

After the Ebb

“It was an adventure. It was exciting all the time.
I suppose I liked being with my Dad.

That first trip I remember when I was five ...
Piel Island it was late in the season.
And we went to the pub ... I was blown away because
there was no electricity, there was just oil lamps.
It was creepy ...

I can remember a fireplace. These kittens
on a hearth. And a glass of lemonade.
These fishermen were a yarning ...
And I bit a lump out of the glass.
I felt so embarrassed...
They were "Oh! Are you alright?"
"Yes course I'm alright"
Dad said "We'd better pay for the glass.."
"No course you won't!"
They were really lovely and welcoming.

And then I can remember thinking how
wonderful it was with all these oil lamps
and everything around.

*It was just like magic.
Being on an island.*

After we'd been in the pub that night
we rowed out and we slept on the boat.
My Dad wrapped me up in the sail
and stuck me up in the forecandle.
We had an oil lamp on the boat too ...

Later on I used to go to Piel Island for
weeks with my Dad in the summer ...

... he just used to let me run wild, basically ...

“... you spend a day at sea. Quite exhilarating.
The weather is never the same.
The sea can be fantastic.
You never know what you're going to catch.

There's all these uncertainties.
And then when you do get back in - it's great.
The feeling of coming home again.
Or going ashore, after being out all day is great.

“We all went fishing, all of us as young boys.

Hand netting with little tiny hand nets.

Getting rubber dinghies, pretending they were trawlers.

And then when I was about eight, I got a trip with a fella called George Mount
on his boat called the "Jane". He took me out for the first time, and it was great.
And then from then on, we just carried on ... It was brilliant.

Yer 'ad to do as yer's told.

But that was the way to grow up to fishing.

They all knew what they were doin'.

There was some really good fishermen and it was brilliant ...

And that set us boys off on a road of going to sea.

“So I was left with my Dad.
Which gave me an amazing upbringing really.
I mostly thrived on happy neglect.
You know benign neglect.

He let me have so much freedom when I think back now ...

He treated me like a lad really.
When I was older, like eleven, twelve ...
... he used to tie my plaits the day we set off so tight with a bit of rope on the bottom.
And he never used to look at my hair again for whole rest of holiday.

And I loved it.



“One fella had a net made.
I said, “*That reminds me of a stocking.*”
He said, “*Well. It catches.*”
I said, “**Well. To my mind it's not a net.**”

A chap brought a net in, it had 20-mesh-tail-end...
And it weren't catching.
I said, “*You know why?*”
He said, “*No. Why?*”
“*Well, shrimps'll come down that side and go round up that side. They can't get in the tail end. Too narrow.*”
He said, “*No. You're talking wet.*”
I said, “*I'll tell you what. I'll put a tail end on for you. And if it dun't catch ... it's free.*”
If it catches, you pay me for it.
He said, “**YER ON!**”

And his wife rung.
She said, “*I just thought I'd tell yer, Ernie lad.*”
He's cook-a-hoop! His net's caught.
He's brought home five stone of shrimp!
“Thought I'd tell you. 'Cause he's not gonna tell you!”
All cause 'e dun't want to pay for a tail end! 4

“**Our pots contain 85% shrimp and 15% butter...**
Which is the highest ratio.
A lot of people do 70/30.
Some even do 60/40 ...
That's the way it's always been.
Nothing's changed...
Same spoon, isn't it?
Yep ... the actual buttering spoon.
It's silver. And that must be at least 90 years old.
That was Bob Baxter's christening spoon.
And we still use it! 7

“**What I got up to is nobody's business!**
I used to row about in dinghies that were fastened up to the wooden jetties. We had one.
Well - me grandad had one, me dad had one.
And we had the big boat anchored off. Moored off.

So I was forever taking the boat, the dinghy, around.
I said to a school mate after school one night,
“C'mon we'll go for a row”.
So we got in and tide was going out.
She wanted to go under the pier.
I was always going under the pier but there were places that you went and places that you didn't go.

Anyway, for some daft reason ... the end of the pier was all lots of criss cross beams ... **and the tide was ebbing.**
We stuck the dinghy like a bird's nest up in the pier.
And we had to climb down.
And we left the dinghy up there.
My dad went mad.
‘Cause we'd climbed down the pier and left it stuck like a bird's nest you know.
And my Dad went mad at that.
Next tide he went and got it.
Played hell at me he did. 1

“The fishermen used to organise their own funerals.
In the Methodist church.
All the fishermen and families would be present.
Four fishermen would be selected to carry the coffin.
They would carry the coffin out of the hearse and into the church. After the service they would go and ... pick up the coffin and take it out of the church.

Then all the fishermen present would form a line up in front of the hearse and walk in front of the hearse onto the promenade until we got to Green Street.
Then at Green Street they would come off ...
Come off the road to form a line along the promenade.
The hearse would slowly pass it on the way to the cemetery or the crem.

**And that was known as...
the fisherman's last look at the sea ...** 9

“**Snigs are little, baby eels. Elvers.**
Snigs are eels, basically.
I don't know where Dad set his snig pikes.
But, I know as a teenager ... when you sneak in at two o'clock in the morning when you should be in bed and you'd been to the dance.
Well, I let myself in through the kitchen door.
(We didn't have a fridge. We had a larder.)
And I didn't put the light on.
Took me shoes off.
And suddenly I'm screaming!
I'm treading on all these things that escaped from the bucket in the larder.
All over the kitchen floor.
And I woke the whole household.
Did I get my blessing really ... yes, so that was snigs. 1

“**I didn't do so bad!**
Because I was so striking ...
... the Bay City Rollers were at the Morecambe Bowl.
And the lead singer was doing one of his hits and directing it at me.
Then when he'd finished he said, “*Can I say something?*”
And I said, “*What?*”
And he said, “**Yer hair looks like an explosion in a mattress factory!**”
Oh yeah, we did alright. **We had a good time!** 2

swim unaided and self-propelled, from Deep to Shallow, one length of the Super Swimming Stadium Bath, one of the longest baths in Britain, and is hereby elected and accepted as a BLUE SEAGULL

“I spent a lot of time in the swimming stadium.
Because I was interested in swimming.
My summers were spent in the big swimming stadium.
You got a blue seagull certificate for a full length...
I did my blue seagull on one of the coldest days of the summer...
And me Dad didn't believe I'd got it.
So he went to the stadium to check.
He said, “*Did somebody do a blue seagull?*”
“Aye, a little thing. She wouldn't stop.”
Me Dad said, “**No. There was money at the end of it!**”
I think there was 10 shillings.
2 and 6 pence for swimming across the half moon...
I got 5 shillings for swimming the breadth.
Then I got 10 shillings for the full Olympic length. 2

“**I was the first guy in Morecambe Bay fishing boat to have a VHF radio.**
That was so I could talk to the Fleetwood fishermen.
You wanted to talk to them, 'cause they would tell you where the fish were...
So without that, you were done.
You were deaf.
You couldn't hear a thing.
You thought, “*Well what's going on?*”
Once I put that radio in, I had a few friends who said, “*Charlie, you need to be here.*” or “*You need to be there.*”
So that was why I put it in.
I remember that first week, Roy Mitchinson said, “*Put that radio in. You'll make that back*”
And I think I made that price back in the first week - the price of the radio... 5

“You used to get stang fish occasionally. Stang fish.
They were weavers.
And they are a terrible stinger...
And if you got stung with the stang fish you were ill.
You were really ill.
They are still wary of them.
Fishermen are always wary of stang fish.
Oh, you were in excruciating pain really excruciating pain ... the whole body.
Localised - but it kind of spread through you.
They always said it was the worst thing you could imagine.
But men are soft aren't they?
I don't know whether it was as bad as childbirth ... but they always said it was the most excruciating pain.
I never got stung.
My Dad did. 1

We would mackerel fish of course.

You couldn't go so fast because you slowed down to mackerel fish. We had about four lines out. Two over the back and two over the side on a pole. It didn't have to be a fancy fishing pole ... the line was not very thick. Just like thick twine. Then on the end of it there was maybe about five yards of nylon, or gut in those days.

And for bait to start off with he used a bit of silver paper out of a cigarette packet.

But as soon as you got a mackerel ...

You shaved a bit of its silver off and put that on the hooks.

So it looked like a little fish.

And you were either in the mackerel or you weren't. And if you were in them you'd get up to about two or three hundred at once. **So we ate mackerel.**

We'd have flagons of water, but at the chemist's shop we had an off-licence.

So we used to take big flagons of cider with us.

And I've had, more than once, several times ...

Mackerel just headed and gutted, boiled in a bucket of cider. Because we'd run out of water! 1

I would run wild on the Island with all the other kids.

Sometimes we'd go up to Barrow.

Up the channel.

Anchor at Ferry Beach

And he would leave me on the other the boat in the middle of Barrow Channel.

Well, I had to amuse myself.

I used to do daft things like rolling around in the dinghy...

But one night I was rolling around and it was dark.

I could see 'cause there was lots of lights around.

It wasn't pitch dark.

It was Barrow Channel and there were roads on either side of the channel and lights and boats.

But a bloomin' submarine came up.

It was not under the water. It was above.

It was only going slowly. But I thought, *'Blimey, it might not see me'* and I was scared.

And I thought, *'Once it gets here, once it's passed me, there'll be a big wash.'* And I didn't want this...

So I remember rowing like mad to get back on board the 'Nora'. And I did I got back on board.

Just as this submarine came past.

But I was wary of it.

I wasn't that brave.

I was glad to get back on board. 1

We'd anchor all night and go to bed.

And the line would be a big hefty sea rod. Two of them, one at each side. At the end of the rod, was fluke for bait. The lines were bloody big you know. Fixed in a bucket. So if you got a bite, the bucket couldn't leave the cockpit 'cause it was tied in. *The bucket would rattle in the cockpit to wake you up.* How lucky was I to be able to do that? **I just loved it!**

The bucket rattled. I remember getting stuck one night in the cabin doors - trying to get out of the cabin and into the cockpit. And me and me dad and his mate were all wedged in the door ...

I remember that! And it was such fun.

The tope used to fight like hell.

I've got photos of lots of tope experiences...

This was a bit of a cheat really.

They put this tope into the *News of the World 'Fish of the Week'* competition.

I was there.

And I was well in up to the elbows catching this tope.

But they gave me the credit for this tope.

And I won.

I won the 'Fish of the Week' competition.

I felt guilty because I hadn't done the whole thing. Had I hell - it was the size of me!

My picture was in *The Visitor* ... with this bloody tope on a broom handle next to me.

And I was old at this time.

I was about 11 and I was a little fatty.

And it said *"stalwart Jacqueline Brooks"*

I didn't want to be *'stalwart Jacqueline Brooks'*

I felt right daft about it... 1

The Bay's a tragedy waiting to happen, isn't it?

People walk out too far. They literally walk into the tide.

They fall in if they're drunk ...

There was an incident, I remember now.

Some young men, in summer. They ran out of, I think it was *The Queen's Hotel*, I think ... They ran.

They'd been drinking all night. They ran across the promenade. Straight down the slipway. Into the water.

Presumably having a laugh ... midnight swim and all that.

And the tide was going out.

There was certainly one, maybe two, drowned.

They got two or three of them, because there was somebody night fishing on the Stone Jetty that caught one of them.

Presumably by his fishing lines ...

I think it was two that they didn't rescue.

Me Dad had to go for them.

But that was just lads being silly.

Out of the pub - into the tide. It was just, well - stupidity and a fast ebbing tide. 2

They were built by Crossfield's.

They were very special to this area on account of the fact that they were quite shallow draught. **So if they came aground it didn't damage them.**

They had this low counter which was very good for shooting the nets off the end.

... they could sail like witches ...

They were built to trawl sailing.

I mean later on, even in my day they were all engines.

But they would still trawl under sail. If the wind was right. 1

Swimming, roughly - Grange to Morecambe. But you couldn't swim in a straight line because of the tides.

When you got to this side, the finish, the tide would be ebbing out and it would bring you down.

So, you'd have an easier swim down to the end. It usually finished round about the Stone Jetty.

They'd get in the water at Grange, and they all had their own individual boat that rowed them across.

You stayed with that boat all the way across.

You had to go up and down, you'd to weave ... because of sandbanks and tides.

You couldn't just get in at Grange and look at Morecambe and think - *'Right, I'm going over there!'*

The advantage you had with having rowers who either were fisherman or had fished was ...

... they had a pretty good idea where the tide was flowing.

And you could take advantage.

Most of 'em made it. But you'd to be very careful ... if you got onto a sandbank, you were snookered.

'Cause if you stood up, and took one step - you were disqualified. 3

We would be out at weekends with me pal Davy Brown rowing.

We'd be hand netting.

Going with the fishermen come summer.

We'd walk down the pier

And jump off .

And swim to the side

And get told off by the people on the pier.

We were forever swimming, jumping, swimming ...

In the days when I was hand netting.

I was in competition with two or three other little lads.

We were all pushing our hand nets about.

Who would catch the most?

And we were really pretending to be like proper trawler men.

We would sell the shrimps .

Get them picked at home and sell them to the local shops.

Then we would compare who had the most at night. 5

I was lucky. I fell overboard.

Landed in the water ...
First thing you do - I got back to side of me boat.
I kicked me thigh boots off. 'Cause they were
filling wi' water ...
'Cause they would have took us down.
As the fishing officer said, *"If you have the
misfortune to fall overboard, always grab hold of
your boat and get rid of your boots first."*
Otherwise they just weigh you down.

A voice told me, ***Don't panic!
Go to the back. Go to the back.***

And I got to the back and got one foot on ... the
engine were still running. The boat was going
because I was bringing me net in.
And, I don't know how... I must have fainted.
I don't know how I got aboard.

But I got me hand on to the deck, and I don't
remember after that.
And they said, *"How you got on board wi' only
one hand, I don't know. How did you do it, Ernie?"*
And I said, *"I don't know."*
I said, ***"It might have been a swordfish
come underneath ... and stuck me up
the backside!"***

***Sometimes they would go out and not get very much.
So you would move from one area to another.
To see if the shrimps had gone there.
It was ... chasing them round till you found where they were.
'Cos my Dad said once, he said,
"I swear the little beggars are burying themselves today!"
He'd tried various places...
He swore they were burying themselves in the sand...
And not coming out!"***

***Me father was a different kettle of fish ...
Shrimping.
Lifeboat.
Inshore swims.
Cross Bay swims.
Pleasure boats.
Fishing parties.
Anything, to go on the Bay...
Anything to do with the Bay.
You couldn't get him off it.***

Me mother didn't want me to go to sea. That was the only problem.
She said, *"Oh."* when I went to sea the first time.
I walked down the back street an' I was sixteen.
And she said, *"Oh - let 'im go"*
She says, *"After one trip, he'll come runnin' back."*
Which I didn't do. ***I stuck it out 'til I were sixty.***

***If the weather wasn't too bad in summer when we were off school,
me Dad would say, "Do you want to go in the morning?"
And he'd let me go trawling with him.
It could be anything from one or two o'clock in the morning...
... to four or five depending on the tide.
He'd let me go on the boat with him.
I thoroughly enjoyed that...
Just going out on the Bay.
Just you and your Dad and the boat ...
Watching the sun rise ...
And the seals and porpoises.
It was absolutely fantastic.***

He used to drag us behind the boat on that rope thing!
He'd set up a rope ... and a big piece of wood, a tiller handle...
And threw it over the stern of the boat.
So we could go overboard and hold onto it while he was pulling us through the water!
I remember once, swimming in the middle of the Bay.
And I was happy as Larry!
He'd say, *"Go on then, if you want to get in!"*
'Cause he'd take us out for pleasure as well. You know, on a nice day.
"We'll go and get the boat, and we'll go out."
And, I was swimming round. Happy as anything.
And I don't know what made me say, *"Any idea, how deep is it Dad?"*
"Eee, I don't know. Twenty five, thirty foot?"
"WHAT? I wanna come back!"
I couldn't touch the bottom ... I'm not staying!
I was alright till he told me how deep it was.

Designed and Compiled by Kate Drummond : www.tickled-pink.org
Using excerpts of oral histories recorded for Morecambe Bay Partnership's Catching Tales
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CATCHING TALES
FISHING STORIES FROM MORECAMBE BAY

MORECAMBE BAY
PARTNERSHIP

Headlands to Headspace

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