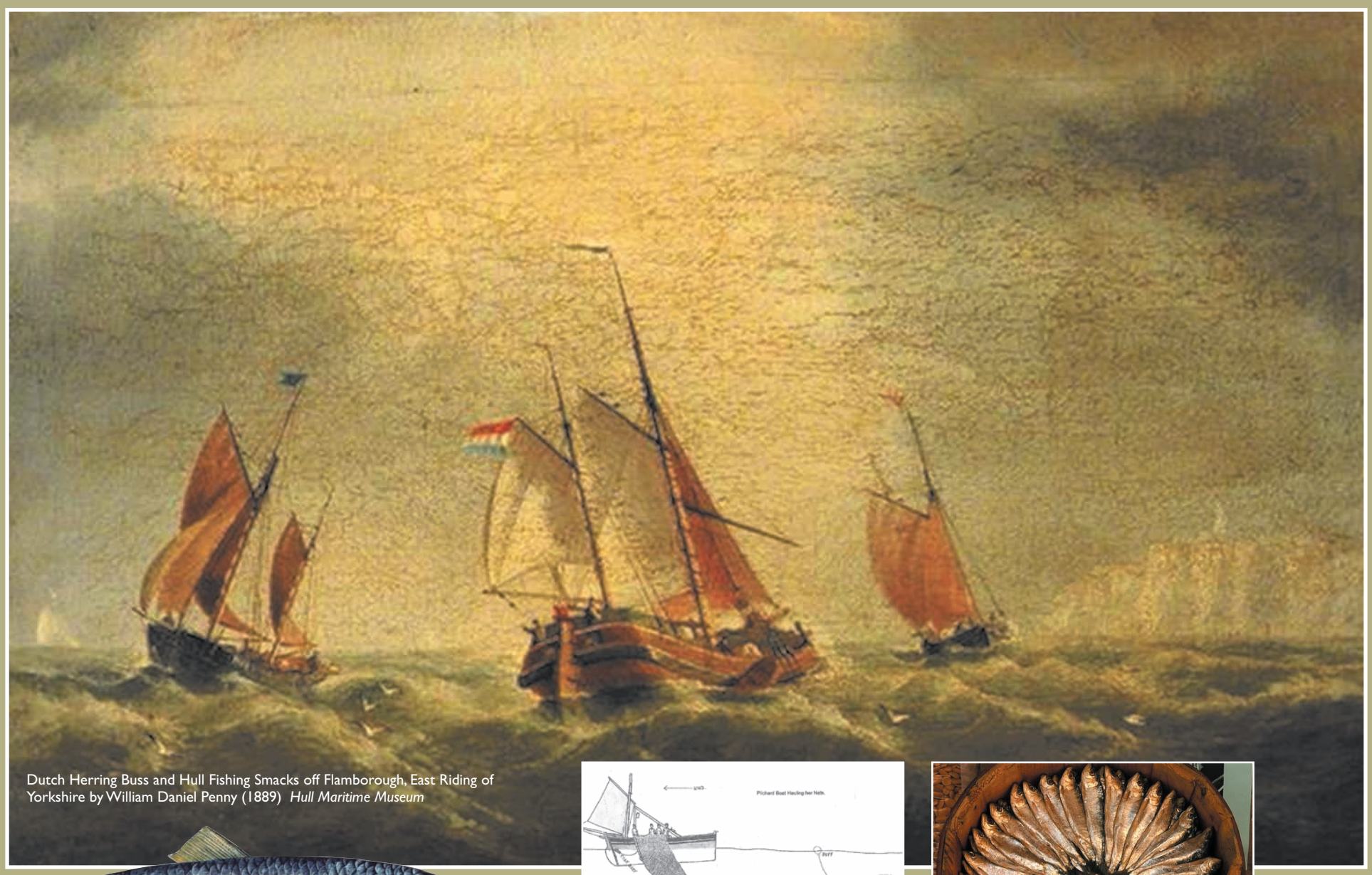
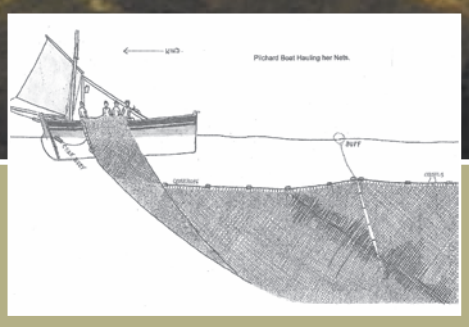
THE HERRING FISHERY



Dutch Herring Buss and Hull Fishing Smacks off Flamborough, East Riding of Yorkshire by William Daniel Penny (1889) *Hull Maritime Museum*

Atlantic Herring *Clupea harengus*



Drifter hauling nets

Herring packed in a barrel

Racks of kippers in a smokehouse

The Atlantic Herring, found throughout British and Irish waters, has been a commercially important fish stock for over 5000 years, and in Scotland they are affectionately known as 'silver darlings'. Herring is a small oily fish related to mackerel and pilchards, feeding mainly on plankton, and shoaling in gigantic numbers. It is an abundant food source for many animals including gannets and gulls, cod, bass and sharks, and dolphins, seals and whales.

Herring follow an annual migration cycle from feeding grounds to spawning grounds. As spawning approaches the fish gather in larger shoals, and this is when they are usually caught. The different herring stocks in the North Sea spawn at different times of the year between spring and autumn, giving rise to a seasonal fishery. They spawn in shallow bays, depositing at least 10,000 eggs on the seabed, and the young are often referred to as whitebait.

Until the 1950s, the technique of catching herring had changed little from that developed by 16th century Dutch fishermen, using driftnets which acted like a giant curtain. Their boats, called drifters, were originally sail-powered, but these gradually gave way to steam and motor engines. The herring shoals rise to the surface at night, so the nets were set at dusk, and the boat allowed to drift so keeping the nets taut. The mesh would allow an adult fish to swim in as far as its gills and then be caught. The nets were hauled in at dawn, the fish shaken out and taken ashore.

Herring is a fatty fish and does not keep well, so they either had to be sold locally, or preserved by salting, drying, smoking or a combination of these. By the late 1800s much of this processing work of gutting and packing was done by women, especially Scots lasses, who followed the fleet around the country from Shetland to Cornwall. This was hard work with very long hours, and once the catch was landed, they had to keep working until it was all packed. They worked in teams of three: two to gut, and one to pack. They were able to gut 40-60 fish a minute, and sort them into different containers depending on their size and condition, with the guts stored separately and sold to farmers as fertiliser.

Most of the catch would be salted, packed in barrels and sold as white herring. This was a very skilled job: the fish were arranged in a rosette fashion with alternate layers of fish and coarse salt, the heads pointing outwards in the first layer and arranged inwards in the next layer. Other well known ways of preserving herring include red herring, where whole fish are dry salted, washed and smoked; kippers, where the fish are split and gutted, then washed and soaked in brine, before being oak smoked for about 12 hours; bloaters, where whole fish are lightly salted by immersing in brine for a couple of hours, then dried but not smoked; and rollmops, which are pickled herring fillets.

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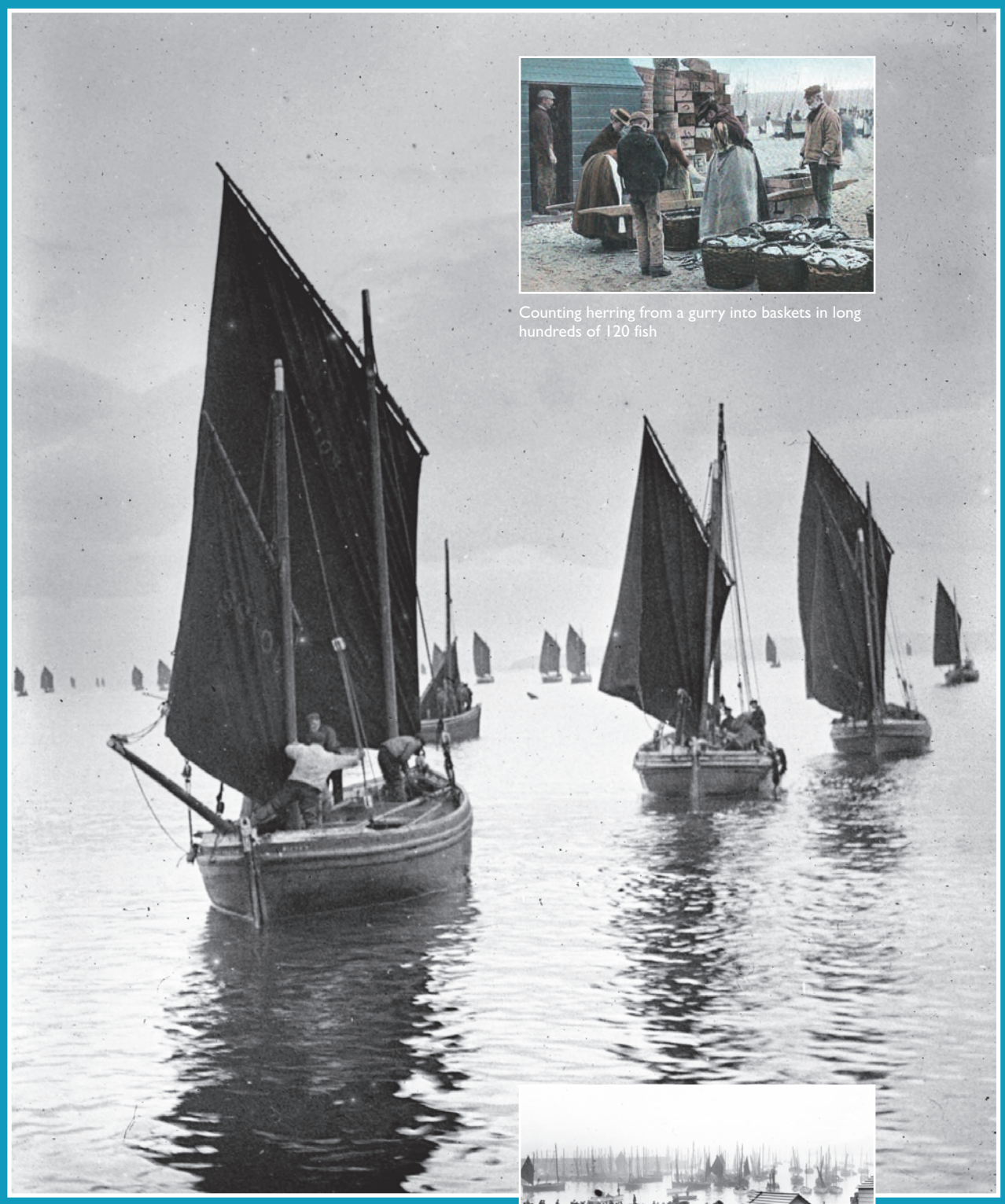
THE ST IVES HERRING INDUSTRY

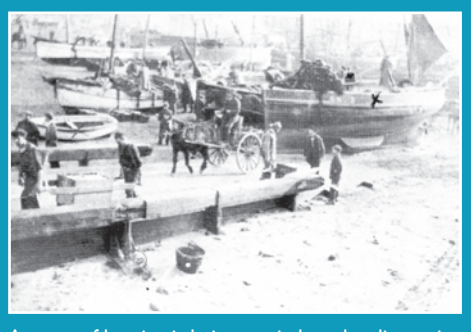
St Ives drifters fished all year round. They fished locally for mackerel from January until June or July, followed by pilchards then herring, but many also travelled north to the Irish and North Seas in early summer in search of herring. For over 200 years the Cornish lugger was the workhorse of the Cornish fishing fleet, the smaller 32' - 38' drifters with 4 crew known as pilchard boats fished for herring and pilchards, and the larger 43' - 50' mackerel boats with 7 crew for mackerel and herring. Many were built in St Ives by boat-builders such as William Paynter and Henry Trevorrow.



St Ives luggers heading out to sea

Counting herring from a gurry into baskets in long hundreds of 120 fish

A packed harbour during the herring season



A gurry of herring is being carried up the slipway in the 1920s. Carrie SS 5 has unmeshed her fish and her nets are piled forward

A St Ives mackerel boat

The St Ives herring fishery is an ancient one dating back at least to the 17th century. In 1688 Christopher Harris wrote from St Ives *"The herrings continues still with us ... we are overcomed with Mounts Bay boates, that beinge now with us att least Eighteen takeinge of herring, having took great quantities of herrings."* In 1724 Henric Kalmeter wrote *"St Ives has 30 ships of 40-100 tons trading to Spain, Portugal and Italy with pilchards and herrings. Sometimes herrings are shipped to Jamaica."*

The North Cornish herring season lasted from October until January, with boats fishing from St Ives, Newquay, Padstow and Port Isaac. The Porthleven fleet came to work from Newquay which had few fishing boats of its own, and the bigger Mousehole and Newlyn boats worked from Padstow, which had a secure harbour once they had crossed the dangerous Doom Bar at its entrance.

The herring were brought ashore at St Ives in baskets or hand barrows called gurries. They were counted by women, two counting from each gurry, and each counted 20 casts of 3 herring to make a long hundred of 120. During the 19th century there were some good herring seasons, but they were unreliable. However following the decline of the pilchard seine industry, herring became the most important fishery on the north Cornish coast between the 1890s and the 1930s. In 1904 the St Ives fleet comprised 81 mackerel boats, 125 pilchard boats and 50 smaller open boats such as gigs, rowing and sailing craft.

When there were big shots of herring and the markets were oversupplied, prices fell, so kipper houses were built to improve the market and Scots lassies came from the Scarborough season to gut the herring. The St Ives kipper houses were Rouncefields at Court Cocking, Pawlyns at the top of Fish Street, Browns in the Rope Walk, Veals on the site of Porthgwidden Shop and Woodgers on the site of Porthgwidden Studios. Padstow also had a large smoke house on the site of the present Lobster Hatchery and one can still be seen at Porth Gaverne's old cellars.

The herring brought prosperity to St Ives until the 1930s when large steam trawlers from Boulogne began trawling herring on the Smalls spawning ground off the Welsh coast. The last big St Ives herring seasons were in 1940 and 1943 when Arthur Brown remembered his uncle lost his pipe in a herring barrel at the family's kipper house, and *"We were all day looking for it!"* Recently some St Ives inshore boats have caught herring in moored nets in the Bay. Unfortunately there is now a limited market for them and these excellent fish have been used for crab pot bait.

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THE IRISH HERRING SEASON

Kipper girls cleaning herring at Ardglass, Northern Ireland

Cornish fishermen sailed to Ireland to fish for herring for nearly 150 years. The first to go was a St Ives skipper called Noall in 1816 after the Napoleonic Wars. Initially there were only two or three boats, but they were so successful that in the following year twelve made the journey. Two Newlyn boats followed in 1821 and the Mousehole men joined in 1823. In 1836 and 1837 the boats brought home £10,000 each season after paying all their expenses.

St Ives fishermen in Ireland c 1930

Landing herring at Peel, Isle of Man

Steam drifters & fishing boats in Peel Bay, Isle of Man

St Ives lugger Margaret SS 47 at Ardglass, Northern Ireland

The Cornishmen sailed for Ireland in late May or early June and returned in late August or early September. In 1847, at the height of the Great Famine, Wallop Brabazon wrote, "*... the St Ives and Penzance fishermen ... go up the Irish Sea until they meet the shoal of herrings that ... come down by Ardglass to Dublin Bay. These men in their well appointed luggers, follow the shoal in company with its many enemies, small whales, porpoises, herring hogs, and numberless sea birds who follow, with unerring precision, the course pursued by the herrings.*"

The Cornishmen fished from the Isle of Man, Arklow, Wicklow, Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) Howth and Ardglass, where in 1876 the herring fleet was made up of 140 Scots, 20 Manx, 42 Irish and 19 Cornish boats. But fishing is a dangerous business. On 20th August 1828 the Newlyn lugger Seven Brothers was lost on the Swash Bank near Wexford with her five crew. In May 1839 the Bounty of Mousehole and the Victory of Newlyn were lost with all hands in the North Channel.

The Cornish had a high reputation. Their luggers were widely copied in Ireland and the Isle of Man where they were known as Nickeys. Among the St Ives luggers sold to Ireland were the Theophilus SS 1, Lloyd SS 5, Uncle Tom SS 10, Snowdrop SS 12 and Waterlily SS 635 which fished from Kilkeel for 50 years. William Paynter, whose St Ives boatyard was on the site of Pizza Express, built so many boats for Ireland that he moved his boatyard to Kilkeel. There were also several Cornish built boats in the Isle of Man, including the Castletown based Cedar CT 9, Zebra CT 10, Lizzie CT 17, Zetetic CT 35 & Dove CT 41, and the Meteor PI 59 and Oracle PI 85 from Peel.

The Cornish motor drifters continued to fish the herring in Ireland until the 1950s. By then the main season was at Dunmore East in the autumn, and the Cornish boats played an important role in opening up this fishery. However it was obviously tempting to follow the herring into Irish territorial waters, and several boats were arrested by Irish Fisheries Protection vessels, also known as The Bogeymen.

In 1955 the Girvan ring netters Arctic Moon BA 369 & Elizmor BA 243 and their highly skilled crews arrived at Dunmore and their phenomenal success made a big impression on the Cornish fishermen. The last Cornish boats were the ring netters Couer de Lion PZ 74, Girl Renee SS 78, JBS SS 17 and the very successful Renovelle PZ 177 and Sweet Promise SS 95, which made the last herring voyage to Ireland in 1961.

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THE NORTH SEA HERRING VOYAGE

For most of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, the big St Ives luggers, known as mackerel boats, left St Ives every year in late June or early July after their mackerel season and circumnavigated England every year in search of the shoals of herring.

Many visited Irish ports such as Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) and Howth before sailing for the Clyde, where they locked in to Bowling at the entrance to the Forth and Clyde Canal. Here they tied a rope to the boat's foremast & began their walk right across Scotland, towing their lugger behind them. Sometimes, if the wind was fair, they set a sail. They locked out at Grangemouth on the Firth of Forth and began their herring voyage in the North Sea.

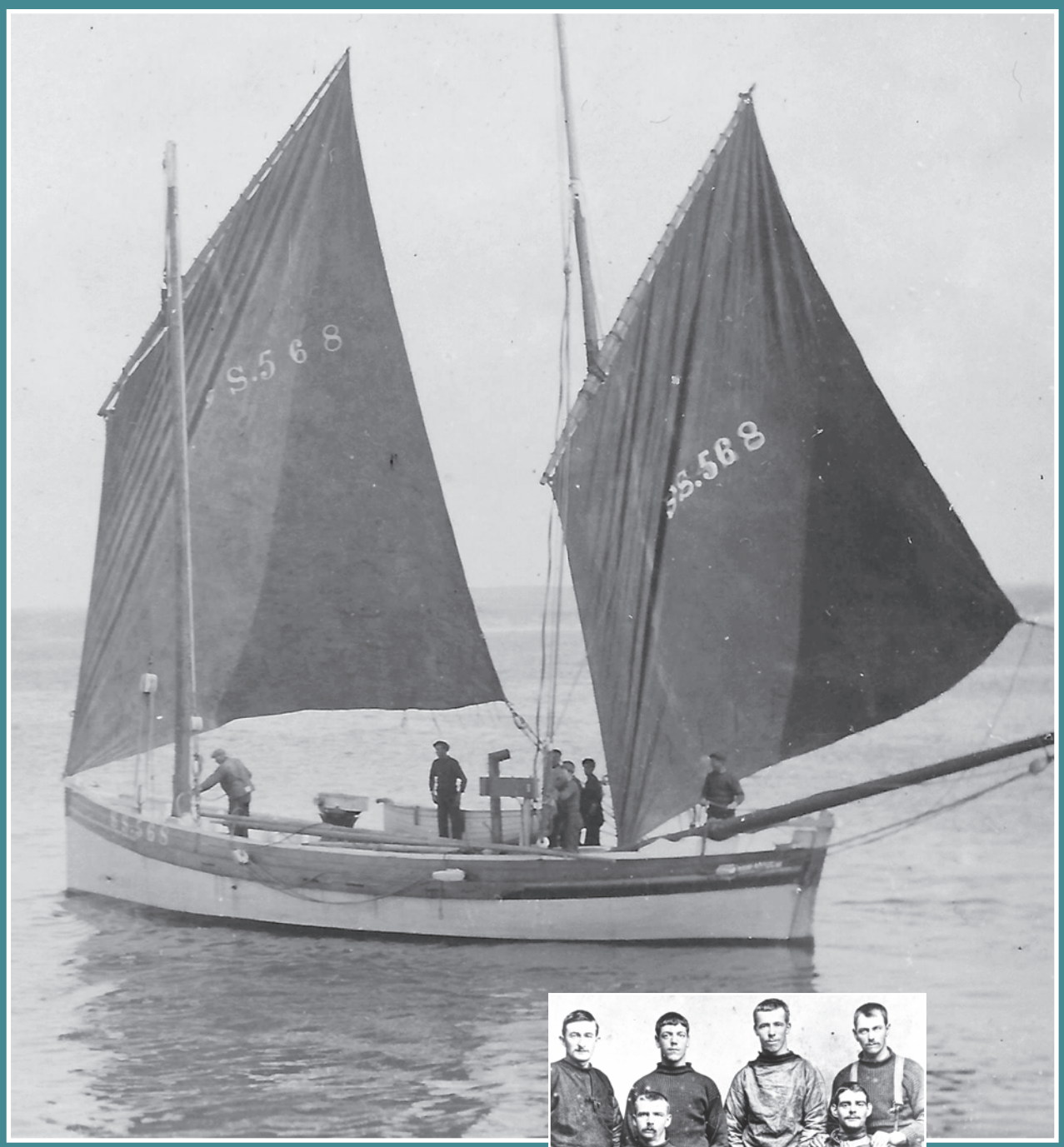
They fished mainly from North Berwick, Dunbar, Eyemouth, Berwick on Tweed, Seahouses, Whitby and Scarborough, but some boats also sailed as far north as Peterhead and Wick in Scotland. In August 1884 the Cornishman reported 72 St Ives boats working from Berwick. These included the Theophilus SS 1, Lord Beaconsfield SS 2, Jane Barber SS 9, Uncle Tom SS 10, Arethusa SS 439, British Workman SS 494, Mary Ann SS 495, Endeavour SS 568, Misty Morn SS 585 and Waterlily SS 635.

It is recorded that the Jane SS 536 left St Ives on 10th July 1895 and arrived in the Firth of Forth on the 22nd. She fished from Berwick until 24th August and then sailed for Scarborough. Their best shot was 43 crans on 10th September, a cran being a measure of landed uncleaned herring, typically around 1200 fish, and they then sailed for home on Friday 13th after barking (curing) their nets. Each member of her crew shared £5.18s.6d. for the whole voyage, about £540 in today's money.

On Sundays the Cornishmen stayed in port. Although far away from their chapels in the cobbled streets of St Ives, Mousehole and Newlyn, they often met together for worship. They praised the Lord in harmony, singing their favourite Methodist hymns, and the local people were moved by their fervent worship and remembered it long afterwards.

At the end of their voyage the Cornish luggers raced for home, down the North Sea and through the English Channel. The record was held by the Mary Stevens SS 5 which sailed the 600 miles from Scarborough to St Ives in 50 hours, and she landed herring in St Ives which had been caught in the North Sea three days before. The Leading Star SS 615 & Johanna SS 601 came from Scarborough to St Ives in 55 hours and the Nellie Jane SS 503 in 56 hours.

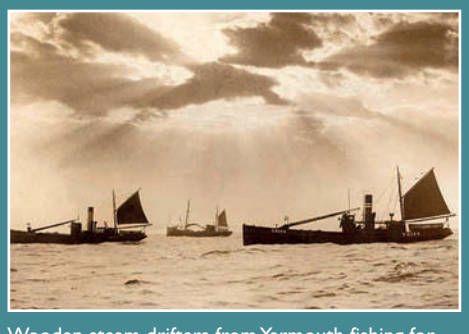
The forgotten heroes of the North Sea voyage were the women who kept their families afloat, often with very slender means, while their men were away. Some souvenirs of the North Sea remain in West Cornwall, little seaside china ornaments and Whitby jet. The children looked forward to a stick of Scarborough rock when Dad came home in September.



The Endeavour SS 568 leaving St Ives for the North Sea

The crew of The Endeavour SS 568

Fraserburgh Harbour cram packed with sailing drifters in the 1880s



Wooden steam drifters from Yarmouth fishing for herring

Cornish luggers at Scarborough c 1903.
PZ 455 Monarch and the record breaking Mary Stevens SS 5

Text and photos adapted from "The Cornish Fishing Industry: An Illustrated History" by John McWilliams

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