herring was going ashore! He would come over above the boat saying "Hurry up! Get it ashore before they come back!" They sometimes 'cast'... they would reject...if they discovered that the herring wasn't as good as its sample. They would cast...reduce the price. My mate was afraid that they would lower the price. "Put it ashore as quickly as you can before they come back!" Ha ha!

JMD: *Ha ha! And the herring goes black?*

KMK: O yes. If it is moved about in the boat. The herring you get in Stornoway today [...] has no scales. They let it swim for 24 hours beside the boat so that it loses its seed...so that it cleans itself out. That's why there are no scales on the herring you get today. If it is moved at all it goes black.

JMD: *They didn't want that?*

KMK: O they were dead against it "Get it ashore!"

JMD: *So it was mostly herring that was fished here?*

KMK: Well, yes. In the winter anyway. But they fished for prawns in the summer. the summer wasn't good for the herring at all. The winter was always better for the herring. They would be at the prawns or the scallops.

JMD: *And the lobster?*

KMK: We were at the lobster with the big boat one year. Ourselves and the *Scalpay Isle*. One year we got 300 creels from Ireland, and we went out. They were round creels made with wire-netting. O, when they came they said "These will never do for the lobster fishing." We put them out anyway. The *Scalpay Isle* worked out at the islands [Shiants] and we worked down from Lewis. O they were plentiful. The *Scalpay Isle* had a pond over here anyway [...] We got a pond from the MacSweens that ran the ferry. They had a pond out there on the island of Rathalaim. We restored it and started filling it up. And we had 350 dozen by Christmas-time for the market. That was great lobster fishing. Now the *Scalpay Isle* had that too, if not a bit more. But we were only at it for one year and then we started on the prawn. But the big nets were dangerous at the shore. They were so deep you see. They were difficult to work at the shore you see. [...] Mùma sold his boat and got a smaller one: a 32 footer. But the lobster fishing was great that year.

JMD: *When was that?*

KMK: I think it was '74 or '75. [...] '75. Now there was great lobster fishing there. Finlay, that one who had the *Scalpay Isle* [...] he fished for lobster for years after that.

JMD: *And you were talking about the velvet crab?*

KMK: Yes. Now this is another thing. When our boat went I went out in the *Agate*...the boat Donald in Cuddy Point had...and I was in it when his sister was ill...and then his sister died and I was on it for a while. And we were at the scallops then. There was great fishing at that [...] We worked on the east coast for two seasons...out of Wick and Thurso and Scrabster. There was good fishing there too. When I came home then the *Agate* was sold. I came home then and I went out with Dòmhnall Beag's boys in the *Watchful*. That was to the prawn...working with creels. The year I went out in her we worked 500 prawn creels. And we worked up at Rodel and we got 40 or 50 tubes a day. That's the plastic tubes they have today. Ten or more of them were large, about twenty would be medium and the rest would be small. They work them today...they started increasing the creels then...and they didn't gain anything on it. You got the same amount but you were working twice as many creels. [...] now they have 3000 creels. They hardly get one box of large a day. They hardly get mediums...most of them are small. That shows you how they are plundering the sea-bed. The prawns are definitely over-fished here. If they had left the creels at 500 per boat I think they would have been just as well off.

Now, the velvet crab is the same. The boys who were here worked the velvet crab...and they would only have about 100 creels or 120. There are a couple of boats now and they have two or three hundred creels for the velvets. The same thing will happen to the velvets as happened to the prawn. It is the fisherman's own greed. That's exactly what it is.

JMD: *Wanting too much.*

KMK: Wanting too much. They would be far better to organise things so that each boat had a certain amount of creels. If they don't do that the velvet crab will be the same as the rest.

JMD: *When did they start on the velvet crab?*

KMK: O there 's a while since the velvet crab started. When we sold the boat in 19...eleven years ago...my brother then bought a small boat for the velvet crab and they started on them then. People worked on them before then...before they started on them in earnest.

JMD: *And before that they would throw them back?*

KMK: O yes. The old folk that used to fish for lobster...they would throw them back into the sea. [...]

The old men here used to divide the sea-bed. The sea-bed was divided. Each boat had its own area. I think three...or maybe four boats...went out to the Islands. My grandfather went there and two other boats.

JMD: *Which islands?*

KMK: The Shiants. Each boat had it's own ground.

JMD: *And you would have to keep to these places?*

KMK: O goodness...if you stepped out...o they kept to that. There were old men here who used to work up in Lewis [...] O they kept an eye on things. But they should never have let these outsiders increase the number of creels. They should have put a stop to that. But that Western Isles Fishermans Association didn't do anything about it.

JMD: *And they came in from other places?*

KMK: O yes. They work out there to the west...to St Kilda...they come up from Guernsey with 2000 creels...all the time. Down to the Butt...and a boat from Orkney works there all year. They kill the best further out. It doesn't get a chance to come to the shore.

We worked up at Rodel and we got some cow-hide. We had been using salt-herring to feed them. We saw this advertised in the fishing news and we got it for the prawns. It was cow-hide which had been treated...I don't know what was put on it...we tried it up at Rodel...my goodness...if you got two or three tubes with the herring you would get six with the cow-hide.

JMD: *They were keen on it!*

KMK: And another thing – it lasted six weeks in the creels. You only had to shift it every five or six weeks. Now you had to feed [with] the herring every second day. They ate it but it was expensive. It was very expensive to buy...but it was very, very good for fishing.

JMD: *Was the fishing in your own family for generations?*

KMK: Well, my father was at the fishing...at the drifts alright. But before then...my grandmother's uncle had the *Village Maid*. That was her name. It was Dòmhnall Fionnlaigh that had her. [...] And there were two boats on my grandfather's side...the *White Heather* and the *Daffodil*...he had those two and other smaller boats as well. O there was fishing down the generations...yes.

JMD: *You learned about it when you were very small?*

KMK: O people were always in the boats here [...]

And another thing...the year after we got the boat...before that too...the small boats would be out there at the factory and the ferry...all the way up to

Sgeotasaigh...the haddock was thick and heavy. They would catch it with darrows...they would go out with the small nets...and there was cod and all sort. That's what the fishing was like here then. [...]

We went to Tarbert one night to cast by the pier...we cast anyway [...] we towed the net for twenty minutes up to Sgeotasaigh, that's all. We got 20 boxes of Dover sole and lemon sole, we got twenty boxes of haddock and fifteen stones of prawns. In Tarbert Loch. That was in 1973 or '74. But that has gone...that has gone. [...]

We worked with the trawl in Rodel. We would get 100 and 120 boxes of cod in spring...in March and April. [...] It came in at the same time every year...that cod.

JMD: *And how did the year work then, say from the start of the year up til the end of the year? Did you fish for different things?*

KMK: O yes. September, October, November, December...December and January and February...those were the best months for the herring...when it got dark quickly. And we fished for either prawns or scallops in the summer. That was from when you finished in March and April. They then took them ashore and painted them. They finished painting them around May every year and then they went to the prawn until herring time again in the winter.

JMD: *And you painted them every year?*

KMK: O yes. They painted them every year. They put them ashore here. The whole crew would be around them painting them. O they kept them well...they were good boats. 1,2,3,4...5...five of the boats here were built in Girvan I think.

JMD: *Where did your own boat come from?*

KMK: Girvan

JMD: *Was she new when you got her?*

KMK: Yes. Brand new from the stock.

JMD: *How big was she?*

KMK: Sixty feet.

JMD: *That is big. That was the Village Maid?*

KMK: Aye. At that time these boats cost £38,000 but if you were to build them today they would be a million pounds...nearly a million.

JMD: *Was that the first boat you had for yourself?*

KMK: It was.

JMD: *Where did you sell the fish then?*

KMK: Stornoway.

JMD: *Always Stornoway?*

KMK: Well with the herring fishing we used to go to Mallaig and Ullapool and Uig. If you worked to the south with the trawl you sold at Mallaig. The Barra factory hadn't started when we worked. [...]

Another fishing we had here for a while, though not for long, was the pout...the Norwegian pout. O it was terrible.

JMK: O the stench!

KMK: O it was terrible. We fished for sand eels too. They say it wasn't good to be fishing for the sand eels either.

JMD: *Because of the food chain and so on.*

JMK: Those were good days.

KMK: I don't know what the old women would say about the salmon if they were alive today!

JMD: *I don't know! How many crew did you have on the Village Maid?*

KMK: Six.

JMD: *Six.*

KMK: Six of a crew. You had six all the year round. If you had six, you would keep them at the prawns too. There are only two in the boats now. There is no work now. There was a lot of work in the prawn tailing. That tailing was hard work.

JMD: *How did you divide the money?*

KMK: A percentage went to the boat. First the fuel and the food was kept out of it. I think it was 35% that went to the boat and the rest...they made a good living. I remember a local boy went out instead of my brother one night and he got £720 for the one night. We filled the three boats. That was how it was, if you filled the boats.

JMD: *The three worked together?*

KMK: Yes.

JMD: *And everyone would have got that?*

KMK: Yes. If one got it they would all get it.

JMD: *That was good money.*

KMK: It was in that day.

JMD: *Even by today's standards it would be very good to get that in a day!*

JMK: Of course my dear, yes!

KMK: If you happened to go to Stornoway and get a good price for it...they sold it by the cran...you know...four baskets.

JMD: *You 'll have to explain how they measured it.*

KMK: Four baskets equal a cran.

JMD: *And how big were the baskets?*

KMK: O just about...

JMK: Peat baskets.

KMK: They were made from cane.

JMK: I'll show you a basket.

KMK: That was the size. There were four of them to a cran of herring.

JMD: *Four of them – that's a cran?*

KMK: If you had 100 crans you would have 400 baskets. If you had 200 crans you would have 800 baskets. [...] Now sometimes you would get, say, £20 for a cran of herring, and if you had 200 crans you would have £4000 for the one boat...for the one shot. Now there were 6 crans to the tonne on average.

JMD: *There would be a fair number of herring in a basket then?*

KMK: It would depend. The herring varies in size.

JMD: *Yes.*

KMK: Some lochs had better herring than others...and it would depend on the time of year. The summer herring was very, very big.

They also boxed the herring in summer so that it would keep longer.

JMD: *With ice?*

KMK: They didn't put ice on it at all...they just boxed it...though I suppose the big boats would use ice but the small boats didn't have room. It kept much better. Some of the boxes would hold more than a basket. O there was a lot of work in the boxing...down in the hold...you would box 80 crans.

John Norman MacSween's brother was a minister in the Gorbals in Glasgow...o how I dreaded him coming home! Every night he would be down here wanting to go out fishing and he wouldn't want to call it a day until goodness knows when. I would give him a hand taking it home but I would leave him there on the shore [fishing]. He would haul fish home and gut and salt it. When he went away again he would have boxes of it to give to the old ladies in the Gorbals.

There was also big-net fishing here...[...] they would go out in the spring and cast at the banks...the south bank out here was very, very good for fishing...and out from Grosebay and out the Gil a Tuath...they would get cod and eels and laing...o they got good fishing with it. That was also the case for the boats in the late forties and early fifties. They would feed them with herring...half the herring was put on the hook and they would leave them out all night...and they would go to them in the morning. I remember my father was out on a boat called the Maria...a boat that MacLeod had when they went to Tarbert...she was a ferry. They worked in Tarbert with her for one winter...they worked on the big nets that year...o the fish was plentiful...the cod was beautiful...they gutted it and the fish was as white as paper. They would eat the roe and the *ceann gropaig* [stuffing made from fish livers and oatmeal].

JMK: O it was very good.

KMK: O that fish was fresh. The hooked fish was fresh anyway. They worked on that for years.

JMD: *How did you spend the day onboard? When did you start in the morning and what routine did you have?*

KMK: You worked all night at the herring...

JMD: *You worked mostly at night?*

KMK: Yes. I would go into the wheel-house when I left here and I would sometimes be there until seven in the morning...straight through the night unless you would go down to have a cup of tea. O there were long hours...

JMK: You wouldn't leave until 6pm.

KMK: At night-fall. [...] But that was all night...but with the prawn you would sometimes go to bed and be up again at half past three. [...]

But I would go to bed as soon as we lifted the net at night...the boys would work...I would be on watch on my own and the boys would go below...that was how it was.

JMD: *And there were beds on board?*

KMK: O we had nice accommodation. We had six beds and a cooker and a toilet and everything. They had good accommodation. The ones that were made latterly had aft accommodation...the accommodation was in the back. Those were far more comfortable....

JMD: *And some-one always had to be on watch?*

KMK: O someone was always on watch. That watch at the prawns was long in the mornings. They would tow for four hours. You would be up there on your own. [...]

JMD: *And did you sleep during the day?*

KMK: O yes. If you were on the ringnet at night you would go to bed for spells during the day. [...]

JMD: *How far out did you go?*

KMK: O we worked on the prawn out towards...we worked out at the Store...that's as far as we would go...and up to the Hillies at Barra Head. That was a fair distance away – it was about eight or nine hours from here.

JMD: *And did you go out to Skye too?*

KMK: They worked over there too.

JMD: *How far south did you go?*

KMK: To Barra Head and we worked over to Tiree. We worked on the scallops over at Coll Bank. We worked on the scallops out of Oban, down to the Sound of Jura.

JMD: *Did you ever go out to St Kilda?*

KMK: We didn't go out there much at all. We did very little fishing on that side. [...]

DISK ENDS