

Extracts for Elphinstone Kist website : work

Interview with Mrs Agnes Scott, with contributions from Mr Jim Scott

The Woman's Role in Line Fishing in Gourdon (Gurden) – 1950s – 1970s

Mrs Agnes Scott, born 1928, recounts the life of a Gourdon fisherman's wife, 1950s – 1980s, focusing on the role of the woman in line fishing, her contributions, sheelin and baitin – shelling and baiting the 1200 hook lines.

Having risen at four in the morning, Agnes commenced work shelling mussels with her helper, working in a shed in the garden after her daughter was a little older but carrying out the work in the house itself to look after her when her daughter was very small. The mussels were delivered daily by the Gourdon Fishermen's Association lorry : mussels were obtained from various places including nearby Montrose and further afield Newburgh.

At the mussel troch ¹

Celia ; So, ye've got the mussel troch. The mussels are sittin inti the troch. Are they aa fool and dirty and garra ² or dae ye hae ti wash them first?

Agnes ; I usually washed them first at the back door there.

Celia: So ye clean up the mussels.

Agnes : Aye – cause they were an affa maiss.

Celia : Yer sittin aside the troch wi mussels intil't and - tell me fit yer gaen ti yoose ti open up the mussels and far yer gaen ti pit it. Noo, I ken the answer, Agnes, cause I'm a fisherman's dother as weel but this is ti get the details fae ye. So jist ging through it. Fit did ye yoose and far did ye pit them?

Agnes : Well, ye hid a sheel blade – fit ye caa'd a sheel blade – but ye kint that - and ye sheeled them intil a jar, or something for measuring foo much ye nought

Celia : That wid be a double jar – twa pund jar – or a pund – a jeely jar?

Agnes : Something onywye usually – ti sheel them inti

Celia ; And yer sheel blade – fit did that look like?

Agnes : They made them oot eh a knife...made them oot eh a knife ³

Celia : So the blade's quite short?

¹ A troch is usually a wooden container with raised sides.

² The mussels were delivered unwashed, coated in a kind of mud and when water was added it turned thick – and was described a garra watter.

³ Agnes asks Jim, her husband to bring through a sheel blade she has kept after finishing line work.

Agnes ; Aye – no – there wid be a bit cut aff.

Celia: And the handle's that bittie langer .

Agnes ; Aye – that's a widden handle, ye see. That's nae the knife handle.

Celia : So that wis puttin thegithir. Did Jm maak that or did ye buy it fae the Soshie?⁴

Jim: Yes., I made that. I made that.

Agnes : Did you maak that een?

Celia; Jim made that een. So custom-made ti be – the richt size for opening a mussel shell

Agnes : Aye, if ye got them that size. Ye ken yersel.

Celia : Now, there ye are. Yer sittin wi yer sheel blade, yer jar, yer trouch o mussels ...

Agnes ; A bath ti pit the shells in – *Yes, the empty shells* – aye, the empty shells and they were lifted up wi the larry usually and hurled doon ti far they threw them awa.

Celia : And foo lang wid it taak ye ti sheel enough mussels for a hale line?

Agnes ; It took me fower oors onywe. Three, fower usually.

Jim – aye it wid. Ye wid be lucky if ye got started at breakfast time ti bait.

Celia: And wis it – were they aisy ti get oot o the shell, Agnes? Were ye quick at that?

Agnes : Well, I wisna bad but some o them wis better than ithers. Some o them wis affa stiff to open. Ken, depends, I suppose far they'd been caught. They took them fae Montrose sometimes.⁵

Baiting the line

Celia: So, eence ye hid enough mussels sheeled and inti the jar or inti the basin, ye were aboot ready to start baitin the line. Okay – now maak a picture for us. You're sittin –now fit wid be on yer richt hand side, and yer left hand side – in front o ye. Fit wid it be like? Fit wye wid it be set oot?

Agnes ; Well, ye wid hae a stool, maybe nae quite sa high as that wi a troch on't, wi yer mussels in't, a basin wi the back eh a chair. ⁶ Ye'd sheeled yer mussels inti

⁴ Gourdon Fishermen's Association shop

⁵ Montrose is some 12 miles south of Gourdon

something and then put them in the bath or whatever for getting them lifted oot a the watter. Di you nae mind o that?

Celia : Yes, I do but I'm jist wantin the details fae you cause you're the expert – *laughter* – Now, yer sittin wi yer mussels, now far's the line and the skull?⁷

Agnes : Well, it's jist sittin in the sheddie and aa.

Celia : Ti yer richt hand, yer left hand side? And yer redden it ... the line's sittin intil a basket ...

Jim ; Ye redd it across this wye, on ti the skull, on a slope

Celia : So the basket's on which side o you, Agnes? Far the line is that yer gaen ti be pittin ...

Agnes : Ye tik it oot this side and bait and drap it inti the skull⁸ – wi grass in.

Celia : Yes, aye – now a skull is like a lang, oval-shaped basket, halfwye marked wi a piece o board gaen across?

Agnes : That's right. That's right.

Celia : Di ye pit, line the tap half, the tap o the oval wi grass? Aye . Or some people didna use grass avaa, did they?

Jim : Some folk yoosed grass and then ye yoosed paper atween the rows.

Celia: Sometimes ye didna need that. My mithir used ti bait toh. She didna sheel but she baited and she got so that she didna need ti pit in strips o paper atween the rows. She wis maybe a bittie like you. She wisna affa, affa fest at it but she wis affa careful. But it did taak her a good lot o oors.⁹ So how mony mussels did ye pit on each hook as yer were takin the line across and yer were taakin the hook oot o the tippin?

Agnes : Well, sometimes ye hid good days because ye hid affa good mussels and next time, the mussels in the shells wis little which meant ye'd mair .

⁶ Agnes indicates a somewhat higher than knee-high table where the tape recorder is sitting as we record. The chair back acts as a curved board made from the chair back where a small supply of mussels is placed for picking up for the next few hooks, constantly replenished from the basin itself.

⁷ The skull is a long oblong-shaped basket where the baited hooks and line are placed.

⁸ The line has been coiled into a large basket which is placed on the baiter's left. She picks up the first length and starts passing it across, loosening the first hook which is then baited with one, usually two, sometimes three mussels from the basin board in front of the baiter. That baited hook is placed on the small board or rod placed across the centre of the skull and the portion of line coiled in the bottom part of the skull. This process is repeated till the first row is completed and the next row begun and many rows thereafter till the whole 1200 hook line is baited. The upper part of the skull where the hooks were placed was usually lined with grass to keep the baited mussels secure. Sometimes paper could be used instead. Some baiters also placed thin strips of paper between each row of baited hooks in the skull.

⁹ Like Agnes, my mother, Elizabeth Craig (Ciss) was an inabootcomer who undertook to bait for her husband and commit to the rather arduous life as a fisherman's wife.

Celia : Two or three on ti the ae hook?

Agnes : For aa that thon wis a affa life

Celia ; So that took ye anither great puckle oors. So yer layin rows eftir rows o baited mussels on the hooks. How mony hooks wis it? Now I do ken, Agnes. I'm jist askin because it's for the record, ye see. So how mony hooks hid it been?

Agnes : Twelve hunder. One thousand two hunder.

Celia : 1200 hunder hooks, wi mebbe two or three mussels on each hook?

Agnes : Aye, dependin on the size o mussels. Sometime ye got a bit – one mussel did it. Ye'll ken that. (*I do*) But ye'd mebbe run awa fae it fan ye wis yunger. Nae muckle wunder. It wis an affa life.

Celia : Well, ye gaed awa ti the school and yer mithir jist carried on. She wis already up and oot in the sheddie. My mithir baited when we were up at Selbie Place and she also baited when we moved doon ti Mowatt's Lane.¹⁰

Agnes : I mind ye bidin at Selbie Place.

Celia : Just customary. And then, fit time di ye think ye might hae finished? Early eftirnone – the middle o the efternone?

Jim : Na, she wid been feenished afore denner time.

Celia : Wid ye!? Oh that wis quick!

Agnes : Well, it wisna bad but – But then I helpit him syne i the eftirnone.

Celia : Oh that wis quick – baitin. So, ye feenished gin aboot denner time, cleared up but Jim hid twa things to doh. He wid hae come in fae the sea - he wid hae ti redd the back which is on the line but he wid also hae to redd the tangled line that came oot o the sea. So which did you help wi?

Agnes : I helpit wi them aa. I yoosed ti redd the back if I wis dune early afore he cam in fae the sea – I yoosed ti redd the back and sometimes I yoosed ti ...

Celia : I yoosed ti help mi father ti redd the line – and ye kinda, ken, checked that the tippin wis aricht and the hook and twisted it roond again inti the tippens and ony that were needin sorted, they were caa'd wints. Meanin they wanted something done – they were wints – so they either hid ti get the hook beaten on again or a new tippen. So that tangled line took a good while ti – clear, ti redd. Noo Jim'll tell yi foo ye hid ti redd the back. Jim.

¹⁰ The house at Mowatt's Lane had been built by my great grandfather Mowatt on my grandmother's side

Jim: Well, the line wis shot ower a funnel and it hid ti be very near guaranteed ti ging clear because if it didna and the hook bounced back, it kid mebbe pick up a bunch. ¹¹

Celia : So, it wis ti mak sure that the line wis gaen ti run clear ower the funnel? Now, I'm gaen ti ask Jim. Did you get muckle funnel bunches aff Agnes's baitin?!

Jim : No, I didna that! No. No

Celia : Very good. That wis excellent,

Jim : Less than ithers I wid say.

Agnes : There's nae doot there wis better baiters than ...

Celia : My father used ti say that he very near widna hae ti bathir reddin his back cause mi mithir coiled it that carefully but yet he did, but he said, "Gosh, I widna hardly need ti redd the back, Ciss – Ye've made that a good job o coilin it."

Agnes : I yoosed ti redd the back ti him sometimes if I wis dune early but I yoosed ti lift it up and redd it fae the start again. An affa life. Fin ye think aboot it noo, if ye'd puttin in the oors inti they car factories or somewye that we put in ti the sea, ye wid be a richt lot better aff.

Celia : Ye would ; ye would. Tell me something that Govie said. ¹² He has a theory about this. I'm nae shoor if ye wid agree but he thocht that the weemen should hiv got an actual wage – (*Aye*) – and then they wid hae been able to hae a stamp *Aye* and they wid hae able to get unemployment benefit. (*Certainly – and a bigger pension*). And a bigger pension – and it nevir happened, did it? The woman jist – she did it – oot a love.

Agnes : I dah ken if it wis love.

Celia : Love and duty?

Agnes ; Sometimes there wisna muckle fin the mussels wis that size!

Celia ; Dearie me. So the hale day started at 4 a clock in tne morning – the sheelin, the baitin, the reddin the back, the reddin the line. Fit did ye hate the maist aboot it – and fit wis – or nae hate - fit wis mebbe the aisiest?

Jim ; Cauld mornins I think's the very worst.

Agnes : I'll tell ye fit I didna like ti start – fin Shirley wis a bairn and I'd ti doh't i the kitchen there. I didna like it at that time. cause - ken it did maak a maiss and ye'd that often oot and in ti ging and I didna like that. It's nae a job I wid pick like but it wisna bad.

¹¹ The funnel was a cylinder-shaped device for shooting the lines off to ensure that they ran clear off the side of the boat.

¹² See Interview with Andrew Gove Cargill of Gourdon

Celia : Did ye prefer sheelin ti baitin or baitin ti sheelin?

Agnes : I dah ken. I wisna very smert at neen o them – I think

Celia : Ye sound as if ye were. Jim’s noddin – he’s sayin ye were smert.

Agnes : He wis lucky. Cause I sheeled and baited – wi a helper – but I also helped him a great lot cause well, near aabody had a hand helper thae days.

Village social life

Agnes goes on to mention that all this work left little time for village social life.

Well, if ye wis sheelin and baitin in oor time, if ye wis, ye didna really hae muckle time ti ging ti things cause, unless it wis a Friday or a Setterday, because ye wis up early in the mornins

The interview then addresses the social changes that enabled girls to pursue education instead of following in their mother’s footsteps into sheelin and baitin. For both the Interviewer and the Interviewee’s daughter, education dominated : there was no expectation that they would become involved in line fishing at all

Celia ; And ye mentioned Shirley now – fit did... Did Shirley participate ava inti the sheelin and baitin like? ¹³

Agnes/Jim : No, no

Jim : We didna want her ti hae nothing ti doh wi it.

Agnes ; No, there wisna an affa lot o young folk did it though thir mither did it

Celia : They did inti Govie’s day, ¹⁴ inti your day perhaps, Jim like and mi father’s day. Mi father and them aa hid ti sheel a jar o mussels afore they gid ti the school. His mither, my granny, widna hiv hid a sheeler or helper and they wid sheel a jar afore they gid ti the school.

Jim : Shirley wis ahint that, ye see.

Celia : I wis also – I didna doh that aither. Ye jist gid awa ti the school. Ye were nevir asked – it wisna expected but I did occasionally help my father ti redd ¹⁵. I mind I got a hook in my finger.

¹³ Shirley is Agnes and Jim’s daughter

¹⁴ See Interview with Andrew Gove Cargill, Govie in Elphinstoen Kist.

¹⁵ This was only an occasional and brief help! It is interesting sociologically to note this change whereby young girls were” excused” from the hard graft of sheelin and baitin, instead pursuing education. Both Shirley and myself, earlier (I am considerably older than Shirley and was teaching at

Creel fishing – partans and lobsters

The interviewer refers to a summer spent going to the sea with her father, at the creels. Agnes remembers her doing so, coming back from Canada where she had been lecturing.

I also gid ti the sea wi my father ae summer fin he wis gaen ti the creels. I wis teachin in Canada, at university in Canada at that time and I gid ti the sea wi mi father – oh – the hale summer. We were workin - we thought it wis a lot o creels at the time but they work mair noo. We must hae been working – oh - at least aichty creels, ye ken and we didna board them. We ran them, so that made it even quicker, a process. We were tikin oot the remains o the auld bait and pittin in the new bait. But, eh, yeah, I likit that.¹⁶ Enjoyed that.

Jim : But ye see, ye kidna doh that noo. Ye kidna hae dohn that fin we gaed..Yer boat widna cairry the crabs. We workit 180, 240 wis the maist.¹⁷ I got less than a meenit ti empty the creel, tik oot the biat, pit in anither een. I yoosed ti doh aa that.

Celia : Well, I did that, that time I wis gaen wi mi father and that involved tying up the bait for creel fishing. This is fishing for crabs and lobsters, crabs caa'd partans, of course, aye.¹⁸

Jim : :Lines winter ... creels summer

Agnes : There wis mair money in't than ye thought..

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Mackie Academy when Shirley was in S5/6 there) became teachers. Govie Cargill's children also pursued other careers.

¹⁶ The bait was usually fish heads or other parts and had to be tied up the day before going to sea. Enough bait had to be prepared for at least 80 creels. Running creels entailed winching/hauling aboard each creel in turn and each creel had to be opened at the trap, emptied of the catch, of partans (crabs) and the occasional precious lobster, the old bait removed and the new bait tied in place. The creel was closed and shot overboard again. Then the next creel was processed till the fleet of twenty was complete and the bough could be cast off to mark the place where the fleet of creels was situated. My father sometimes operated fleets of twenty-five, instead of the traditional twenty. Boarding the creels entailed taking the whole fleet aboard and then clearing and re-baiting them before putting the fleet back into the sea I particularly enjoyed being at the tiller of an early morning, steering the boat up the path of the rising sun, dazzling, brilliant – pure joy!

¹⁷ Jim was working with a bigger crew than simply the two of my father and myself.

¹⁸ Shell fish were sent by rail to Billingsgate Fish Market in London till Doctor Beeching shut the useful branch lines and started the demise of fishing for crabs and lobsters. Alternative buyers appeared and disappeared over time till now only a few boats are left fishing in this way. Scallop fishing off Montrose is now pursued. Inshore fishing *per se* is in a parlous condition as is indeed all fishing, including the ultra-modern trawl fishing.