

Harris Fishing Heritage Project 2007

Interview with Alasdair MacLeod (AML), Taigh a' Chnuic, Scalpay

(Translated from Gaelic)

NB:

...denotes pauses in speech

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

JMD: *This is Jo MacDonald in Alasdair Choinnich's house in Scalpay on the 7th August 2007. Now, we are going to talk about fishing. You are very knowledgeable about the fishing on Scalpay, Alasdair.*

AML: Well, I was involved with it for thirty years.

Is that right?

Yes.

When did you start fishing?

I first went out in 1961.

Which boat were you on?

I was on a boat called the *Venture* which my brother had at the time. When I was away in my younger days...well, after I had left school...I was in Edinburgh and I learned a trade there...I was in Edinburgh for nearly six years.

What work did you have there?

I did electrical engineering. I learned a trade in it. And then unfortunately perhaps...fortunately in a way when I look back...I was called for the National Service and I was in the Air Force for two years. [...] And I came home after that, fully intending to return to the trade and to the mainland and I went away to a couple of interviews but, I didn't know, my heart was here. My heart was always here. Even while I was away...the years I was away...my heart was in Scalpay and in a way my heart was in the fishing. Just at that time...that was the time when people started to get money from the Highland Development Board and the *Remembrance* came...and the man who got the *Remembrance* was a crewman on my brother Iain's boat...and after that one called the *Estralita* came...the *Estralita* that Murdo had...you spoke to Murdo recently...well he got the *Estralita* and he was also a crewman on Iain's boat and when Murdo left and bought the *Estralita* and parted with Iain I went in his place on the *Venture*...in 1961...and I was there until we gave it up.

What kind of boat was the Venture?

Well, a type called a Ringer. That was the work we had...what they called the Ringnet.

How did the Ringnet work?

With the Ringnet...two boats worked together at the Ringnet...in pairs.

You couldn't work on your own?

No, you couldn't do anything on you own. No. The net was cast...say we were going to cast the net...the net was cast...our companion would lift the end of it and then the two boats would perhaps tow for a wee while and bring that end back to us. That's why it was called a Ringnet...it was a round circle. Then you would pull it like that...bringing up the base of it and the herring would stay in it.

Was it only herring you fished for?

Yes, at that time; just herring in those days.

You didn't bother with lobster or anything like that?

No, no. We made our living from the herring. I told this [story] often...when I went out that year...just around about this time...the end of August or about that time. It was customary to divide the money three times a year. They didn't share it every week or every fortnight at all. They shared the money at New Year, at the time of the Spring Communion and at the time of the Autumn Communion. And I went out and the Autumn Communion had passed and when the money was shared at New Year, I had £13 and three sacks of potatoes.

Which year was that?

That was at the end of 1961. Thirteen pounds in three months and the potatoes...they would buy potatoes in Gairloch which had come from the Black Isle and the boats would, say, bring potatoes home from Gairloch at the end of the week and would divide them amongst the crew...and the money would be deducted from the crew's money, you see.

And was that good at the time?

No, no. That was very, very poor. That would make you...that would almost make you stop. But, as it happened, after the New Year again fishing started over on the Mainland - on the Mainland of Scotland that is. And we went over there and we had some good fishing over on that side. There was nothing to be had on this shore at all for two or three years then.

Really? What do you think caused that?

Well, I don't know. It must have been some sort of cycle...it was as if the herring just went to that side. But we made good fishing over between Store and Loch Inver and down to Loch Ewe and around these places.

How far did you go?

Well, that was as far as we went with the herring...but we also worked down to Barra Head on the herring too...to a place they called the Currachan...there's a small skerry out from the mouth of Northbay which they called the Currachan. It was good for herring. We used to go there and we would go to the Skye shore and sometimes down to Coll...we would go to Coll Bank. We would go that far out sometimes, yes. But then you would go away on Monday and you would be back on Saturday, you know?

You would be away all week?

Yes, we were away all week.

And did you go as far out as St Kilda?

O no. We weren't on that side...but we did sometimes fish out from the west side of Harris...out West Loch Tarbert between Taransay and Soay and in towards Bunavoneadar...you know...round there. We were fishing out to Loch Resort and Loch Tamanavay...we would go to these places too.

How long were you on the Venture?

The *Venture* left...we built the first *Ribhinn Donn* [Brown-haired Maiden] in 1966.

And that was built for yourselves?

For ourselves, aye; it was built for ourselves. I didn't have a share in the *Venture*. Iain got the *Venture* three years before I joined him but when he went for the next one I took a share in that one. That was in 1966.

Between the two of you?

Between the two of us, yes.

Where was it built?

In Girvan. That was where Kenneth's was built too and the next one we had...that's her photo there. We had the first *Ribhinn Donn* until 1973. We went for a bigger one then.

What size was the first Ribhinn Donn?

The first *Ribhinn Donn* was 56ft. And the next one was 63ft. She was a lot bigger, a lot bigger.

And they would have engines anyway?

O yes, yes. But the second *Ribhinn Donn*...the last one we had...the engine was in her front...usually the engine is in the back of a boat...we asked for the engine to be in her front.

Why did you want that?

For comfort. The cabins were in the back and the engine was a bit away from it and there was no noise you see.

And it didn't make any difference to the boat itself?

No, no. It worked well for us. Infact, the ones that built it in Girvan said they wished they had done it before then.

It was good you thought of it then.

It was. We thought of that.

That was the second one?

That was the second one – the last one.

How many of you worked on her?

Six when we worked on the herring. There were six on each boat. And when you were...when the net was being cast and the other boat coming to you with the end of the line, four from that boat would come onto our boat. Two stayed in her and four came aboard our boat...onto the boat that cast the net. That way you had ten to pull the net.

Right. And you had to do that by hand?

Yes, yes. Well, the bottom of the net was taken in by a winch and the rest...You had five in the back of the boat and five in the front of the boat.

That would be very heavy.

You had a winch in the middle pulling the bottom of it...that's how it was.

And what other boat worked with you?

O well, there were two or three of them.

You didn't always work with the same boat?

Well, no. When I started first we were with the *Harmony* from Plocropool. That was the first one that was with us...and then another boat came when Murdo started...when Murdo got the *Estralita*. We had three working together.

And that worked too?

O yes, yes. When three worked together, one would just rest until you were ready to start again.

But only two boats would work together at the same time?

It would be two boats that would work. But I think we spent most time with David's *Majestic*. In the last two or three years after getting that *Ribhinn Donn* we started another method of herring fishing...we started the trawl...the mid-water trawl they called it.

How was that different then?

Well, you had two boats and you would tow the net behind you...you would tow it for a while.

Did you go deeper?

I wouldn't say we went any deeper but we thought it was better. It was more powerful. That was what we did latterly.

There were also Drifters weren't there?

There were.

Were they there before the Ringnets?

O yes, they were at the Drifts before the Ringnet came.

How did that work?

We just used to cast the nets. In the winter they would cast the nets on anchors in the lochs. Most of the time I think they would cast ten nets and there would be an anchor at each end securing them. They would go out at dusk to cast them and would pull them at dawn. That was how it was in winter but now in summer when the herring was out deep they would cast the nets after her. Maybe forty nets – they were just stretched behind the boat and they would hang from the boat all night and they would then pull them. The night wasn't so long. The nets would be hanging out all night in the summer. I was never at that work...I was out in a small boat casting two or three nets but I was never...but Iain my brother was at the drifts for a while before he got his own boat.

When, then, did people here start the Ringnet?

The Ringnet started...the first new boat came home here in 1948...the *Maighdeann Hearach* [Harris Maiden] that the Cunninghams had. That was the first newly-built boat that came to Scalpay.

Do you know where she was built?

In Banff. In Banff. She was the first new boat that came to Scalpay and I could say that it was then the Ringnet started, and Iain my brother was a crewman on the *Maighdeann Hearach* and they were down...I think they were six weeks down on the Clyde...in Ardrishaig and Tarbert Loch Fyne and places like that so that they could learn a little about this fishing method which was new to us at the time. And that was how it started.

And then others saw how this worked and they started to do it?

That's it, I think. The *Scalpay Isle* and the *Maighdeann Hearach* were the first two, when they started it first. They tried it with a couple of the old boats right enough but they weren't suitable for it. And then when Iain bought the *Venture* in...what was it?...1958...that was the next Ringnet that came.

And would you get far more fish in the Ringnet?

Than you would get with the Drifts? O goodness yes, yes.

So it was more profitable?

O yes, yes. And the work wasn't so great. It wasn't so hard. It wasn't as hard as the nets, as the Drifts. There was a lot of work in the Drifts, in pulling them you know.

Was there always fishing in your family?

O my father always fished. My father bought his share in a boat from the east coast in 1921. He bought...she was called the *Britannia*. And my father was always at the fishing. Well, my father's health failed in 1945 and he had to stop and part with the boat.

You would have been too young to be on that one?

I was too young. But I was out on her as a schoolboy...I remember going out in her as a schoolboy on a Saturday morning.

Where did you go?

Och, we were just round the lochs here and the Bays lochs, between here and the Sound of Harris and the lochs of Lewis. In summer, when my father was at it, they would sometimes leave on Monday morning and work out of Stornoway all week...working out from the Tiumpan and out from Tolsta and these places.

Was it for herring?

Herring, yes. I remember when I was a boy in school and we would go up to the hill here above the house and you could see out to Rùisinnis there and out to the islands and we would look out for the boats coming home on Saturday evening...to see which one would come in first. We would be there looking at them and waiting until they came in the Kyle.

How old were you then when you started properly at the fishing?

When I was with Iain? I was 27.

So you have good knowledge of all aspects of fishing.

O well, that kind of fishing anyway.

Was the fishing in Scalpay different to the fishing on mainland Harris?

It was once that method started. No one else between here and Eriskay used that method.

No?

No. No-one on mainland Harris or in Lewis used that method. There was one for a short while in Lemreway and she partnered us for a while...she was called the Isabella. She was the only one who ever made anything of that kind of fishing. The Lewis folk were always at the drift. And no-one between here and Eriskay used the ringnet. There were ones in Kyleakin and in Kyle and round about there...and then in Mallaig. We were better acquainted with people from Avoch than we were with plenty around here.

I'm sure.

We called them Na h-Abhaich [The Avochs]. They would work with us...they would sometimes partner us if, say, an Avoch boat had cast a net and say they had more herring than they could carry, they would sometimes shout to our boat to take what they had left. And then their one and our one would go to market and then our one and their one would anchor and they would then go out together that night. And one of our boats would fish along with one of the Avoch boats. They would work together like that.

Where would you sell the fish?

Most of it...when we started first or when I started first, we would most often go to Gairloch and if there wasn't a good market we would go to Stornoway. We would go to Stornoway for fishmeal you see. We would go there but Ullapool and Gairloch and Mallaig were the three [main] ports in those days. And then a man started up in Uig, Skye, buying herring too, and we used to land in Uig for a year or two.

How often would you land it?

O you would have to go every night. The herring would be sent ashore as you would get it, you know. You would go as soon as you caught it.

It would have to be fresh.

O yes, yes. You would go every night that you would get the herring.

And did it just depend on which port was closer or would you also consider the prices?

O yes. You would have to look at the price too.

Were some places better than others?

Sometimes. If you thought you would get a better price in Mallaig than you would in Ullapool or Gairloch you would go to Mallaig. I saw...I remember one night setting off and we were at Store, north of Loch Inver and we set off from there to Mallaig with the herring. We passed Ullapool and we passed Gairloch as we thought we would get a better price in Mallaig.

It must have been worth your while to go there then?

Well, we thought it was...you couldn't be certain of that until you arrived. It would sometimes work for you and it sometimes wouldn't.

And how would you divide the money?

In those days, if my memory serves me well, nine shares were made of the money. The expenses would come out of it first – the cost of the oil and things like that – and then...

And was the food deducted at the start too?

Yes, yes. And nine shares were made of it then. Each of the six had a share and the other three shares went to the boat for the net and for maintenance and things like that.

And how often would you share it then?

That was it – three times.

Three times a year? And did that change after that?

O yes. When the new boats started to come you see.

That was a long time to be waiting for money.

Yes, it was a long time.

And how often do they divide it now?

Every week, every week.

And they've been at that for a while?

O yes, for a long time. When we went to the...when we started on the prawn fishing...we started to share it every week then.

When did you start on the prawn?

We started when we got the first *Ribhinn Donn*. The herring wasn't so plentiful in summer so we would go to the prawn all summer and we would return to the herring in the winter. But then a quota was put on the herring fishing. I don't know what year that was now. It was around about 1970. Then we had to go to the prawn as there was nothing else for us. We weren't happy. I wouldn't say our people were ever happy fishing for the prawn. The herring was in the blood as it were.

And what made them impose a quota on the herring fishing? Was it being over-fished?

That's what they maintained. To preserve the stocks. I don't know.

Do you think the fish is scarcer?

O yes. The fish is scarcer – you can hardly get it at all.

Why do you think that is?

O just that it was killed.

It was killed because of over-fishing?

O aye. Yes.

Was that because of the Ringnet?

No. O no. I fully believe that if things had continued as they had when we were at the herring fishing that there would still be herring to be had. O, big boats started to come from the East coast. Then something called the Purse started – the Purse net. That one was...it was the same kind of method as the ringnet but much bigger. That was as big as a football pitch.

Really?

They would catch hundreds of crans of herring then. That's what killed the herring.

That's very sad then.

O it is sad.

And in the Ringnet...how much would you catch?

Well, that would depend on how much you would catch. You would perhaps get two or three hundred crans in one catch.

How much could the boat take?

The last one we had would take over 200 crans. The first *Ribhinn Donn* would take about 150 crans. But the second one would take 200 or up to 240 or so.

So you didn't tend to fish near Scalpay at all...you would go out a bit and stay away all week?

We'd be away all week. When we were at the prawn we would normally be away all week too.

And you slept on board?

O yes.

And you would take the food with you too?

O yes. There was no shortage of food on board...we always had plenty food.

Did you have a cook?

Sometimes. When I first went out we had a cook. Well, he would do all the cooking. But in the end no-one was keen on the cooking so we would take night about or week about cooking.

I see. So you would have become very good at cooking!

O yes. The men then...the men learned like that in the boats. All the men could cook.

What sort of food would you eat on board?

Och, just the same as you would eat at home.

Meat, potatoes and fish?

Yes. Roast and fish and anything you would have at home you would have there.

You would buy it every week?

O yes. You would have it going on the Monday.

And you would go on Monday morning?

Sometimes. We would leave early at the prawn, early on Monday morning, almost just after the Sabbath. We would usually be away until Friday then. But at the herring, that would depend on where the herring was and what time of year it was. When the herring was on this side itself we wouldn't go until Monday afternoon but when it was on the far side, on the other side of the Minch, we would have to leave early to be over there at dusk.

And did the herring move at different times of the year?

O yes. The herring would move.

Did it follow a reasonably certain pattern?

You couldn't be sure, no. In the autumn and up to the start of winter you would see the herring to the south, up towards Lochmaddy, up that way, off the coast of Uist and you would get that herring until it came down to the lochs of the Bays. You could see that it had that pattern right enough.

And how would you spend a typical day at the fishing? When would you get up and what would you do?

Well, you didn't have much of a day at the herring. You pretty much worked according to what you would get. If you got the herring early, if you got enough to take early, you would then head for the market. You would put it ashore in the morning, and you would spend a good part of the day landing it. When all of that was over, when you got the boat washed down, you would set off again and there wasn't much...perhaps two would set off with her and the other four would be in bed when you were taking her to the market...two would take her there and the other four would be in bed.

Someone would have to be on watch?

O yes. Two of us always were.

And you usually fished through the night?

The herring fishing was pretty much always done at night.

And you would sleep during the day?

Well, you would sleep on the way to the market. Perhaps the two that were on watch wouldn't get to bed at all until you would land it and then those two would get to bed on the way back.

And there were six beds on board?

Six or seven beds.

What pass-times did you have on board?

We didn't have much time for pass-times. If we were anchored for a day with bad weather or something like that you would play cards or something like that.

Did you sing songs?

No, we didn't.

Or stories?

Well, I suppose there would be stories anyway.

Just talking backwards and forwards. But most boats had Bibles didn't they?

O yes. In every single one, yes. And the Bible would be read every night if at all possible. Yes.

And praise-singing?

No. We didn't sing at all. I did see that if two or three of us were anchored together...the crews would go into one boat to read the Bible and they would sing. But before I started, I heard Iain talking about that...he could remember...in summer when my father was at the fishing...and they were casting at the Bays bank as they would say...they would cast there and the boats would be a short distance apart and they would hear the praise from one boat in the next one. They did sing in those days.

That would be beautiful.

It was beautiful, yes.

And didn't they have superstitions too? Weren't there superstitions connected to some things?

O yes.

Did you hear about those?

We heard about it but there wasn't much of that in our day at all. But I heard Iain talking about it, that was before I started, I think it was in Loch Sealg. They were anchored and there were two boats from the Clyde. They weren't enjoying good fishing at all. He was in the *Maighdeann Hearach* then and they got up this morning and the crew in this boat were going about with a fire-flame in their hands, as if there was a mop with oil on it and on fire and they went off with that and they started at the back or the front of the boat, I

don't know what and they were hitting the mouth of the boat. If they started at the front, they took it down one side, round the back, and up the other side until they reached the point where they had begun, as if they were expelling the witchcraft. That was off Clyde...that's where that boat was now. I heard Iain telling that. I never so that sort of thing but I heard Iain talking about it.

There were also colours that they didn't like to see weren't there?

Yes, green. Plenty were against green. You still get a bit of that here but the *Britannia* my father had was green. She was always green. When we painted the last *Ribhinn Donn* – she was varnished coming home and for years after coming home – but for the last few years we had her there was so much work in the varnish and we painted her, and we painted her green, because, I suppose, that it was green that my father had. And the one Murdo got...Murdo is my father's brother's son...and Murdo's father was with my father in the *Britannia* and that was why Murdo called his own boat the *Britannia*. And when Murdo painted the *Britannia*, he painted her green too, I suppose because my father's *Britannia* was green.

Were people surprised that you painted her green? Did anyone say anything?

No, no, they didn't say anything. But there were plenty that wouldn't do it all the same.

Why was green..?

I don't know what they had against green?

And they were against crotal too weren't they? They didn't like socks which were dyed with the crotal?

Yes, that was also true. But there were plenty here, and I believe there are still plenty, who wouldn't paint a door green or put green around the house. Yes, or green paper. There are still plenty that believe in that. I don't know what they had against the green but that certainly existed in some.

Were there other things like that? Were they afraid of things? What about the old ladies on the road?

Yes. They...I heard my father telling...he was going out and I don't know what woman it was and it may not be wise for me to say even if I remembered, but this woman met him on his way to sea and she spoiled his trip. He was delayed anyway and the rest of the crew weren't pleased. But because of this, whatever delay it was...I don't remember now...they were a bit late in leaving to go south...out from the Bays shore...this was in the summer and they went north – out to the light in the mouth of the kyle there. It was closer to them and they cast the nets there and when they drew the nets in the morning, they had a dozen crans or so and the ones that went south got nothing. And they worked on this sort of thing, but that was only what was fated to happen and

he was happy enough with the amount of herring he caught after all that had been said to him for speaking to that woman!

Were there just specific women in that case?

Yes. There were some that they tried to avoid.

Why? How would they get a reputation for that?

I don't know.

Did they have the second sight or something like that?

Well, they believed there was something like that.

And weren't there words...?

O yes. 'Deer' and 'rabbit' and they didn't like to mention deer at all!

On a boat?

Yes. Or 'salmon' or 'rabbit' too.

Why would that be?

I don't know. But that was before my time. But there was a man with me...he was my father's cousin's son and he was also Murdo's father's brother's son. He was with us in the first *Rìbhinn Donn* and if he saw a box of matches – Swan Vestas – coming onto the boat, he would throw it into the sea!

Yes?

They didn't like that at all.

Was it the swan?

The picture of the swan on it. They didn't like the swan at all. He would throw the box of Swan Vestas into the sea. That was terrible foolishness!

That's fascinating.

It's terrible foolishness and plenty of them were also against playing cards. They would throw the pack of cards into the sea, some of them...they would! I once saw a man who was far younger than I – who was with us as a crewman – I saw him throw a pack of cards into the sea. He didn't want us to play cards at all.

Did he think it was the devil's work?

Something like that, yes.

Are there still people who would be reluctant to talk about deer and things like that?

No, not now. That was another custom they had...they wouldn't go...in those days there was no pier here. It was at the back of the boats that the anchors would be tied in those days; they thought the anchor lay better at the back of the boat, and when they would go and release the anchor, they would have to go sun wise. They wouldn't go against the sun at all.

Wouldn't they?

No, they wouldn't. They would make every effort not to have to go against the sun. Sometimes it might be difficult because of the wind or something like that, but if it could be done at all they would have to go with the sun. And they would make a huge effort too to keep to that.

That's fascinating. Were any lives lost here because of the fishing?

There weren't. There was an amazing preservation amongst the number that was fishing here.

Considering the number of people involved?

I was counting only the other night that we had 11 or 12 boats going out from here at the Ringnet, and six in each boat, and as I told you before when the net was cast and the other boat would pick up the other end of it, the two boats would then come together shoulder to shoulder, and four from one boat would jump into the other boat. Now, if you picture the two boats coming together in a swell and one rising above the other and that sort of thing, and they would jump. We would jump from one into the other.

You didn't tie them?

No, but they came together like that and as soon as they joined together you would jump with three quarter wellies on and they didn't wear trousers and jackets in these days but an oilskin smock down to your knees. You would lift that up round your middle and jump and nothing ever happened to any of us.

That was amazing.

It was amazing. Nothing ever happened to anyone.

Did the fishing on Scalpay exist independently from the fishing on mainland Harris? Was there much interaction between them?

Well, there wasn't much fishing on mainland Harris. In those days... in my day ... there weren't any boats in mainland Harris apart from the ones in Kyles Stockinish and these were at the drifts. There weren't any others in Harris at that time.

What do you think was so special about Scalpay? Why do you think the fishing was so successful here?

I don't know. Well, it was for the fishing that people came to live in Scalpay in the first place, I believe.

The place must have been naturally suited to it?

The place was good for it. There was a good harbour – there were two good harbours – the north harbour and the south harbour. They mostly used the north harbour – the one opposite us here.

Was it especially sheltered?

It was sheltered, yes. It is almost completely closed. There is just a kyle in the mouth of the harbour coming in. But it's a good harbour. And then the fishing ground... a lot of the fishing would be off the Bays shore and off the Lewis shore. But I don't know why the Lewis folk didn't and don't make use of the Ringnet as well. The only ones that used the ringnet were the Scalpay folk and as I told you before, the Eriskay folk.

But they did well out of the fishing in Scalpay?

O in those years they did very well indeed in Scalpay. And in Eriskay. The two places were similar.

Yes. When was the Scalpay fishing at its peak?

Well, between 1970 and 1980.

Until the herring quota?

Even after the herring quota, even when we had to go to the prawn, we still had good fishing. We also worked the mackerel... there was mackerel on the shore and we would be fishing the mackerel with the trawl. And we were fishing sprats. The best weeks fishing I ever had – in the last *Ribhinn Donn* – ourselves and David's *Majestic* – that was the best weeks fishing we ever had, at the sprats.

Yes?

At that time. And that record stood for many years but it's common enough today... to have five or six thousand in the week but in those days...

That was exceptional?

It was exceptional. It was exceptional. I think we had about £12,000 between the two boats in the week.

On the sprats?

On the sprats. That stood for years before it was topped but it's common enough today.

But the fishing has changed today?

The fishing has changed a lot. It hardly exists at all today. It won't be long until there are no boats left here. They are declining rapidly and the population is leaving too you know.

Why do you think that is? Why do you think the fishing changed so much?

Well, in a way the fishing changed itself. There was no fishing. The fish isn't there as it used to be.

The fish itself isn't as plentiful?

It's not as plentiful.

And the people aren't there?

The people aren't there. I don't know...if you think of a dozen boats going out in those days with six in each boat...that's 72 people leaving here every Monday to earn a living...that was a lot. And apart from that there were people here working in other boats. There were two or three here working on boats in Kyleakin and in Kyle.

What do you think the fishing will be like in the future?

I think the fishing will be poor here if it exists at all. It continues to decline.

How many boats work out of Scalpay today?

In my day there were only that type – there were no small boats – but today there are only small boats....going out with just one person or two people. There aren't any boats going out of Scalpay today with more than two people.

Isn't it still the Ringnet they use?

Och no. Today they only use creels. Some...one or two left trawling for prawns and they sometimes work the clams, but apart from that there are only creels. People working alone and working on the creels. Some of the boats with two people on them and that's it.

The change in the fishing must have affected the community?

O yes, I believe so. This was a happy community in those days. There was a lot of...how shall I put it?...you wouldn't call it jealousy at all but a sort of rivalry between people trying to do better than one another.

Competition?

Yes, competition. There was a lot of that naturally. But at the same time, as I told you before, if we were going to get more herring in the net than we were going to take with us, well, you would shout your neighbour then...you would shout one of the other boats to come over. Although that rivalry existed, we worked together at the same time. It was a happy sort of rivalry.

Yes. The fishermen would surely look after people who didn't have much? If you caught a lot of fish would you give some away too?

If there happened to be anyone, yes. I saw them giving away herring to the Drift boats too – the ones that used the Driftnets – if there was anything left in the nets. We would put in onboard the drifters.

What about the women and children who were ashore? Was there anything they could do to help with the fishing?

Not in my day, no there wasn't anything.

They wouldn't help to mend nets or anything like that?

No, no.

That was a man's job?

Well, in my day, you couldn't take the nets home to mend them anyway. It was a Ringnet and you would mend them onboard. Or you would take it to the pier and mend it on the pier. It was big.

O it would be far too big to take home?

But even when they were at the Drifts in my father's time they used to take the nets home to mend them, but the women didn't take anything to do with that. No.

You mentioned the catch earlier?

The catch, yes. [We would put it on] the cotton nets so they would last and wouldn't rot. The cotton in the nets would rot if they weren't looked after.

They would last longer?

They would last longer.

You mentioned the place where they did that.

There was a place down here, near my father's house there and they called it *Rubha a' Choire*. [The Kettle Point] *An Coire Cartach* [The Cutch Kettle].

They would have a big tank to melt it. A big fire would be put beneath the tank and they would melt the catch.

And you remember that?

O I remember that.

And it was a material that was imported?

Yes, yes. And I also remember when we started on the Ringnet, we would bark the Ringnets in Stornoway...they had a big tank and the Ringnets could be put into it and we would put it on a lorry and take it to these big tanks and in those days it didn't get a chance to dry at all...we did that with the ring net too before nylon came in, when the ringnets were made of cotton. And they went to nylon after that and it wasn't needed.

When would that be? Do you have any idea?

Now...round about 1960 or so I would say. Or after that. Maybe 1965 or so.

What about communicating with home? Did you have a wireless on board?

O yes. There was hardly a home in Scalpay that didn't have a wireless, listening to the boats talking to each other. That was a pass-time every night here. There was hardly a home that didn't ...even if they didn't have anyone on board themselves; they wanted to listen to the boats speaking to each other.

What was the first instrument they had? Was it VHF?

No, it took a while for the VHF to come. We had got the first *Ribhinn Donn* before the VHF came.

What was there before that?

Just something we called the Big Wireless. RT – Radio Transmitted – RT. That existed o...before I started. That's the one they used to listen to at home.

And they would have it onboard. And they would hear the boats?

They would hear the boats speaking to each other. You could get radios then with the *Trawler Band* as they called it.

And could they speak to their homes using that?

They could speak to their homes but their homes couldn't speak to them. The home would just be listening.

I see. And then the VHF came?

When the VHF came some houses got VHF and they could speak to the boats, but it was illegal.

Was it?

It wasn't legal to have VHF on at home speaking to the boats. But then do you remember the CB – Citizen's Band? We had that for a while too and you could then speak to the boats from home.

Was that legal enough?

That was legal enough, yes. And when we were at the prawn fishing, when we were nearby here instead of going to Stornoway...we would land it here in Tarbert or no in Kyles and send a lorry over to Stornoway with it. There were two – The Big Skye man in Urgha and Big Lachie in Urgha – Big Lachie is still living – it was Big Lachie that would take the prawns and the Big Skyeman would take the clams if there were any. And they would have CBs in the lorries. And when we would be on the road in we would shout to them and tell them that we would be in Kyles [Scalpay] or in Tarbert at such and such a time and they would meet us there. One was called King Prawn and the other was called King Clam!

Ha, ha!

That's what they had. We would speak to them like that and they would wait for us when we would come in and they would take our catch to Stornoway.

What do they use now? Did any means of communication come after that?

Just the phone...everyone has a mobile phone today and they speak to each other with mobile phones today.

Has the CB gone out of use?

Yes, the CB has, but the VHF is still going. You must have VHF for safety. Yes. But I don't think there's so much of the big wireless as we would call it – RT. I don't know if that has to be onboard today, I'm not very sure. But VHF must be onboard.

What instruments did you have onboard? When did the radars and that sort of thing start?

The first thing we had was the Echo Sounder for locating the herring. That existed when I first started, they had started with the Echo Sounder and that started I'm sure around 1950 or so.

Is that a sort of screen?

Yes, and it would show the sea-bed and you could see the herring between you and the sea-bed.

And would it show you rocks and things like?

O no, it wouldn't show you rocks until you were above them. It wouldn't show anything that was in front of you or round about you.

O I see.

It was no use for rocks or anything like that.

How would you know about rocks and things like that then?

O just your own knowledge. Then...the first radar we had was on the first *Ribhinn Donn*. It wasn't on her when we built her at all but we got it a year or two after we built her. When was she built – in 66 – maybe in 68 or so? We had a radar on the first *Ribhinn Donn*.

And what does the radar show?

The radar shows round about you. It shows you the land. It won't show you rocks but it will show the land round about you. The radar was useful in the dark...the radar was useful.

Is there anything today which will show rocks?

O yes. Then we got...I don't know what year that was...the sonar. You know, like the submarines had during the war? When you watched a wartime film and you would hear this ping ping from the sonar, we got one of them. That put out... you got a picture round about you.

Did that use sound?

O it would show you a picture too. You could see a picture of the sea-bed. If there was a hard place or a rock or anything like that you would see it. And you would see... well it was used to find fish...that was what it was used for. If there was fish round you, it would show you it. The echo sounder would only show you what was around you but this would show you the fish that was around you see. If there were two boats towing, with the trawl, if you saw a shoal of herring in front of you, well you could steer so that it would go between the two boats and it would go into your net.

What boats, what were the names of the boats here? Do you remember?

O well there was...

Lots!

My father had the *Britannia*. There was the *Try Again*, the *Daffodil*, the *Village Maid*, the *Jasper*, the *Agate*, the *Golden Rule*, *Racer*, *Virgin*, *Industry*, *Golden Eagle*, *Choice*...what other ones were there now? There was the

Thistle – I vaguely remember the *Thistle*. There was the *Celerity* – I don't remember many just now.

Did many have Gaelic names?

There weren't many Gaelic names. I can say that the *Ribhinn Donn* was the only one in those days that had a Gaelic name. Murdo had one, when he sold the *Britannia* and got a smaller one, he called it *Faire* [Vigil].

There was one called A' Mhaighdeann Hearach wasn't there?

O yes, *A' Mhaighdeann Hearach*. That was the first one with a Gaelic name.

Which was the biggest boat ever in Scalpay?

The longest one was the *Ribhinn Donn*. She and the *Vigilant* were 63 ft. The *Ribhinn Donn* was just a couple of inches longer. That was the biggest of the boats.

She was bonny.

She was. She was a lovely boat. They were all lovely boats.

And where did she go when you sold her?

She went to Ireland...to Ireland...and she's still there. She still fishes. She still fishes out of Port Avogie.

There were many characters here that were at the fishing I'm sure. I've heard some names. Did Alasdair Coineagan fish or was it just cargo he was involved with?

Yes, yes. But they had the *Golden Eagle*, the Cunninghams. They were at the driftnets on the *Golden Eagle*. Well Rodaidh Alasdair had her, Alasdair Cunningham's son. And they had the *Seagull*. The song your father sings about 'The Wee Boat?'

O yes. Am bàta beag cho bòidheach beag?

They had that one. The *Seagull*.

The Seagull?

The *Seagull*.

When would that have been? I wonder when the song was made?

O well, I remember her. I remember the boat herself. They weren't doing anything with her when I remember her. The song was made before my time.

He made other songs too didn't he?

Well, it was Alasdair Cunningham who received the credit for that song but some maintained that it was the man who was with him that made the song. But I'm of the opinion that it was Alasdair Cunningham who made the song. He speaks in the song of the 'boy who was with him'.

Yes. Who was that?

A man they called Ruairidh Nèill. Do you know Ruairidh Mòr – Tàpaidh? That boy's grandfather. That was the one that was with her.

They also say that it was he that made that port "Tha bean agam, tha taigh agam." Is that right?

I never heard that.

Didn't you? You know [the song] "Tha punnd de shiabann geal agam." [I have a pound of white soap]

Yes.

I heard that anyway. I don't know if it's correct.

Now I never heard that.

It's strange you never then. I don't know if that's correct.

Morag will know. I don't know. It's hard for me to swallow that but it's possible he did.

I must ask Morag. I might have picked that up wrong, I don't know. What about Dòmhnall Ruairidh who was at the gutting?

Yes. He smoked – he made kippers.

Where did he do that?

He was at the outer pier. That big shed that the fish farm has today. I remember the shed in which he made the kippers. There were two or three of these sheds then. There were two piers there then, where the outer pier is today. That was where the *Loch Mòr* used to call before the ferries started. And there was another pier a short distance in from that, in a corner there, and that was called the Stewart's pier. The one that gutted there must have been a Stewart. I remember that one, the Stewarts pier. It was falling apart when I first remember it. And Domhnall Ruairidh had a shed there where he was at the kippering.

And can you still see these piers?

No. There's no sign of the pier at which the *Loch Mòr* used to call...it was ourselves that demolished it when we were working at the salmon. We put a concrete pier in its place.

Where is that?

Just over there [points]. See where you see the small boat...with a white wheel-house? See the big shed down there? That's where that pier was. The *Loch Mòr* used to call there on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday.

And what do you call this pier? [pointing]

They called that The Station. They used to gut there too. That was in...when would it be?...that pier was built in 1970 or so. When we took the first *Ribhinn Donn* home in 76 she was on an anchor. That pier wasn't there at all.

And where that factory is, down there...when was that built?

O that was built with the factory itself. There was never a pier or anything there. That pier was built when the factory was built.

And where the ferry crossed, was that made especially for the ferry?

O yes, yes.

That had nothing to do with fishing?

No, no. That was built for the ferry.

And the skerries round here...you will know all their names?

O yes. Ha ha! And you would have to know where they were too!

You would! What skerries are there then? What would you call this out here?

That's Cuddy Point. There's one there after you go round Cuddy Point called *Sgeir NicCuinn*, whoever *NicCuinn* was [...] That's what that one was called. There was one over there at *Stiughhaigh* called *Sgeir a' Cheann Reamhair*, and then there is *Sgeir a' Bhraghaid Mhòir* outside of that. And *Sgeir Urgha* is in at the shore just up there, just on *Urgha* and *Cuidhtis Sgeir* is just up from *Sgeotasaigh* there, that's all that's round here I can say.

What about going out to the Shiants?

There's nothing there. Between here and the Shiants, you go out the Kyle here and if you keep straight for the Shiants there's nothing there. But there is a skerry they call *Damhaig* – it's in that song your father sings. There's a light on her today, on *Damhaig*. *Sgeir an Nodha* is out from the light...now there are three...if you went out from here to the north of Skye...there are three skerries in a line. There's *Sgeir an Nodha*, and *Sgeirean Maola* and *Griadaich*

a' Chuain. These three are out there between you and the end of Skye. That one is called *Griadaich a' Chuain* but there is another *Griadaich* to the South West of the light closer to land...there's a light on that one now too...*Griadaich*.

But you would have to know these skerries.

O yes.

Was it your father that told you about them?

It came down through the generations.

You would hear about them when you were growing up?

Yes, yes. When I went out with Iain first I didn't have much knowledge but as I was going on...

Did you ever hit a skerry?

Yes, one night with that one. It was Iain that was on her [skipping her]. We came across...I think it was from Skye we came...myself and the *Majestic*. It was dark, bleak winter's night. And he had a radar too and after coming round *Stiughaigh* out there...I was behind his in the wheelhouse and I saw...you could see the lights on the jetty over there...you could see the jetty shining and I said to Iain "You're keeping too close to the back of *Aird na Cille*". And he turned the wheel out, to come to the left with her – to port – and the next thing she hit! It was the darkness of the night...and he was altering the picture on the radar at the time, making it bigger, and as he was shifting he misjudged, and the *Majestic* was following us. She stuck...she didn't come off at all. She stayed until the tide took her off.

Was she damaged?

She was damaged slightly, but no great damage was done. She didn't start to leak or anything like that. That's the one thing I can remember.

Were you ever really frightened at sea?

No. I can't say I was ever really frightened while I was there.

Were you ever caught out in a really bad gale?

We were out in gales right enough, yes, but I can't say I was ever frightened.

What was the worst gale you were ever out in?

O [force] nine or ten, that would happen.

That would be pretty rough!

O yes. That would happen. You wouldn't go out in it but it might come upon you.

You would have to keep a close eye on the weather.

O yes, yes. But you trusted those who were with you. It was Iain that was skippering mostly. He was older than me and more experienced than me. I trusted him. I suppose that was the reason I wasn't scared...and everyone was in the same position. You trusted the person who was in charge.

Did you have to gain a ticket to go to sea?

Yes. When we got the first *Rìbhinn Donn* she was just under the 25 tonnes. If you had a boat over 25 tonnes you had to have a ticket. She was within that...she wasn't quite 25 tonnes. But the money we got for the first *Rìbhinn Donn*, it wasn't from the Highlands and Islands Development Board, but from the Herring Industry Board. It was from the Herring Industry Board in Edinburgh that we got help for the first one. At that time they advised one of us to go for a ticket – myself or Iain. And Iain was older than me and he said “You go for it.” So myself and two other boys from here went to Edinburgh, to Leith, and we were the first in Scalpay to get tickets.

How long were you there for?

Nearly three months. More than two months anyway. We stayed in the Sailors' Home in Leith. And then, how long...now when the second *Rìbhinn Donn* came that one needed a ticket as she was over...

But you had a ticket.

I had a ticket, but that meant that if I wasn't onboard that Iain couldn't take her out. And Iain went then and he was actually seven years older than he was when I got it. But he went and got it. A few of the boys here went for tickets – well, they would have to. Like *Coinneach Sticky* there and *Dòmhnall Beag Dhòmhnail Maireid* and *Murchadh Mòr* and *Murchadh Ailig Aonghais Bhàin* and *Dàbhaidh* and all these boys.

Did you have to pay to do that?

No, no.

And the help you received to buy the boats, did you have to pay that back or was it a grant?

Both. Some got loans too.

But that was a help.

Yes, yes. I remember, when was it now? 1977, *Ceiteag Thormoid* down the road here died – she was married to *Calum na Corraig*. Her brother had the *Scalpay Isle*. And when Ceiteag died, Finlay her brother had the ticket, but nobody on board but himself had a ticket. And when Ceiteag died he stayed at home for a week or two and he came where I was so that I would go out in his place on the *Scalpay Isle* as Iain had a ticket for the *Ribhinn Donn*. And I went out for a week or two in the *Scalpay Isle* instead of Finlay. With the law, it was a bit risky if something was going to happen with someone without a ticket on board.

You have a lot of knowledge about the fishing, which is obvious.

I'm not as knowledgeable as *Murchadh Dhòmhnail Iain* at all but he was at it a lot longer than I was.

DISK ENDS

