

## SAND GROWN 'UNS

by

Tess Pickford

The first fingers of dawn lighten the sky over Morecambe Bay. The town sleeps. The only signs of life are the dipped headlights of a car approaching the promenade.

It stops. A figure, bulky in oilskins ambles towards the slipway. Another ~~figure~~<sup>CAR</sup> - another well clad figure - 10 of them eventually appear.

All that remains of the 200 band of men who once fished Morecambe Bay.

These survivors are a breed set apart, the nucleus of the many who can proudly claim they are 'Sand Grown 'uns', born and bred along the shores where shrimping, cockling, musselling and the wet fish industries once ruled supreme.

The fishermen of today retain the strength of character of their forefathers - tough, professional, most of them are following a family tradition. They know their job. They know the complex waters of the Bay. They have their own brand of fine independence, laced with a salty humour. As they heave fishing gear on board, remarks fly from boat to boat, the dry Lancashire wit as sharp as the dawn breeze. They are the first to scoff at any 'heroic' label, but they have proved their worth, many as members of the RNLI, all ready to help each other when the going gets rough.

Sadly they are a dwindling band, for despite the world wide fame of Morecambe Bay shell-fish, the high overheads and costly equipment cream away the profits; in former days each boat had a crew of two men - now they must work single handed, excepting when an enthusiastic amateur offers his services - 'just for the ride'.

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Working single handed is a hard job, especially when shrimping, which is done in shallow water, which ~~now-a-days is done~~ <sup>20 ft in water</sup> mainly with trawl nets, some 2ft 6" to 4ft 6" in length. As soon as the shrimps are hauled aboard they are boiled, in water kept hot by bottled gas.

"It is a fact that Morecambe Bay shrimps are the best in the world," said Mr Sam Baxter, a well known local character whose son, Mark, is the fifth generation of his family to fish the Bay.

"They are the best," said Sam. "The salinity of the water is our speciality, and the clean sands washed by tides twice a day, with fresh water from four rivers flowing endlessly into the Bay.W

Sam was a fisherman all his life, until he suffered an accident some 15 years ago. He was also a crew member of Morecambe lifeboat, then its secretary for many years, and now he is proud to be president of the <sup>LOCAL</sup> lifeboat station. Recently, he had a very happy ~~pre~~ evening, when he was present to see his son, Mark, also a RNLI crewman receive a framed letter of commendation for his part in rescuing a sail boat, last autumn.

Nobody can have a better claim than Sam to be a 'sand grown 'un'. he was born in Morecambe Street, Morecambe, and when he started to fish the boats had just oars and a sail. Now they have engines, and Sam dismisses the harshness of the single handed work with the quip:

"At least they don't get cold - doing two jobs keeps 'em warm."

But he is the first to deplore the expenses which are bringing doom to the fishing fleet;

"These lads get no ~~st~~ subsidy, and their licence fees are very heavy," he said. <sup>RUNNING COSTS</sup>

When he had to give up fishing he became manager of Morecambe Trawlers Ltd., a job he held until his retirement in May this year. He remains chairman of the enterprise, which is a co-operative, formed in 1919, to sell at a fair price the fish which then was caught from the Solway to the Ribble.

The 10 fishermen still use the co-operative to sell their catch, which at different times of the year includes whitebait, flounders, <sup>PLAICE</sup> ~~heering~~ - anything which comes into the nets. Fish which local housewives may buy the day it is caught, giving them the lead on the London chefs who take the bulk of the catch for top class restaurants.

One of the fishermen, 59 years old Benny Wodehouse, does his own marketing of shrimps, from his stall on Lancaster market. A fisherman for 45 years, Benny remembers the days when picking the shrimps from their shells was a brisk cottage industry in Morecambe.

"When I was young there were no fridges, and we used to ~~put~~ rub salt into the shrimps, pack them in barrels, put on water-tight lids, then turn the barrels over to be sure the salty water ran through them. Before they were sold they had to be washed clean - it was quite a job," he said.

Benny still picks his own shrimps, but health authority <sup>regulation</sup> ~~restrictions~~ have ended the cottage industry, the shrimps now being picked under licence in hygienic conditions.

"Which means more expense," said Benny. "But everything connected with our job is expensive. And there's no security - if you don't catch owt, you don't get owt."

In a bigger way of retailing is Mr Bob Baxter - no relation to Sam - whose firm, James Baxter & Sons was established in 1799. Now in business as Baxters Frozen Foods, the firm has the distinction of holding two Royal warrants - H.M. the Queen's, and the Queen Mother's.

~~xxxxxxx~~ "Our shrimps are good because they are boiled on the fishing boats, then potted in the same way as grandma used to pot them - with herbs and butter," said Mr Bob Baxter.

As well as supplying the Royal households the potted shrimps are in demand at the big London restaurants.

"People in this area don't realise what a delicacy they are considered to be in other parts of the country," said Mr. Baxter.

Another firm which despatches this delicacy to all parts of the country is The Smokehouse, on St. George's Quay, Lancaster. They also specialize in traditionally smoke in oak salmon, some of which comes from the river Lune, which runs alongside the quay.

Where the ~~old~~ <sup>former</sup> Custom House has been restored to house the fascinating Lancaster Maritime Museum, As well as displays which graphically describe Lancaster's role as a port in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the museum also displays a full feature on Morecambe Bay's shrimping, cockling, musselling and wet fish industries, along with a whammel boat, used for salmon fishing in the river Lune, 8

It is a similar custom built boat, the 'Sirius', constructed in Overton in 1923, which Mr Tom Smith still uses for his salmon fishing, in the Lune estuary.

A member of the two Sunderland Point families whkxhx to which the five licensed salmon fishermen belong, ~~Mr~~ <sup>Mr</sup> Tom's story is similar to that of the fishermen of Morecambe Bay - he has ~~xxx~~ fished all his life, following the pattern set by his father and his father's father.

"Our boats were made to be worked by two men, but for the past 20 years or so we have been forced to work single-handed because of the heavy overheads," said Tom. 9

These include pricey licence fees for the 10 drift nets, 26 haff nets and the one seine net used by the Lune salmon fishers.

Drift netting is done on the ebb tide, with nets of a maximum 300 yards. Starting off Cockerham sands, the boats drift at intervals along the stretches of the Lune.

The main way of fishing however is by the use of haff, or half nets, a method dating back to the days of the Vikings, the word haff being Norse for deep. The 8 ft net has a wooden beam with a tall staff, and the fisherman stands motionless in the water waiting for the salmon to strike his net. 10

"The biggest problem is the cold. However many warm clothes or protective ~~clothes~~ <sup>gear</sup> you wear, the cold always seeps through," said Tom. 4

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The seine net operates by being released from the back of the boat, and floating out in a semi circle, the end returning to the same boat.

The salmon fishing season is from April until the end of August, no fishing being allowed at weekends for conservation reasons.

~~Realistically~~ <sup>the season</sup> "Realistically only starts in June," said Tom. "And although we work round the clock on the two tides a day during the season, we estimate that we take only about 10 per cent of the river's salmon. Most of the fish comes into the river in September or October, after the end of the season."

They go to spawn in the upper reaches of the river where they were spawned, and spent the first two years of their life. Then they go out to sea, sometimes across oceans, but always to return in their first or subsequent years - often returning tens of times.

"It doesn't lose its wonderment because you see the miracle every day," said Tom.

Who finds no wonderment at all in that part of the sky line blotted by Heysham Power Station.

"I don't like it, I'm dead against it," he said. "But I do give samples to their laboratory people, and so far there's been no bad reports."

Unlike the factory pollution which at one time ruined the river for salmon. Until legislation stopped the pollution, and the river immediately cleared. Now with the coming of Lancaster's new sewerage works, <sup>another</sup> ~~that~~ problem is well controlled.

"Fish won't run in dirty water," said Tom. "They need healthy conditions, and the Lune is now a healthy river." There's no better salmon than fish coming in from the salt water of the sea - many people prefer <sup>Lune</sup> ~~it~~ to Scottish salmon."

Unfortunately the men who catch it have difficulties in making a decent living. The past two summers have been especially bad, with the everlasting rain flooding the estuary with fresh water.

The increasing number of fish farms have also hit ~~the~~ salmon fishermen, for they have had to keep down their prices to compete with the farm reared fish. 3

Most of the Lune fishermen have another job, like Tom, who works the small market garden adjoining his home.

Like their colleagues who fish Morecambe Bay, the Lune salmon fishers can envisage no other way of life.

One man who did change his job was Mr Keith Willacy, a member of a family which has fished Morecambe Bay for almost 100 years. In 1959 he surprised his colleagues by taking the job of enforcement officer with the North Western and North Wales Sea Fisheries Committee.

"Instead of going after fish, I went out to get men," was Keith's somewhat Biblical description of his change of job. 4

But he remained a keen member of Morecambe and Heysham Fishermen's Lifeboat Association. All the local fishermen were involved in the Association, financing their own rescue boat with the aid of voluntary contributions. In 1964 the RNLI opened a station in Morecambe and supplied an inshore rescue boat; the fishermen transferred to the national service, Keith being Senior Helmsman until his retirement last March.

Keith is optimistic about the future of the fishermen, which he thinks are going through a state of change. He says shrimping has been poor for some five years, but is now recovering, while he hopes that the market is beginning to realise the value of such fish as mullet and bass - caught in the Bay but never 'fashionable' on the fishmonger's slab. 5

"These sort of fish had a working class image, but now, they are going up the ladder, via Morecambe fishermen," said Keith.

He agrees that the fishermen are a special breed of Sand Crown 'uns, determined and set in their chosen way.

"They're independent - though maybe that's now regarded as an anti-social evil," Keith laughs.

Mr Sam Baxter thinks that the sea and its harvest has a fascination for fishermen:

"They're individualists who will go on doing it because they are draw to it," he said.

Speaking of the special type of character demanded by those who follow their chosen way, He adds:

"They've got to have a sense of humour. They've got to be philosophical."

End