

Fishwives and Herring Girls

Most married women worked as unpaid assistants to their husbands in some capacity and the wives of fishermen were no exception. Life as a fisherman's wife was particularly hard; the living was uncertain and reliant on the vagaries of the fish shoals. It was also very dangerous and many fishermen left their wives as widows and their children, orphans. Unless the fisherman was only engaged in local, coastal fishing, he might also be away from home for extended periods of time. The censuses for fishing communities reveal many 'headless' households, where the husband and father was away at sea on census night.

The British trade with the fishing grounds off the coast of Newfoundland is well documented and dates back to the seventeenth century. Fishermen, particularly from the western coasts of Britain crossed the Atlantic, fishing for cod as they did so. The cod would be dried on the shores of Newfoundland and then sold on, often to European buyers. The wives of those engaged in the Newfoundland trade had to support their families, waiting for several months for their menfolk to return so they could benefit from their wages.

Many fishermen would be working on small family boats and the domestic economy of the fisherman's household was dependant on the contributions of the women. The wives might be expected to clean and mend nets. The nets would be spread out to dry, debris would be picked off and any holes mended. Many fishermen's wives also cleaned and re-baited fishing lines. Each line might contain over a thousand hooks and fixing small pieces of inferior quality fish to each sharp hook was hazardous.

The women would also be tasked to prepare the catch, gutting, cleaning, pickling or smoking the fish. Fish was usually salted down in large barrels, with the fishwife placing alternate layers of fish and salt in the wooden barrel until it was full. Often, the fisherman could not spare the time to sell his produce. That too might be left to his wife, who would walk to market or go door to door with her basket of fish, known as a creel, on her back. To supplement her husband's income, especially if he was away from home, the women of coastal communities might scour the rocks for mussels, cockles or limpets to sell.



Shucking Oysters in Newhaven

Hill & Adamson [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

In communities that lacked a harbour or jetty, women might wade out to the boat barefoot, in order to piggy back their husbands across the shallow water, so that they remained dry as they began their day or night's work. In addition, when the small fishing boats returned to shore, the women would be on the look-out, waiting to help to winch the boat in across the beach.

Women did not just cure fish that was caught by the family boat. A survey of women's labour, *Toilers in London; or, Inquiries concerning female labour in the metropolis*, published in 1899, wrote of the female workforce in the fish-curing factories of East London. "Curing fish is largely practised in Stepney. Fish-yards may be found there in which work goes on all the year round, and every day of the week, including Sunday. The fish is fetched from Billingsgate [the major London fish market] to be dried and taken back again when finished. Friday is the best day to see this work, for then the yards are full of fish. These yards are barns, attached to the houses at the back, and covered with tiles or straw. They are generally a few inches deep in water, and the women stand on boxes or stools while

preparing the fish. ... All sorts of fish are cured in these places- salmon, herrings, cod, and sprats, but chiefly haddock. The heads of the fish are cut off the bodies are cleaned and dipped in salt-water. They are then strung on iron bars, and hung up to dry. ... The work is very cold in winter. The girls say that icicles often hang from their fingers after they have dipped the fish in the salt water, and that hanging up the fish to dry in the hot cupboards gives them chilblains. ... The usual pay is 2s. 6d. or 3s. a day for the girls and women.”

Margaret Ward, in her book *Female Occupations: women's employment 1850-1950* (Countryside Books 2008) refers to a haddock smoking factory in Camberwell, London around the same time. Here the work was non-stop, with the women working day and night shifts to produce four tons of smoked haddock a day.

The notorious herring girls were much more independent. Each year the herring shoals arrived in the Shetland Islands, off the north coast of Scotland, in May or June. The herring then gradually made their way down the east coast of Britain, with the fishing fleets taking advantage of their journey. The season ended in September, by which time the fish were off the coast of the East Anglian ports of Yarmouth and Lowestoft. Herring need to be preserved swiftly, as they do not keep well. This might be achieved by drying, smoking, or salting but the latter was most common. Once salted, the herring were destined for Russia, Scandinavia and Germany and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a surge in the demand.

Employers recruited the girls from the east coast ports, offering wages that these women would find attractive. They were paid by the barrel but the best workers could earn up to ten shillings a day. Each year, several thousand herring girls followed the fleet down the coast in order to gut, clean and pack the fish as it was caught. The women might travel by ship, although some seamen regarded it as unlucky to have women aboard. As the railway network expanded they might travel by train. The herring girls were predominantly unmarried and the journey south was an opportunity to acquire a husband from another port. In some ports, wooden shelters were erected where small groups of women could live whilst the fleet was in the area, or they might lodge with local families. The herring girls might bring furnishings with them to make their temporary accommodation more comfortable.

The women worked in teams of three, two gutters to one packer. The herring gutters worked at incredible speeds and the most experienced might maintain a rate of fifty to sixty fish per minute. The gutters also sorted the fish by size and quality. Packing the herring, although requiring immersing the hands in salt, was less hazardous than wielding a razor sharp gutting knife. The conditions were poor and the days long, perhaps starting as early as 6.00am. The women were often working outside; the damp and the salt leading to sore hands and chilblains. Oilskin aprons protected their clothing to a certain extent but it was not a pleasant task. As the packed fish compressed, completed barrels had to be topped up and brine was added before the barrels were sealed.

In common with many groups of women who worked independently, the herring girls acquired a reputation for being brash and riotous. They adopted a distinctive dress, with striped underskirts and a dark flannel overgarment. The women were famed for their knitting whose style often reflected their port of origin. The knitted garments that they produced were an additional source of income.



Clovelly Fisher-girls
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Further Reading

Fisher Folk www.nefa.net/nefajnr/archive/peopleandlife/sea/fisherfolk2.htm

The Ferrow Fishwives <http://www.johngraycentre.org/people/east-lothian-folk/the-fisherrow-fishwives/>

Fishwives of East Lothian <https://www.johngraycentre.org/collections/local-history-centre/fishwives-of-east-lothian/>

Newhaven Fishwives <https://scotlands-sounds.nls.uk/index.php/2020/09/03/newhaven-fishwives/>

Newfoundland Salt Fish <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/economy/salt-fish-markets-1850.php>

The Cullercoats Fishwife <https://www.sunnisidelocalhistorysociety.co.uk/fishwives.html>

Frank, Peter *Yorkshire Fisherfolk* (Phillimore 2002)

Hadshar, Rose Angelica '*[T]heir Tales are sweet': a queer social history of fishwives in early modern London* (e thesis for the University of York 2016)

<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/17263/1/full%20draft.pdf>

Wilcox, Martin *Tracing your Fishing and Fishermen Ancestors: a guide for family historians* (Pen and Sword 2009)

A version of this article first appeared in Going In-depth Magazine in May 2017 and can also be found on the website of A Few Forgotten Women

<https://afewforgottenwomen.wixsite.com/affw>