

27th January 2017

Can she bait a line? Fisher Women in Northumberland

A packed audience was treated to an informative talk by local historian and poet, Katrina Porteous, at the January meeting of Glendale Local History Society. As the Chair remarked it was the first time we have had to provide “sitting-on-the-floor-room only!”

Katrina made excellent use of various images from the past depicting girls and women whose lives were integral to the fishing industry of the north-east coast. Those fishing communities are connected by the Anglian culture in which dialect and the fishing coble are fundamental. Starting with the American artist Winslow Homer of the Cullercoats artists’ colony, she led us from the romanticised “bonny fisher lasses” through to Isa Thompson’s pair of fishwives in their dark clothing trudging over the shore and on to beautiful medieval images from France and Italy of women practising the skills still in use in these parts 700 years later. The method of knitting a net has not changed for even longer, possibly 6000 years! Numerous photographs from places like Seahouses, Beadnell, Craster and Newbiggin gave an insight into the work and toil of these hardworking women. It was fascinating to travel back in time to familiar places such as the car park at Beadnell Beach occupied by women rough-salting the herring before the finer packing into wooden barrels when there was a glut.

Just as important as the images in this talk were the quotes and anecdotes which Katrina has collected from local people working in the industry for many years. Thank goodness she did! For many of these characters are now no longer with us and fishing, as it was in the first part of the 20th century, has now almost disappeared. Some of the people Katrina has known have inspired her poetry, now published in several books. Among these was Cathy, from Newbiggin and later Amble, whom she described as “busy as a sanderling”. Bird-watching members of the audience did not miss the allusion.

Fundamental to the women’s story is the fact that without their work the men could not do their job and fish could not be caught. It was women’s job to bait the long lines, half a mile in length, with 700 hooks each requiring a limpet and mussel to be added by hand before men could go out with the boat. Normally each man took two half-lines, carefully wound into a “sweel”, a basket shaped to hold the line so it could be fed into the water smoothly at the right time. The woman who had several unmarried grown-up sons was to be pitied for she would have all those lines to bait every day. In some cases other women had to be paid to do so as it was a time-consuming and skilled job. It was rare for a man to marry into a non-fishing family simply because it was essential to have a wife who already had the skill to bait a line. It was not a skill a woman could simply “pick up”. And of course they had first to fetch and carry home the bait from the shore! It is said that Beadnell women walked to Waren Mill to gather limpets which they took home to plant on the rocks at Beadnell in the

early 20th century. Such toil meant that it was usual for women in fishing villages to die much younger than men.

From the end of the 18th century the herring industry began to be industrialised. Most of the fish was exported to the Baltic, once improved methods of preservation were introduced. We learnt about the tradition of the herring girls, both those resident in local villages who must have anticipated the arrival of the herring shoals each year with mixed feelings and those from the North of Scotland who followed the fleets down the coast as far as Lowestoft. In the early 19th century they travelled with the boats but used the railway from the middle of the century. The latter were fortunate enough to acquire some freedom and independence as well as hard cash through their work but at what cost! Paid a retainer for the months they were not working, it was not unknown for them to work up to 16 hours daily. Employed by the coopers, many of whom settled in the county from Scotland, the girls slept in dormitories above the herring yards. They worked in teams of 3, with 2 gutters and 1 packer, aiming to deal with 1 fish per second. Those gutting suffered numerous cuts on their hands from the sharp knives used. The record is said to have been set at Seahouses when a team packed 24 barrels in a single day, each barrel containing 1000 herring. Some of the Scottish women went on to marry Northumbrian fishermen.

Smaller villages like Beadnell ceased their involvement when over-fishing by steam trawlers from the Tyne saw a decline but places like Seahouses continued to fish for herring after WW1.

Women's work did not end when the men set sail with their baited lines. Many would walk miles carrying their own weight in creels on their backs as they sold the fish at markets or door-to-door around neighbouring villages. Once home again they would take up their knitting needles and oiled wool to knit ganseys for their menfolk, incorporating their own family motifs into the pattern. They would even knit as they walked and waited for the boats to return.

Another task for women was launching the boats. The coble came into its own in the absence of a harbour. Its flat bottom was designed so it could be dragged over the sand where there was no harbour. To avoid men getting wet from wading into the water before going to sea, women carried out this task and also launched lifeboats. This was such a hard job that many families moved from places like Newbiggin to Amble, where there was a harbour. There are many tales of heroic action by these strong women in times of rough and dangerous weather.

Katrina's presentation was followed by numerous questions from an enthusiastic audience, privileged to hear this knowledgeable and inspirational speaker.