Image and Identity:  
The Lives of the Scots herring Girls 1900-1950

Jill de Fresnes

Ph.D.

UHI Millennium Institute  
31st January 2010

Date of submission: 2 Feb 2010
Date of award: 3 Aug 2010
CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. v
List of Illustrations .......................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1  Thesis Aims and Objectives

1.1 Introduction: charting a hidden history – the context of the research ....................... 1
1.2 Documenting an untold history of herring girl labour ............................................. 3
1.3 Expanding the coverage of women’s history and occupational community ............. 6
1.4 A methodology of oral and visual distinctiveness ..................................................... 10
1.5 Conclusion and Summary of the Thesis Structure .................................................. 11

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Methodology

2.1 Introduction: Identifying the existing literature on the Scottish herring girls .......... 13
  2.1.1 A Gendered Literature ...................................................................................... 14
  2.1.2 Anthropology and Sociology .......................................................................... 17
  2.1.3 General Histories ............................................................................................ 21
  2.1.4 Popular Publications and Local Histories ....................................................... 24
  2.1.5 Contemporary and Fragmentary Sources ....................................................... 25
  2.1.6 The Visual Narrative ...................................................................................... 26
  2.1.7 Online Journal Archives ................................................................................ 28
  2.2 A critical appraisal of the existing literature ......................................................... 29
    2.2.1 A Social Science Analyses of the Scottish fishing communities .................... 29
    2.2.2 Cohen and Abrams: Fishing communities from an island perspective ............ 34
    2.2.3 The detail of herring girl experience ............................................................. 39
  2.3 Oral and Video History as a Methodology ............................................................. 44
  2.4 The Primary Interviews ......................................................................................... 51
  2.5 Integrating fragmented evidence and developing a framework ......................... 62
    2.5.1 Online Resources ......................................................................................... 62
    2.5.2 Online Archives ............................................................................................ 63
    2.5.3 Archive Visits ................................................................................................ 64
    2.5.4 Journals and Diaries ..................................................................................... 65
    2.5.5 Scots Herring Girl Conference .................................................................... 65
  2.6 An innovative methodology: incorporating visual image and oral history ............ 66
  2.7 Conclusion: aligning thesis objectives and thesis methods .................................. 67

Chapter 3: The Historical and Social Context

3.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................. 69
3.2 The history of the industry ...................................................................................... 69
    3.2.1 Early Legislation ............................................................................................ 70
    3.2.2 Fishermen for the Naval Reserve .................................................................. 71
Chapter 6  Time off for the Scots Herring Girls

6.1  Introduction ............................................................. 266
   6.1.1  Women from different backgrounds: life stages ...................... 267
   6.1.2  Irish Men at the gutting .......................................... 273
   6.1.3  Social practice – recreation during travel .......................... 275
6.2  Patterns of accommodation ........................................... 276
   6.2.1  Huts and lodgings .................................................. 277
   6.2.2  Lodgings ............................................................. 286
   6.2.3  Organising the accommodation .................................... 289
   6.2.4  Aspects of cultural difference .................................... 292
6.3  Social Activities ....................................................... 296
   6.3.1  Music and song, hut dances, parties and ceilidhs .................. 296
   6.3.2  Songs .................................................................... 300
   6.3.3  Jokes and Tricks ...................................................... 302
   6.3.4  Fishermen’s Visits .................................................... 304
   6.3.5  Excursions and fishing trips ....................................... 308
   6.3.6  Different patterns of recreation ....................................... 310
   6.3.7  Promenading ............................................................ 317
   6.3.8  Self regulating supervision ........................................... 318
   6.3.9  Dances ..................................................................... 323
   6.3.10 Church attendance patterns ......................................... 329
   6.3.11 Community Support .................................................. 335
6.4  Romance and Marriage: cultural boundaries and community identity .... 338
   6.4.1  A fisherman’s wife ..................................................... 338
   6.4.2  Marrying within the fishing community ............................. 346
   6.4.3  Marrying outwith the fishing community .......................... 351
6.5  Celebrating a tradition .................................................. 356
6.6  Conclusion ................................................................. 361

Chapter 7  Visual Narratives

7.1  Introduction: Developing Visual Narratives .............................. 363
7.2  The advent of photography .................................................. 367
7.3  Reading the Photographs .................................................... 380
7.4  Professional Photographers and Private Collections .................... 395
   7.4.1  Photographs from within the community ............................ 397
7.5  Women in Photographs ...................................................... 400
7.6  Changes over time ............................................................ 404
7.7  Photographing a way of life at the gutting ................................ 406
7.8  Triangulation of Sources .................................................... 410
7.9  Conclusion ................................................................. 413

Chapter 8  The Heritage Portrayal

8.1  Introduction ................................................................. 415
Chapter 9  Conclusions

9.1  Introduction ................................................................. 455
9.2  Key findings and contributions ........................................ 457
9.3  The Importance of Recreation ......................................... 459
9.4  Identity: Perceptions and Portrayals ................................... 461
9.5  Occupational and Social Community .................................. 463
9.6  The Importance of Community .......................................... 464
9.7  Image and Identity .......................................................... 465
9.8  Heritage Practice ........................................................... 467
9.9  Conclusion and future research ......................................... 467

Glossary .............................................................................. 470

References .......................................................................... 472

Appendix: DVD of interview samples included with thesis
ABSTRACT

Image and Identity: The Lives of the Scots Herring Girls, 1900-1950

This thesis is an exploration of representations of the Scots Herring Girls through oral, visual, and contemporary sources in the period 1900-1950. The Scots Herring Girls were a large migratory workforce of women who were employed within the herring fishing industry during the nineteenth and twentieth century, to gut and pack the fish into barrels as it was landed on the piers around the coast of Scotland and down to the southern ports of East Anglia. The thesis builds a portrait of the lives of the women who followed the herring, focusing on the themes of transport and travel, living and working conditions, and recreation and culture. Through distinctive fieldwork and methodology, it considers the complex patterns of identity and perceptions, both through the voices of the women themselves, through the voices of those outside the industry and through the popular media of the time. It also combines the visual narratives and the way in which the women were portrayed, both at the time, and subsequently as part of a cultural heritage.

This manuscript is accompanied by a DVD of filmed interview clips as an Appendix.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter 1
Figure 1.1 Map c.1930: Ports and Seasons of the Herring Fishery, Murray Slater and Sons, courtesy of Mallaig Heritage Centre

Chapter 3
Figure 3.1 Herring Lasses off Duty, c.1900, Postcard, Ebay
Figure 3.2 Herring Station, Lerwick, Shetland c.1890, SCRAM 000-000-125-821-C; Shetland Museum
Figure 3.3 Stornoway, c1900, Postcard, Ebay
Figure 3.4 Fishing communities on the move; c.1925, Catherine Emslie private collection

Chapter 4
Figure 4.1 Scarborough, c1900, postcard, Ebay
Figure 4.2 Dancing at work, from Transport and Society Network website [Colin Marr]

Chapter 5
Figure 5.1 Great Yarmouth 1905, Postcard: Knight Series, Ebay
Figure 5.2 Shetland Stations, Smith (1977: 57)
Figure 5.3 Argyllshire c.1910, Gutting herring on the pier, SCRAM 000-000-150-389-C; Argyll and Bute Council Library Service
Figure 5.4 Mallaig c.1920 SCRAM 000-000-153-541-C; St Andrews University Library
Figure 5.5 Lowestoft, c.1910 ‘Scotch Girls working in Lowestoft’, Postcard, Ebay
Figure 5.6 Northbay, Stornoway, 1906, Valentine Series Postcard, Ebay
Figure 5.7 Great Yarmouth, c1910, Ronnie Dugald private collection
Figure 5.8 Great Yarmouth, 1906, Postcard, Ebay
Figure 5.9 Agreement between Maevier and gutting crews, 1921, Comunn Eachdraidh Nis
Figure 5.10 Young girls at the gutting, c.1925 SCRAM 000-000-201-194-C; Hulton Getty
Figure 5.11 Mrs McNab [centre] with her crew c.1950, McNab Private Collection
Figure 5.12 Packing the herring c.1930 Valentines
Figure 5.13 Gutting Knife, SCRAM 000-000-198-385-C; Scottish Fisheries Museum
Figure 5.14 Travel by train c.1940 T&S Network photo: Colin Marr
Figure 5.15 Girls travelling to work via lorry in East Anglia, c1930, Catherine Emslie Private Collection
Figure 5.16 Packing barrels c.1940s, McNab Collection
Figure 5.17 Wet weather work wear, Whalsay, 1930s, from Whalsay Museum
Figure 5.18 Scarborough, Fashion conscious herring girls in the 1920s, SCRAM 000-000-480-040-C; North East Folke Archive
Figure 5.19 Highland women, c.1900s SCRAM 000-000-465-758-C; National Museums Scotland
Figure 5.20 Gutting on the ground c.1900 Orkney and the Sea (Towsey, 2002)
Figure 5.21  c.1900 Herring Stance, Dunbar, SCrán 000-000-470-488-C; East Lothian Museums Service
Figure 5.22 Lowestoft at the end of the nineteenth century, SCrán 000-000-504-837-C; Moray Council, Elgin Library
Figure 5.23 Stornoway, end of nineteenth century SCRAN 000-000-504-803-C; Highland Council (Inverness Museum)
Figure 5.24 Farlanes in Yarmouth c1900, Ronnie Dugald Private Collection
Figure 5.25 Scarborough Fisher Girls c.1900, postcard, Ebay
Figure 5.26 Working in Wick c.1910, postcard
Figure 5.27 Covered farlane in Ireland, c.1910; postcard, Ebay
Figure 5.28 Gutting herring in Gardenstown, c.1940 SCRAN 000-000-480-056-C; North East Folklore Archive
Figure 5.29 Gutting in the 1950s; image from Ebay
Figure 5.30 Women working at a sloping farlane, c.1930s; Getty Images
Figure 5.31 An early gutting machine, around the 1940s; Time and Tide Museum archive
Figure 5.32 Cleaning the oilskins, 1930s, Whalsay Museum archive
Figure 5.33 Putting the barrels, Whalsay 1954, Whalsay Museum archive
Figure 5.34 Yarmouth c.1900 Women putting barrels, Ronnie Dugald Private Collection
Figure 5.35 Putting barrels c1920s, Getty Images
Figure 5.36 Scottish Rest House for Scottish, SCRAN 000-000-468-503-C; National Museums Scotland
Figure 5.37 Women working at the barrels, Dunbar c.1900 SCRAN 000-000-471-439-C; East Lothian Library Service
Figure 5.38 Childcare in the workplace, c.1940s, The Reaper exhibition, Scottish Fisheries Museum
Figure 5.39 Fife photograph showing children at the farlanes c.1900, c.SCRAN
Figure 5.40 Lowestoft postcard, early 1900s, Ebay postcard
Figure 5.41 Off-duty c1920s, Ebay image
Figure 5.42 Ruth Geddes, Aged 5 at the gutting in Yarmouth, 1923, Time and Tide Museum Archive
Figure 5.43 Rita and her family outside their hut in Lerwick c.1950s, McNab Private Collection
Figure 5.44 Strike in Yarmouth, 1936; The Scotsman 26th October 1936
Figure 5.45 Herring girls enjoying a dance in the gutting yards of East Anglia, Transport and Society Website, Colin Marr
Figure 5.46 Lovick, Elizabeth, 2007, Ganseys and Knitting Patterns, www.northernlace.co.uk
Figure 5.47 Time off for Knitting c.1920s, c. SCRAN 000-000-480-038-C; North East Folklore Archive

Chapter 6
Figure 6.1 Whalsay, c.1930s, Maggie Leask and friends relaxing during time off. Maggie Leask Private Collection
Figure 6.2 Eyemouth, c.1950, Older women working, McNab Private Collection
Figure 6.3 Coopers and gutting crews c1940s, McNab Private Collection
Figure 6.4 Peter head 1959, Women working at the herring, Ebay postcard
Figure 6.5 Whalsay, c.1940, Young boy working at a farlane, Whalsay Museum archive
Figure 6.6 Herring Gutters outside huts in Stromness, c.1900, Stromness Museum, Orkney
Figure 6.7 Outside the huts in Gremista c.1910, SCRAN 000-000-465-604-C; National Museums Scotland
Figure 6.8 Shetland c1930, Inside the huts, Whalsay Museum archive
Figure 6.9 Shetland, c.1940s, Wash-day outside the huts, Catherine Emslie Private Collection
Figure 6.10 Dancing outside in Shetland c.1930s Catherine Emslie Private Collection
Figure 6.11 Music at the huts, c.1920s Dan Taylor Collection, School of Scottish Studies
Figure 6.12 Sunday Excursions, Fishermen and women relaxing on their day off, c.1930s Dan Taylor Collection, School of Scottish Studies
Figure 6.13 Seonag MacArthur’s vase from Yarmouth c.1930s, Jill de Fresnes, 2007
Figure 6.14 Britannia Pier, Yarmouth, c1900, www.old-picture.com/europe/Britannia-Yarmouth
Figure 6.15 Britannia Pier, Yarmouth c.1945, Photograph taken from www.simplonpc.co.uk/Norfolk-Piers.html
Figure 6.16 Fishing Family c.1890 George Washington Wilson, (Gray, 1982: 42)
Figure 6.17 Whalsay girls working at the harvest, c.1930s Maggie Leask Collection
Figure 6.18 East Anglia, early 1930s, Fishermen from Fife boat The Gleanaway KY40, with Herring Girls in the early 1930s, SCRAN 000-000-503-966-C; Scottish Fisheries Museum
Figure 6.19 Crowning the Shetland Herring Queen 1939, postcard from Maggie Leask Private Collection
Figure 6.20 Shetland Parade, 1960s McNab Private Collection
Figure 6.21 Shetland Parade, early 1970s McNab Private Collection

Chapter 7
Figure 7.1 Packing Herring in Fraserburgh c.1900, Davidson’s Glossy Print Series postcard
Figure 7.2 Stornoway, 1891, Gutting Herring, sketch from unpublished journal of Constance Astley, Arisaig.
Figure 7.3 Stornoway 1891, Stornoway Pier, sketch from unpublished journals of Constance Astley, Arisaig
Figure 7.4 Fisher Girl, Valentine Series, 1905 Ebay 4.09.09
Figure 7.5 Wick c.1920, James More’s herring curing station, by the Johnston Family Photographers; http://imagesfoeducation.org.uk/blog/gutting-the-herring/
Figure 7.6 Uyeasound, Unst, Shetland c.1900, George Washington Wilson; http://shetlopedia.com/Pictures._.Fishing
Figure 7.7 Filling up the barrels, c.1910, Time and Tide Museum Archive, Yarmouth
Figure 7.8 Weather Prophets, Valentine Fisher Life Studies, 1904, postcard from Ebay
Figure 7.9 The Graphic, August 24th 1912, from Ebay, 23.1.06
Figure 7.10 Peggy Livingstone, Musselburgh, 1988, Ian Mackenzie unpublished paper: Festivals, Faces and Fire, 2005
Figure 7.11 Children in the workplace, Ruth Geddes, 1923, Time and Tide Museum Archive, Yarmouth
Figure 7.12 Yarmouth, 1906 Herring Barrels, Valentine Series, Ebay postcard
Figure 7.13 Lunch time in Yarmouth, c.1930 Catherine Emslie Private Collection
Figure 7.14 Herring Girl Strikes - Political Action, 1936, Scotsman October 1936
Figure 7.15 Wick, Scarborough and Yarmouth, c.1900s, Ebay postcards
Figure 7.16 Filling up and packing barrels, c.1900s, Ebay postcards

Figure 7.17 Whitby c.1905, Scottish Fishing Girls Gipping Herring, Ebay postcard
Figure 7.18 Time off in Yarmouth, c.1930, Dan Taylor Collection, School of Scottish Studies
Figure 7.19 Mrs McNab with her crew c.1930s McNab Private Collection
Figure 7.20 Whalsay women outside their homes c.1930, Maggie Leask Private Collection
Figure 7.21 Sledging in Whalsay, c.1930 Maggie Leask Private Collection
Figure 7.22 The Herring Girls in Portrait photographs c.1930s Maggie Leask Private Collection
Figure 7.23 Gutting crews portrait c.1890s, Maggie Leask Private Collection
Figure 7.24 A gutting crew dressed up for a photograph in the 1920s. Dan Taylor Collection, School of Scottish Studies
Figure 7.25 Whalsay c.1930, Jane and Katie Irvine, from Whalsay Museum archive
Figure 7.26 From top left Ardglass Ireland, c.1940s, postcard from Ebay; Orkney c.1900s, Orkney Archive; bottom two, Yarmouth photos from Ronnie Dugald Private Collection
Figure 7.27 Whalsay c.1930 Washing oilskin aprons, Jessie Helen Williamson and Katie Hutchison, Whalsay Museum Archive
Figure 7.28 Making Tea: Lizzie Jamieson and Ruby Pateson in a gutters’ hut c.1930, Whalsay Museum Archive
Figure 7.29 Children in the Workplace, early 1900s, Postcard from Douglas, Isle of Man
Ebay
Figure 7.30 Taking a Break, photographs from Ronnie Dugald Private Collection (top right) and Getty Images
Figure 7.31 Music and dance in the workplace, photos from Dan Taylor collection, School of Scottish Studies and (bottom left) Colin Marr, Transport and Society Network website
Figure 7.32 Lewis crews in Yarmouth, (Kidd, 1992: Cover)
Figure 7.33 Gutting crew, showing thread on wrist, c.1940s McNab Private collection
Figure 7.34 Two Whalsay Lassies with their ‘makin’ [knitting], Maggie Leask Private Collection

Chapter 8
Figure 8.1 Old gutters huts in Gremista, 1984, SCiRAN 000-000-572-025-C; Scottish Fisheries Museum
Figure 8.2 Information panel from Time and Tide Museum, February 2007 Jill de Fresnes
Figure 8.3 Herring Gutter display, Scottish Fisheries Museum www.scottishfishmuseum.org/tour
Figure 8.4 Herring Gutter display, Mallaig Heritage Centre, June 2009 Jill de Fresnes
Figure 8.5 Gutting on South Beach Quay, Stornoway, June 2007 Jill de Fresnes
Figure 8.6 Herring Gutter on North Beach Quay, Stornoway, June 2007 Jill de Fresnes
Figure 8.7 Fishergirl statue, Nairn Harbour, from ‘A gurn from Nurn’ website, photo by Iain Fairweather
Figure 8.8 Siglufjörður Herring Museum, www.siglo.is
Figure 8.9 Gutting herring at Siglufjörður www.siglo.is

Chapter 9
Figure 9.1 Herring Girls relaxing on the barrels c.1920s, Scran 000-000-201-193-C; Hulton Getty
Acknowledgements

It has been four and a half years since I began this research and in many ways it seems a lot longer. It has been a huge privilege being able to spend concerted amounts of time researching what has proved to be a fascinating topic, and speaking to many people who were involved in the herring fishing industry in the first half of the twentieth century. My first thanks go to those who gave me their time and their memories – my interviewees, some of whom are sadly no longer with us. In particular, I wish to thank Lindy Henderson from Mallaig, who gave me the inspiration to begin this work with fascinating and funny stories of her time as a herring worker in the 1920s and 30s. She is hugely knowledgeable about all aspects of life in a fishing community and very wise about life in general. Also thanks to Tommy Ralston who was very encouraging and gave me a number of contacts.

I would like to thank my supervisory team, three great and inspirational women – Dr Donna Heddle, Dr Gillian Munro and Prof. Margaret Grieco. I have been incredibly lucky to have such a good team, who have provided me with support, advice and enthusiasm for my research area – on many occasions above and beyond the call of duty. Their commitment to me as a student and their friendship in what have been difficult times has been invaluable over the past few years.

I want to mention Donald Archie MacDonald, who was also a great inspiration. He first gave me the encouragement to continue with my studies after I had my first child Peter, and to understand the role and importance of oral history and how it can be combined with other sources to produce a more complete history of people and communities. Another School of Scottish Studies stalwart who sadly is no longer with us, photographer Ian Mackenzie who was always enthusiastic about the role of visual image and photography in particular in social history, and always supportive of my various ventures over the years.

I would like to acknowledge the UHI itself without which this endeavour would not have been possible, along with Sabhal Mor Ostaig and Orkney College. Christine Cain and the staff of the SMO Library were a tremendous help. Living in Mallaig, hosted by the Gaelic College and undertaking my PhD with Orkney College Cultural Studies Department and the new Centre for Nordic Studies, my academic journey to this stage is one which shows the possibilities which a University of the Highlands and Islands can provide. Also to Orkney College and the Cultural Studies Department for their financial support by way of a bursary, and to the Inverness Field Club and the Arisaig Fund who were also generous in providing me with some financial support.

To my friends who have supported and encouraged me – in particular Mairead Robertson who shared some of the pressures of study in Skye as well as a good deal of humour which made it all that bit more enjoyable; to Anne Huntley who was so generous in providing me with material as well as a bed in Whalsay, Shetland along with Irene Williamson; to my Icelandic colleague and friend, Anna Olafsdottir; to Niki, Fiona, Eilidh and Ross, Jonathon and Sally, Julie and Grant, and Yves who was always there at the end of the phone when I needed someone to speak to – thank you all so much.

My final thanks must go to my family – my children Peter, Joe, Robbie and Fiona who have not only endured the process but have been remarkably positive about the whole experience. I hope they will be proud. Lastly thanks to my Mum, who always considered education to be the way forward and provided much encouragement – and in memory of my Dad, who would I know have been very pleased.

Jill de Fresnes
Morar,
January 2010
Chapter 1 Thesis Aims and Objectives

1.1 Introduction: charting a hidden history – the context of the research

The Scots Herring Girls were a large migratory workforce of women who were employed within the herring fishing industry during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to gut and pack the fish into barrels as it was landed on the piers around the coast of Scotland and down in the southern ports of East Anglia. At the height of the industry in 1913, the value of herring landed in Scotland was over £2,000,000 and it had become the main catch of the Scottish fishing fleet (Gray 1978: 149). At this time there were estimated to be almost 14,000 women employed as gutters and packers (Annual Report of Scottish Fishery Board, 1914).

Herring are a very perishable product owing to the oily nature of the fish, and before refrigeration, it was necessary for the processing to take place as soon after the fish were landed as was possible. The work of the women was vital and they were a familiar sight during the herring fishing season, standing on the piers and harbours working often for long hours and gutting the fish with considerable speed and dexterity at the wooden troughs into which the herring were poured, known as the ‘farlanes’. While material exists regarding the herring industry, in particular the fishing methods and the history of the industry itself, the lives of the women have been less well documented. The purpose of this thesis is to gather the existing fragmentary material together and to uncover and record new evidence relating to the history of the Scots herring girls.
The scale of the herring fishing industry and the movement of associated workers is an important aspect of Scotland’s industrial history during the period 1900 – 1950, a period for which it was still possible to obtain oral history accounts. Interviews collected for this research were predominantly with women whose memories of the industry stretched back as far as the 1920s and this material was supplemented with other material and other interviews undertaken by myself and other researchers during earlier periods, with respondents who could recall the industry at the beginning of the century.

Although some women only gutted herring in their home ports, the majority followed the herring fleet round from the west coast of Scotland, up to Shetland, to Orkney in the summer months, and down the North East Coast and into England, to the bigger fishing ports of East Anglia – Hull, Grimsby, Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. Some continued on to the Isle of Man and to fishing ports in Wales and Ireland. The women were contracted, or ‘arlsed’ - in Gaelic as airleas (see p.169 for phonetic rendering) as an ‘employment pledge’. Although used in Gaelic, this is not a Gaelic word. It was current in Scots and derives possibly from Old French and Latin. Arles were also a standard component of farm employment and the term might have come from that landward ‘sector’. This contract was made between the women and the curing firms at the beginning of the herring season, as work groups of three, two of whom would gut the fish while the third would pack the fish into barrels. They would then travel to wherever the curer was based, and move around the ports to different fishing stations run by the same curer. These women played a vital economic part in their communities back home - the fishing communities of the North East and also the crofting communities of the Highlands and Islands.
While seen from the outside as one mass of workers, living and working in the same environments, the 'Scots Herring Girls', also known as the 'Scots Girls', 'Scotch Girls', the 'Herring Quines', the 'Scots Lasses' or 'Clann Nighean an Sgadain', the women were from different areas of northern and north west Scotland and there were considerable social and cultural differences between them.

1.2 Documenting an untold history of herring girl labour

This thesis is an original piece of work, undertaken in an innovative way which incorporates the spoken experiences of the women themselves with fragments of
existing history and then combines them with the photographic record. As such, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the field of social history by documenting the lives of the herring girls during one of the main periods of this tradition of seasonal migration, 1900 – 1950, with the focus being on the following key themes: employment and working conditions, including travel patterns; accommodation and living conditions; recreation and culture and the role of the women within their communities. This will be undertaken using aspects of image and identity, oral and visual narratives and a consideration of the current heritage portrayal. An important objective of this thesis is to expand the coverage of women’s maritime history and its relationship to female occupational communities. It uses the voices of the women themselves, their own memories of this period of history, and how they felt about their lives and experiences. The visual representation of the herring girls is also viewed as an important feature of the thesis and its analysis uncovers a number of different aspects of the history of these women which is often hidden from public view.

The thesis takes account of the scale of the industry and the often unacknowledged but vital part the women played in it. It considers a wide range of materials which help to piece together a social history account of the workplace and the social aspects of life at the gutting. The use of oral history is also of considerable importance providing a valid and authentic account more closely bound to the history of the women themselves, which augments the written accounts, statistics and reports which are available.

The question of why the women went to the gutting is considered, along with the notion of the occupational and social community, both within and out-with the workplace. This also links with relationships between the men and women, and subsequently to
romance and marriage indicating the way in which the women and men interacted, but often stayed within their own communities, even while away at the fishing.

The portrayal of the women and how they were perceived by those outside the industry is often in contrast to their own sense of identity. Discussions regarding stereotyping and stigmatisation provide a fuller account of the way in which the women were viewed, and are contrasted with the way in which they viewed themselves. This ties in with the visual representations, and the thesis considers the photographs taken of the women, and also the photographs which were taken by the women, with field work having uncovered a wide range of material within private collections. Once again consideration is given to the contrast between public and private portrayals, and what this adds to the discussion regarding image and identity.

The important economic role which the women played in the fishing communities is another aspect of their lives that is of relevance to the thesis and one which has been missed in many formal accounts. However, to view the fishing community from either a male perspective or a female perspective would not provide a full account of the lives of either gender or of the communities from which they came. The lives of the men and the women can be seen to be intrinsically linked both at home, and also while away at the fishing.

The current heritage portrayal is an aspect of the thesis which ties in with discussions regarding the representation of the women, and this also reveals a missing account of the women. Ways in which this imbalance can be addressed are discussed towards the
end of the thesis, with the use of technology bringing opportunities to portray the women and their working lives in imaginative and creative ways.

1.3 Expanding the coverage of women's history and occupational community

These key themes and areas – employment and working conditions, accommodation and living conditions, recreation and culture, image and identity and the changes in the role of women during this time – cover the main aspects of the women’s lives as they travelled and worked at the fishing. These were themes which were discussed in all the interviews undertaken, and considered in relation to other material such as photographs and postcards, newspapers and journals, archived interviews, statistical accounts and reviews along with more formal histories covering aspects of the social history of the fishing industry.

The objective of documenting the employment and working conditions of the herring girls was developed in a context where there were major gaps in the existing record on these matters. All the women interviewed for this research referred to the amount of travelling they undertook, and the different curing firms with whom they had worked. While there is some photographic material from curing firms, there is considerably less written material, with few curing records surviving to provide background material. The records which do survive have been analysed and information which was gained has been added to the other sources of material to provide as rounded a picture as it is possible to create. There are very few women left now with experience of the industry.
and without the interview material, much information regarding the working lives of the women would have been completely lost.

The thesis also considers the travel and accommodation patterns of the women, and how this changed over the time period in question, and how it reflected the developments taking place elsewhere around the country as communication routes were opened up. Some of the women living on islands relied more on the boats travelling to the fishing to take them to the starting ports, and then they would join the other women travelling around the coast sometimes by special trains organised by the curers. Through examining evidence such as the Napier Commission Report conclusions (Napier Commission, 1884) it was clear that developments in communication and transport sometimes came about as a direct result of the requirements of the herring fishing industry. In some areas the women lived together in purpose-built ‘huts’ close to the fishing stations, while in the East Anglian ports, the tradition of crews lodging together with local families had built up over the years. The lives of the women as they worked together in the different ports are considered, with comparisons made as to the different locations, and the ways in which being part of an occupational community was important to the women.

The thesis will show that while the herring girls did appear to have more freedom economically and socially then their counterparts back home, there were constraints on that freedom not immediately obvious to the outside observer. Aspects of community life and how they extended into the occupational migration will be discussed and analysed within the thesis.
Recreation and culture were of considerable importance to the workers, and the thesis will demonstrate how, in the face of the hardships of the work at the gutting, these aspects of the women’s lives were main factors in their return to work each year. The thesis explores the notions of the group identity, a ‘community on the move’ through the exploration of recreation and culture in the lives of the women. This is an aspect of the lives of the women which has been almost entirely missed from the formal histories, and even from literature which does deal with aspects of the social history of the women at this time. The documentation within this thesis regarding how the women spent their free time at the gutting will fill an important gap in the historical account.

The thesis considers how the women were perceived and portrayed by others outside the industry, both through written and visual sources. Within the context of women’s lives at the time, the herring girls were visible and different. They were working with fish - guts, blood and mess, and they were working outside where they could be seen by others, in an occupation which some considered inappropriate for women. Others viewed them in a more idealistic or romantic way, picturesque and sanitised, both in text and in visual imagery. The thesis considers how these perceptions and misconceptions arose and the impact they had on the women themselves. It also considers the way the women viewed themselves, and what they themselves thought about their lives at the fishing. The importance of community is discussed in this context, and both the constraints and the support which it provided to the women at home and away travelling.

Consideration is given to the mixture of women involved in what to outsiders was one grouping of women - ‘The Scots Herring Girls’. The women are often depicted and
described as young girls mainly from the north-east coast of Scotland, however the research uncovered a more complex pattern with women being from different locations, of different ages and marital status, some travelling with children, and with changing patterns of age range and backgrounds over the time period in question. These differences and the consequences this had for both work and leisure are discussed within the thesis.

The thesis is set within a context of the changing roles for women, the end of the Victorian era, the consequences of the First and Second World Wars, and the coming of more political freedom and rights for women generally in Britain at this time. The impact which these changes had on the herring girls is considered along with political action in which they themselves were involved. The thesis considers the role of women within their own fishing communities, and the way in which this compared to other communities at this time. Mobility was one of the key features of the occupation and although the women often stayed within their community groups while travelling and working around the country, there is no doubt that the opportunity to travel and experience life out-with the bounds of their home communities was one of the main attractions of the role.

The thesis unravels some of the more complex patterns found during the research into the lives of the women, looking at the differences which occurred during the time period, and along with textual analysis, uses distinctive visual research models such as timelines to show aspects of the work and lives not previously considered. This complexity has not been considered at any length within previous accounts, and yet to understand the lives of the women, it is of great significance. What took place at one
particular time during the history and is marked out as part of the ‘tradition’ often changes at another point; what is claimed to have been the normal way of life for one set of women from a particular place or background, has been found to be different for others. The living conditions and accommodation, and the occupational aspects of life such as clothing, tools and conditions within the gutting stations - all these change as the time period or the location differ. This thesis sets out some of these patterns in an attempt to provide a greater understanding of the lives of the women during this time frame of 1900-1950.

1.4 A methodology of oral and visual distinctiveness

While the main methodology for the research has been oral and video history interviews with women who were actively involved in the industry, along with collecting and considering the photographic record, other contemporary sources have also been used such as newspaper accounts, official reports, letters, postcards, journals and diaries. These have been combined with other written histories to provide a fuller account of the lives of the herring girls than that which existed previously. Fragments of evidence exist in a huge variety of places, and this thesis brings such evidence together, to highlight aspects of the missing record of the social history of the women and most importantly combines it with the evidence provided by the women themselves.
1.5 Conclusion and Summary of the Thesis Structure

Collecting the interview material for this thesis has been crucial as there are so few women left now who were actively involved in the herring industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Initially, the thesis was principally concerned with giving a voice to a neglected social category - the herring girls - and was focused upon recording their accounts of their histories and the history of the industry. The wealth of the pictorial record of the women in museums and heritage centres and the availability of additional photographic sources from the women themselves and from online sources made it possible to include visual image as an important aspect of the research. While the women's own accounts were mainly from the 1920s, '30s and '40s, the photographs and the stories behind them helped to draw the evidence back towards the latter part of the nineteenth century when their mothers or grandmothers took part in the industry.

The women who were involved in the herring fishing industry have been largely left out of the formal histories recording this important period in the history of the fishing industry of Scotland and Britain. This thesis has brought together a wide range of sources of evidence to provide a comprehensive account of the lives of the herring girls; the travel they endured, their employment and working conditions; their accommodation and living conditions; the recreation and culture which was a part of their lives at the gutting, along with the role of women within these communities. What has been uncovered is a fascinating and complex pattern of life, with many different aspects all contributing to a distinctive and important piece of research into the lives of these women. What is of additional importance is that this material was collected together while it was still possible to include the accounts, memories and experiences
of the women themselves.

The thesis begins by looking at the literature in the field and the importance of the methodology employed in the fieldwork. Chapter Three provides a historical context for the study, describing the early years of the fishing industry and the fish processing industry and how it developed into the highly industrialised movement which it became by the turn of the century. Chapter Four considers the perceptions of the women involved in the herring gutting from out-with the fishing communities and how they were viewed and reported by others. Chapters Five and Six are principally concerned with the lives of the women while at the gutting from their own perspective, predominantly using interview material – the voices of the women themselves – to describe their experiences. They consider the living and working conditions of the women along with recreation and culture and incorporate images from both public and private photographic collections which also highlight aspects of life. Chapter Seven continues the themes of visual image, and explores more fully the visual representation of the women at work. Chapter Eight discusses the heritage portrayal of the fishing communities, and looks at how the industry and the women are portrayed within historical displays and heritage trails, museums and heritage collections. The thesis concludes with Chapter Nine which draws together conclusions from the material presented and suggests some future research which could be undertaken to take this material forward.

The next chapter will look at the existing literature and how the history and lives of the herring girls have been documented thus far. It will also look at the way in which the research for this thesis was undertaken, and the reasons for the methodology chosen.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Methodology

2.1 Introduction: Identifying the existing literature on the Scottish herring girls

As identified in Chapter 1, this thesis will document a social history of the Scottish herring girls and their seasonal labour between 1900 and 1950. The literature relating to the lives of the women themselves is scarce and where it does exist, it tends to be contained within a section of a larger maritime history dealing more specifically with the fishing industry at sea rather than the processing of the catch ashore (Gray, 1978; Coull 1996; Coull, Fenton and Veitch, 2008), or within the confines of feminist historical literature (Abrams et al. 2006; Ardener, 1993) which does not tend to reflect the communal or familial nature of fishing communities or as fleeting mentions within more formal histories (Devine, 1979; Smout, 1986) often as examples of difference.

It was an important aspect of this work that the voices of the people and in particular the women themselves were central to the research. The texts of other sociological and oral historians such as Paul Thompson and anthropologist Jane Nadel-Klein were of considerable value in helping to establish a theoretical as well as a methodological framework for this work, in particular their work dealing specifically with fishing communities (Thompson, 1983 and 1985; Nadel-Klein, 1988 and 2003). Despite the fact that the majority of this research is now well over 20 years old, there are surprisingly few more recent texts which cover the same area and put at the forefront the importance of using evidence from the people themselves. However, it was interesting to find that other researchers in the field currently are using similar oral history methodologies such as the work by Gillian Munro, Anne Coombs, Jane Liffen.
and Frances Wilkins (de Fresnes, 2006) perhaps reflecting a growing trend towards incorporating the voices of those about whom academics are writing.

To understand the lives and work of the women, and the way they themselves viewed their lives and experience, from the outset it was necessary to move out-with the bounds of the formal literature, and consider the greater range of the more scattered and ephemeral sources such as newspaper accounts, magazine articles, journals and diaries and combine these with the main source of material – the interviews carried out with the women themselves who had worked within the industry. Thirty-nine individuals were interviewed specifically for the thesis, mainly women who were actively involved in the industry themselves particularly during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Additional interview material was also sought and used, including material from the School of Scottish Studies, the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) - Qualidata archive held at the University of Essex, the Scottish Fishery Museum, Whalsay Museum and Heritage Centre, the Time and Tide Museum in Yarmouth and Commun Eachraidh Nis in Lewis, amongst other online sources (See Interview Table: 55). My own interview material and this additional earlier material covered work experience from the early 1900s through to the 1960s and provided enough evidence to reflect the thesis time period of 1900-1950.

2.1.1 A Gendered Literature

The study of the women within the fishing communities must be set against a backdrop of a Victorian Britain in which the idea of domesticity and women remaining in the
home had become a popular notion. Davidoff and Hall (2002) considered British society from the standpoint of the family structures of the middle classes. 'The equation of women with domesticity came to be one of the fixed points of middle-class status.' (Davidoff and Hall, 2002: 275) This text provided useful background material from which a clearer understanding could be gained regarding the way in which working class women were viewed and it provided a contrast with the even greater differences of the fishing community. Another useful publication for context in particular, concerning Scottish women is The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women (2006) edited by Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes, Sian Reynolds and Rose Pipes.

While there has been a recent increase in the publication of work relating to the lives of women in Scotland, the history of women generally tends to have been overlooked by historians, and is further overlooked when focusing specifically on one area of study such as the women involved in the fishing industry. Work specifically on the history of women, Shetland Women, and Gender in Scottish History since 1700 (2006) edited by Lynn Abrams, Eleanor Gordon, Deborah Simonton and Eileen Janes Yeo, provides some extremely useful context material for the lives of the herring girls. Abrams work on Shetland women, Myth and Materiality in a Woman’s World: Shetland 1800-2000 (2005) also provides some specific material relating to the women themselves. Deborah Simonton also mentions the herring girls specifically in her work A History of European Women’s Work, 1700 to the Present (1998). Of considerable use was the work undertaken by Elizabeth Roberts, A Woman’s Place, an Oral History of Working Women 1890-1940 (1984), which focuses on the lives of women in the northern towns of England. Despite covering the experiences of women from very different
backgrounds to the herring girls, this work was particularly relevant as it used oral testimony as a main source of evidence.

The lives of working-class people (particularly men) in the earlier part of this century have been extensively written and spoken about, whether by historians, social observers and reformers, or sociologists, politicians, civil servants and clergies. It is rather less common to hear or read about how working-class people saw their own lives; they were and are less likely to keep diaries write letters or enter items in account books than their more prosperous, educated and leisured contemporaries. In the absence of this personal documentary evidence, oral evidence is vital. Through old people's spoken testimony about their lives and those of their parents, one can attempt to reconstruct a picture of everyday life over the last century. (Roberts, 1984:3)

Roberts more recent publication Women and families: an oral history, 1940-1970 (1995) was also of considerable use particularly as comparative material. I was particularly struck by the approach taken by Roberts who incorporated the words of her informants into her text, and made key points using the recollections and experiences of the people about whom she wrote. While the herring gutters' lives are often portrayed as 'different', particularly in relation to the more sedentary nature of women's lives at the time, it was possible to gain a greater understanding of their role and of the society of the time through considering Robert's research relating to the role of women in working class areas of Northern England. Margaret Grieco's text, Workers' Dilemmas, Recruitment, Reliability and Repeated Exchange (1996), which considered the families who moved from London to work in the hop fields during the hopping season provided
additional comparative material. Greco’s approach was similar to that of Roberts, and also used oral testimony as a key source for her work. The female perspective was again taken by Leah Leneman in her publication, *A Guid Cause* (1991), which told the story of women in Scotland fighting for the vote at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. This was useful background material and was particularly relevant as context for the strike action in which the women were involved during this period.

2.1.2 Anthropology and Sociology

Looking more closely at the thesis area, works within the fields of sociology and ethnography have contributed towards a clearer understanding of life within the Scottish fishing communities, in particular anthropologist Jane Nadel-Klein’s work with Dona Lee Davis - *To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies*, (1988) and more directly relevant to the Scottish communities - *Fishing for Heritage, Modernity and Loss Along the Scottish Coast* (2003), and the work of sociologist, Paul Thompson with Tony Wailey and Trevor Lummis, *Living the Fishing* (1983). These texts will be considered in more detail below in section 2.2.

All these texts have provided a good account of the fishing communities during the time period in which the thesis is set, but deal only with certain aspects of the lives of the women and do so utilising anthropological and sociological methodology. They do acknowledge the complexity of the nature of fishing communities and the regional
differences, and the somewhat overemphasised idea of the 'traditional' fishing community:

Fishing has been an unstable occupation for centuries; for, in order to survive the constant changes in the sea's resources and the demands of society, generations of fishermen have had to seek new grounds and new markets, learn new techniques and new attitudes. It is these very differences, between communities and over time, which we believe are the fascination of fishing history. (Thompson, 1983: 4)

The oral history testimony used within Living the Fishing in particular, provided another layer of understanding compared to texts relying purely on formal historical accounts or records, and gave credence to the use of oral history testimony as a main source of evidence within this thesis. Thompson also wrote of the often undervalued part played by women, children and community in the histories:

Fishing is commonly thought of as a man's trade. In fact it is an occupation peculiarly dependent on the work of women. There is, first of all, the direct productive contribution of women's labour, on which the fishing industry has always relied, as have the economies of so many other kinds of industrial and agricultural communities throughout history. Secondly, there are the special responsibilities which women must carry because of the absence of men away at sea. Lastly, there is also the role which has been principally theirs in all human societies, of creating the next generation, both in a physical and moral sense: of bearing and raising children. (Thompson, 1983: 165)
Anthony Cohen's work on Whalsay – *Whalsay: Symbol, segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community* (Cohen, 1987) was also useful, although written as an anthropological text. It is specific to one of the areas where the herring gutting had a huge impact on the people and the community as a whole, although it does not deal with the historical aspects of women's lives at the gutting, being more concerned with the identity of the community from a more contemporary viewpoint, and not how its history shaped the community as it is.

One of the most useful texts for this thesis was published in 1950 by Peter Anson, *Scots Fisherfolk*. While not an academic, and this is not an academic text, Peter Anson had a close association with the fishing communities throughout his life as a Roman Catholic Priest. He was also an artist and a social commentator particularly sympathetic to the people and their way of life. His work could be described as anthropology or ethnography as he was living amongst the fisherfolk about whom he wrote. While the focus of his research was the fishermen, he did also include some description of the women in the communities, commenting on their hard work, and the power which they held within the family. He wrote about the descriptions of the women given by James Bertram and the Rev. A. Anderson from around the middle of the nineteenth century:

"...The women enslave the men to their will, and keep them enchained under petticoat government."

We learn that the woman is "allowed an influence which in any other condition of life would appear little consistent with either feminine propriety or domestic order...." (Anson, 1950: 24)
However, he displays a greater understanding of the workings of the fishing communities than the two commentators of the time, describing the way in which all the members of the fishing community had their parts to play:

No doubt it was due to this close intercourse of men and women in the Scottish fisheries that helped to preserve their national characteristics. Where a whole family takes its part in the catching, curing and selling of fish, and where everyone has a share in the job, it is quite a different thing to the conditions found in those big centres of the trawling industry in England. In Scotland, every man, boy, woman and girl retained a sense of individual responsibility, so long as the fishing industry maintained its freedom from combines and company ownership. (Anson, 1950: 27)

He shows a far sightedness regarding the future of the Scottish fishing industry which has increasingly come out of the hands of local families and communities and has dwindled to a tiny proportion of the fleet which existed in the first half of the twentieth century:

The alarming decay of the sea fisheries which has gone on since the first world war may yet involve the disappearance of countless self-contained communities which have lived by the sea for generations, and their absorption into the population of towns and cities. Fewer and fewer sons of fishermen are following in their father's footsteps. Their parents realise that sea fishing has now become a far too risky means of earning a living. (Anson, 1950: Introduction)
While being extremely useful background material for the fishing communities, Anson does tend to oversimplify aspects of life, and does not always take into account the complexities of the pattern, and the differences of time and location. He does not give equal treatment to the men and the women within the communities but he does make the important point that the communities functioned as a whole – men, women and children.

2.1.3 General Histories

Most general histories of Scotland during this time concentrate on aspects of life in different areas for example James Hunter’s work *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Hunter, 1976 and 2000), which concentrates on the Highlands of Scotland from a male perspective. In the most recent edition of *The Making of the Crofting Community* James Hunter states:

What other changes might I make to a wholly revised version of ‘The Making of the Crofting Community’? I would not, to begin with, make the mistake of implying – as I tended to do in 1976 – that the crofting population is almost exclusively male. (Hunter, 2000: 24)

This is an important statement indicating the realisation that the history of women of this place and time has not been given proper recognition. However, the background material regarding the social history of the Highlands of Scotland was of considerable
use, often from a community perspective and the importance of the growth of the herring industry was also recognised.

Christopher Smout’s *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830* (Smout, 1969) while reasonably comprehensive, along with *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (Smout, 1986) which also includes good context material, still does not provide equal or adequate coverage of the history of women in Scotland.

Historians such as Isobel Frances Grant in her book *Highland Folk Ways* (1961), while not dealing specifically with the women at the fishing, have consistently questioned the lack of development of a fishing industry on the west coast of Scotland:

The rich store of food within the seas, the fisheries, seems to have been astonishingly unimportant in the Highlander’s economy until comparatively late in their history, but then through dire necessity the industry became closely integrated into the life of the people of the west and north. (Grant, 1961: 251)

The whole nature of the herring fishing had an associated transience which very much included those people who travelled to work within it, and who had to cope with the difficulties of not being able to rely on any aspect of the industry. The movement of people to work in the fishing industry to make a positive contribution to sustain the traditional crofting lifestyle in the Highlands and Islands has not been well represented in formal histories from this period of Highland history. I.F. Grant is one of the few
historians who does consider this aspect of Scottish history and also makes mention of
the large numbers of people involved:

the rise of lively fishing ports of the extreme north...like Portmahomack,
Lybster and Helmsdale inhabited by Gaelic speaking folk, others like Wick,
the greatest of them all.....became almost a boom about the middle of the 19th
century ....It has been estimated that in 1845 10,000 workers, mainly
Highland, came to work at Wick alone....They had also begun to find their
way to the east coast fishing ports...the island girls also began to come to the
mainland to work as Herring gutters. Such subsidiary earnings, although
perhaps not more than £3 or £4, were of such importance to the poverty
stricken people that, although the work clashed with the time of the harvest,
all who could tended to go to work at the fishing ports... (Grant, 1961: 265)

One of the most useful histories for this thesis was Malcolm Gray’s The Fishing
Industries of Scotland 1790-1914: A Study in Rural Adaptation (1978) which has yet to
be surpassed as a thorough piece of research into the growth and development of the
fishing industry in Scotland particularly through the nineteenth century. However, it is
somewhat surprising that while recognising the fishing communities and the part they
played, his research does not take much account of the lives of the women, and the
herring gutters are mentioned only in the passing. Gray takes a more formal approach
to the history which does not incorporate much of the social aspects of life. A
subsequent publication by Gray, George Washington Wilson and the Scottish Fishing
Industry (1982), was particularly useful in that it combined the early photographs of
Washington Wilson with Gray’s knowledge of the Scottish fishing industry to provide
an informative account showing how useful the pictorial record can be when combined with relevant text. Hance Smith’s work *The Making of Modern Shetland* (1977) and *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914* (1984) which focused on the Shetland fishing industry, were also consulted and provided much information regarding the importance of the trade to the Shetland Isles. As context material and for background into the development of the industry and in particular the important part played by The British Fisheries Society, Jean Dunlop’s *The British Fisheries Society, 1786-1893* (1978) was of particular use.

### 2.1.4 Popular Publications and Local Histories

Specific work relating to women who were at the gutting exists in more popular publications such as also Susan Telford’s book *In a World A Wir Ane*, (Telford, 1998) which is an account from her grandmother’s time at the gutting and Margaret Bochel’s account of life at the fishing in *Dear Gremista: The Story of Nairn Fisher Girls at the Gutting* (Bochel, 1979). These publications fit in well with the methodology used within the thesis, as accounts from the women themselves, and how they viewed and recounted their experiences of the time. David Fraser’s publication *The Christian Watt Papers* also provides a fascinating insight into the life of Christian Watt who reputedly worked as a gutter from the 1850s and provides a rich background of life in the North East fishing communities. David Butcher’s book *Following the Fishing* - ‘The days when bands of Scots fisher girls followed the herring fleets round Britain and scores of trades depended on the harvest of the sea’ – used the testimony of seventeen people who had been involved in the fishing industry. However, of these seventeen, only three
were women and only one was a herring gutter. This is yet more evidence that even those publications dealing specifically with the herring fishing industry fail to give prominence to the women involved. Despite the lack of women interviewed, the first chapter of Butcher’s book does deals with the women at the gutting, and used the interview material from Annie Watt who had started her work at the gutting firstly in Peterhead aged 13 in 1906, and then travelling to Gorleston in 1908. This was a very interesting and useful account, providing comparative material for the interviews undertaken as part of this research.

2.1.5 Contemporary and Fragmentary Sources

Fragmentary evidence was crucial in order to piece together a more holistic account of the women at the gutting, and to look at specific aspects of their lives. Other evidence which was considered within the thesis included newspaper accounts, journals, diaries and articles written over the course of time for various magazines such as The Scots Magazine and The Graphic and pieces within relevant newspapers such as The Fishing News, The Fraserburgh Herald, The Stornoway Gazette and the Shetland Times. A particularly useful online archive which yielded much material for the thesis was The Scotsman Online Archive. Journals were also used such as Constance Astleys diaries (1872–1902, unpublished), which included descriptions of the herring girls in Stornoway in the 1890s. From her accounts it was possible to gain a contemporary view of the herring girls as observed by an interested outsider, and she also provided visual records having sketched them at their work.
Another useful source of information was contained within The Napier Commission Report (1884) which held considerable detailed information relating in particular to the crofting areas of the north of Scotland. The opinions and conclusions of the Commissioners were of interest as well informed contemporary observers of the time. Other official reports such as the Scottish Fishery Board Annual Reports contained useful statistical information, and fragmentary accounts of the women at the gutting were also contained within specific court records and ministerial reports held by the National Archives of Scotland which provided further details of the women’s lives.

2.1.6 The Visual Narrative

Once it became clear that the visual aspect of the women at the gutting, how they were represented in postcards and photographs, both public photographs and private collections, was going to form a part of the thesis, texts concerning visual anthropology and methodology were used (Berger, 1972; Collier and Collier, 1986; Becker, 1995; Banks, 2005). In his publication Theatres of Memory, (1994) socialist historian Raphael Samuel discussed how he came to realise that the use of photographs combined with other sources of evidence could be of importance to the understandings of social history:

Deconstruction, using photographs in conjunction with oral testimony and written documents, splicing together different classes of evidence, or using one to expose the silences and absences of the other, is one procedure which
historians can bring to bear on the explication and interpretation of old photographs. (Samuel, 1994: 332)

The use of the visual in both the recordings made of the women themselves and their portrayal at the time, has provided an additional source of evidence with which to elucidate the lives of the women, what Banks also refers to in Visual Methods in Social Research, (2005) as the ‘internal and external narratives’ of the source material.

This combination of oral, visual and textual is a new perspective on the Scots herring girls, which produces new understandings of the experiences and sense of identity of the women in both their working and recreational lives at the gutting.

Berger’s Ways of Seeing (1972), is a text which describes the complexity of the visual experience and the way in which meaning is encapsulated within the image regardless of the medium. Viewing a visual image is compared to communicating in a foreign language, and the understandings come from being able to interpret and understand the language being used. It was particularly enlightening to be given such a different perspective on what is an everyday experience as well as new ways of interpreting images such as the early photographs of the herring girls. Even within these photographs the image of the women can be seen to correspond to Berger’s description of the objectification of women. This also compares to the early photographs of Hill and Adamson, in particular their ‘Newhaven’ series in which there is also clear objectification of women.
*Wick Harbour and the Herring Fishing* by Iain Sutherland (1983), was more directly relevant to the thesis focus tying the aspects of photography and the herring industry closely together. The book is full of photographs undertaken by a Wick family of photographers, the Johnstons who – over three generations – between 1861 and 1950 took over 100,000 photographs mainly of Wick and the surrounding areas. Alexander Johnston set up one of the first photography studios in the country, in Wick in 1863. The close ties between the history of photography generally and the development of the herring industry through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century is described more fully in Chapter 7, Visual Narratives.

### 2.1.7 Online Journal Archives

A search for online journal articles was carried out using the JSTOR archive of scholarly journals. This provided a wealth of background reading including comparative material from fishing cultures around the world such as *The Maritime Household in Northern Europe*, by Reginald Byron in which he looked at all aspects of life within households and fishing communities in northern Europe including the relationship between crofting and fishing – what he described as the ‘commensal’ relationship, in which crofting could not survive without a dependency on the fishing economy either seasonally for the community itself or as a result of the employment of people within the fishing industry, as was often the case in the Highlands of Scotland. (Byron 1994: 276). Dona Lee Davis’ work on occupational community (Davis, 1986), in which she analysed the lives of the women working in the fish processing plant in an area of Newfoundland was also of considerable interest to this thesis, with the notion of
the group experience being at the forefront of her work. Paul Thompson’s article, The Roots of Power Between the Sexes (Thompson, 1985) was a particularly useful article describing the perceived control and power held by women within fishing communities with the men spending considerable amounts of time at sea, leaving the women with more power and control of the domestic sphere but also with the women having active involvement in the economic aspects of the fishing community. Thompson discusses the balance required for this type of community to work, and the way in which the women within these communities can be seen to have more equality than other women at that time.

2.2 A Critical Appraisal of the Existing Literature

As has already been ascertained, little literature relating specifically to the herring girls exists, apart from a few texts dealing with individual women’s accounts. Most of the information gained from literature has been background material, context for both the social history of the time, and of the lives of women in general, along with relevant articles and journals concerned with fishing communities, working women or related topics which fell into the main themes which were being considered within this thesis.

2.2.1 A Social Science Analyses of the Scottish fishing communities

The anthropological and sociological approach of both Jane Nadel-Klein and Paul Thompson have provided key texts for this thesis. Paul Thompson’s *Living the Fishing* (1983) was part of the History Workshop Series which was founded by Raphael Samuel and advocated the notion of ‘history from below’, encouraging the use of oral history
and the inclusion of ordinary people both as subject material but also as historians themselves. Samuel’s own writing on the notion of ‘people’s history’ and the idea of heritage as part of history in *Theatres of Memory* (1994) was also of use in particular for Chapter 8 of this thesis, Heritage Portrayal.

‘History from below’ is certainly the approach taken by Thompson and while not being concerned so much with the notion of heritage portrayal, his work constantly seeks to ensure that the voices of the people are heard right at the centre of the arguments.

Thompson discusses the place of women within the fishing communities in his publication *Living the Fishing* (1983) and takes the view that their role was stronger because of their active involvement with the fishing industry. He makes the argument that there was more equality between the sexes in fishing communities than in other working class communities, given the involvement of the women in the fishing industry, and the domesticisation of men aboard boats. On the economic underpinning of the communities through fishing enterprise and shared responsibility for finance as well as work Thompson wrote:

> All this gives women the possibility of achieving, within the fishing family, a degree of independence and power which is unusual. (Thompson, 1983: 177)

A key part of Thompson’s argument is that he believes that it is women who shape the attitudes of their children - they create a new generation both socially and physically. He makes this point in both *Living the Fishing* (Thompson, 1983) and *The Roots of Power Between the Sexes* (Thompson, 1985) that the women only had a few years
between leaving home and getting married themselves and looking after a home and family in which they were engaged at the gutting. This, however, does not reflect the wider range of age and marital status of the women, and while perhaps the majority of the women were young and single, there were considerable numbers who were not. In *Living the Fishing*, Thompson provides a section which considers the experiences of the women in the fishing communities, and he describes well the importance of the women and their work, both at the gutting, as part of the fishing economy and at home. He also discusses their strength and their ability to stand up for themselves and for others within the communities, in particular during times of industrial strife.

Thompson also points out that the idea of fishing communities having always existed, and the traditions surrounding them being based in the mists of time, is in fact a fiction. Even the older fishing communities of the North East coast of Scotland grew up after landowners cleared potential farming ground and led the landless population to the coast. Some provided boats and encouraged fishing in return for a share of the catch with Buckie having been settled in the mid-seventeenth century (Thompson, 1983: 14). But the notion that ‘the sea is in the blood’ was often quoted by fisher folk from the north-east when in fact, many of these communities are not much more than a couple of hundred years old. The idea that these people and fishermen in particular had to constantly adapt and change to survive, and that ways of life and the idea of ‘tradition’ grew up sometimes within decades is particularly applicable to the herring girls, whose existence as a large mobile workforce lasted not much more than a century.

*To Work and to Weep – Women in Fishing Economies*, (1988) by Nadel-Klein and Davis was of considerable use for both background theoretical understandings and also
information regarding women within the communities themselves. In another key text, *Fishing for Heritage*, Nadel-Klein makes a valid argument about the importance of studying fishing communities, and the idea that ethnography such as this can contribute to a wider global debate:

....I also know as an anthropologist, that ethnographic investigation can teach us much about the experience of what is now fashionably called globalism. To understand the consequences of public attitudes, policies, national agendas and transnational economic forces upon localities, we cannot afford to look only at statistics on employment and migration... The fisherfolk are fabulous – and generous – storytellers who can teach us much about survival, integrity and strength in the face of hardship. By listening to them and by setting their tales in present-day as well as in historical context, we engage with memory as a tactic that builds and rebuilds identity. For it is not just the body that must perpetually renew itself; it is our sense of self, as well. (Nadel-Klein 2003: 2)

Nadel-Klein goes on to explain how she lets her informants speak about matters of identity, time, place and community – and sets their views against those of “outsiders”.

In this way, I examine how Scottish fishing people define themselves, how others define them, and how these contrasting perceptions shape an ongoing, but rarely equal dialogue, similar in many ways to that encompassing Highlanders, Celts, Gypsies and others who occupy stereotyped and often stigmatized categories. (Nadel-Klein 2003: 2)
Nadel-Klein’s approach to history from an anthropological viewpoint takes into account the people themselves, their experiences, thoughts and beliefs, and a sense that their identity is central to the historical narrative. This was particularly useful in shaping the theoretical approach taken in my own research. However, evidence from my own fieldwork would suggest that she over emphasises aspects of stereotyping and stigmatisation of the fishing communities and of the women in particular which are a key point of her findings. The evidence of this thesis indicates that there was a real sense of pride amongst the informants in being ‘fisher’ as opposed to a feeling of stigmatisation, and there was also considerable respect for the fishing communities from the majority of those ‘outside’. There was also more parity between the herring girls and those outside the industry than Nadel-Klein describes, particularly the ways in which they spent their leisure time which shows how they were in fact, not very different to other women of similar ages in different locations of the time - interested in the same social pursuits and also the general fashion trends of the day. From the primary interview evidence collected (see Chapter 5 and 6), the differences of age, marital status or rurality had a considerable effect on the women and not just their occupation. The stereotype of the fishergirl is what has perhaps even historically marked these women as ‘a race apart’ when in fact they felt that they were as much part of their society as other women.

In the publication To Work and To Weep (1988) Nadel-Klein and Davis comment on how little material there has been - until the 1970s and how this is an area of ethnography which can provide much useful and interesting material. Fishing communities do not tend to follow the ‘rules’ of other communities, and the power -
sharing between genders, whether in a domestic or a work sphere, is very different. Nadel-Klein and Davis make the case that women play a vital role within these fishing communities and they go on to discuss how they have been examined by other researchers in the field.

Davis and Nadel-Klein recognise that the way in which researchers have approached the topic has been wide and varied although most have used the ‘time-honored anthropological field method of participant-observation’. One of the biggest issues with previous studies identified by Davis and Nadel-Klein is that they have generally been undertaken by men:

...they have been undertaken from a male bias, or emphasis on male activities – to the virtual exclusion of female activities. The large majority of studies have been conducted by men, but even in the rare cases where a female ethnographer conducted the research, men tended to remain the focus (e.g., Ward 1965). It was extremely frustrating to read such genderless descriptions as “'the people’ went out to fish every morning,” or “'shaman’ blessed the catch. (Nadel-Klein and Davis, 1988)


2.2.2 Cohen and Abrams: Fishing communities from an island perspective

Two key pieces of Shetland based research provided accounts of the people in the islands and some relevant material for the thesis. Anthony Cohen undertook fieldwork
on the island of Whalsay in the 1980s while Lynn Abrams most recent text relating specifically to women in Shetland was published in 2005.

Anthony Cohen’s publication *Whalsay, Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community* (Cohen, 1987), while including some interesting detail, was less useful than the previous two texts mentioned. Whalsay is still one of the few pelagic fishing communities left in Scotland, and had a thriving herring industry throughout the period in question, but Cohen’s interest lies more in the anthropological aspects of contemporary community life in the 1980s. However, some interesting background material was provided.

While looking at aspects of gender within the community, Cohen discusses the way in which domestic arrangements on Whalsay are not easily compared with those elsewhere. Although there are a few gender specific tasks, the distinguishing factor seems to be the way in which duties and chores are shared and he also discussed how this has changed, or is changing and the reasons for it.

He notes that women laboured alongside the men on the crofts and at the peats and were also involved in baiting the lines for fishing and when the herring processing came to the area, the women were actively involved in the gutting. Fishing itself, he states, was the one activity which women did not actively take part in. Men would knit when ashore, they would share cooking duties in the household, and carry laundry for the women to wash:
This sharing of tasks is a residue of an earlier mode of economic life which persisted until after the last war.....The 'traditional' domestic economy thus involved women's participation in the production of subsistence; they worked within the same economic spheres as men but, with the exception of crofting, performed specialised tasks within them. (Cohen 1987: 173, 174)

This is the same theory put forward by both Thompson and Nadel-Klein with a sharing of tasks within the fishing communities. However Cohen does not pursue this idea and he makes little reference to the historical work of women at the fishing in Whalsay.

He puts forward the notion of 'privatisation' of the household, with public tasks such as collecting water from the well, and other essential chores which could be shared throughout the community and he also discusses how these changed over time. This idea is particularly relevant as background to the lives of the herring gutters. The main period of time during which these women were sharing accommodation, and living closely together at the gutting falls before this and it is therefore important to consider that the idea of 'privatisation', of being in a 'private' house would have been unknown to most of these women.

Cohen discusses the work practices of the Whalsay fishermen, in their large pelagic vessels - who are out now in the wider world. However, instead of that creating a bridge between the outside world and Whalsay - the men tend to stick together and do not mix with non-Shetlanders, and information from home is daily delivered to sustain ties of family, friendship and community - all of which adds to their sense of cultural distinctiveness rather than destroying it.
One of the most striking features of the lives of the Shetland women in comparison with other women from crofting or fishing communities was their sense of independence and power. This has also been noted by other historians such as Lynn Abrams, and it was surprising that it did not receive much attention from Cohen, although this is perhaps because he was dealing more with contemporary community as opposed to pre-war Shetland.

Lynn Abrams *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000* (2005), was part of the Gender in History series, which attempts to redress the balance of history by providing more texts on the history of women specifically:

The expansion of research into the history of women and gender since the 1970s has changed the face of history...They have also investigated the history of sexuality and family relations, and analysed ideas and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Yet gender history has not abandoned the original, inspirational project of women's history: to recover and reveal the lived experience of women in the past and the present. (Abrams, 2005: forward)

Abrams points out that the Shetland women who went to the gutting are not given the same validation for their labours as other women from Shetland:

37
The female crofter and knitter has an iconic and symbolic status in Shetland, but the female herring gutter is a more ambiguous character who features more rarely in representations of the past. (Abrams, 2005: 111)

Abrams herself does not give them the same attention. Much is made of the fact that most of the gutters in Shetland during the season were from outside – the North east and the Highlands of Scotland, and examples of ‘foul-mouthed’ Fraserburgh gypsies and coopers, are contrasted with descriptions of the Shetland women who reputedly had higher standards of conduct, reticence and dignity (Abrams, 2005: 115)

Abrams makes the point that the women had considerable freedom alongside the men operating as ‘relatively free agents’:

Here, as elsewhere along the Scottish east coast, it was precisely these aspects of their employment that prompted unflattering descriptions and concerns for the women’s morality. (Abrams, 2005: 115)

There is considerable merit in Abrams approach and an understandable desire to redress the balance with regard to the representation of women in history. However, while providing fascinating material and much worthwhile work, there would seem to be a lack of material which takes a more holistic community perspective rather than a gender approach. Taking either the male or female perspective does not truly reflect the communities in which people live. A community perspective, with research which takes into account the way in which men and women live together more truly reflects the lives of people both historically and today.
2.2.3 The detail of herring girl experience

*In a World A Wir Ane* (Telford, 1998) and *The Christian Watt Papers* (Fraser, 1983) were both useful texts because they are singular accounts from the experiences and memories of women who were involved in the industry, and along with interviews in archives and museums previously collected for other studies, provided a reference point for my own interviews.

Susan Telford writes about her grandmother Christina Jackman who worked in the industry during the 1920s and 1930s. She gives a good description of her own family background, growing up amongst the fisherfolk of Lerwick in the ‘Burgh’, and an indication of the hardship of life for poor families during that time. She also manages to convey her grandmother’s experience on a number of different levels – as an individual, as a member of her family, and as a part of the wider group of girls who travelled form all over the north of Scotland, the Highlands and East Coast. In her introduction, Telford describes the way in which the herring girls were portrayed romantically and nostalgically:

Ironically, just as the herring fisheries on the east coast of Britain began their long slide towards economic disaster, culminating in their closure in the 1960s, media interest in a trade not previously noted for its glamour picked up and took on the romantic hue of nostalgia. In the newsprint of the 1930s
depression years, the girls were frequently referred to as 'buxom'. But by 1935 their numbers had been reduced by two thirds ..... [Telford 1998: 1]

As was noted in the Telford text, transport and travel was at the very heart of the herring fishery, both for the catch and for those fishing and processing it. Thus Telford's description of the background makes useful reading in particular descriptions of the railway network and the change in mode of transport from sail to steam. She also points out the huge changes in society at the time and how economically, rather than a fishery which was to supply the local needs of the coastal communities, the herring fishery became very big business. Instead of the family groups which used to work as units to fish and process the catch, it became necessary to have a mobile workforce who could travel around with the herring fleets to work for the growing numbers of curing firms, selling to large buyers in both Russia and Germany.

Telford makes an important contribution here, providing some explanation as to why this mobile workforce first came into being. She goes on to say that the women were able to take the time out and travel the fishing because the croft work was less arduous in the summertime. On the basis of the evidence collected for this thesis, however, this is not the case across the whole of the crofting area, as there is evidence that summer on the croft could be one of the busiest times, but the travels could be tied in with the planting and harvesting and as long as there were enough family members to tend the animals, then it would not only be possible, but of preference that other female members of the family could be out earning additional income, at a time when crofting was becoming less of a self-sustaining and more of an economic enterprise.
Telford’s grandmother’s account talks of the strikes in which the herring girls were involved and how they had their wages increased by one shilling only to find that their landladies in Yarmouth had put up the rent by a shilling a week, so they gained very little at all. Telford does also include some material referring to some of the more controversial aspects of the women’s lives when they were away at the fishing, such as the visits to the public houses in Yarmouth where they would partake of a port and lemon. This side of life is generally less well reported:

We werna supposed ta drink, because Shetland wis a dry place. Nae pubs. Dey wir licensed grocers, a course, but nae pubs fir efter da War. Da women didna drink. If dey drank dey wir looked on as horrible. Whan we wir in Yarmouth we wid geng in sometimes an get somebody ta treat wiz, just ta a port an lemon.... If onybody towld wir faiders an midders we wir in a pub we got a god hoiding wan we got hame. But naecbody towld because aabody wis ida sam boat. [Telford 1998: 29]

From both Fraser’s and Telford’s accounts, it can be seen that the women’s own particular experiences have tended to shape their understanding of the whole situation of life at the gutting, creating over simplifications of what was, in fact a more complex pattern, which changed over time and depended on which group the women were working with. These individual simplifications create tensions in the overall account of herring girl life and practice.

The complexity of the pattern which has been revealed in the research for this thesis warns against making assumptions based on small pieces of evidence, or as in the case
of the Telford material, based on only one interview. The ‘tradition’ of the gutting incorporated many different aspects of life and work, and was continually changing, depending on the state of the industry at the time, as well as other external factors such as the effects of the First World War, both on the economy and the industry, but also on society in general.

David Fraser’s *The Christian Watt Papers* (Fraser, 1988) is a striking piece of work based on a seemingly strong voice from within the community. Christian’s recollections are vivid and feisty, and provide some real drama and colour to life at the time – from the 1840s through to the 1920s. Despite the fact that there is some ongoing controversy as to the validity of the account, and how much of it was Christian’s own voice, and how much was included by the author himself, it does provide one of the earlier accounts of women at the gutting:

I had learned to gut when I was 10: curing had started in a big way. In 1844 during the summer, most Broadsea fishers went to the west coast and the Hebrides. We as lassies went to cook for the men. We lived in sodbuilt bothies on the shore, I shared one with Annie Rogie and Saffie Noble, at Loch Eishort in Skye… We gutted the herring, and packed them in barrels and ships from Glasgow took them away…. We went again and again to Skye. The coastline was dotted with the bothies of girls; it was hard work to bake wash and cook to 27 men. The catches were not big; at this time the fishermen did most of the gutting, it had not yet become wholly a female job. [Fraser 1988: 28]

---

1 Andy Noble at the Herring Girl Conference in Skye 2006
As well as being an early account of life at the fishing for girls and women, it is also an early mention of gutting undertaken by men before it became the tradition for women only to gut the fish. It is likely that it would have been a transition, and dependent on the labour available in the earlier years, and also along the west coast at this time, while there were no large ports at this time, there were boats which received the barrelled herring and took them directly to the markets.

One of the most striking things about Christian Watt’s writings is that it is dealing with such a changing way of life, from carrying fish to sell round the country, to travelling to the gutting. The whole notion of moving around the country, to find work where possible comes over very clearly. Of the changes to the fishing industry after the turn of the century, Christian noted how towns and villages grew or shrunk, depending on how well they could be used for the fishing. The inclusion of her granddaughters who were also at the gutting take the account into the 1920s.

Christian should perhaps not be regarded as a typical example of the women of her day. She was extremely opinionated, was passionate about justice and equality and willingly spoke out, when others might have kept quiet. In her final years, she was sought out by many to provide opinions on various matters, and to help students with a variety of theses. She lived to be 91, and finally seemed to have a comfortable way of life, still living at Cornhill and was at peace with the world before she died.

This is a fascinating account which added considerably to the knowledge of the lives of the gutters from an early period through to the 1920s. The contention that the material
might not all be written from Christian's own account has not been proven, and from her writings as a strong and independently minded woman, it can be argued that it would have been difficult to insert another voice into this account without it being more obvious. Her account also closely fits with the other interview material and contemporary accounts of life at the fishing.

2.3 Oral and Video History as a Methodology

As well as literature relating to the fishing communities and the contextual history of the time, literature relating to methodology chosen for this thesis was considered. I was particularly keen to ensure that the voices of the women who had worked at the herring gutting would be heard as part of this study, and it was of considerable importance, indeed a race against time, to collect their recollections as there are very few women left now who worked at the fishing. I also believed that the ability to film the interviews would provide additional visual material and information as well as providing a more complete record of the respondents than could be done through oral interview alone. A sample of clips from some of the filmed interviews has been provided on a DVD and included with this thesis.

Due to the development of the video camera as a smaller and less obtrusive and less complicated piece of technology, it is possible to set up an interview with a video camera with no more difficulty than an audio recorder. For those who believe that the voice is worthy of recording and archiving, the ability now to capture an image of the interviewee telling their story is surely even more worthwhile.
Oral history is ‘a process as well as a product’ (Perks and Thomson, 2006 2nd edition). This is an important statement which reflects the way in which the interviewee is invited to become part of their own history, and in some respects a historian in their own right:

Through oral history interviews working-class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities, among others, have inscribed their experiences on the historical record and offered their own interpretations of history. (Thomson and Perks, 2006: ix)

In terms of the use of oral history as a methodology, the most influential text used was *The Voice of the Past* by Paul Thompson which describes in great detail why oral history is as reliable in many respects – and more reliable in quite a few – than documented sources. He describes the ‘accepted hierarchy’ of sources at the disposal of the historian including letters and reports, social inquiries, parliamentary and press reports and diaries amongst others, all of which are contemporary sources written at the time. Thompson goes on to suggest that there are a lot of assumptions made about the written record and that questions must always be asked about potential bias of the writer.

In an interview situation the interviewee can be questioned on particular aspects of the history which is being given, and this was particularly useful for the fieldwork undertaken for this research particularly as there was so little historical information.
available on the topic. It was also clear that there were no better sources of evidence of
the lives of the herring girls than the women themselves. Despite a lack of objectivity
within an oral history interview, the interview process does allow the historian to ask
specific questions and to gain further insights from the informants, or confirmation or
previous knowledge. Indeed, if the interview is not too structured, additional
information can be forthcoming from respondents.

*The Oral History Reader* by Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson includes chapters by
many leading oral historians and Alessandro Portelli wrote about the ability of the
interviewer to elicit additional information if the interview is not too formalised:

> It is the researcher who decides that there will be an interview in the first
place. Researchers often introduce specific distortions: informants tell them
what they believe they want to be told and thus reveal who they think the
researcher is. On the other hand, rigidly structured interviews may exclude
elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to the
interviewer... (Portelli 2006 ed.: 38)

A further chapter in the Oral History Reader, by Dan Sipe relates to the use of video
interview as a methodology. This was particularly relevant, as the majority of the
interviews were filmed for this thesis. Sipe wrote:

> An epoch in the practice of history is coming to a close. For hundreds of
years the printed word has been the dominant mode of communication for the
historical profession, in the process shaping its basic assumptions and
structures. Today, the printed word is being superseded by a diversity of communication forms with the greatest impetus coming from moving images. As a methodology rooted in multiple modes of communication, oral history can play a pivotal role in accelerating the historical profession’s comprehension of this radical shift in the nature of communication. In return, moving images can more fully express oral history’s reflexive dimension, which makes more explicit the human role in the creation of history. The relationship between moving images and oral history, always reciprocal, holds particular promise amidst the present revolution in communications. (Sipe 2006 ed: 379)

Sipe goes on to discuss the availability of the filmed image to a younger audience, and the general public who are using and consuming this medium often much more than written material.

Professional historians have had limited effect on the history presented through moving images; the changes in communication wrought by moving images have wielded even less influence on the historical profession. (Sipe, 2006: 379)

Traditional historians have found the notion of oral and video history at odds with their idea of reliability of official documents and records. However, on the argument that statistics are more reliable evidence for history than individual recollections, Thompson discusses how the use of statistics can also be manipulated. This was certainly the case with some aspects of this research where it was difficult to find reliable census statistics.
for women working at the fishing for example, because by its nature it was seasonal work and part time work was not always recorded. This combined with the fact that the fishing communities were moving around the coast made it even more difficult to work out how many people were involved:

Social statistics, in short, no more represent absolute facts than newspaper reports, private letters, or published biographies. Like recorded interview material, they all represent, either from individual standpoints or aggregated, the social perception of facts; and are all in addition subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained. With these forms of evidence, what we receive is social meaning, and it is this which must be evaluated. (Thompson 2000: 124)

However, there are drawbacks to the use of oral history as a historical source, not least being the time taken to transcribe, but the advantages include the fact that all the words are there on the recording:

...added to them are social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humour, or pretence, as well as the texture of dialect. It conveys all the distinctive qualities of oral rather than written communication – its human empathy or combativeness, its essentially tentative, unfinished nature. (Thompson 2000: 126)

One interview example from Buckie – when one woman described how one girl shouted at all those at the farlanes to ‘stop work!’ – because she had no herring in front
of her – is far more memorable in spoken form than in written form. The dialect and use of language is particularly bright and adds a layer of interest to the story – particularly when spoken in her own voice:

Oral sources are oral sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published. Occasionally, tapes are actually destroyed: a symbolic case of the destruction of the spoken word. (Portelli 2006 ed.: 33)

The actual physiological process of memory is of interest to the social historian – with the time lapse between an event happening and the recollection of it being of importance. Memory depends upon perception. Thompson writes about memory being a social as well as an individual process – and of the influence of ‘collective memory’. This is particularly pertinent to my research, in that the herring girls mostly came from a very clearly defined group of people – Fisher folk – often describing themselves as ‘Fisher’ in interviews and they were identified as Scots Herring Lassies, Herring Quines, Clann Nighean an Sgadain etc.:

In studying well-defined social groups, whether rural villages or urban neighbourhoods or groups at work or an extended family, this is a very fruitful perspective for exploring group consciousness and where collective perceptions are the issue the accuracy of memory is no longer the main focus. (Thompson 2000: 133)
However, it is important to understand ways in which collective memories can sometimes determine the memory itself, particularly for something like the fishing industry which is in decline currently and for which there are sometimes more romanticised and idealised accounts.

Of particular relevance to this research was the evidence that the process of recollection – although reduced after the age of 30 - does not diminish hugely between this age and 'old' age. The idea of reflexiveness was of interest within this research, and whether or not the older women would have such clear memories, but this was not found to be the case.

Every historical source derived from human perception is subjective, but only the oral source allows us to challenge that subjectivity: to unpick the layers of memory, dig back into its darknesses, hoping to reach the hidden truth. If that is so, why not seize our chance, unique to us among historians, ease our informants back on to the couch and, like psychoanalysts, tap their unconscious, draw out the very deepest of their secrets? (Thompson 2000: 173)

Oral history is an area of historical research which has the attraction of permitting the opinions and views of those who often have the wisdom, but not the required opportunity or tools with which to set down or take a part in the creation of their own and their communities history, being of equal importance to the history of people from a different social group who do. Filming the interview provides additional information, as well as an additional way of communicating this information to a wider audience.
2.4 The Primary Interviews

The main sources of evidence for the thesis were the interviews collected – mainly those undertaken directly for the research, but also those which stretched further back in time and had been collected in the course of previous research both by myself and other people. The major method of the research was open-ended video recorded interviews. Although they varied in length, the average length of the primary interviews was around two hours, and with some respondents, repeat visits were made. A survey method would not have been appropriate as it would have required more respondents to be available, and it would also have required random selection of interviewees, and potentially less willingness to participate fully.

All the interviewees were told the reason why the interviews were being undertaken, and many were in agreement that this aspect of history has not been reported fully, and were therefore keen to take part. From the outset, the opportunity to undertake a cross section of the group under consideration was not going to be possible. There were so few respondents left, that the decision was taken early on to interview as many women as possible from different locations around the north of Scotland, using mainly word of mouth recommendations and information from local people. Most of the names of potential interviewees were given to me by friends and acquaintances from within the industry or the communities, and this made it easier to approach the women to ask if they would speak with me. No-one declined an interview, and only two women expressed a desire not to be filmed.
Despite reticence at the beginning of some interviews, all interviewees quickly became comfortable with the procedure and the equipment, and talked relatively freely about their experiences. One interviewee who had recently had a bereavement was visited only as a courtesy without the expectation of an interview, but she having spoken to one of her ‘crew’ whom had also been recently interviewed, was very keen to take as full a part as her friend and asked where the video camera was. She sadly died shortly after the interview was undertaken. There was certainly a sense that the women were very keen to impart information about what had been a particularly memorable aspect of their lives, and in many cases, something which they were proud of having been a part of. For most of the interviewees, the process was an enjoyable one.

Some interviewees were particularly good at recalling memories about their lives, and were also philosophical about aspects of their lives relating to how they felt about specific themes. Other interviewees were less forthcoming and while they could give information about their own experiences, were less thoughtful about the situation for other people for example. All the interviewees seemed particularly keen to impart a positive account of their time, even those who did not enjoy the actual work with the fish, spoke of the ‘good’ times they enjoyed.

Initially the proposal suggested that between twenty and twenty-five interviews would be undertaken, but that this would include those who remembered the herring season within their communities, or children of herring girls, as well as the women themselves. However, more interviewees were identified than anticipated. Twenty-five women who had worked as herring gutters themselves were interviewed, mostly as single
interviews but there were two interviews with two people, and one with a history group. Additionally twelve interviews were undertaken with relevant community members such as fishermen, and those who had lived in the communities such as Stronsay for whom the herring industry had had such a huge impact, as well as those who had grown up within a fishing family.

The geographical spread was not as straightforward as anticipated however, and it became apparent that there were far fewer women still alive in the Western Isles who had been at the fishing, mainly due to the fact that far fewer of the women carried on travelling with the fishing following World War Two. On the other hand, the herring fishing in Shetland carried on for some time after this, and indeed right up into the 1960s and early 70s, and there were still quite a number of women who had been involved. More respondents could have been found in the Shetland Islands, but for the research, it was felt that it would be better to try and have a reasonable geographic spread and to reflect the earlier time period rather than the later one. Again the geographic spread reflected the industry to some degree. For example, there were no respondents found in the Wick area, an area which was diminishing in prominence during this period, and Fife while having a large number of fishermen involved in the industry had not developed the same tradition of women travelling with the herring fleet as the North East fishing communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Date of Location and</th>
<th>DOB</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

53
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place, Year</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Other Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Stewart</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>1.2.07</td>
<td>Sealloway, 1913</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Burra Isle, Shetland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Macdonald</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>6.6.07</td>
<td>Stornoway, Lewis 1920</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seonag MacArthur</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>6.6.07</td>
<td>Stornoway, Lewis 1906</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seonag MacArthur</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>17.10.07</td>
<td>Stornoway, Lewis 1906</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>31.1.07</td>
<td>Lerwick, Shetland, c1925</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Jim McNab</td>
<td>and Cooper</td>
<td></td>
<td>Glasgow and Frasbergh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet Gillespie</td>
<td>Herring Gutter/Kippere</td>
<td>4.4.06</td>
<td>Preston, Fraserburgh 1925</td>
<td>2.30*</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Hughes</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>11.5.05</td>
<td>Anstruther, Buckie 1922</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Bruce</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>2.10.05</td>
<td>Buckie 1913 anc 2.40</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Katie Coull</td>
<td>and Kipperer</td>
<td></td>
<td>1925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernie Fiddler</td>
<td>Mailboy to the stations</td>
<td>15.6.05</td>
<td>Kirkwall, Stronsay 1920</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Kay</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>30.1.07</td>
<td>Lerwick, Shetland 1924</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Michie</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>18.4.06</td>
<td>Fraserburgh 1925</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>Herring Gutter/Kippere</td>
<td>22.6.05</td>
<td>Mallaig, Peterhead 1913</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>Herring Gutter/Kippere</td>
<td>9.12.05</td>
<td>Mallaig, Peterhead 1913</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>Herring Gutter/Kippere</td>
<td>29.6.95</td>
<td>Mallaig, Peterhead 1913</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Lawrence M.</td>
<td>Fisherman</td>
<td>25.1.06</td>
<td>Mallaig, 1928</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Barra</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archie Reid</td>
<td>Stronsay childhood</td>
<td>15.6.05</td>
<td>Kirkwall 1930</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ina Murray</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>18.4.06</td>
<td>Buckie 1922</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Leask</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
<td>2.2.07</td>
<td>Whalsay 1920</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Sinclair</td>
<td>Stronsay childhood</td>
<td>5.11.05</td>
<td>Stronsay 1925</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy Ralston</td>
<td>Fisherman</td>
<td>6.11.06</td>
<td>Mallaig, Campbell 1925</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Henderson</td>
<td>Boatbuilder</td>
<td>3.3.07</td>
<td>Mallaig 1918</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald MacDonald</td>
<td>Postman</td>
<td>29.10.07</td>
<td>Mallaig, Tarbert 1920</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loch Nevis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burra Isle</td>
<td>Herring gutters</td>
<td>31.1.07</td>
<td>Burra Isle c1920-</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

54
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History Group:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adalane Fullerton,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes Ward,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan Christie,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara Smith,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cissie Goodlad,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena Cumming,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Lawrenson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Emslie</td>
<td>Fisherman's daughter 1.2.07 Burra Isle c1950 0.40 Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Duncan</td>
<td>Fisherman 10.10.08 Mallaig c1928 4.10 Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie MacKellaig</td>
<td>Ice factory owner 22.3.09 Merar c1925 2.20 Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane MacPherson</td>
<td>Fisherman's daughter 14.9.08 Mallaig c1938 1.00 Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nana Peace</td>
<td>Stronsay childhood 16.6.05 Kirkwall, Stronsay c1920 1.00 Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Watt</td>
<td>Herring gutter 6.9.77 Lerwick - Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Martin</td>
<td>Herring gutter 31.8.77 Lewis c1915 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Mackenzie</td>
<td>Herring gutter 31.8.77 Lewis c1915 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Armstrong</td>
<td>Herring gutter 31.8.77 Lewis from Mussel Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannie and Jess Crai</td>
<td>Herring gutters 28.1.78 Aberdeen - Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edith and Bert</td>
<td>Herring gutter, 28.1.78 Aberdeen 1915/19 Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamson</td>
<td>fisherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Rushmore</td>
<td>Herring gutter 1975 Lowestoft 1895 Trevor Lummis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Parker</td>
<td>Herring gutter c.1975 Lowestoft 1901 Trevor Lummis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zetta Doran</td>
<td>Herring gutter c.1975 Buckie 1920 Alan Hawkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr and Mrs Flett</td>
<td>Herring gutter, fisherman c.1974 Buckie 1914 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella Jappy</td>
<td>Herring gutter c.1974 Buckie 1910 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Murray</td>
<td>Herring gutter c.1974 Buckie Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Stewart</td>
<td>Herring gutter c.1974 Buckie 1904 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lass Bruce</td>
<td>Herring gutter c.1974 Portessie 1914 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Marshall</td>
<td>Herring gutter 3.5.82 Fraserburgh 1897 Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Gatt</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy Geddes</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Malcolmson</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Marshall</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella Muir</td>
<td>Mallaig crofting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Shearer</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitty Kay</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby Sales</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy Murray</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogighrig Nic-a-Ghobh</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Henrietta Smith]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes and J.D. Buch</td>
<td>Herring guttern,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fisherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Flora MacNeil</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy Aitchison</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary MacLean</td>
<td>Herring Gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josephine</td>
<td>Nurse to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgland</td>
<td>women in Yarmouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Horsburgh</td>
<td>Herring gutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mrs W.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corstorphine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilja Olašdottir</td>
<td>Herring gutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karin Viggisdottir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asta Olašdottir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

56
The oldest respondent was from the Isle of Lewis, and was 101 at the time of interview. Over 50% of the respondents were over 80. Of the interviews conducted for this research, over 20% were in their 90s or over, 40% were in their 80s, 35% in their 70s and 5% in their 60s.

While there was a loosely structured interview guide with a variety of questions relating to the main themes, the interviews were not strictly confined to these areas, and allowed the interviewee freedom to talk about other aspects of life which were of importance to them. This led to the ongoing development of the interview structure, with aspects of life for the women becoming more apparent as the number of interviews progressed.

In order to use the material, summaries were undertaken, and many of the interviews were fully transcribed, with responses to particular questions being noted. The accuracy of the evidence can be gauged to some extent, with many responses – even those from interviews done in earlier times – being very similar. Responses to the questions regarding living and working conditions were similar for women from all the areas. For example, in response to questions regarding how the women felt about the nature of the employer/employee situation within the herring curing yards, many women talked about the relative ‘freedom’ which they felt. One of the women interviewed told me:
You wisna bossed aboot, wis ye nae? Ye wisnae tellt 'dae this, dae this, dae that, dae that'.... (Bruce, 2005)

Thirty years previously, Thompson interviewed a woman from Shetland about her life who said:

I enjoyed it, I was free because once you were off with the fishing in the year your time was your own and you'd nobody to say, well you do this, you see, you were just with the girls.... it wasn't like service or anywhere where you were under a master all the time (Malcolmson, 1976)

The similarities are striking. Exactly the same sentiments were expressed by the women from very different areas of Scotland, despite the interviews being undertaken around thirty years apart.

The dialect was also an aspect of the history which was captured during the interviews, but for most of the interviews this would have been a watered down version, in order to communicate with the researcher – an ‘outsider’. An interview with two women from Buckie in which they were often talking and reminiscing with each other, provided the richest dialect. The group of interviews from Whalsay undertaken in the 1990s, were particularly difficult to understand, as they were undertaken by Anne Huntley who is herself from Whalsay. She provided copies of her interviews and the dialect is rich within them but she also provided some required translation. One of the Lewis women would have preferred to have spoken in her native Gaelic, and the interview although of
reasonable quality, would have been better had she been speaking to an indigenous
Gaelic speaker. She was searching for the English words at times, and used the Gaelic
for ‘learner crew’ or learner – ‘caoilear’, and ‘beannag’ for the headscarf which she
wore at the gutting. Subsequently a Gaelic speaker was organised to undertake a
courtesy interview in Gaelic.

Some women were more forthcoming about more controversial aspects of life than
others. While some were keen to stress the naivety of the women, and the innocent
nature of the life, other interviewees seemed to relish the opportunity to speak about
men visiting the huts, and of how some women made extra money through prostitution
(McNab and McNab, 2007; Kay, 2007). It is quite possible that some of the younger
girls were not aware of this behaviour, as it was outside of their knowledge. It is also
quite likely that this type of behaviour was hidden from younger workers by the older
ones. But there is also a likelihood that the respondents did not want to tarnish the
reputation of the workers, which generally is held to be moral and upstanding, but is on
occasion reported unfavourably. It was interesting to note that in some of the
interviews undertaken in the 1970s and 80s, there were women who were more
forthcoming and displayed a sense of indignation for example about the lack of
morality displayed by some women and fishermen at the fishing at the beginning of the
twentieth century (Marshall, 1982). This was in the light of their own staunch religious
upbringing and the perceived hypocrisy of the supposedly religious fishermen involved.

Interviews were also undertaken with men, both from within the fishing community and
also some who had been within communities such as Stronsay in Orkney which was
greatly involved with the herring fishing industry each season up until the Second
World War (Reid, 2005; Fiddler, 2005). To undertake the research purely from the women’s viewpoint would have provided a less full account than taking the accounts of others. Although the women were living in a female dominated work space, it was not to the exclusion of men, and their social lives also revolved around a mixture of men and women. One interviewee from Fraserburgh, Jim McNab, provided much interesting material on his views of the women and their lives at the gutting, having spent his own life as a coaper, his father having been a coaper before him and his mother and his wife were both gutters. Another interviewee from Barra, Donald Lawrence MacNeil, was a fisherman and he was also able to talk about the lives of the women, his own grandmother, mother and aunts having worked at the fishing too. Ernie Fiddler from Stronsay discussed the impact of the herring industry on the island, and also spoke of his sister who was one of the few resident women who did work at the gutting. There was so much interconnectedness between the interviewees – men and women - that it helped to underline this aspect of community and the reliance of people on each other, in both a social and an economic sense.

The precise historical period for the study was between 1900 and 1950. The original time period proposed had been from 1850 to 1950, but in order to ensure that there was a reasonable spread of interview material available, it was necessary to change the period under consideration. Even for the period 1900 to 1910 it was impossible to find anyone alive now who had experience of work in the earlier period. However interviews undertaken previously in Mallaig included one woman, Bella Muir, who was born in 1896 and recalled the herring girls in Mallaig living on The Point at the beginning of the century. She was interviewed in 1995 and again in 1996 as part of the West Highland Museum Oral History Project. Some of the earlier interviews referred
to and collected by other people such as Paul Thompson and Andrew Noble in the 1970s and 80s and Anne Huntley from Whalsay in Shetland in the 1990s, included experiences stretching back to before the First World War. Many of the primary interviewees for this thesis also spoke about the experiences of their mothers and grandmothers which provided useful information about the women in the earlier part of the historical period under consideration. The alternative would have been to change the time period for the thesis to reflect only the work experience of the women interviewed for the thesis – to 1920 to 1950. But it was felt that this would miss out a substantial and important part of the herring industry – particularly the years leading up to the First World War which were some of the most successful and the busiest. Added to the interview material, other primary source material such as journals, newspapers and photographs helped to balance the evidence. In order to fully understand the work experience and the perceptions of the women during the 1920s and the subsequent decline in the industry, it was deemed necessary to consider the earlier more successful period in which attitudes were shaped towards the work and towards the fishing communities generally.

Alongside the interviews, the images took an increasingly important role in the thesis as evidence for aspects of the lives of the women which were hidden within the textual narrative. Incorporating the textual and visual in the methodology for the thesis provided opportunities to present a new and distinctive account of the lives of the women who were working at the gutting during this time period.
2.5 Integrating fragmented evidence and developing a framework

To accompany the oral and visual material, data and evidence was collected from a wider variety of sources. One of the benefits of this approach was that the validity of the interview material could be established through triangulation with other sources, including contemporary sources such as newspaper reports and diary accounts and journals. This multi-evidential approach reflects the complexity of the experience of the women themselves, drawing on primary and secondary sources alongside the voices and experience of those involved, and prevents the constrained or over-simplified nature of some existing accounts which do not take into account changes over time, geography and status of the women.

2.5.1 Online Resources

My search also included a sweep of the sources of online material available. This provided considerable amounts of material, of much variety and variable reliability, but it also provided useful links to other sources of literature. An example of this was the Napier University’s Transport and Society Network website, a section of which brought together a variety of sources and articles relating to the herring girls, opening up the area to the public and encouraging participation and contributions. It was through this website that contact was made with its author and editor, Professor Margaret Grieco.

Online resources researched included SCRAM and Am Baile, featuring historical articles, records and photographs all of which were useful in uncovering evidence
which could be taken into account for this thesis. There were problems with some of
the online sources, such as the Highland Council website, Am Baile, which did have
some useful material, including oral interview material from women who were at the
gutting, but no available information as to when the interviews were collected or by
whom, and no way of validating the sources. Other websites concentrating on the
fishing industry in East Anglia, such as the East Anglian Network and the North East
Fish Tales website also yielded useful material and accounts of the herring girls and
their movement down to the East Anglian ports during the winter. The BBC online
resources, such as the series entitled ‘Nation on Film’, include reminiscences and film
clips, the earliest going back to 1902 – a three minute clip entitled ‘Herring
Fisherwoman – (BBC, Fish Quay Scenes 1902/b&w/silent)’. To be able to watch
online a scene from the height of the herring fishing industry, with herring gutters
working on the pier at Yarmouth was quite remarkable and is evidence which some
previous researchers and historians did not have open access to. The internet houses a
wealth of material and evidence of this type has contributed to this research, as the
work patterns described both in text and in interviews can be viewed in action, from
over 100 years ago.

2.5.2 Online Archives

A further source of evidence was the online archives of newspapers such as The
Scotsman, with over 150 reports and articles being accessed to provide evidence and
context for the thesis. This archive has not previously been analysed systematically to
provide evidence relating to the women at this time. It was of particular use as a source
of both statistics and context, as the newspaper provided both Herring Fishery Reports
of incidents relating to the herring fishing and the women in particular, along with more informal articles relating to royal visits and perceptions of the women at work.

A less obvious, but nonetheless useful source of information and material was the online auction site Ebay. Many photographs and postcards appear on this site, available to buy, but it is possible to collect digital images which provided useful visual evidence from all the different locations under consideration. It was also possible to purchase some of the less well known literature relating to the fishing industry, community based publications such as *The Herring Girls in Stornoway*, by Stornoway Amenity Trust (2006), *Tales of an Orkney Island* by WM Gibson (1987) and *Wick Harbour and the Herring Fishing* by Iain Sutherland (1983). For the first two years of the research, the website was checked regularly and every time a new image appeared, it was added to the collection.

### 2.5.3 Archive Visits

Visits were made to the archives of the main fishery museums including the Scottish Fishery Museum in Anstruther, The Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth, the Orkney and Shetland Museums and smaller heritage centres such as Whalsay and Mallaig, referring to articles and photographs which were held in the collections there. Comunn Eachraidh Nis in Lewis, provided interviews undertaken with women from Stornoway who had been at the fishing which had been recorded in the 1980s.
As part of the research, and often in conjunction with interviews with women still based in the fishing communities, harbours around the country were also visited including Lerwick, Scalloway, Whalsay, Mallaig, Ullapool, Wick, Nairn, Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Buckie, Gamrie, Oban, Stornoway, Castlebay, Kirkwall, Stromness, Stronsay along with one of the biggest of the East Anglian ports, Great Yarmouth. This provided an appreciation of the areas where the women were living and working, as well as the changes which have taken place since the herring gutting ceased.

2.5.4 Journals and Diaries

The unpublished journals of Constance Astley from Arisaig provided first hand accounts of visiting Stornoway at the height of the herring season in the 1890s, with a vivid description of the scene on the pier and in the harbour. Sketches of the women working at the fishing provide a good indication of what is seen as well as the textual evidence, and are followed by the contrast described in the account of the observance of the Sabbath by the fisherfolk in the town.

2.5.5 Scots Herring Girl Conference

Another significant aspect of the methodology was the organisation of a conference in the Gaelic College, Sabhal Mor Ostaig on Skye in September 2006, which brought together researchers and students working in the field of fishing communities, with the emphasis on Scotland and the women involved in the fish processing. This was very successful and as well as an opportunity to discuss aspects of the research, in particular
the research methodology and the use of oral history, it led to a publication entitled *Travels and Travails of the Scots Herring Girls* (de Fresnes, 2006), which included papers from all the participants. This contributed significantly to the work of all the students involved, who presented papers alongside more senior academics and experts in the field including Paul Thompson and Jane Nadel-Klein who were guest speakers.

2.6 An innovative methodology: incorporating visual image and oral history

As well as incorporating all the fragments of evidence as specified above, the use of photographs became important to the methodology when it became clear that there were not only many photos of the women at the gutting in the public domain, but also some of the interviewees had collections themselves, which they were prepared to allow me to use. Albums of photographs had been kept by families, and in the case of Maggie Leask, who had also been at the gutting, she became the repository for other people’s photographs. Rita and Jim McNab had a considerable collection of photographs and postcards relating to their own lives in the fishing, but also photographs stretching back in time and including Jim’s parents and grandparents.

The visual image is important as it has a marked psychological impact particularly when combined with text. My own research into the visual aspects of the women at the gutting began with Ian Mackenzie, the photographer in residence at the School of Scottish Studies. Having worked with him in the past, and collected photographs while interviewing in the 1990s, and held exhibitions of original material, he was particularly encouraging about the use of the visual aspects of life at the gutting. He was also able
to provide me with access to the archive of photographs at the School of Scottish Studies.

With the lives of the herring girls, where the text is often missing, and the visual image exists, it would have seemed a missed opportunity not to make use of the visual record. The engagement with the subject matter is heightened through the use of photographs and also historically, photographs are important in that they show what people thought was worth preserving in pictorial form. Through the use of the internet and websites a substantial number of images were collected.

The use of photographs and visual image is spread throughout the thesis, and provides additional understandings when combined with the text. Further use is made and analysis undertaken of the visual narratives in Chapter 8, which deals specifically with this aspect of the thesis, and how it is used to present a clearer understanding of the lives of the women at the herring gutting.

2.7 Conclusion: aligning thesis objectives and thesis methods

This thesis seeks to document the lives of the Scots Herring Girls between 1900 and 1950. It is an exploration of representations through oral, visual, and contemporary sources. The thesis builds a picture of the lives of the women who followed the herring, and through distinctive fieldwork and methodology, it considers the complex patterns of identity and perceptions, both through the voices of the women themselves, the voices of those outside the industry and popular media of the time. It also combines the
visual narratives and the way in which the women were portrayed, both at the time, and subsequently as part of a cultural heritage. The methodology chosen to undertake the research was the most suitable to obtain both original evidence, and to produce an exciting and innovative portrayal of the social history of the women who worked at the herring gutting between 1900 and 1950.

Having dealt with the introductory questions of the existing literature and the justifications for the methodology used, more detailed consideration of the topic now ensues. The following chapter provides a historical backdrop to the research, and considers the development of herring industry throughout the nineteenth century.
Chapter 3: The Historical and Social Context

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the thesis with a detailed historical and social background. Firstly, it will consider the historical background to the herring fishing industry in Britain with a particular focus on the growth of the industry during the nineteenth century in Scotland. It will then go on to examine the context of the women's work at the herring fishing. The fragmentary nature of the account of the women working within the industry is also reflected in the lack of documentation from the earlier period. However, evidence was found in a wide variety of sources which has been used to piece together a picture of the development of the Scottish herring industry itself and more particularly accounts have been brought together relating to the women who began working in the industry from the early years of the nineteenth century.

3.2 The history of the industry

The Scotsman newspaper of 22nd February 1869 gives an account of the importance of the industry to Britain as a nation and to Scotland in particular:

From the earliest times, fish have constituted an important item in the food supplies and commerce of the people of Scotland. Within the last century, the fisheries have been developed until they have become one of the greatest
branches of industry in the country, employing upwards of 100,000 persons, and affording profitable investment for several millions of pounds of capital. As early as the ninth century, the sea fisheries were sufficiently extensive to merit special mention by historians, and in each succeeding century references to them became more frequent. (The Scotsman, February 22nd 1869)

3.2.1 Early Legislation

The article regarding the history of the Scottish fishing industry in The Scotsman in 1869 also refers to the legislature on the herring fishing – stretching back to 1474 when an Act of Parliament was passed to encourage fishing in the coastal burghs, with authorities being urged to provide equipment and all idle men be compelled by the Sheriffs in the country, and by Bailies in burghs, to pass therein for their wages... (The Scotsman, February 22nd 1869)

It was after this Act that more herring were caught than could be consumed and an export trade did begin to build up. The Dutch on the other hand, had been fishing in British waters since the fourteenth century – along with the Danish, French and Germans. Restrictions on how close they could fish inshore were placed upon them in later years. (Gray, 1978) The Civil Wars during the reign of Charles I [1625 – 1649] distracted attention away from the European fishings. But the early Scots fishermen
were able to copy the method of fishing with the use of busses, and continued this for several generations. An indication of the numbers involved in this early fishing are also included in the article:

In a manuscript of Sir Robert Sibbald, it is stated that before the Union 600 boats, manned by upwards of 4000 men, might have been seen fishing in the Firth of Clyde alone and that these afforded 3750 tons of fish for exportation. A district of the Fife coast not above twelve miles in length sent out 168 boats, manned by 1120 men, and exported annually 12,000 barrels of herring. In 1695, the small town of Crail alone exported 2400 barrels. The Parliament of Queen Anne passed, in 1705, an “Act for advancing and establishing the fishing trade in and about this kingdom,” which afforded some relief, and encouraged those engaged in the trade. (The Scotsman, 1869)

This would indicate that there was a fairly substantial industry, employing many thousands of men, although often the general understanding of the industry in Scotland is that it did not become an important export from Scotland until after 1830. No mention is made, however, of the processing requirements. The Dutch method was to gut the fish on board the boats – and place them in barrels, and this was most likely to have been done by the fishermen themselves.

3.2.2 Fishermen for the Naval Reserve
By the 1730s the trade had increased still further, and the importance of ensuring a ready and skilled supply of men who might be called upon for the navy, was a factor for the government's willingness to support and encourage the industry. (Gray, 1978; Weld 1860; The Scotsman 1869; Napier Commission, 1884)

Following the Union of 1707, the governments support for fisheries grew, and the setting up of the Board of Manufactures in 1727 provided both the economic will and drivers. Throughout the second half of the eighteenth-century, the government continued to support the fisheries both to ensure a supply of trained seamen for the navy as mentioned above but also in the north of Scotland, partly as a result of the political requirements to provide an industry to employ men in the Highlands of Scotland following the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. A bounty was introduced in 1749 and harbours were extended or built with subsidies from the Society for Fishing in the Deep Sea. (Dunlop, 1976) However, it was the beginning of the nineteenth-century before it began to flourish and grow into the industry which played such an important part in the national economy throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

3.2.3 Curing methods and the growth of industry

In 1808, the Herring Fishery (Scotland) Act was passed and this in turn led to a separate Fisheries Board made up of seven Trustees from the Board of Manufactures (The National Archives of Scotland, c.2010). Responsibilities included the fishery harbours and the crown branding of the cured herring. It was only in the 1820s when the Scottish fishermen adopted a similar curing method to the Dutch with the
different qualities of fish being separated out and gutted and barrelled with specific amounts of salt, known as the Scotch Cure, that the Scottish herring industry really took off with an export market to the continent. Once the Scottish fishermen were able to produce a similar and highly marketable product, they were then able to capitalise on the fishing around their own coastline. Combined with the imposition of quality control and bounties being made payable per barrel, this led to an upsurge in the herring fishing. However, the vagaries of the market had a considerable impact on the industry. A good proportion of the salt herring cured at the beginning of the nineteenth century was bound for the slave plantations of the West Indies. With the abolition of slavery in 1833, this market no longer existed. For curing firms this meant finding new markets or facing complete ruin:

Much of Shetland’s salt herring had been supplied to the West Indies where they were used as cheap food for plantation slaves but, with the emancipation of the slaves, this market became closed almost overnight. New markets had to be found and Shetland curers could only look to the Continent of Europe where curers from the Scottish Mainland were already finding an outlet for their growing catches of herring. (Nicolson, 1982: 75)

The Fishery Board however, continued to support the industry and encourage the development of the markets as well as ensuring the quality of the barrelled herring with frequent inspections:

It is to the credit of the Fishery Board and its officers that curing practice was improved and refined and by the mid-nineteenth century Scottish
herring were to achieve a position of dominance in Europe, a position they were to retain till World War I. (Coull, Fenton and Veitch; 2008: 217)

Unforeseen events such as the cholera outbreaks in the 1890s in Europe and an influenza epidemic in 1893, which caused the Pope to decree that meat as well as fish could be eaten on a Friday (Fewster, 1986), as well as the effects of various trade treaties and wars all had considerable effects on the industry.

3.3 The Scottish Fishing Ports

During the course of the nineteenth century, communities which had once relied on a variety of forms of fishing came to depend more and more on the herring:

Till 1815 the growing herring fishing had been virtually confined to Caithness, but then came a sudden widening to envelop a string of new bases....by 1820, Peterhead had opened as a herring station, a fleet of over 2,000 boats would gather every year in the stations dotting the coast all the way from the northern tip of Caithness to the eastern coast of Buchan. (Gray, 1978)

In order to accommodate this level of fishing operations, considerable works had to be undertaken in many of the ports to ensure their survival and ability to profit from this expanding industry.
The growth of Wick was directly linked to the increase in fishing around the North East coast of Scotland, with boats starting to pursue the shoals of herring around the North East, rather than relying purely on the fishing grounds around Shetland. Improved boat design and technology as well as knowledge relating to the shoaling and seasonal migrations of the fish also provided more opportunities for fishing all around the coast. This led to a real need to provide safer harbours for the increasing numbers of boats. The British Fishery Society was also actively pursuing opportunities to increase and expand the herring fishery, and appointed Thomas Telford to undertake a survey around the West Coast of Scotland in 1790, and also to look for potential harbours on the North East Coast. (Dunlop, 1976)

By the 1820s, the importance of the fishing industry was beginning to be recognised throughout the country. The following extract from an article relating to banks, and the wealth of the country appeared in the Scotsman on the 10th June 1826:

"The herring fishery on our coasts employ several thousand men, and is of very great importance. Instances have occurred of herrings being taken in Lochs alone to the value of £40,000 in one season; and a thousand boats are generally employed there in the fishing. The fishermen every morning sell their fish to the cutters on shore, receive their money, and set out in quest of more. The value of each boat's fishing for a night sometimes exceeds £5, but generally is under it; and there is in this fishing station alone a thousand boats to be paid off every morning, of whom most probably two-thirds have to receive less than £1 each. It will be impossible to provide gold and silver sufficient for such a purpose; and in the remotest part of the North Highlands, where the fishery is much more extensive, and banks at a great distance, the difficulty is insuperable."

(The Scotsman, 1826)
As the industry expanded, those who lived in the ports visited by the herring fishing had to accommodate many hundreds of people pouring into their towns to work at various aspects of the industry, and as a consequence, the fishing had a direct impact on every aspect of town life. It increased the trade for shopkeepers and bar owners, and those living closer to the piers were able to rent out any free space they had. Every spare space became potential accommodation for the fishers and those associated with the industry. Areas down by harbours were developed by fish curers as herring stations were set up, and landing stations were improved. Communication lines became important, as people and fish could be transported, at first generally by sea around the coasts and subsequently by rail as the railways played an increasingly important part in the industry. As it grew, the industry attracted people from other areas of Scotland and further afield from Ireland, who recognised that work was available along the coasts, and they became a migratory workforce often walking considerable distances to join the herring fleet as crew aboard any available boat or to work processing the fish.

As was evidenced by the Fishery Reports throughout the period, Wick was the biggest port for herring landing in the first quarter of the nineteenth century but in the subsequent period, the east coast ports of Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Aberdeen became significant, along with Scalloway and Lerwick in Shetland, and Stornoway in Lewis and Barra in the Western Isles.

By 1811, the British Fisheries Society had made the decision to create a new harbour in an area to be known as Pultneytown, although even this new harbour with
accommodation for 400 boats was unable to accommodate the fleet which had grown to over 1000 boats by the 1820s.

The massive growth of Pultneytown was not without its problems however, as thousands of people from Scotland and beyond poured into the town during the summer fishing season, putting pressure on the local resources, in particular the available accommodation, and also giving cause for concern with regard to the spread of disease as a result. A letter from the British Fisheries Society warned of the problems associated with this huge influx of population, and in so doing, provided much interesting material in relation to the numbers of people coming into the town, and their origins and the women working with the fish:

...the population of the Towns [Wick and Pultneytown] is between 5000 and 6000, of whom more than ½ are Inhabitants of Pulteney Town and are principally employed in or connected with the Fishery. That the above numbers are augmented during the Fishery Season to 12,000 or even 15,000 by an Influx of Strangers from Ireland, the South and Western districts of Scotland, Cornwall, France, Holland and Norway

That the accommodation for the Multitudes that assembled is from the locality of the Town and the Temporary nature of the demand necessarily of the most confined description, two or even three Boats crews being usually compelled to content themselves with a single small room.

That the operation of cleaning the Herrings previous to packing is carried on principally by women, (who resort in hundreds from the interior for that
purpose) and who usually stand barefoot during the work in large Vessels into which the refuse is thrown.

That the whole process is carried on during the hottest season of the year amidst a constant decomposition of animal matter by persons in the most filthy state and for the most part indulging immoderately (even down to girls of 13 and 14 years of age) in the use of Whiskey. (Dunlop, 1976: 226)

This letter was dated June 2 1832, and is one of the earliest written sources found which provides details of the women gutting the fish.

Another source of early reference to the women was found in the National Archives of Scotland in a court record from 1842 (Inverness High Court, 1842, NAS) which recounted an act of ‘wilful fire raising’ by David McKay, a cooper from Broadhaven, who was in court for attempting to burn out three young Highland herring gutters who were renting a barn close to Wick. This record gives details of the evening of 3rd September 1841 - two Highland gentlemen sitting at an open peat fire in the barn, in the company of two of the girls, sisters Betsy and Williamina Mackay who were wearing shifts and petticoats at the time, and a further Highland gentleman was playing the bagpipes near to the barn. The defendant, David McKay and two young friends had been drinking and he had wanted to light his pipe from the fire and stay in the company of the women, but was thrown out of the barn. He allegedly returned an hour later and set fire to the buildings. The record provides detail of the women’s clothing - boots, frocks, stays, stockings and petticoats along with counterpanes which were lost in the fire and describes how the women were sleeping on straw at one end of the barn. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that they were in a group of
three, the usual make-up of a crew of girls for the gutting. This record provides a small snapshot of life on one particular night in Wick in 1841 during the herring fishing season, and one of the few early mentions of the herring girls around this time.

3.3.2 The North East Fishing Ports: The Fisher Toons

Although the small fishing communities along the North East coast had not yet been as greatly affected by the herring fishing as had Wick, they were becoming established by the turn of the eighteenth century. There were many villages strung out along the coast between Burghead and Aberdeen. Gray describes the ‘villages’ in the 1790s, 48 of which had a number of boats documented in the Statistical Accounts. (Gray, 1978) These small villages grew in size during the first part of the eighteenth century, with the areas commonly known as ‘the fisher toon’:

Some were compact sections of larger towns, but even then the fishers lived apart in well-defined areas; the ‘fishertown’ or the ‘seatown’ was a familiar part of many small Scottish burghs of the east coast and within them lived, in chosen seclusion, the people of the fishing community. (Gray, 1978: 10)

This type of organisation of the fisher part of the towns existed right up into the twentieth century, with the traditional area of the town still inhabited by fisherfolk until relatively recently:
IM: Aye, bain my grannies were Buckie – ma father’s mother and father stayed in the next close – they’re awa noo. And my mither – when I wis young, my grannie stayed here wi my mother and father. But she wis 90 when she died. And then when my mither died, I had my father 9 year after that – my mither wis 82, but my father was 92 when he died – aye....

JdF: And were they all at the fishing?

IM: Aye – they all workit at the fishing. My mither used tae mend the nets too along wi Margaret’s mother. Her husband had a boat. They had the women tae help them mend the nets. So my mither used tae geng and so did Margaret’s mother, and mend the nets, ye ken, in this hoose. (Murray, 2005)

As well as the ‘fisher toons’ being distinct both socially and geographically, with the seasonal herring fishing, both women and the men from these communities were also moving around the country en-masse, still in a distinctive group and set even farther apart from the people into whose communities they came. For the herring girls, whose work was ashore and visible to the public, they created a spectacle which led both to the pictorial record, and the subsequent commentary regarding their difference to other women of the time.
3.3.3 Shetland

In Shetland the industry was of growing importance throughout the nineteenth century, and had two distinct seasons – Scalloway and Hamnavoe in June and July, and then the east side fishings from the middle of August through to the end of September. (Nicolson, 1982) But for Shetland, it was the 1870s onwards which were the most important years:

In 1874, 1,100 barrels were cured in Shetland; in 1881, 59,000 barrels, with a fleet of 276 and in 1888, there were over 300,000 barrels cured and the fleet numbered 932 (Nicolson, 1982)
In 1897, there were 79 herring stations but only four years later in 1901, there were 141 (Smith, 1984). The catch had also increased almost threefold, from over 137,000 crans in 1897 to 422,500 crans in 1901. However, following the First World War, by 1920, the number of stations had been drastically reduced:

The first year in which the steam drifter was much in evidence in the Shetland fishing was 1900, and the numbers increased rapidly until by 1914 by far the greater proportion of the herring catch was being landed from drifters.... Drifter catches fetched higher prices than sailboat catches, as these could be landed more regularly and more quickly thus being in a fresher state. The drifters had sufficient speed and independence of weather conditions not to be tied to the nearest fishing station, as the sailboats were. They tended therefore to prefer stations offering the ‘day’s price’ under the
new auction system established at Lerwick and Baltasound in 1894. (Smith, 1984: 195-196)

The fishing became concentrated on larger ports such as Lerwick and Scalloway. From Nicolson’s account of Hays and Company, it was interesting to note that as the fishing vessels got larger towards the turn of the century, the company decided to focus their activity on stations which could accommodate the draught of these vessels. They concentrated on Scalloway, Freefield and Whalsay, and at each place had to put in the required infrastructure to allow the industry to function. This is one of the major reasons why smaller stations could not compete in the industry as it grew in scale and the fish curing efforts became concentrated on larger ports and stations. Although Hays and Company did not work in Lerwick, this port also grew considerably in importance towards the end of the nineteenth century, while many of the smaller stations closed down.

3.3.4 Orkney

Orkney also experienced a herring boom during the late nineteenth century. From 1888 onwards during the herring season Stromness Harbour, Whitehall in Stronsay and many other harbours in Orkney were packed with fishing vessels from all over the North East of Scotland. For six or eight weeks an extra 4-5000 people lived in the town, (Stromness Museum display, 2005) the men on their boats, and the women working at the gutting, living in lodgings or in the large wooden huts at the North and South Ends.
To meet the demand for berthing and shore facilities wooden jetties were erected and the Point of Ness was built in 1893. The influx of fisher-folk put great pressure on fresh water supplies and sewage disposal. The six public and 70 private wells were nearly all polluted and in 1900 a piped sewage system was introduced, together with a reservoir and piped water.

(Stromness Museum Exhibition, 2005)

Stronsay and Papa Stronsay also played an important part in the herring industry in Orkney, with over 5000 workers descending on these tiny islands in the month of July. Many of the local population were involved in the industry while it was on their doorstep, and as the industry grew at the end of the nineteenth century, this major addition to the local economy became increasingly important. However, the majority of the fishing in Orkney undertaken by local men was as part of a crofter-fisher lifestyle:

The old wisdom was that the Shetlander was a fisherman with a croft, while the Orcadian was a farmer with a boat. While like all generalisations this is less than perfect, it does focus on the very considerable differences there were and are between these two island groups, and it has much validity especially for the period from the mid-nineteenth century till World War 1.

(Coull, Fenton and Veitch, 2008: 311)

This notion of cultural identity was also a factor in relations between the fishing communities of the North-East and the crofting communities of the West Highlands.
3.3.5 The Western Highlands and Islands

The Western Isles of Barra and Lewis had a growing dependence on herring fishing as a major part of the local economy during the nineteenth century. However, despite increasing poverty of the crofting communities throughout the nineteenth century, the mainland West Coast of Scotland did not develop a fishery in the same way in which it was happening on the East Coast. A number of different arguments as to why this should be, have been put forward particularly by the British Fisheries Society at the time, and in the historical accounts of James Hunter in *The Making of the Crofting Community*, (2000) which include both aspects of cultural identity of the people combined with the wildness of the coastal landscape. There was also a lack of capital investment in both boats and equipment although there had been previous fishing enterprise such as the MacKenzie of Seaforth and the MacDonald enterprise in North Uist in the seventeenth century. The most comprehensive account of the situation for the Highlands with regard to the fishing industry during the latter part of the nineteenth century exists within the Napier Commission Report which was published in 1884.

While both Barra and Lewis had taken advantage of the expanding herring industry, the west coast mainland, even areas further south towards the Clyde, never saw the scale of the herring industry which had come to Wick, Shetland and the larger east coast ports such as Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Aberdeen.
Despite the lack of infrastructure for a herring fishery on the west coast, the rise in prosperity in the north and north-east of Scotland had a marked impact on the west as thousands of men and women travelled to the north and east to work – predominantly from the Western Isles. The development of the fisheries in the west and the Western Isles might have been delayed in part because work was readily available to fishermen and women from the west, and there was a growing tradition of travelling to the fishing in the north and along the east coast.

From the mid nineteenth century onwards however, a summer herring fishing season developed around both Barra and Lewis. They played an important part in the herring fishery off the west coast of Scotland, which expanded rapidly and became an important part of the economy of both islands. Many of the local people were actively involved in the fishing, both as crew and as herring gutters, but for the fishery to prosper and expand it required an influx of curers, boats and crew from the East Coast:
In the 1840s the early summer months began to see much activity in catching and curing herring in west coast waters. The fishery, in fact was based on the eastern shore of Lewis and on Barra, and both the Minch and from Barra – Atlantic waters were fished. The curers came mostly from east coast centres and about four-fifths of the fleet they engaged also came from the east coast. (Gray, 1982:31)

This situation continued on into the twentieth century as the fisheries developed, when there would be an influx of people from the east coast to the west during the herring season, as there was an influx of people from west to east later on in the season. However, while the fisheries were developing along the Western Isles, there was still no significant development taking place on the west coast mainland.

The Napier Commission Report of 1884, provides some very useful historical background for the herring fishing industry in the Western Highlands and Islands. One of the areas of investigation by the Commissioners showed how the herring industry helped to promote the development of remote communities, encouraging the building of infrastructure such as harbours, piers, roads and railways and in addition, the Postal Service including telegrams. It also indicated the importance of the industry to the country at this time, whereby the building of infrastructure in such remote locations could be seen as both necessary and desirable for the good of the nation as well as for the communities of the remote Highlands and Islands:

By far the greater number of the crofters and cottars of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are wholly or largely dependent for their subsistence on
their earnings as fishermen. Taken as a whole the population into whose condition we have been making inquiry derive a larger annual income from the sea than they derive from the land. The subject of the fisheries has consequently occupied no inconsiderable portion of our attention. (Napier Commission Report, 1884: 53)

There is a common misconception that crofting was the main employment of the people of the Highlands and Islands. The Napier Commission report shows how important fishing was to the economy of the area, indeed indicating that it was of more importance than crofting. However, there was also a realisation that the communities around the country were very different and the people themselves, particularly those on the west coast, were less likely to want to pursue fishing as a full-time occupation:

It may be asked, is there a reasonable prospect that any great number of the population would take to fishing as a regular calling, and pursue it with the steadiness necessary to ensure success? While the fishermen of the east coast of Scotland are simply fishermen and nothing else, at sea in all weathers and at all seasons, the population of Shetland and the north-west Highlands and Islands are partly crofters and partly fishermen, pursuing now the one calling now the other, often it is alleged, to the disadvantage of both. We have frequently, in the course of our inquiry, asked the question whether the present system of combining both occupations was of advantage to the people or otherwise. As might be expected, we have received the most contradictory testimony on this point. Generally, though not by any means
invariably, the people actually engaged in crofting and fishing are in favour of the combined occupations, whereas the weight of external evidence seemed in favour of separating the two callings. (Napier Commission Report, 1884: 59)

The cultural identity of the communities of the West Highlands was of considerable importance to this question, with the people seeing themselves first and foremost as crofters or cottars, and not as fishers.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the people of the West Highlands became what James Hunter refers to as ‘A Redundant Population’ (Hunter, 2000), with landlords now expecting financial return from their estates. Despite efforts by some landlords to force their tenants into the fishing industry, by way of clearing them from inland areas, reducing the size of the crofts thereby compelling them to seek additional income, the fishing industry did not take off on the west coast in the same way as it had along the north east coast of Scotland:

.....there were high hopes, on landlords’ parts anyway, of developing the fishing industry. Mainland crofters were consequently compelled to participate in fishing by a method identical to that used to force their Hebridean counterpart to become kelpers: individual crofts were made deliberately small and their rents fixed at a level that was quite unrelated to their productive potential. (Hunter, 2000: 63)
Despite the situation on the West Highland mainland, many women were already employed in the Western Isles, particularly Barra and Lewis. It is notable by its very absence from the Napier Commission Report that the Commissioners failed to recognise or to report on the important part that the women of the crofting communities played. There is no mention of the herring gutters within the findings, despite the fact that at the time of its writing, there were already many hundreds of women travelling from the Western Isles having been arlsed by curing firms at the beginning of the season, making considerable contribution to their families back home.

3.4 The Herring Girls

Further to the discussion relating to the development of the fishing industry around the coast of Scotland, this section deals more specifically with the women themselves. Firstly the question of the women’s involvement in the industry is considered in relation to the context of other women working at this time.

3.4.1 The Context of Women’s Work

Through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, women in the herring fishing industry can be set against a prevalent notion of women and what has been referred to as the ‘cult’ of domesticity, or the ‘angel in the home’ (Ardener, 1993; Abrams, Gordon, Simonton and Yeo editors, 2006). Women were involved in many
industries up until the first half of the nineteenth century, even as part of heavy industries such as agriculture and mining in Scotland. The Mining Act of 1842 included regulations which prevented women and children working down the mines. The Victorian era changed the cultural identity of women within society and in many ways reduced their identity to that within the sphere of domesticity. It reduced their ability to become involved in trade or industry particularly in positions of authority, and remain socially acceptable. Partly as a result of industrialisation, women who had traditionally worked in the fields or with spinning or weaving as part of family enterprises and other similar industries found themselves out of work and based in the home.

In the meantime, women in the fishing communities were still an essential part of the industry, and were actively involved, both on an economic level and at a practical level, as they had been for many decades, mending nets, baiting lines and as the herring industry grew in strength and importance, the natural progression was to take part by following the fishing and processing the catch. As far as the ambitions of the women themselves were concerned however, no evidence was found of women working as curers or playing an active role in the wider business aspects of the herring industry. Despite the relative freedom and equality enjoyed by the women, and their involvement within the family business, there were still limits to their full participation in work within the fishing industry.

However, the idea of women within nineteenth century Britain being defined and confined within the home is set in stark contrast to the lives of the herring girls. These were women who were not just working, but who were often working away
from home. While a majority of these women were single, not all were. Married women and mothers also formed part of this workforce, and the defining aspects of the women as herring gutters were generally a long way from the feminine ideal of the woman of the time, who stayed at home looking after house and family. Gender historian Deborah Simonton’s view (2006) was that men were not defined in this way, although it is unlikely to have been seen as acceptable for men of the time to stay at home and look after house and children, so there is a converse argument that they too suffered social stereotyping.

Some of the general ideas do still stand within this study, with women being defined by their role as home maker as well as herring gutter within their fishing communities. Despite sometimes being far from home, aspects of community life and the links between the women and the men as they travelled meant that they were in fact almost still within their own communities. The ways in which the community relationships were maintained even while the communities were on the move and situated in different locations is an interesting aspect of this research, which will be discussed more fully in the following chapters.
The pattern of the work and the workplace in the gutting yards was also somewhat different to the general gender pattern of workplaces associated with mass female labour. While in factories and even in fields there was a clear division of labour, and a clear supervisory role with men generally in charge of the female workforce, this was less the case at the gutting. The way in which the gutting was organised, with the women forming their own gutting crews, and a signing on fee or ‘arles’ being paid to them when they signed up, along with a weekly sustenance pay and pay per barrel gutted, meant that the women felt they had some control over the amount of work they were undertaking. This was a practice which had been in place since the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Gray, 1978: 109) and continued throughout the period of the thesis. It gave them a status more akin to being self-employed. Aspects of status and competition as well as the amount of pay were linked to the amount of work done, and this ensured that they worked long and hard.
3.4.2 Cultural Geography

At all times under consideration within the time period of this thesis, while there was a large mobile workforce of women involved in the gutting, there were also women who would work in their home town or port, or close enough that they could travel locally. They would work alongside the women from further afield, and would make extra money during their own local season. The women in Shetland and the Western Isles often had a pattern of work which would tie in with the crofting requirements such as the harvest, with Western Isles women often returning home for a few weeks after the Lerwick season, before travelling down to the ports in East Anglia. Gray (1978) estimated that half of the 9000 jobs for women in the yards along the north and north east coast in the 1830s were taken by local women.

The lack of women from the West Highlands who travelled to work as herring gutters is notable, particularly as their communities suffered considerable poverty throughout the nineteenth century, and it would have seemed to have been an obvious opportunity for employment. Hunter (2000) goes some way to explaining the ways in which the ideas of land ownership and family bonds of the West Highland crofting communities were completely at odds with the new economic requirements to make money during this period:

Until the eighteenth century was well advanced, a man born in north-west Scotland lived his life in much the same way as his father or grandfather – the essential continuity of past and present encapsulated in genealogies and
traditions which often spanned several centuries. Then, within the space of just one lifetime, all was changed. (Hunter, 2001: 137)

From within that north-west Highland crofting society, the women did not make the necessary cultural change to their own identity which would have enabled them to leave their homes to become herring gutters. On the other hand, the women of the Western Isles of Barra and Lewis did make this change, although these islands did not have the same rough coastal terrain as did much of the western Highlands, and the combination of crofting and fishing was a much more viable way of life in these areas. This indicates a significant difference between the cultural identities of the women of the Western Highlands and those from the Western Isles of Barra and Lewis.

In David Fraser’s work *The Christian Watt Papers* (1983) Christian talks of working as a young girl on the West Coast looking after the east coat fishermen who were working in the Minch, and discusses the condition of the people she met there.

some of the tenants were very poor, an old wifie of over 80 we visited regularly in a hovel.......this old creature was banished to Canada along with the whole of Sleat Peninsular when Lord Macdonald started the clearances with unbelievable cruelty. He drove the people out; when we returned in later years not a soul was to be seen for miles and miles... We went again and again to Skye. The coastline was dotted with the bothies of girls; it was hard work to bake wash and cook to 27 men. The catches were
not big; at this time the fishermen did most of the gutting, it had not yet become wholly a female job. (Fraser, 1983: 27-28)

While this shows that there was a north east coast workforce travelling to the fishing in the west coast, it was described almost as a foreign encounter – even the language would have been different, with the east coasters making money round on the west coast while the population there were undergoing intense poverty and subjugation.

There were clearly marked cultural differences between the women from different areas, and while those outside the industry saw them as one workforce, there were very distinct groups, which had implications for their way of life while at the gutting. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.4.3  Transport and Travel: A Mobile Workforce

The movement of people around the country to markets with stock or for seasonal work purposes, with young women travelling along with the men, was not unusual. Tom Devine suggested that a huge percentage of workers from the Highlands had to travel in order to gain employment:

One contemporary, after extensive travel in the region, came to the conclusion that at least half the “young women” in the southern highlands went south for the harvest, while more recent historical investigation has suggested that few families in Argyllshire could have broken even without
the earnings of their young seasonal workers. Yet, although agricultural employment almost certainly absorbed the largest number of temporary migrants at this time, it was by no means the only outlet of importance. Already, by 1800, highlanders also worked for the season in the herring fisheries of the north east...... (Devine, 1979: 354)

Devine also makes the point that without these employment opportunities the resulting depopulation of the Highlands in particular would have been much greater than it actually was during the nineteenth century. The highland economy actually depended on the availability of temporary seasonal labour. He also suggests that during the famines of the 1840s and early 1880s it reduced the reliance on the limited foodstocks available, when young migrant workers were able to eat elsewhere.

Until the improvements in the infrastructure, the roads and ferry routes, and the coming of the railway in the later nineteenth century, people generally had to walk to their destination, even if that happened to be many miles away. As was previously mentioned, The Napier Commission report recognised the fundamental importance of lines of communication, roads, railways and also telecommunications such as the telegram to enable the fishing industry to function in the remoter areas of the north of Scotland.

In the later years of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, women and men from the Western Isles went by steamer to Kyle, and then by rail to Wick or Aberdeen. There was soon a regular ferry in place to take them on to Shetland. Once the railway reached Kyle in 1897, the train was used to travel across to the east coast
fishings. So as the communication routes developed, so changes arose in the traditions and patterns of movement of the women travelling across the country.

There were other occupations which required the movement of people around the country for seasonal work, in particular the harvests. The difference was the growing scale of the fishing industry, its movement around the coast and the repeated nature of the migration. There was also a sense of tradition and culture which was growing up around the women’s travel, in a relatively short space of time, including travelling with chests, or ‘kists’ full of relevant items for the duration of the trip, and in later years, the ferry and train journeys themselves and the seasonal accommodation, either in the huts or in the lodgings of East Anglia or the Isle of Man.

As the rail links were developed around the country, the travel to the fishing began to be undertaken most regularly by train. From the late nineteenth century, the curers would provide tickets for the women to travel to ports, particularly for the East Anglian fishery, on what became known as ‘Specials’, trains which ran from Aberdeen down to Yarmouth, taking the women and their belongings. When they got to their destination, they would walk around the town until they found suitable lodgings, and the curers would then bring their chests with their belongings.

3.4.4 Working conditions

From an outside perspective, the work of the gutters looked arduous, and somewhat messy, but even early mentions of the women often portrayed them as ‘cheerful’ or ‘good humoured’, combined often with a sense of disbelief that women could actually
portray any signs of enjoyment while being engaged in such a ‘disgusting’ occupation. In 1849, the women were described by James Thomson:

By a looker-on, the work may seem distasteful, and even to a degree disagreeable. It is, however, healthy, and those engaged in it are full of cheerfulness and good humour. Their happy feelings on the morning of a successful catch, are expressed by the merry laugh and harmless joke. Though during the week, the fashion of the toil brings their apparel to the plainest standard, yet, on one of the seven, there is none more gay than the young lass to whom the world is much indebted for the taste and flavour of a salted herring. (Thomson, 1849: part 15)

The working conditions of the women during the nineteenth century and the work which was involved are well described in the Scotsman article of 1869:

The fish are shovelled into wicker baskets, and then carried to the “station”, where they are measured and emptied into “boxes” or enclosures of wood from 20 to 30 feet square, the sides of which are about 30 inches in height. As soon as a convenient quantity of fish has been deposited in the box, a troop of women, arrayed in canvas and oil-cloth, approach, and the “gutting” and “packing” processes begin. The gutters, each armed with a small knife, surround the box, and, taking a herring up in the left hand, operate upon it with the knife held in the right hand. The rapidity of their movements is surprising, a good hand being able to dispose of one thousand fish in an hour. As the fish are gutted, they are dropped into baskets and
handed over to the "packers" who "rouse" them with salt in a large tub, and then arrange them in layers in the barrels. A free use of salt is made, the herrings being first coated with it separately in the rousing process, and the layers in the barrels afterwards thickly overlaid with it. The barrels are temporarily covered and allowed to stand for ten days, during which time the fish settle down considerably. Additional fish are then put in until the barrels are quite full. After being examined and approved by an officer of the Fishery Board, the barrels receive the official brand, which is accepted in the market as a guarantee that the fish are of a certain standard of quality. A large number of coopers and labourers are engaged in preparing and heading up the barrels and removing them from one place to another. (The Scotsman 22nd February 1869)

Once the knife had been introduced as a requirement for cleanly gutted fish, the method for gutting in the manner described above did not change significantly for almost a century through from 1850 to around 1950, until the introduction of gutting machines after the Second World War.

3.4.5 Accommodation

The women who travelled to gut the fish generally had to find accommodation or lodgings in the ports where they were working, although towards the end of the nineteenth century the curers began providing huts near to the curing stations in Shetland, Orkney and some of the north east ports as the industry expanded and
infrastructure was being put in place. A report in the Scotsman from January 1888, showed that accommodation was not always of a very high standard:

Accommodation in Wick: The Scotsman 5th January 1888

The Secretary for Scotland had asked the Fishery Board for Scotland to undertake a report into the conditions of the women who were working in the herring industry, having listened to accounts of poor conditions from local MPs. This was particularly in relation to accommodation and to the rise in the levels of disease in some areas when the herring season was on. While most areas were deemed to be relatively satisfactory, both Fraserburgh and Stornoway were found to require changes particularly in relation to overcrowding. The Local Authority in Fraserburgh subsequently produced guidelines relating to the minimum requirements for the accommodation of the women, which were circulated to the other local authorities under investigation. (Report of Fishery Board for Scotland, 1888, NAS)

The East Anglian fishing was undertaken in the colder autumn and winter months, and therefore from an early period, the tradition of accommodation was to stay in local lodging houses:
As a result of town planning and in order to favour local landladies, the building of huts for the gutters was forbidden in Lowestoft and Yarmouth. Therefore the girls took lodgings with the landladies, who in the summer season rented their best rooms to holidaymakers. Before the girls arrived the landladies protected their rooms from fish oil damage and the lingering smell of herring. They covered the walls with brown paper and oilcloth and removed most of the furniture. (Newland, 1999: 116)

Although some women did form lasting relationships with the landladies over the years, and stayed in the same lodgings each season, others were treated less well, sleeping in very cramped conditions, often still three to a bed, and regarded more as a necessary means of making money rather than as women working many hundreds of miles from their homes.

3.4.6 Legislation and politics

The success of the Scottish herring fishing industry was entirely dependent on rapid processing and the production of a quality product, cleanly gutted and presented in the barrels, and regulated by the government’s fishery officers. Fishery Officers were employed to ensure that the fish were of the right quality and were gutted and packed in the correct manner. One of the earliest references to the gutting of the herring was that made in a report from the Wick Fishery Officer, Allan McFarlane to James Dunsmore, Secretary to the Fishery Board in July 1815. It included reference to the
use of a knife for the gutting process, indicating that previously the method for
gutting was to use the hands only:

The curers have nearly all introduced the use of the knife in gutting, many
being of opinion that the new law directs the seizure of all herrings gutted
otherwise. This idea, seeing it has a much more powerful effect than
persuasion I neither confirm nor contradict. Mr Millar and myself do all in
our power, and appropriate a good part of each forenoon to the teaching of
the people employed the proper manner of gutting with the knife, which,
although they are strongly prejudiced against, and extremely awkward in the
use of I have no doubt they will soon attain. (Wick Fishery Office Letters
and Reports Book, part 04, 1815)

It became regular practice for the bottom tiers of fish to be inspected by the coopers,
or supervisors before the barrel could be filled, and the top tier once the barrel was
ready for closing, as these were the layers which were going to be seen first by the
buyers.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, more attempts were made to regulate the
industry, both in regard to the conditions of work of the herring girls and their
accommodation in various ports. When a large catch came in, the women would be
expected to continue gutting until all the fish were barrelled in order that there was no
wastage. With the organisation of the work ensuring that the more fish the women
gutted, the more money they were able to make, they themselves were not keen that
their hours should be reduced or contained within the hours of more regulated
occupations such as factory work. Indeed the Factory Work act of 1878 was one which was originally intended to include the fish-curing trade, but with pressure from the industry, it was excluded.

In 1898 a Report was produced looking more specifically into the question of regulating the curing industry and the working conditions of the women, but again the difficulties of regulating the industry prevented legislation being enforced. The reasons put forward within the Report as to why these difficulties arose included the perishable nature of the catch, the unpredictable hours of landing of boats, the variable supply of fish, the short length of the season, the requirement to export the product quickly, and in Scotland the requirement to gut the fish within 24 hours in order to achieve the Crown Brand. The inspectors went on to discuss ways in which the legislation could be relaxed:

In the course of our investigations we have held meetings with the various local Fish Trade Associations, wherever such existed, with the National Sea Fisheries Protection Association in London, and with a large number of individual employers and workers, with a view to ascertaining how far our recommendations would meet the requirements of the trade. In making these recommendations, we may say that they have met with almost universal approval from all sides, as shown by the correspondence furnished herewith.

As to workers, the women engaged in the industry would appear to be strongly opposed to any interference with their hours of work in the initial processes of curing. They assert that it would practically amount to their
exclusion from the industry which, as it is, furnishes almost their only means of living.

It is clear to us that a large portion of the industry could not be carried on under the ordinary provisions for factories and workshops, and that considerable relaxation as to hours of labour is absolutely essential for this large and most important trade. (Factory and Workshop Fish-Curing Trade Report, 1898: part 13: 14)

Although the women were keen to ensure that the processing of the herring was exempt from legislation, they were beginning to take their own action against their conditions of work. From the end of the nineteenth century the women were involved in a variety of strike action which helped to some extent to ensure that their working conditions remained acceptable. These strikes were held with some regularity throughout the period of the thesis. But not all strikes by the women were on their own behalf. They had enough power within the industry to strike on behalf of other sections of the fishing community, either the fishermen or the coopers. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of the growth and expansion of the herring fishing industry and the fishermen and women who were involved, as well as considering the cultural geography of the women involved.
The herring industry grew and flourished during the nineteenth century, and at the turn of the century was at its height, up until the outbreak of World War I. The patterns and traditions of the women had developed during this time, and most were still in place during the period of the thesis, 1900-1950. The herring industry of the nineteenth century is the backdrop to the working lives and experiences of the women who were interviewed for this research, with many of their relatives – mothers and grandmothers before them - having been actively involved in the herring fishing during this period.

The next chapter will consider the portrayal of the women by those outside the fishing communities, and the ways in which the women’s identity was shaped by their occupation.
Chapter 4  Social Portrayal: Perceptions of identity

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will consider that notion of identity, and how the women were perceived and portrayed by those outside the industry. I will also discuss how the women themselves felt about how they were perceived by others outside the industry. The chapter will conclude with a discussion about the issues of identity and the heritage portrayal of the herring girls today.

4.2 The nature of identity

The portrayal of the women who worked at the gutting is of particular note, in that it was a very visible occupation, and a visibly dirty occupation:
Gutting was an activity clearly exposed to the outsider and dominating the scene in the ports. Requiring little equipment it spilled over the open spaces, although some yards had covered accommodation, the essential processes visible to the camera and to the onlooker. (Gray 1982: 10)

There was no way to hide the mess and the associated smell. There was no way in which the women could keep themselves clean and tidy due to the very nature of the work. There was also no comparable occupation in which women in large groups were so visible, and not within a factory setting. Therefore it is not surprising that people from out-with the industry found it remarkable that women could be involved in such physically demanding and dirty work.

The concept that an individual has a unique identity developed relatively recently, and was influenced by factors such as research into aspects of psychology, where identity emerged as a distinct field of knowledge. Erik Erikson was one of the earliest psychologists to study identity, and the idea of the ‘ego’ as the self and a specific personal identity being attached to each person. He was also interested in the collection of social roles and the idea of both social and cultural identity, as well as how this changes over a person’s lifetime. Other theorists such as Barbara Engler (2006) have written about the importance of identity as a way a person is able to be a productive member of society. This is relevant to the lives of the herring girls, who were generally content that their role in life was as part of a community, in which they played what they considered to be an important part. Cohen interpreted the notion of ‘community’ in The Symbolic Construction of Community (1985), looking at ways in
which the idea of ‘belonging’ changes from one individual to another, and how the ideas of values and identity are closely bound up with the community to which an individual feels they belong. He also discussed the ways in which communities set up boundaries to distinguish themselves from those around them:

The community can make virtually anything grist to the symbolic mill of cultural distance, whether it be the effects upon it of some centrally formulated government policy, or a matter of dialect, dress, drinking or dying. The symbolic nature of the opposition means that people can ‘think themselves into difference’. (Cohen, 1985: 118)

It is useful to see the way in which the contentment which most of the women expressed in interviews about their life and their work at the gutting, came from a feeling of contribution to their own community and society and family. This in turn came from their own sense of identity and of belonging to the communities from which they came, communities which were very distinct from those around them.

An aspect of personal identity which is of relevance to the history of the herring girls is the growth in the sense of privacy and the individual. This is a more recent social phenomenon, and there is clearly a change in perceptions between the present day and the time period in question. For example, questions asked about the lack of privacy in the accommodation provided for the women, in particular the requirement often to sleep three to a bed, showed how this was generally not regarded by the women themselves as a problem at all. Sharing a bed, or living in such close quarters, was the normal situation at home for many of the women at that time. It is therefore
necessary to consider the changes over time, which have led to the changing circumstances for both individuals and families, who would no longer accept, or be familiar with the living conditions which were prevalent at that time.

Another theorist whose research could be regarded as relevant to the working lives of the herring girls is Foucault. Foucault's (1975) theory regarding discipline was written principally about the prison system, but also incorporates aspects of discipline in other areas of public life such as the workplace. His theories regarding panopticism and social enclosure are relevant to the working practice of the women at the farlances, in particular the idea that while seemingly working with no supervision, there are ways in which discipline and organisation can provide supervision without someone being directly in charge. What is being observed by an outsider as an unsupervised group of women working alone is not necessarily the case, as the women were often under the supervision of the coopers working around them.

The women who became herring gutters had their own sense of their identity as was shown through the interviews when they referred to the dreams and aspirations which they had before becoming part of the herring fishing industry. But while they may have had their own aspirations, the reality of their lives was linked to their strong sense of community identity, particularly in the North East as 'Fisher folk'. The cultural identity of 'Fisher' was more important, especially in the earlier years of the thesis period than their individual identity as young girls of the time.

The 'fisher toons' were themselves often set apart within the villages and towns around the North East coast in particular, with specific areas down by the piers where
the ‘fisher folk’ would live, such as Ferryden, where Jane Nadel-Klein undertook her fieldwork. The fishing communities were seen as separate by those outside, and as will be discussed further in Chapter 6, there was a tendency to try and ensure that marriages were kept within the community to ensure that both the husband and wife were clear about their roles within the fishing community itself. This led to claims of inbreeding from those outside the community:

When a middle-class, university-educated man at a Scottish National Party gathering in 1993 said to me that the people of Ferryden village were “odd” and closely inbred, he expressed a widely held stereotype that has a long ancestry. (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 21)

An article in the Scotsman newspaper from 1925 describes the Revival movement – a religious movement which involved many North East coast fishing communities in particular, and refers to the fisher folk as a ‘race apart’ underlining the ways in which they were regarded as separate from, or different to the society of the time:

The services were often accompanied by strange exhibitions of extravagant emotionalism. The occurrence of similar scenes in more restrained form at the present day reveals the fisher folk as true descendants of a people who have persistently married amongst themselves, and have preserved themselves pretty much as a race apart, handing down their traditions, their characteristics, and their calling from generation to generation. (The Scotsman, 14th August 1925)
Peter Anson who had a close relationship with the fishing community throughout his life, describes the herring girls of his own time, in the middle of the twentieth century:

The modern fisher-lassie, when she is at work usually wears dungarees or slacks. Her legs, once hidden beneath a mountain of petticoats and aprons, are now displayed for all to gaze on! What’s more she powders her face, plucks her eyebrows, uses lip-stick, and has her hair ‘permed’. She is not ashamed to be seen striding down the street with a cigarette in her mouth. When off work it would seem that the ambition of many a Scottish female fishworker of today is to achieve something of the glamour of her favourite film star! (Anson, 1950: 26-27)

Anson’s description shows how the identity of the women was not static but changed over time, and also reflected the society of the time.

The notion of identity is an important way to understand how the women were viewed by those outside the industry. It is also relevant in terms of how the herring girls viewed themselves and how those around them perceived them in terms of either discrimination, exoticisation or acceptance. People could react to the group of women in a discriminatory way as a result of their occupation, and also their social expectations regarding what they felt was or was not a ‘suitable’ occupation for a woman. The location and the time of the observation is also important, as the views and social expectations changed over the time period in question. In August 1860, Charles Weld described the herring girls whom he encountered in Wick:
...These are the gutting troughs. Round them stood rows of what close inspection led you to conclude were women, though at first sight you might be excused for having some doubts respecting their sex. They all wore strange-shaped canvas garments, so bespattered with blood and the entrails and scales of fish, as to cause them to resemble animals of the ichthyological kingdom, recently divested of their skin, undergoing perhaps one of those transitions set forth in Mr. Darwin’s speculative book “On the Origin of Species.” And if a man may become a monkey, or has been a whale, why should not a Caithness damsel become a herring?

... the Wick gutters – I timed them – gut on an average twenty-six herrings per minute. At this rapid rate you no longer wonder at the silence that prevails while the bloody work is going on, nor at the incarnadined condition of the women. How habit deadens feeling! Who would imagine that a delicate looking girl could be tempted by even a high wage to spend long days at this work? Such, however, is the face; for although the majority of the 2,500 women employed in gutting herrings are certainly not lovely nor delicate limbed still I observed several pretty and modest-looking girls who would apparently have made better shepherdesses than fish-gutters. But here, as elsewhere, the love of gain overcomes repugnance. (Weld, 1860: 55-56)

Charles Weld’s description gives an essence of the way in which the women were viewed by some, although he himself went on to describe the skill required by the women, and the important contribution which their work made financially to their families.
While there is not space within this thesis to dwell on a deep analysis of identity and its place within various theories, it is important to consider identity with regard to the way in which it both shaped, and is important to the individual. It brings a deeper understanding of the way in which the collective – the group – played such a large part in the lives of the women at the gutting, both their community and their occupational group. This is particularly relevant to the herring girls, who were able to maintain a positive sense of identity, despite the nature of the work. But this was in a group setting, as opposed to individual women making specific choices regarding occupation. Few of the women interviewed claimed to actually like the work itself and many of the interviewees commented that they did not enjoy the work, for example Henderson 1995, 2006; Coull and Bruce 2005. But the social aspect of it was important as was the financial contribution they were able to make to their families because of it.

Roberts in her publications (1985; 1995) also discussed aspects of the identity of women within communities. She makes the point that there are sometimes more similarities than differences between people from different locations or backgrounds, and it is the differences which are most often highlighted rather than the similarities:

There are, for instance, somewhat stereotypical views about differences between north and south, and more especially between London and the north, but we found some striking similarities between London working-class life and that in this region. (Roberts, 1995: 5)
Despite the differences between the fisher communities and country folk which are often the focus of attention, there are aspects of comparison which can be made between working class women in other areas of Britain at this time, which would also bring into question the uniqueness of the fisher folk experience. For example, Roberts discusses how working class women in Lancashire were in charge of their home finances, and had considerable power within the family, which was also the case in many fisher families. There was also a direct comparison with Roberts description of the social lives of the girls and the importance of dances and dancing at that time:

Dancing, already very popular before the first world war, became almost a mania in the 1920s, with a proliferation of dance halls..... It was common for girls to go to at least two dances a week. However, whatever wild behaviour may or may not have occurred at the dances of the wealthy ‘bright young things’ in the 1920s and 1930s, working-class dances were very strictly controlled. (Roberts, 1995: 71)

Wilmott and Young’s study of Bethnal Green (1957) described similar family situations and life for the working class, and in Workers’ Dilemmas (1996) Grieco described many aspects of life of the hop-pickers of the East End of London, which were similar to the lives of the herring girls of the North East of Scotland, in particular the way in which others reacted to mobile grouping of workers.

While it is important to document the differences between the types of community,
fisher and non-fisher, it is also clear that while those outside the fishing community regarded being ‘fisher’ as marking individuals apart, in fact there were many aspects of similarity to other groups within society. This is perhaps more obvious with the idea of ‘fisher’ as a collective. As individuals, the herring girls also regarded themselves as part of their own generation rather than something exotic and set apart.

This concept of individualism was also discussed by Roberts (1996), who described how different sociologists have had different observations relating to the increase in the importance of the individual, at the expense of the working class ideals of shared communal living. She argued that when times were hard, for the working class in particular, collective action could work well for the individual. However, in 1963 Goldthorpe and Lockwood wrote of the weakening of communal attachments and collective action in the workplace, and contrasted this with ‘the greater scope and encouragement for a more individualistic outlook as far as expenditure, use of leisure time and general levels of aspirations are concerned’ (Goldthorpe and Lockwood, 1963: 152). Others also noted the weakening of the traditional working class communities, some feeling that this was a welcome move forward which would provide individuals with the opportunity to break out of their working class backgrounds.

The theories of identity within the field of social anthropology which have most relevance to this research, are those which deal specifically with fishing communities, particularly the work of Cohen (1987) on the fishing community of Whalsay in Shetland, and Nadel-Klein (1988; 2003) who studied the fishing community of

Cohen looked at community identity within Whalsay and the overarching importance of this communal sense of belonging and identity intertwined – of being ‘da same’. He discussed the ‘egalitarian suppression of distinctiveness’ which is required to some degree within tight knit communities in order for these communities to survive, and how people continue to identify with the community to which they belong:

Public identities provide some of the signposts through the fields of unprocessed data..... They are like compass bearings. If they were mutable, people would lose a fundamental means of social orientation. In such circumstances the authenticity of the community would be severely jeopardised. (Cohen, 1987: 61)

Cohen goes on to explain how the skills within a community are often marked by kinship stereotyping, rather than as an individual being identified as being particularly good at a particular thing. He uses examples of men principally, and how they were particularly good fishermen, or woodworkers, but within the community, these skills were attributed to their family background.

The community is too small, too isolated, and socially too compact to withstand the unfettered battle of egos. The competition is thus limited and codified to produce an exemplary harmony of collectivity and individuality which recognises the identity needs of each. (Cohen, 1987: 64)
This is of relevance particularly to the fishing communities, although Cohen’s area of study was the crofting/fishing island of Whalsay, and it is therefore relevant to all the communities from which the vast majority of the women who travelled to the gutting came. This type of community background, and idea of collective identity is of considerable importance to the perceptions of the women themselves, but it also served to set them apart and make them distinct from other people – people outwith the industry and communities. This in itself would have an effect on the way in which the women and the fishing communities were viewed from the outside.

While Cohen’s study is set in more recent times, he is describing a community which has not changed considerably over the course of the twentieth century, and still maintains many of the features of tight-knit community life which would have been a part of the lives of the women during the time period in question. Cohen also introduces the occurrence of endogamy within the community, with marriage to partners outwith the community being the exception rather than the rule. The intermarriage within the community means that most people are related in some way to each other, which also serves to bind them together by both kinship and social ties. He states that during the herring fishing of the past, there were more opportunities for women and men to meet at fishing stations – either men landing fish in Whalsay, or women travelling to work at fishing stations in other places:

Fishermen from other Shetland communities may have landed herring at the station in Whalsay where local women were employed to gut and pack the
fish. Similarly, Whalsay women may well have worked at stations elsewhere in Shetland. (Cohen, 1987: 66)

Nadel-Klein (2003) begins her discussion about identity with the notion that fishing communities by the beginning of the nineteenth century were single occupation places, the idea of ‘occupational communities’ being used to describe the whole community:

By the end of the eighteenth century, fishing specialists lived in clearly identifiable settlements with sharply marked boundaries. These were occupational communities, or single-industry places that were small and homogeneous. Within them, virtually every member of the community, male and female, relied directly upon the success of the catch. (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 40)

This is a description which would fit some of the North East fishing communities, but not the crofter fisher communities of Shetland or the Western Isles. Nadel-Klein discusses the argument that the Newhaven fishing community for example, were in fact descended from Flemish and Dutch immigrants, again marking them apart. Nadel-Klein makes much of the notion of stigmatisation of the fishing communities, and how they suffered from stereotyping in both fiction and in reality:

Outsiders branded fishers as backward, dirty, inbred, superstitious and intrinsically disreputable. Their villages were cast as dangerous places that
strangers would do well to avoid. With this ambiguous, but generally seamy reputation, fisherfolk found their engagements with others – particularly with fish dealers, employers, landowners, social workers and bureaucrats of all stripes – to be fraught with difficulty… (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 43)

However, the evidence from the interviews and from contemporary newspaper reports and articles would suggest that there was also a level of pride in the herring industry and in the abilities of the fishermen in particular, as well as the skill of the herring girls, which Nadel-Klein does not take into account. The requirement to have skilled seamen who could transfer their skills to the Navy as and when they were needed, is not to be underestimated, particularly throughout the nineteenth century. Britain relied heavily on its Navy to protect the shores, and it was therefore of the utmost importance that there were enough men capable of going to sea should the need arise. The British Fisheries Society and The Napier Commission (1884) specifically mention this need when discussing the industry as a whole, and more informal accounts such as that of Charles Weld who wrote about the industry when visiting Wick in 1860:

Look at the fine stalwart fishers, clad from head to heel in oilskin garments, their faces shining like the newly risen sun with health. Who could fear the decay of our naval power when we have such men as these? Remember too that there are thousands of them, for the far Western Isles, Sutherland, and in short, all parts of Scotland, and a portion of the north of England, send out fishers, so great and profitable is this might herring harvest. (Weld, 1860: 37)
Coupled with the desire to ensure that there was a skilled naval reserve, was the knowledge that the herring fishing industry was of immense economic importance to Britain as a whole. These were two important aspects of the industry which ensured that there was considerable respect from some quarters for the men and women involved in the fisheries. There is no doubt, however, that there was some levels of stigmatisation of fisher-folk, as a ‘race apart’, as ‘different’, and there were regional variations to this trend:

One does not have to go to the geographical periphery to find the cultural margins, however. The “other” may be found whenever class and power differences become conflated with localized identities. At such junctures, “locals” easily become either vilified or exoticized (or both). Thus in their stigmatized and dependent positions, they resemble other, less localized, but even more marginalized or pariah groups, such as the Gypsies of Europe...

(Nadel-Klein, 2003: 10)

While acknowledging that there were aspects of stigmatisation and stereotyping, the interview evidence in particular would still suggest that it was less of an issue to the women themselves than Nadel-Klein contends. Davis (1986) also researched the ideas of identity and the notion of ‘occupational community’ looking at the wives of fishermen in a Newfoundland village. She describes the origins of the notion of occupational community:

The concept of occupational community was introduced by Lipset (1956) in his study of the printer’s union in the United States. According to Lipset, high
occupational status, prolonged apprenticeships to learn complex skills, and pride in work led to a high level of job involvement for printers as compared to other manual laborers involved in low skill low paid work.... Lockwood (1975a), ... feels that occupational community could entail diverse types of manual workers, adds the following definitional criteria to the typological format: (1) a high degree of job involvement; (2) a strong attachment to primary work groups; (3) autonomy from supervisory constraints; (4) a distinctive occupational subculture; (5) stress on mutual aid; and (6) a sense of belonging which generates an "us and them" social imagery. It is the latter point which has become a major issue of controversy, and has resulted in the elaboration of types and sub-types of occupational communities. (Davis, 1986: 129)

It is Lockwood's interpretation of occupational community which most closely fits the herring girl occupational group. Davis goes on to describe how the concept was linked only to male groups by theorists such as Lockwood and that it was not applied to work groups of women. As with the historians, the role of women within the fishing community, would seem to have been overlooked by the theorists. Davis describes how Trevor Lummis did acknowledge the part that women played within the fishing community, but failed to analyse occupational community as it applied to the working women's groups. The men were the focus of his study. Thompson however (1983; 1985), did acknowledge both the part women played within the fishing community, and also within the work place. He described the place of women within fishing communities, particularly once the herring fishing became a major industry, contending that they in fact had more power in some ways than the men.
Once the fishing became a large scale export industry, most of the work was done outwith the home and community, by both men and women:

...the ‘quines’ of the trade, were straightforward employed workers, never entangled in share earnings; so that their consciousness was able to develop more directly, and find expression separately from their men, and so, at certain times, to speak for their communities when the men were silent. (Thompson, 1983: 168)

This was particularly true of the women who became involved in militant strike action, and had more freedom to strike than the fishermen. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

The acknowledgement or otherwise by theorists, that women did play an important part in the fishing communities was of little importance to the women themselves. They were aware of the part they played, particularly within the traditional fishing communities of the north east of Scotland, and were generally respected within the community itself. However there is significant regional variation to the general pattern, with this situation being somewhat different within the crofting communities of the Western Isles for example or Shetland, which also had a crofting and fishing background. The Shetland women tended to be particularly confident, and had a good sense of their own identity and how they fitted in to the social and economic structures around them:
Shetland identity is unusual because unlike most of western culture, it is strongly feminine. It is founded upon narratives of the past which incorporate a series of complementary archetypes of Shetland womanhood: the tragic woman, the heroic woman and the crofting woman. For over two centuries these archetypes have, singly and collectively, performed two functions in Shetland. First, they have constituted models of ideal femininity upon which Shetland women have drawn in the construction of their own sense of self. And second, they have acted collectively to project women as pivotal to the whole identity and culture of the Shetland archipelago. (Abrams, 2005)

The idea that the women of Shetland were generally more self-assured is an argument put forward by both Lynn Abrams (2005), and Paul Thompson (1983) and was something which was apparent even with the interviewees for this thesis research. Thompson also suggests that the strict control which the Free Church exerts over the people of Lewis in particular, works in the opposite way on the people there, as it frowns on aspects of social life such as music and dance, along with drink and illegitimacy of children. (Thompson, 1983: 284)

Why instead of the callousness and blunted affection which Jeremy Tunstall’s The Fishermen had led us to expect, did we find instead the exceptional family gentleness of Shetland fishermen? The Hull men were wage-paid long distance trawlersmen, the Shetlanders inshoremen working their own boats and never away from home for long. But we soon discovered that other inshore communities had still different family patterns. In subsequent years, through the research which led to Living the Fishing, I have come to see the
complexity of explanation required, not only in the part played by culture, religion, and other factors as well as economic organisation, but also in the way that relationships within the home and between the sexes themselves in turn help to shape the economy. (Thompson, 1985: 5)

Barra however, even today is still predominantly Roman Catholic, and the Church has a less controlling influence over the social life of the islanders than did the Free Church in Lewis. Another difference between the communities of the Western Isles was that while there were very few boats bought by Lewis fishermen, and the men tended to work in the industry as hired hands, the Barra fishermen were more proactive in the industry, buying and skippering boats and being involved in all aspects of fishing and processing (Gray, 1978).

The general conclusions regarding identity and the theories which surround the concept of identity and the herring girls, are that it is very difficult to make generalisations, even when focusing on women within small fishing, or crofting/fishing communities, and that the pattern changes in relation to the location and also the time period, which relates in turn to the culture of the communities.

One thing is certain however; as an occupational group, who worked out in the open, in full view of the public, the herring girls faced considerable scrutiny over the time period, leading to various reports and articles which depicted them in a variety of ways, from the nimble-fingered herring girls, to the scarcely human ‘ichthyological creatures’ described by Weld (1860). Despite their visibility, the converse of this situation is that within the written historical narrative they are almost invisible.
Identity is a concept which stretches across the boundaries of purely textual and can be regarded within the realm of the visual aspects of the herring girls. The visual portrayal of the herring girls was important, particularly to those outwith the industry, with thousands of postcards and photographs of the women having been taken over the period. Chapter 7 deals more fully with aspects of image and identity in relation to the herring girls.

4.3 Popular perspectives on herring girl identity

The herring girls were ‘visible’ to those from outside the industry in a number of different ways; working outside at the various ports; through news film reels at the cinema; through various reports in the local newspapers, and not least through the proliferation of images of them particularly during the first years of the twentieth century. When the season reached the different areas the communities and the harbours would become a hive of activity – with boats coming in and out, stevedores and coopers working away on the pier, and the women themselves, mostly working outdoors. This had a huge and very visual effect on the area – and became a source of material for early photographers and film-makers, which has ensured that although the lives of the women have been less well documented in formal histories, there is a huge wealth of visual material. This material itself can also be interpreted in terms of social meanings, identity and stereotyping and as was mentioned above, Chapter 7 will look more fully at this aspect of the research.
Nadel-Klein (2003) talks about the stigmatisation and marginalisation of fisher folk. She approached the topic of the fishing community through the ‘gender, stereotype and marginality’ of the ‘fisher lassies’ and makes the point that the fishing community was already stereotyped – seen almost as an oddity – and adding gender to this ‘different’ way of life made the women seem not just odd – but even less respectable.

Fisher folk were seen as a ‘race apart’, but they maintained a pride in their culture and tradition. The herring girls, who were moving from place to place during the season, were very visible to the general public, and they were both exoticised - marvelled at – and frowned upon in equal measure. The prevailing Victorian values of women and domesticity which carried on through to the twentieth century, with women being the weaker sex and the ‘cult of domesticity’, along with the idea of women being kept ‘out of sight’ - has been extensively written about by historians such as Abrams (2005) and Shirley Ardener (1981; 1993).

But these theories are harder to uphold within the fishing communities in which the women undertook an active role, and worked alongside the men on the piers. In terms of gender, in some respects this imbued the fisher communities with a greater sense of equality between the sexes than other communities. The men were aware that they needed their women – not just to keep their families and their homes, but to actually undertake labour in order to sustain the fishing economy. But for those from outside, it underlined the difference between the fisher women and women in their own communities.
Ernie Fiddler from Stronsay in Orkney, spoke about how important the herring season was to the local economy there, and how everyone would be involved as the population quadrupled in the summer with the influx of fisher folk:

*We used to look forward to it very much – it brought so much life to the Island. When you’re young – flying around all over the shop – seeing the boats coming in wi’ all the fisher girls who did the gutting, and the coopers worked at the stations – it was a busy, a happy time I would say, when we were young.*  
(Fiddler, 2005)

But he also pointed out that while romances were not uncommon, there was still a sense that the women were from a different social class and the people from Stronsay would not have classed themselves as ‘fisher’:

*JdF: do you think it was just romances – or was there more to it than that?*

*EF: Oh – I would think so – weekend flings kinda thing. I don’t know – there were one or two married – but very few really that I knew of. But there were some nice women there – because they were gutters – some looked down their noses at them – but there were some nice girls – and nice women among them – they were indeed. Nice looking as weel – but there was just that stigma if you were a gutter – you were at the low end of the pack – that sort of thing.*  
(Fiddler, 2005)

wife: an account of the oral tradition of the life of the fisherfolk of Easter Ross’ - includes aspects of community life in Easter Ross which show the involvement of different aspects of people’s lives with the herring fishing in that area of the country. Donald Lawrence MacNeil from Barra also spoke about the herring season coming to Barra. He was speaking from a different perspective from Ernie, having been a fisherman himself, and as was common on Barra, all his family had been involved with the herring, his father a fisherman and his mother and aunts had all been gutters:

*JdF:* *It must have made quite a difference to the women too, to be able to contribute to their families with their work?*

*DL:* *Oh, yes. They were contributing enormously especially in the islands that is for sure. Yes, they did indeed. They contributed financially and when they were at home in the practical ways. Yes they did. They contributed every bit as much as men if not more. My mother and my auntie Annie were as good as any man – good as any – capable in every way – cooking, baking – every way – you could not beat them. There’s no praise high enough for them and generally it was the way things were. Generally. But the women did an awful lot of work. I think women do an awful lot of work even today.* (MacNeil, 2006)

Donald Lawrence MacNeil was speaking from an insider’s perspective about the women at the gutting while Ernie Fiddler was not from a community where it was common for women to take part in the gutting, so there was more of a sense of ‘otherness’ about his account of the women.
Papa Stronsay was a tiny island just off the main island of Stronsay in Orkney, and Jack Scott who was a child at the time, remembered the girls arriving for the season:

There was twenty of us in the isle [Papa Stronsay] and suddenly one beautiful day in summer three hundred girls appeared...it was quite a business. They took them in by special boat. We used to go down, past the huts to school and when these girls appeared we used to go the back road. There was such a lot of them...they were Gaelic speakers and we didn’t know what the dickens they were saying to us you see...some of them used to chase after us and we were just boys at the time. In fact one day I was down with my brother at the pier and some of the girls caught him and put him in the hut and I had to go home for help to get him out. Oh, they weren’t doing him any harm, it was just the fun of it, I suppose. (Towsey, 2002: 38)

For these small communities, it meant that the place ‘came alive’ and many additional services were required such as cinemas, and ice-cream parlours, (Fiddler, 2005) as well as the employment opportunities which opened up. Many locals had to make as much during the season as possible to see them through to the next year. But for the younger members of the communities, it was the life which the herring industry brought to the places which was most fondly remembered:

It felt as flat as a flounder when they went. It did feel very flat when they went ‘til you got used to it again. They had a foy, a big do, and all the people gathered at the end of the season. (Towsey, 2002: 39)
There are many newspaper reports of the day in which the women were described in glowing terms with regard to their industriousness, and indeed, their morality. A journalist for the Scotsman in November 1926 wrote:

Among the women workers of the world, there are probably few so hard-working, and at the same time so picturesque as the rosy-cheeked and vigorous Scottish fisher girls, who follow the herring fishing from port to port. Beginning at Lerwick in the Shetland Isles, or at Stornoway during the month of May, these girls are kept busily employed until the end of November, when they finish their season’s work in Yarmouth and Lowestoft. (The Scotsman, 1926)

The Graphic of August 24th, 1912 ran an article about the ‘Scots Fisher-Girls and their Work’, which clearly portrayed the public perception of the women. The article was written to inform the public about the fishing industry and the women in particular, by a resident of Aberdeen, Robert Anderson:

In the North of Scotland, as is the case elsewhere, fishermen form a distinct class. Perhaps one of the most noticeable features of this exclusive class — so exclusive indeed, as almost to be reckoned a caste — is the extensive participation of the women in the industry in which their men-folk are engaged. They have not, it is true, as yet invaded the special domain of the men — the handling of the boats and the catching of fish. The arduous toil of these operations with all the accompanying hardships and dangers, is still left to the predominant partner — if the phrase is now permissible in these
suffragette and sex-equality days. But the women, nevertheless, are employed in many tasks incidental to the fisherman’s occupation which, though deemed subsidiary, are none the less essential: and they learn to take their share in the work at quite an early age..... Modern developments of the fishing industry, however, so far from curtailing the employment of women, have extended it, and very large numbers of women are now employed by the wholesale fish merchants and fish-curers in the big towns in the various processes of cleaning, packing and curing. (The Graphic, August 1912)

This article shows that although people were aware of the herring gutters and their work, they did not understand the workings of the fishing community, and the way in which the work of the women was a vital part of the economy of the community. It is also of note that at this period, the idea of sex-equality was at the forefront of the public perception, with the Suffragette movement being in full-swing. Anderson goes on to describe the ‘individuality’ of the girls, although what he seems to be describing is the way in which the girls stay within their own community groups, rather than their own personal individuality:

Gutting herrings can hardly be described as picturesque – it is certainly not over-cleanly; but there is a fascination in the deftness with which it is done and the rapidity with which barrels are filled, the girls all the while singing merrily or chattering gaily with each other. Despite their changes of environment the girls do not lose their individuality. They live very much by themselves and among themselves, and are often to be seen, after a day’s heavy work, industriously knitting stockings: and on the termination of the
herring-fishing season they return to their humble houses, little affected by the attractions or temptations of the bigger places in which they have temporarily sojourned. (The Graphic, August 1912)

There are aspects of the idea of 'separation' within this article which are in line with the arguments put forward by Nadel-Klein (1988), but it also clearly indicates that there is a generally positive aspect to the portrayal of both the women, the fishermen and the communities from which they came.

There are also newspaper reports which present a different aspect of portrayal of the women in the industry, for example reports on strike action. The women had considerable power within the industry owing to the perishable nature of the fish and from the 1890s through to the 1950s there are examples of the women going out on strike, either for more pay, or in support of fishermen or coopers:

Strike of Fish Gutters -17th June 1914: Without giving their employers any warning, a hundred women gutters stopped work, and, banding together, visited all the curing yards in the town, and called on their fellow-workers to cease work until they got an increase of 20 per cent on their wages. The agitators were successful in their raid, and over two thousand gutters came out on strike.....The curers are indignant at the action of the gutters. (The Scotsman, 1914)
It is interesting to note the change in the use of language, from the normal descriptions of the ‘picturesque’ and ‘rosy cheeked’ herring girls to ‘agitators’ acting against the curers.

Another aspect of public visibility of the herring girls was during the travel to various ports, either on boats or in later times, on the special trains, or while in the larger ports, by lorry to their work place. Various commentaries exist describing the behaviour of the girls as they travelled – particularly their light heartedness, and the music and dancing which often accompanied them on their journeys en masse.

*Lorry Loads of Laughing Girls.*

It is a great sight to watch the dozens of lorries driving through the town, laden with singing, laughing girls on their way from wharf to lodging-house, and from lodging-house to wharf. These lorries are provided by the employers, who have had them fitted all round with iron railings. Yet, despite these precautions, only the other week, thanks to their overcrowded condition, an accident occurred when one of them swerved too quickly round a corner. But such accidents, and others incidental to their calling, do not daunt these high-spirited girls and women. They make light of trials

*(The Scotsman 12th November 1926)*

To some extent the girls themselves seemed to revel in the reputation for living life to the full – the singing, the dances, even in public, dancing on the railway platforms on the way to the ports further south – or on the pier near the farlanes.
To the outsider, however, observing the women while travelling or while working, the general impression was one of a high spirited group of women, combined with their reputation for hard work. There were also those who were willing to write on behalf of the women, when they felt they were being treated unfairly. One letter to the Scotsman newspaper on 14th October 1921 describes the treatment of the girls as over 400 travelled by boat from Stornoway to Kyle before catching trains to take them south to Yarmouth and Lowestoft:

On the boat the situation was more disgraceful than it was on the quay. As it chanced, heavy rain came on just as we started, and upon clearing the harbour the ship encountered a minor gale of wind. The girls had no accommodation. On deck they were lying (literally) all over the available flat surface without any cover whatsoever. Below on the saloon deck they were filling every passage and corner, so that circulation was an utter impossibility. After about an hour the saloon (which was at first locked up) was opened up to them in common humanity. Sick and soaked about 50 staggered in and lay all over floor and seating.

With difficulty I climbed up an unofficial ladder and gained the ordinary promenade deck, where I remained till dawn. Here girls in the last state of prostration, soaked to the skin, ill in the most unpleasant and horrible way, lay exposed to rain and cold until we reached Kyle about 8.30. The saloon and the gangways below were by this time indescribable: a certain callousness bred in the marches of Flanders enabled one to pass unscathed; otherwise the sight, sounds, and smells must have been too revolt.
These are decent Scottish girls, bound on a recognized important mission. Many had left their homes in the remoter isles and villages of Lewis at 4 A.M. on the 5th. When they reached Kyle they still had before them the long, weary journey to Yarmouth or Lowestoft. At Stornoway there was apathy and lack of organisation; the steamship company had made no preparations to receive them; the little station at Kyle was a desolation, without even a porter told off to marshal the girls for tickets or guide them away from certain carriages in the train which were mysteriously locked. Sudden from the boot, they stood for nearly an hour in Highland rain.

The girls made no protest; they are evidently used to it! The crew of the boat were kindly but helpless. Everybody in authority took it as a matter of course that 400 decent working girls should be herded worse than sheep on a journey for which the average man thinks it necessary to make quite elaborate preparations.

(The Scotsman 1921)

The writer, J.M. Mitchell, was an ‘outsider’ but obviously felt that he had to comment on the poor treatment of the women as they journeyed south. Many similar stories of uncomfortable sea crossings particularly between Aberdeen and Shetland were provided by the women interviewed. (Leask, 2007; Murray, 2005; Sales, 1995; Shearer, 1995)

For some of those outwith the industry, what made the fisherfolk and the women in particular more acceptable than they would have been otherwise, was the fact that many of them came from religious communities, and religious observance was of considerable importance, particularly to those from the North East and the Western Isles. The religiosity of the community was also apparent through the singing of songs as the women worked, which often included hymns, and there were churches specifically built for the fisherfolk, such as the Free Church in Wick.

The singing in the churches on a Sunday has been mentioned in many interviews – both by women who remembered as children listening to the singing of the fisherfolk.
at church, and by those from the communities which became part of the herring season.

EF: They were always singing. And there were a lot of Highland girls came up – and of course, they sang in Gaelic... It was fine to hear them. They were jolly, they were always happy and god knows, it wasn't a nice job – standing there all day long

JdF: Do you think they sang to keep time with their work – or just to pass the time?

EF: Oh – I think they sang just to break the monotony I would think and they would be talking to one another and shouting two or three rows down. Having great fun at times – and they sang a lot – but I couldn't tell you what songs they were singing... Well, they attended church at the weekend... and it used to be packed to the door. And it was really worth hearing – beautiful singing. (Fiddler, 2005)

Another Stronsay resident, Meg Fiddler, also remembered the singing of the fisherfolk and in particular the Sankey Hymns:

.....like a Sunday night service they came into that all dressed the same. Sankey hymns. The Kirk was catering for it...they had a station.... They sang and they were beautiful singers, on a Sunday night there were Sunday evenings in the little church that was down here and even the local people went there, just to hear them singing the redemptions, the redemption hymns,
that's all they would sing. (Towsey, 2002)

The size of the herring fleet and of the associated workers, meant that there could be huge congregations. These vast numbers would have ensured that the singing of hymns would have been of considerable volume and would have created an impression on both those involved, and those who could hear the service. Reports from the United Free Church also refer to the large congregation and the hymn singing of the fisherfolk:

The Sabbath services were such as no one enjoying the privilege of conducting them will soon or readily forget. They were held in the Seamen's Bethel. In the morning something like a thousand were present, while in the evening, about thirteen hundred, of whom I should say at least a thousand were men, completely and even uncomfortably crowded the building, while one was grieved to see hundreds having to turn away. That great congregation of earnest, expectant people, and the volume and heartiness of their praises, created an atmosphere in which worship and preaching were easy. (The Missionary Record of the United Free Church, 1913: 135)

While religion was a way in which people found fisherfolk more ‘acceptable’, this newspaper account of the Revival Movement in 1925 shows how religion could also be used as a way of showing how different the communities were:

The “revival” movement was very general on the shores of the Moray Firth. It
would often follow on a failure of the herring harvest, such failure being regarded as a judgment on the fishermen for their sins; and at the herring ports the curing yards would resound to the singing of hymns by a motley crowd of fishermen, coopers, and herring gutters. The services were often accompanied by strange exhibitions of extravagant emotionalism. The occurrence of similar scenes in more restrained form at the present day reveals the fisher folk as true descendants of a people who have persistently married amongst themselves, and have preserved themselves pretty much as a race apart, handing down their traditions, their characteristics, and their calling from generation to generation. (The Scotsman, 14th August 1925)

4.4 Herring girl accounts of stigmatisation

The women from the fishing communities were generally self-contained enough, and confident enough of their own place within their own society, for any negative perceptions as portrayed in articles or in the press to be of little concern. What was of greater concern, was aspects of stereotyping or actual prejudice, which affected their day to day lives. This took the form of stereotyping within communities, where the separation between fisher folk and 'country' or 'town' folk meant that neither section of the community would mix to any great extent with the other. This experience of Fisher as 'outsider', or different, was described by Lindy Henderson, who was born and brought up in Peterhead. She describes two different types of people even those living next to each other – in Peterhead, 'Fisher' and 'Town':
There was two different types of people, there was the Fisher people and there was the Town’s people. And one walked on the right side of the road and the other walked on the left side of the road. Fisher people were on the left, the town’s people were on the right. But they still were friendly and it was like, the Fisher People weren’t very happy if their sons married a woman from the town. My father did, my mother was from the town... (Henderson, 1996)

The segregation of people within relatively small communities is something which had been part of life for those in the fishing industry for many generations. It is interesting to note Lindy’s terms – ‘Fisher’ and ‘Town’ – for Peterhead, while in smaller villages such as Buckie, the terms used locally were ‘Fisher’ and ‘Country’.

In Buckie there were similar divisions:

*IB*: We used tae call them ‘Country-folk’ – and they would called us ‘The Fishers’.

*KC*: Aye ‘The Fishers’ – two separate kind o’ timers.

*JdF*: And did you mix?

*KC*: No, no I woldnae say – no you woldnae bother going after a country lad.

*IB*: No, no – see there were no hooses awa’ up where there is now in Buckie – up where Parklands is... (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

Nancy Dorian (1985) writes about the fishing community of Golspie, and the difficulties encountered by Fisher-folk as children, when they were often taken out of school, either to work directly with the fishing, or to look after younger brothers or
sisters. She also noted the separation between the two sections of the community in Golspie – fisher and non-fisher – East Enders and West Enders, and how this extended into most aspects of people's lives, including separate churches. Childhood can sometimes unite separate sections of society, and Dorian noted:

There was just one thing that sometimes led to a mixing of East end and West End children: there were always a few tuathanach (“non-fisher”) boys who were consumed by a passion for boats and the sea, and they couldn’t resist the lure of the pier at the West End and the boats tied up there. (Dorian, 1985: 105)

She went on to explain in her Postscript that she did not write at length about the prejudice against fisherfolk locally in Golspie – “which resulted in the social segregation noted....” and goes on to say that “Some fisherfolk descendants feel considerable bitterness and hurt about it still.” (Dorian, 1985: 105) It is clear that while there was a degree of segregation in other local communities, in East Sutherland it was rather extreme.

Marriage outwith the fishing community was also generally frowned upon, for a variety of different reasons, the most important of which was that within the fishing community, women played a very specific role, minding the finances over what was always a variable year. They also a long tradition of working within the industry – mending nets, baiting long lines with shell fish and from the middle of the nineteenth-century, actually travelling the fishing with the menfolk – working as herring gutters.
This would have been completely outwith the experience of women who were not from a fishing background.

Lindy Henderson who now lives in Mallaig had experience of this, both from her parents who were from different classes in Peterhead, and for herself when she started going out with a fisherman from a Gaelic speaking crofting community in the West Highlands when she arrived in Mallaig for the fishing. Her introduction to his parents stuck very firmly in her mind and shows the type of prejudice faced by the girls:

LH: My own family, from Peterhead — well, my heritage is a Fisher. From away back - from as far back as my grandfather’s time.... My father — well my mother — she was ‘Town’. There was the fisher part of town and there was the Town’s part. And it was something like if people married from the Town into the Fisher the families weren’t very happy y’know. It was something like Mallaig in the old days — and the West Coast — if you came into the West Coast from the East Coast and you got married — it was a strain on the families. [Laughs]

JdF: Was that the case here...?

LH: Oh yes. I mind when Jimmy took me in to see his mother and father — he turned round, and Jimmy said to him, ‘Now Father, you’re talking in Gaelic— Lindy doesn’t have the Gaelic but you have — and she doesn’t understand’: ‘If she hasn’t got the Gaelic then she shouldn’t be here!’ [laughs] and that was my welcome. (Henderson, 2005)
Another interviewee, Rita McNab, a herring gutter, was one of the few women interviewed who was not originally from a fishing community. She had decided to try going to the gutting when she heard of some friends who were going. Her family were all from a mining background and they had trouble accepting her choice of career. But she continued with the fishing, enjoying life as a gutter, and spoke about how her family dealt with her ‘strange’ choice of career:

*RM:* I got digs and I went to Lowestoft, and I went to Yarmouth, and I came to Lerwick, and back home, got a job in the fish and chip shop and worked away then. then back to the fishing when it came roond again, and I just couldn’t wait.

*JdF:* What did you family think?

*RM:* I stunk when I came in. They were miners and I remember when I came hame, ‘What’s that smell!’ And “You wash yer clothes!” You did the best you could with what you had and they couldn’t get o’er the smell o’ this herring. It stuck to you. No matter how clean you were – how much you scrubbed yersel’ you always found a scale.

*JM:* Yeh?

*RM:* And when they seen this scale, well... And yet, my faither could work up the pits with stinking o’ oil and as black as coal and they thought nothing o’ it. And my three brothers were the same but mines was.... fishing among that..... And then the pits finished and the family scattered, Corbie, Fife. The pits just closed up. (McNab and McNab, 2007)
She also married a cooper, Jim McNab from Fraserburgh, having met him in the Isle of Man, and they made the decision to get married without either family being present, to prevent any problems which might occur for both of them marrying outside their own communities.

There were occasions when prejudice towards the herring girls was more obvious from those outside the communities. When Lindy Henderson was working at Scarborough, during one season there she vividly remembered an incident when she was standing watching the herring gutters, alongside some tourists:

*LH: Well I was working with this firm – and then they went to Scarborough. But it was good. Cos there was the beaches and they were on holiday – people were on holiday – and there was all the clowns and everything and all the beaches and things going on y’know and shows and jerry planes and things all like that. But I remember it was Monday – and we got Monday off and I had on a dress and it was like a thick silk and it was a nice colour of red with a wee collar on it. And at Scarborough there was like, the town and then there was the hotels away up a step on a high hill and some of the people came down – a few of them anyway – down onto the beach and here there were two women standing looking at this women that was working outside with the salt herring and said ‘Oh just a creature made for the purpose’. Well if she did! ‘A creature made for the purpose’ and then she turned and she looked round and she seen the dress – and she talked about the dress being so nice and so fine –and I said ‘Aye, but I’m one of the creatures made for the purpose’...
JdF: That’s awful. But how do you think fish workers were regarded...

LH: Oh, fish workers was ‘oh, they’re fisher’ – but then fisher people had more intelligence than some of the people that’s behind a desk. (Henderson, 2005)

This incident had remained in Lindy’s memory for over 70 years, and there was still a real sense of anger at the attitudes of these women.

4.5 The current portrayal: an idealised reality

The idea that women were more equal to men within the fishing communities than in many other occupational areas is one which has been put forward by a number of different academics such as Thompson (1983) and the matriarchal model put forward in earlier years by Anson (1950). But it has to be regarded in the light of our own perceptions of equality in the present day, perceptions which were very different at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thompson (1983) discussed the possibility that there was more equality between the sexes in fishing communities than in other working class communities, given the involvement of the women in the fishing industry, and the domesticisation of men aboard boats. On the economic underpinning of the communities through fishing enterprise and shared responsibility for finance as well as work, Thompson wrote:

All this gives women the possibility of achieving, within the fishing family, a degree of independence and power which is unusual. (Thompson, 1983: 177)
From an outside perspective, this notion of equality was not one shared by the majority of people of the time, and was certainly different to the normal situation for women during the first half of the twentieth century. However, there are similarities with Roberts (1984) and her research of women in Lancashire in which the oral evidence from the women she interviewed did not uphold the notion that they were either oppressed or treated unfairly by men. The sense of independence and power which Thompson uses to describe the women in fishing communities was probably out of the reach of most the men and the women from the working classes in Lancashire during this time:

...Ten years ago it was anticipated that there would be considerable evidence about women’s oppression by men, and certainly there can be no argument about the legal, political and employment inequalities suffered by women in the public sphere.... Much of the evidence was oral and, as the research progressed, it became evident that there was little feeling among the majority of women interviewed that they or their mothers had been particularly exploited by men, at least not by working-class men.... In their interviews many women indicated their awareness of the limited horizons and opportunities of their lives, but were just as likely to associate their menfolk with this lack of choice. They tended to blame the poverty which governed where they lived, the length and nature of their education, and very often the kind of jobs available to them. (Roberts, 1984: 2)
This resonates with the interviews undertaken for this research, in which the women were more likely to talk about the problems for the community as a whole, rather than their personal lack of opportunities owing to the fact that they were women. (Bruce and Coull, 2005; Henderson 2005 et al.)

However, the general notion that women remained within the home in a more patriarchal society, caring for the house and families, while predominantly being a middle class ideal, is the one which is most often put forward in the historical narrative and would certainly contribute to the idea of separation and stigmatisation of the fisher folk as a whole. The image of the women carrying their menfolk on their backs out to their boats could be seen from two different standpoints – that of the weak woman who is servant to the man, or the strong woman – physically able to carry her man, as well as to carry creels full of fish around the country in the case of the fish wives, or to work for many hours in the open air gutting fish in the case of the herring girls.

Communities were in general more identifiable before the First World War, wearing clothes which set them apart, and signified that they came from specific places or groups, farming, factory or fisher. This changed to a large part after the First World War when the mass production of clothes meant that this aspect of identity became much more generalised, and even more so after the Second World War:

Standardisation in all ways of living, even more so “Clothing Coupons,” during and after the second World War, have affected the fisher fashions, both male and female. A quarter of a century ago, [c.1925] it was easy to
determine to what district a fisherman belonged by the way in which his jersey
was knitted, each had one or more favourite patterns. (Anson, 1950: 18)

From the 1920s onwards, the herring girls could dress up in everyday wear, and no-
one would know where they were from or even what their occupation was.

Dress Transformation: While the girls are working they wear thick woollen
jerseys, heavy oilskin overalls, and high rubber boots. Round their heads is
bound a gaily coloured handkerchief. But at night, when work is over, the
handkerchief is removed, and well cared for bobbed or shingled hair is
revealed, while the “oilies” are exchanged for fashionably short skirts,
artificial silk stockings, and high-heeled shoes. A few of the elder women,
however, remain true to their traditional black shawl, which practically covers
them from head to feet. (The Scotsman, 12th November 1926)

Out with work it was not possible to tell them apart from other young girls in the
towns who were not working with the fishing industry. While observers of the time,
and historians and social commentators of our time talk about the women being set
apart, and stigmatised as a result of their background and their occupation, the women
themselves were dressing in the height of fashion and fitting right in to the culture of
their times, as was described earlier by Anson (1950).

On the other hand, the same journalist goes on to discuss how surprising it is that
these women are able to carry on, despite the hardships they face in the workplace:
They make light of trials and difficulties which would overwhelm and indeed, impair the constitution of less robust women. No matter what the weather is like, they sing at their work and have nothing but smiles for curious and inquisitive visitors who travel miles to see them. (The Scotsman, 12th November 1926)

This writer is setting the women apart, because their behaviour seems to him so remarkable.

Change over time has seen the notion of the overall importance of the ‘group’ – the occupational group or the community group, the extended family group, being diminished and replaced by a much more individualistic outlook. The fishing communities themselves have now all but disappeared as a result of economic and social change over the past 50 years. But there is a sense that the current generation wants to recapture these old traditions, and a traditional way of life and celebrate it within the portrayal of heritage in exhibitions and heritage museums such as The Scottish Fisheries Museum in Anstruther and The Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth.

People’s perceptions change over time, and the way in which the fishing community is regarded, and has been regarded in the past, is not static. There is a romanticism regarding old traditional communities now which envelopes the fishing community as an entity, and can see it portrayed in a very idealistic way, which has little bearings on the reality of life in the first half of the twentieth century. Previously there was prejudice towards those who were from such a different group of people, prejudice
which has been neatly painted over in the portrayal of such communities in heritage centres and museums around the country today. There is no mention there of people walking down the streets of towns such as Peterhead on different sides of the road depending on whether they were ‘fisher’ or ‘country’ (Henderson, 2005), nor of the clear prejudice which existed in small towns such as Golspie towards fisherfolk. The heritage portrayal is one of romantic notions of seafarers, of wives waiting at the quayside, or of the ever cheerful bands of herring girls, singing while gutting fish at the farlanes on the piers. This will be examined further in Chapter 8 which looks at the heritage portrayal of the fishing communities.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the perceptions of the women who worked at the herring from outside the industry, and their portrayal within the media. It has shown that the women were portrayed mainly in a positive light, but that the general feeling was that they were something ‘other’ than normal, and that they were exoticised within the press and also within the visual portrayal. They were not a part of mainstream society, and therefore their ability to work in what was generally considered to be a dirty and difficult industry in full view of the public, was seen by most commentators as a marvel, and by others as somewhat repugnant.

Issues of gender and what was and was not considered as appropriate work for women, combined with the apparent freedom which these women appeared to have were also important factors in understanding the perceptions of those from outside the
fishing communities. We have discussed aspects of identity and how this fitted in with these experiences. In the following chapter, the experiences of the women themselves, and their own perceptions, their own sense of identity through their memories and experiences, are considered.
Chapter 5: The Work Place

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the views of the women themselves will be considered, concentrating on the occupational aspects of life at the gutting, from the initial signing on with herring curing firms, work space organisation, skills and working conditions through to the more social aspects of the workplace, such as song and dance. Within this chapter, aspects of identity relating to the workplace will also be considered.
The ability to work and earn money was of considerable importance to the women, regardless of their geographical location, as an opportunity to contribute to the family income, and many women left school as soon as they were able to, often at the age of 14 or 15. By the turn of the 20th century, ‘travelling the fishing’ had become a tradition, with many women following in the footsteps of their own mothers and grandmothers. While there was an indication from the interviews that there was little choice of occupation, there was also a sense of pride in both their identity as ‘Herring Girls’ and their ability to earn money. One of the points which came across clearly from interviews of those who had worked as herring gutters, was the feeling that they were, at least to some extent, working for themselves. This was seen as a positive thing by many of the women. This was partly because they had some control of what they earned, which depended upon the numbers of barrels gutted, and it seemed to have given them a sense of power and control. However, this did not always work out when the curer asked them to undertake additional work at the end of a long day. As Jessie Stewart explained, if one crew decided to carry on working, then all the women felt they had to stay:

*JS: Yes, we were – we were working for wirlselves. The way we were paid, we did feel that we were working for wirlselves. The boss – the owner – you never saw. There were one occasion at Mitchells that we’d had a hard week o’ work. But aifter tea time, then the owner cam and he bought 80 crans of fish fae a boat that came in. And the herring were washed – washed herring – they’d been bought before and he’d gotten them cheap and they had to be gutted and finished immediately... So of course some of them said they’d*
stay, so we all had to stay. And it was 4 o’clock in the morning when we were
din. (Stewart, 2007)

The women were aware before they started of the harshness of both the living and
working conditions at the herring gutting. Information regarding the work was passed
down from mother to daughter in many communities, and the hard work and the lack
of sleep were seen as part of the tradition. Despite these conditions, the women
continued to sign on each season, to return to the gutting and to travel with friends
and family round the coast. The fact that they were working for themselves was
important to the women, as it gave them a sense of empowerment, and this ensured
that when the curer’s representative called each year at the different communities,
there was a steady supply of women and young girls willing to sign up for the season.

5.1.1 The work place and organisation

The main areas from which the herring girls came were Stornoway and the
surrounding areas in Lewis, Barra, Shetland and the ‘Scotch Girls’ from the coastal
villages around the north east coast of Scotland. There were also men from Ireland
who came over to work at the gutting. While it was almost unheard of for Scottish or
English men to be working as herring gutters, there is frequent mention of men from
Ireland working alongside the women (Coull and Bruce, 2005; Murray, 2005; McNab
and McNab, 2007 et al.).
By 1914, according to the Annual Report of the Fishery Board for Scotland in 1914, there were around 35,500 people employed in the herring curing industry including the curers, cooperers, gutters, packers, labourers, carters and seamen with approximately 14,000 women working at the gutting. The statistics also contained information regarding the areas from which the women came and the total of their pay:

Some idea of the extent to which our coast population are dependent on the curing industry may be gained when it is stated that the number of women employed as gutters and packers was 13,800, while their earnings for the limited season in Scotland amounted to £166,700, and for the very short and reduced season in East Anglia, to £9336, or a total of £176,036. The districts from which the girls hailed in greatest numbers were the Lewis (2720, and earnings £45,400), Peterhead (1626, and £17, 569), Fraserburgh (1425, and £14,250), Shetland (1159, and £18,135), Buckie (1063, and £1,1693), Orkney (1032, and £12, 923), Wick (965 and £8260), and Barra (819, and £8563). (Annual Report Fishery Board for Scotland, 1914)

The majority of the women came from the north east coast, although it is notable that despite being the largest town, Aberdeen is not noted here as an area in its own right. Aberdeen’s main industry after 1900 was white fish, as opposed to the herring, with a fleet of steam drifters fitted out in the early years of the 1900s to fish all year round. Although there would have been women from Aberdeen working at the gutting, most were from the three main ports of Fraserburgh, Buckie and Peterhead – almost 4000 women. While it is often thought that the vast majority of women at the gutting were
from the north-east, in fact between Lewis and Barra, there were almost as many women employed in the industry as from the east coast, with over 3500 included in the statistics. It is not clear if the women who worked only in their own ports are included in these statistics, as they may not have been signed on by the curers at the start of the season, and were only called on when the fishing was particularly good. It could be that considerably more women were involved than appear in the statistics, but it is very difficult from the available figures to ascertain if this was the case.

The gutting yards themselves had developed over the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, with many small herring stations around the coastline. As was seen in Chapter 3, by the twentieth century, with larger herring drifter taking over from sail power, the herring industry was becoming concentrated in several large ports, which could accommodate the bigger vessels with deeper draughts (Nicolson, 1982). That is not to say that some of the smaller stations in smaller areas such as Castlebay in Barra or Mallaig on the west coast did not continue successfully to play a part in the industry for many more years. But the vast majority of the herring were landed in the larger ports.
A clear example of the changes in the organisation of the fishing stations can be seen from the map of Shetland which shows the location of the stations around the coast of the Shetland Isles, with over 140 stations in 1901. That number reduced considerably between 1901 and 1914, mainly due to the introduction of larger steam driven drifters. This meant that the vessels had the power to steam to larger ports and discharge their landings:

At first the influence of the herring fishing was exerted through the need for herring stations to be sited as near to the fishing grounds as possible, as the method of herring fishing with sailboats consisted of fishing at night and bringing the herring ashore early in the morning while still fresh, so that gutting and the initial process of curing could get under way without delay....
Any delay in landing the herring resulted in deterioration and ultimately in inferior quality of cure. (Smith, 1964: p193)

As the processing was carried out at the stations, the consequence of this for the curing yards was that after the First World War they tended to be situated in several large areas, rather than strung out along the coast. Thus Lerwick became the central landing point for the herring fleet in Shetland, and the herring girls were mostly situated here during the season. It was a similar situation for many of the smaller stations around the Moray Coast, with curing stations becoming centralised into the bigger ports of Fraserburgh, Buckie and Peterhead.

5.1.2 Industrial scale and work groupings

The following images of the work place indicate the different scale of the industry in different locations:
Figure 5.3 Gutting herring on the pier

This photograph shows an unidentified port in Argyllshire in 1897, with the women gutting the herring on the ground. There is not the infrastructure here that existed in larger ports and the herring had been landed from the boats directly onto the pier.
Mallaig was a small but growing port in 1920, and the women had farlanes at which to work as well as accommodation in huts. Kippering was already becoming the most important aspect of the herring industry in Mallaig, as can be seen with the kippering sheds in the background.
In contrast, the industrial scale of the processing in Lowestoft can already be seen in this image taken before the First World War.

Figure 5.6 Northbay, Stornoway, 1906, early Valentine card

The biggest processing port on the west coast of Scotland was Stornoway, where the processing took place right in the centre of the town, by the pier. Enough space was available here for the processing and stacking of barrels.

Figure 5.7 Great Yarmouth, c1910
Yarmouth was the largest of all the herring ports, and the industrial infrastructure had
grown up around the sea front including the fishing stations and curing yards which
can be seen in the background of these two photographs.

Figure 5.8 Great Yarmouth, 1906

By the end of the nineteenth century, it was a huge industry requiring considerable
labour and infrastructure to ensure that it could function. The photographs above
show the scale of the industry in the East Anglian ports of Yarmouth and Lowestoft,
and even ports in the Western Isles of Scotland such as Stornoway and those in
Shetland such as Lerwick required the scale and infrastructure to compete in what had
become an international market:

All the curing operations were carried out on the herring station, including
gutting and packing and making barrels. Stations were complete with living
accommodation for the shore-workers (gutters and coopers), and cargoes of
cured herring were taken direct from the curing stations to market in the vessels which brought in fish stock (salt, staves, barrels) direct to the station. (Smith, 1984: 193-194)

While this was the case in Shetland and the north east coast, in Yarmouth and Lowestoft, the living and working quarters for the women were separate, with the women living in lodgings and travelling to work at these more industrialised sites.

5.2 An occupational community – the gutting crews

The herring gutting crews of three were well established by the turn of the nineteenth century, and were beneficial for the organisation of the working practices with the most efficient working rhythm ensuring that two women gutting could gut the maximum number of fish for one woman packing the barrels. Along with the other crews working around at the station around the farlanes, they constituted what Dona Lee Davis described as an ‘occupational community’, bearing much resemblance to the women fishworkers in Newfoundland (Lee Davis, 1986). Some of the similarities are quite striking, although Lee Davis is describing women working in the 1970s, they are women from fishing communities who were working in a fish processing plant. The women describe feeling that they are playing their part by working in the fisheries:
I'm just glad I can be doing what he's doing... We're fisherfolk and I like doing my share; I feel like I'm right in there helping my husband. (Lee Davis, 1986: 134)

The idea of occupational community is one which has been used to describe workers in a wide range of occupations which requires them to live together, and to socialise as a result of the work situation itself (Van Maanan and Barley, 1984; Darren Lee Ross 2008). Van Maanan and Barley describe occupational community as:

...a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work and whose identity is drawn from the work; who share a set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply to but extend beyond the work-related matters; and whose social relationships meld work and leisure. (Van Maanan and Barley, 1984)

This ties in particularly with the women from the Scottish north east fishing communities, who had always played their part in the industry, baiting lines, mending nets and going to the gutting, very much a part of the fishing community and the industry. Further similarities lie in the description of relationships between the women who are working together, and how this strengthens both the occupational and the social ties. Davis (1986) discussed how friendships formed within occupational groups:
Other relational aspects of the occupational community include a strong attachment to primary work groups, autonomy from supervisory constraints, stress on mutual aid and isolation from workers in other occupations. (Davis, 1986: 135)

Lee Davis also raises the notion that in order for this type of work group and indeed, community to function, there has to be aspects of keeping individuals in order, not encouraging any form of difference, or deviation and not encouraging hierarchical structures. Education within the fishing communities was seen in many cases as superfluous – the boys would be going to sea, and the girls would be either keeping house or going to the gutting. There was little encouragement to do well at school, and indeed a number of the women interviewed received exemptions from school so that they could leave early and start work (Hughes, 2005; Bruce, 2005; Michie, 2006).

5.2.1 Signing On – The Arles Process

The curers had to contend with the variable nature of the herring shoals, and the changes which could take place season by season, as well as the geographical spread of the industry, and ensure they had sufficient labour to meet the needs of the industry. An established curer had often built up a relationship with a community, and with the women and families within that community, with most of the women going to the herring gutting as part of a longer tradition within their families. It was important to have a reliable workforce, and with the repeated nature of the work, and the close knit families within the communities from which the girls generally came, it was possible for the curer to gauge how competent the women would be.
The curer did not make an agreement with the individual women, but with the work group of three. Generally the women would sign on with a curing firm before the beginning of the season, when the curer or a representative visited the different communities in the Western Isles, Shetland, Orkney and the North East coast. This pattern of signing on was an agreement between the curer and the crew of three known as ‘arles’, and it bound the women to a particular curer for the whole season. Wherever that curer wanted the labour force to be, and wherever they were asked to move on to, the women would be bound by that agreement. For example, Margaret Hughes was disappointed not to be sent to Yarmouth in 1939, but instead to be sent to the much quieter port of Hartlepool with her crew (Hughes, 2005). The curer generally organised transport and would provide a date when the women were expected to start. Accommodation in some areas was provided, and in others – such as Wick, Yarmouth and Lowestoft, the women were expected to find their own accommodation.

Although the following letter relates to a later time period, it follows a pattern described by some of the women, whereby a local curer would be particularly keen to employ local women. Employing women he knew, or women whose families he knew ensured that the community and kinship ties would further bind the women to the curer, and prevent potential problems during the season. There would also be a sense of security for the women who would also know the curer from within the community. The letter was from Magnus Shearer from Whalsay who had the curing firm J. and M. Shearers Ltd:
Sandwick,

Whalsay.

Dear Barbara,

We are very anxious to get two machines at Lerwick staffed by Whalsay lasses and for this we would need about twelve lasses.

We hope that you will try and come to Lerwick this summer, and you might let Attie Williamson know. He is making barrels at Symbister just now.

Perhaps you might know other lasses who might come and help us to make up the number, as you know, that experience does not matter as much with machines.

The huts will be as before, only that we have ordered new type of stoves for the old ones there were finished a long time ago, also we hope to improve the hot water system in the wash house.

Trust that we shall see you in the summer.

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Magnus Shearer [signed]

FOR AND ON BEHALF OF J.& M. Shearer, Ltd.

(Shearer, c.1950, unpublished)

The following document is an agreement made between the curer Duncan Maciver of Stornoway and his workforce, before the autumn fishing season in Yarmouth. It is likely that this agreement in 1921, which was made after the start of the season as a whole came about as a result of a pay dispute between the gutters and the curers. The
agreement covers the experience of the women, any additional work expected, and the
travel to and from the East Anglian ports. Each crew of three women had one person
who dealt the curer, including the arles process and payments to the crews. There are
27 names on this particular agreement, which would be 9 crews in total, and it is clear
from the signatures that one person signed for each crew.

Figure 5.9 Terms and Conditions of work, Duncan Maciver, Stornoway 1921
Seonag MacArthur from Stornoway spoke about signing on for the first season, and not understanding fully what it was all about, but being guided by older women in the community. This was a form of occupational socialisation which illustrates the importance of being within a community where she did not need to have this knowledge and understanding as there were other experienced members within the community on whom she could rely. She also spoke about working for a number of different curing firms during her many seasons at the gutting:

SM: Well, our curer had nearly 20 crews. Yes, a lot of crews. They were doing well too. MacDonald was my first in Stronsay – after that it was Skinner, and Cormack in Wick.

JdF: Did you sign up with MacDonalds before you went to Stronsay?

SM: Oh yes, you had to sign – the arlais – you had to be going the next season.

JdF: Did you sign up just for one season?

SM: We didn’t know what we were doing really. The old ones was telling us, yes, but we were alright. (Macarthur, 2007)

Some herring girls were given training by their mothers before they went, while others learned in the yards. Learner crews would be paid less than experienced gutting crews, which took some of the pressure off the girls during their first season, and would allow friends to travel and work together without the requirement of experienced members being part of the crew:
JdF: So - what happened then? You decided you would go... what did you families think?

MH: They were quite pleased at that - my mother - it was grand - because she told us everything we needed to ken - and before we went she was cutting up the strips of cloths for covering up your fingers and a' that - and letting you see how to tie them. We were well taught before we went. And the others were all the same - we were all fisher families. (Hughes, 2005)

IB: It wis an Orkney man that learned me tae gut – and I think I wis the cleanest gutter in the yard. When the manny used tae come roon and inspect – mind he would come roon the tubs and inspect and the cooper foreman – Maisie wis wi’ me and didnae care – and there were guts and that – and the Orkneys’ man – Tommy – and he learned me. He’d a stern face – and he learned me tae gut, ‘Two dabs’ he says - two dabs ...(Coull and Bruce, 2005)

JdF: Do you remember your first season? When did you first start?

SM: I was in Papa – in Stronsay the first time I was out. I was a ‘caoilear’ learner – the first time. The coopers had not much Gaelic... There were three of us – sometimes there were six of us staying in a room, yes....

JdF: How did you make a crew?

SM: You would get ... together, just to make arrangements.

JdF: So you would go with friends – was it girls from Cromore or Stornoway?
SM: *Cromore first. After that we had ones that we would know. Yes.*

(Macarthur, 2007)

The ‘dabs’ referred to were the cuts which the women made with their knives – some fish requiring only one cut to gut them and others requiring more depending on the season and the size of the fish. In Shetland the ‘learner’ crews were known as ‘green’ crews (Potten, 2007). It was also possible for the women to write to curers and enquire about signing on with them for the season. This was the case for Margaret Hughes in Buckie. She and two close friends decided to go to the gutting and took advice from other girls in the community before signing on with a firm:

*MH Aye there were three of you - and the one that I was pally with at the time was Ina - Ina Murray and she was frae Yardie in Buckie. And the other was Nan Murray - as well - but they weren't related. We were all the same age - that's the three of us at 16 - we were all the same age ...*  

*JdF* *So what happened next - how did you get emplyed?*  

*MH* *See, the neighbours girls they were all there and they were going to the same place as us, and that's why we decided to go. Slater of Aberdeen - they went under the WS&S of Aberdeen. I think that Ina got the address. I think that some of her cousins were going, and she got the address and wrote.*  

(Hughes, 2005)

For young girls going away to the gutting for their first season, this would have been the season to learn the trade. For others, if they were taken on by older women, or as
was the case with Jessie Stewart, with her mother, she would not have been paid as a 'learner' crew as she was with an experienced gutter:

\[ \text{J.S. In 1933 — I left school and I was at home. Mum had been when she'd been young, working at the fishing — at the herring, and she said I could go with her and we'd work for this local man in Sandwich. So I worked with her for him in 1933. Then in 1934 I was asked to go and work for Robert Gordon — and we went — to Cullivoe in Yell, and we were there for six weeks and then he paid us off. And we were very disgruntled, 'cos we expected to be taken to Lerwick to finish the season. So we thought we wouldn't go to him again. (Stewart, 2007)} \]

For many young girls, going to the gutting was an exciting adventure, the first real step away from home. There was a sense of safety and security as part of a migratory community of fisher folk, and there was also the opportunity to see different parts of the country, and for many girls from more remote locations to gain a sense of independence and see the big towns and cities particularly in East Anglia. For some, their mothers would only let them go if they were being chaperoned by older women:
VG: ... But I couldn’t get away to Yarmouth til this Jean and Jess White - this is friends that I’d met in the fish house - unless they were guaranteed to look after me, cos of being so young y’know.

JdF: Was that from your mother or from the firm?

VG: No - from my mother. She wouldn’t allow it until I got them to go up and... they were nice respectable women, y’know married, and they said they’d look after me and by golly they did. You weren’t allowed to do owt - y’know! Course you were too tired to go out all week anyway! (Gillespie, 2007)

Several other interviewees also recalled how their mothers wanted to ensure that they were going to be looked after properly before they would agree to let them go.

MH: They used tae come and visit on a Saturday - we never went tae the pictures or any thing like that for it was too far....

JdF: Was this the guys from the boats?
MH: And looking back - you say - you must have been right innocent - you're mixing wi' a' that different... And I can mind my mither saying 'Now watch yersel' when you're gang awa' there...watch yersel!' And yer saying 'What are you saying watch yersel' aboot?' You dinnae think about a' this carryon.... (Hughes, 2005)

Lindy Henderson talked about her first season away from Peterhead, having left home aged just thirteen. She had her fourteenth birthday in 1927 working at the herring in Scarborough. She worked round from there to Yarmouth and Hull before coming home to Peterhead and talked about how shocked her parents were when they went to meet her coming home with the other girls off the train:

LH: When I came home from Hull, there was a market place there [where the girls bought clothes]. So, here, I came home like the rest of the girls that was with me at my age, and we had high heeled shoes, Spanish heels they called them at that time, fish net stockings, lipstick and my skirt would be short and tight, that was hysterical! We're going up the road, and it's the main street, to get to our house. My mother met me and says "Oh Lord, let me get home, Lord let me get home, till I get this girl into the house!" Well, the bag was taken off me, the lipstick was thrown in the fire, the shoes were thrown in the fire, the net stockings were thrown in the fire. "You're nothing but a street walker, I've never seen the like!"

JdF: So this was you grown up?

LH: This is me grown up now and going home to Peterhead....I was out in the big, bad world to them. I thought I would dress the same as the other girls!
JdF: Did they not dress like that in Peterhead?

LH: No, very, very plain. The big market was in Hull. The girls were all dressed up... (Henderson, 1995)

Within fishing communities, there was an understanding which had grown up over the history of the industry regarding the organisation of the work, the seasonal nature of the work and the organisation of the pay. There is not much evidence of the pay scale or structure, other than later oral accounts, but an account of ‘The Value and Importance of the Scottish Fisheries’ written by James Thomson in 1849 does include discussion of the work and the pay of the women.

The payment structure was not a straightforward process, as the women were paid firstly for signing on, then they would receive weekly money and extra money for ‘filling up’ generally on a Monday, and at the end of the season there would be a settling up with ‘barrel money’ which was calculated from the number of barrels the crew had filled in total. All the payments were divided equally between the three members of the crew. Having not come from a fishing background, Rita McNab was not aware of the financial structures of the work, and it was three seasons before she realised that her two crew members were cheating her out of her end of season ‘barrel’ money:

RM: But the crew that I was wi’ – it was a lang lang story – but it was a story that I don’t think I’ll ever forget. ... ‘cos I was working at the fishing – and I got £2 a week. They gied you that and then you paid yer digs, and ye’d a book and you shared a’ the groceries. But at the end of the season, I didnae realise
you get paid by the barrel, so that was — if a barrel was 15 pence then that was 5 pence each. Well, I never ever got that — the crew took it. (McNab and McNab, 2007)

In 1936 and 1937, Margaret Smith told James Miller that she had come home from Yarmouth with over £20 for 10 weeks work and that was apart from the weekly wage to buy food and pay digs (Miller, 1999). To provide a comparison and a sense of context, it should be noted that a shop-worker would earn around 25 shillings per week at that time, so the herring gutters were earning almost twice as much. As we have seen, Rita McNab had been unaware that at the end of the season she was entitled to ‘barrel’ money, and had been content with the weekly wage which the curer paid to the women while they were away during the herring season. Like other aspects of the fishing industry, and the requirement to budget finances over a whole year, this money would have to last through the months when the season was not on.

The group of three was the most effective way of splitting the labour, with two women generally being required to gut enough fish to keep the third woman busy with packing them into barrels. This working rhythm had been in place since the early part of the nineteenth century, and had become a fixed part of the tradition. It was also a useful number in terms of additional work such as lifting baskets of fish or lifting the tubs with the guts, which had to be taken to a different part of the yard when they were full. Aspects of this workplace organisation have been captured in photographs sometimes in a clearer form than information available through the industrial record.
It would have been a much more arduous task for an individual woman to lift the tubs, and the weight of the two tubs could be shared between the three women:

Figure 5.11: Mrs McNab [centre] with her crew c.1950

Another aspect of the work which the women had to decide upon was who would be the packer out of the three. This does not appear to have had any particular reasoning behind it. It was a decision made between the girls themselves, whichever aspect of the work they preferred. In some cases, it was not the most sensible choice, with one interviewee talking about being so small she actually used to fall into the barrel occasionally, although one of her other crew believed that she must have had longer arms than the rest of them:

JdF: It must have been hard when you were at the bottom of a barrel?

MH: Well, that's what I was just thinking - I was short like - it was alright when your barrel was half full. But Ina... [she was] richt, richt doon intae
the barrel - tae get a bottom tier laid ken- someone wi' long arms - she must a haid lang arms 'n us! But you were all right when it came up a bit - you could bend down and do it.

JdF: You didn't take it in turns with the jobs?

MH: No, she was the packer and we helped to pack if she was getting too much - and we were getting maybe finished. And then we'd to go out filling up - for the barrels - to get them up to the top. (Hughes, 2005)

The women were aware that despite the idea of self-employment, they were being supervised often by the coopers, to ensure that the process was being carried out correctly. Packing the barrel was a skilled job, and the bottom tier would sometimes be checked to ensure that it was done neatly and correctly. The top or bottom of the barrel would be the first sight of the fish that the buyer would have upon opening the barrel, so it was important that these fish were presented as well as they could be. There was a set pattern which the women would follow in laying the fish out in the barrel, and each layer was supposed to be laid out correctly before the cooper would take the barrel away to lie for some days before the 'filling up' process after the fish had settled in the brine and shrunk down into the barrel.
This postcard clearly shows the way in which the herring were laid out in tiers throughout the barrel, starting and finishing with the neatest tiers at the bottom and top of the barrel.

The main work tool used by the women was their gutting knife. This had to be kept as sharp as possible to enable the women to gut the herring quickly and cleanly, and this was another task which the coopers at some yards would perform for the women. The women needed the skill to know exactly how to use the knife, and depending on the time of the season, whether the guts of the fish would come out in one action or two:

_JdF:_ How many would you do in a minute?

_JS:_ Well if I timed myself – I have done 60 in a minute – but I couldn't keep that up. No way could I keep that up. That was the fastest – the fastest that I
could go. That was when it was one dab[cut]. If you had to take two dabs you couldn’t do that... Normally you took two. The first one, you cut into the fish and it took the gut up—that come up. And you had to do another one to get out the gut and the gills, and then you’d come fairly perfectly clean. And when it was just one dab... and when it was full herring—then one dab because the silt—the milt or the roe—would be coming up and you’d cut into that if you took another dab. So usually one dab you could just one dab them—and that was the quickest ains.

JdF: So it would depend on the state of the herring?

JS: It would depend on what you got. You hoped you would get ‘one dabs’.

(Stewart, 2007)

Figure 5.13 Gutting Knife

There was a requirement to show that the barrel had been packed within 24 hours of the herring being landed, and this accounts for the necessity for speed at the gutting process, and also why it was necessary for the women to work late if there was a large
landing of fish, to ensure that the maximum return was received for each barrel packed.

As well as the speed required to gut the herring, the women also had to select the herring as they gutted them. There were up to five different selections (Telford, 1998: 5) depending on the season, and the condition of the fish.

_JdF: You must have had to concentrate so much as well..._

_IB: That's right you had – y' see..._

_KC: You had tae select yer herrin'. Ye hadnae jist tae throw them in the tub – you'd three or four selections._

_IB: Matties, matt fulls, fulls and sma’..._

_KC: And tae select them into a basin..._

_IB: And you could just lift wi yer twa gutters when their tubs wis full – whit they wis getting 'maist o'.

_JdF: And you had to do this for a long time? What sort of a length of a day did you have?_

_IB: A whale day. Ye’d tae dae that til dinnertime._ (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

The selection of the fish depended upon the type of herring bought by the curer from the boats and also corresponded to the time of year and the stage of the season.
Towards the end of the nineteenth century, communication links and infrastructure were improving immensely. The past necessity of walking across the country had all but gone, although there were still some distances travelled by women who were working only in specific ports. The Barra women of Northbay for example at the beginning of the century, would regularly walk five miles to gut fish in Castlebay and a further five miles home if there was a good fishing season and their labour was required (MacNeil, 2006). There were now railways linking Kyle with Inverness, and then on to Wick or to Aberdeen. There were also railways down to the East Anglian ports of Yarmouth and Lowestoft. These had been built in part to service the fishing industry and so it was only natural that the women who were working within the industry utilised them on a regular basis to accommodate the seasonal migrations which were required. Seonag MacArthur from Lewis talked about the journeys she made to the fishing:

*JdF:* What do you remember – what about the journey – how did you get there?

*SM:* The train to Kirkwall – and the boat after that.
JdF: *The ferry?*

SM: *There was no cars coming to Stornoway then – from where I was staying – we would come in by sea to Stornoway – and might take the day in Stornoway before the boat from there – at 11 o’clock.*

JdF: *Would that have been full of other girls going?*

SM: *Oh yes, sometimes there would be a few hundreds – going away to the herring – going away together... Sometimes we would be very sea sick – if the night was coarse.*

JdF: *Were you well looked after in the boat?*

SM: *Oh well no – we just had to go and lie where we could get – the boat was so filled sometimes. [laughs] Oh well, I’m sure you would get tea or something on the boat sometimes.* (MacArthur, 2007)

One of the women from Shetland interviewed by Anne Huntley from Whalsay recalled being so sick on the boat, and even on the train, that she decided she would never go back to Yarmouth:

K.K. *Weel we gutted aa Summer, dan de coopers came around and asked you if you were wantin te dyeen te Yarmouth. Weel, I thought I would try it ee (one) year. But I wis brawley sorry dat I did because I was dat sea-sick dyaan awa, I even spewed aa train! (laughs)*

A.H. *[laughs] Was dat the first time you were oot of Shetland?*

K.K. *Yeah, but I liked being awa dere it was Yarmouth, it was splendid, but it was just the thought of winnin back again. I said, if I ever was upon Lerwick*
steps dat wid be de hidmost (hindmost) time I wid dyeen awa yondrew unless I wis ill (laughs).  (Kay, 1995)

The sea-crossings seem to have held some of the worst memories for the women, particularly the crossing between Aberdeen and Lerwick (see also Bochel, 2004). Indeed, the problem of sea-sickness was mentioned far more by the women than home sickness.

An investigation into the sea passage between Aberdeen and Lerwick took place, with a female factory inspector, Miss Meiklejohn in May 1927. (Report from HM Chief Inspector into Conveyance of Fish Workers from Aberdeen to Lerwick, 1927) She reported that 1800 women were carried on the S.S. Sunniva during May and June 1927, and the journey took around 17 hours with many women lying on the open deck under tarpaulin during bad weather, continually sprayed by sea swell, but that many suffered from sea-sickness and actually preferred to be outside.

On the return journey from Lerwick, some women continued their work travelling down to the East Anglia. Trains known as ‘Specials’ would take the women down to the southern ports, with carriages hired for the women by the curing firms.

VG: Well we all went. It was carriages y’know and there was a train hired - and there was all these carriages - I can’t remember. There was a lot of carriages - and there were 7 or 8 of us to each carriage [compartment]. It was quite crushed y’know - and we were hours - night and. We left Aberdeen in the morning - and I think we were all night travelling - all day, all night til
the following day. It was a terrible journey. You were going from one end of
the map to another really—near enough and we were young as I say. At 14
time is nothing. And we were getting a laugh and we were singing and there
were good yarns—some of them we didn’t get to listen to. (Gillespie, 2006)

They would then travel en-masse to work each day on lorries provided by the curing
firms, particularly when they were in the larger ports such as Yarmouth and
Lowestoft.

The following photograph shows the girls packed onto the back of a lorry—in one of
the East Anglian ports. There are over 30 women on the back of this lorry:

![Figure 5.15 Girls travelling to work via lorry in East Anglia, c1930](image)

The women from the Western Isles in particular had a very lengthy journey to get to
and from Shetland, and in August 1938, a plane was commissioned to fly the women
back to Stornoway after the Lerwick season’s work:
First Direct Flight Between
Orkneys and Hebrides

Six Lewis fishergirls in the employment of
Duncan MacIver, Ltd., Stornoway, flew to
Stornoway yesterday from Stromsay, where
the herring season is now almost at an end.
This is the first time that a direct flight
has been made by passenger plane between
the Orkneys and the Hebrides, and was
made at the girls’ own request. The total
flying time was less than two hours, as
against nearly three days by rail and
steamer.

In the ordinary course the girls would
have travelled by boat from Stromsay to
Kirkwall, by boat from Kirkwall to Aber-
deen, by train right across Scotland to Kyle
of Lochalsh, and by boat to Stornoway,
entailing in all three sea crossings and a
rail journey of ten hours.
The flight was made in two “hops”—
from Stromsay to Kirkwall, and Kirkwall to
Stornoway—there being a delay of two
hours at Kirkwall while a weather report
was awaited.

Captain Presson, of Highland Airways,
who piloted the plane, said the crossing
was uneventful although made in a heavy
rainsstorm and almost entirely over the sea.
Land was crossed only for a few miles at
Cape Wrath, the journey between Kirkwall
and Stornoway being made in a direct line.

Captain Presson afterwards returned to
Inverness.

The Scotsman 20th August 1938

The report indicates that it was the women themselves who had requested that this
flight be undertaken, as it would have cut their journey time by several days. It shows
a far sightedness in terms of travel which is quite remarkable for the time, as it was
many years before regular passenger flights were in operation around the country.

Torquil MacIver who was working as a cooper for Duncan MacIver in Lewis at the
time remembers a flight coming in to Stornoway with two gutting crews aboard, as
the fishing was so busy in Stornoway that Macivers had in fact sent for another two
crews. It is possible that this was the same flight:
... one time we needed two crews quickly, so six of the girls arrived on one of the first flights into Stornoway. I remember the first plane that landed in Stornoway, it was piloted by Captain Fresson and he landed on the golf course at Steinish, where the airport is now. The cows went mad the seagulls went madder. Our boss Norrie Maciver took them to his house for tea, very strong tea it was. Weren’t our girls brave coming in a plane, we were so busy here and there wasn’t a lot of herring in Lerwick at that time. (Stornoway Amenity Trust, 2006: p31)

Requisitioning a plane to take the women there shows the importance of their labour to the industry.

5.2.3 Differences within the group

Although the herring girls were thought of by those from outside the industry as one mass of women, amongst the group were women from different backgrounds and of different ages such as the young ‘learner crews’ mentioned previously and older women who had made their career out of the fishing. Also, alongside the mass of women who travelled seasonally with the fishing, were women who only worked when the season came to their home ports, or when the season was particularly busy. This was often women who had been involved in the gutting as young girls, and had since married and had children. They were able to organise childcare for their children within the local community:
JdF: Once you had your family – did you carry on working?

JS: When we came to Scalloway this man was curing just across the road – and seemed too big an opportunity to miss. And I had a cousin in Grangemouth that used to come for holidays and she was very happy to come and just stay and kinda keep an eye on the family while I was working... And then I could work. My husband was a fisherman so he was at sea most of the time.

JdF: Were there many women that were working at the gutting that had families?

JS: Well the local women that was working here – they all had families...
There was one that worked that wasn’t married at that time – the other ones had families as far as I can mind. (Stewart, 2007)

This was an important opportunity for women to earn additional money, and provided the curers with some flexibility in terms of additional workers when required. The women would not be arlsed for the season but would be paid for the work that they did. Smaller stations in various locations sometimes required only local women, who would work for the curers as and when they were required.
For some women, travelling the fishing to gut herring became a way of life. The main time period of the thesis saw a World War between 1914 and 1918 which decimated the population of many communities of coastal Scotland. As with many other women of the time, a shortage of men left women having to support themselves, and there were quite a number of older women who made herring gutting their life and carried on working in the industry for as long as they could, and sometimes into their 60s and 70s. In the absence of marriage and family life, they enjoyed the social aspect and the friendships which they formed at this time. Seonag MacArthur, for example worked at the herring gutting for over 60 years, having started as a young girl just after the First World War, and Lindy Henderson joined a friend to gut fish in the Isle of Man in her mid 70s. Other women – particularly those whose families were involved in the industry, with husbands as curers or coopers, would also carry on working in the family business, such as Jim McNab’s mother. But the majority of the workforce throughout the time period was made up of young, single women who would work for a few seasons before getting married and leaving to have a family.
As well as the range of ages amongst the herring girls, the women from different locations would sometimes be located in specific areas of ports at different curing yards depending on who they were working for. For example in Lerwick, the women from Shetland preferred to be located closer to the town centre, as they had friends and family who would be able to visit the huts, while the women from further away were located out towards Grimister – which required a long walk into town. Maggie Leask (2007) from Whalsay, Shetland recalls that the Highland women who were working in stations further out from Lerwick, would also have to work later because they had lighting at their station, while the Whalsay women would finish earlier because they had no lights.

5.2.4 Competition amongst the women

The type of piece work being undertaken meant that competition was inevitable, both between yards and also between the women in the yards themselves. One interviewee remembered how some women would try and beat the system – and other crews at the farlanes, by ‘bulking’ the herring – laying down the first two tiers correctly – but then just shoving the rest of the herring into the barrel, and finishing off with a neatly packed tier at the top:

*RM: ..... well, she’s leading packer, and I still never thought nothing about it and so, they were packing away this day and she shouted ‘Bottom!’ and nae long after it she shouted ‘Barrel!’ , and she was right aside me, and I says ‘You*
finished that barrel already?’ I should never have said anything, cos you never say that to anyone. And she says ‘Yeh, if it’s any of your business’ and she kept on. And I says [to myself] ‘She’s bulking.’ There was some folk did bulk. And I says ‘I’m goin’ tae try – I’m goin tae go hand for hand wi’ her’. She used tae take, what a herrin’ she used tae take up, and then she’d start again. And I said ‘Nah, nah, nah, there’s something wrong...’ Well, when a herrin’ inspector came along and looked at her barrels, she’d tae forfeit her money for them, it was just bulk. And it was fear of getting’ ahead o’ you, if you were getting’ ahead o’ her, she would have hurried up and bulked it like that. But then, the curers would mark a barrel, and it was always the one with the cross that was used for filling up. And I says ‘That’s that barrel that she’s bulked.’ But you didnae say nothing.... So it was mair or less, they knew whit they wis daen, the coopers. And it kept them in the clear, and they were going tae tip the barrels anyway, and it was getting rid o’ the herrin’. (McNab and McNab, 2007)

It is clear from the interviews that the women would not be keen to openly accuse others of this type of bad practice, but they would know that it was happening, and the sense of pride that some women took in their work made them indignant that others would cheat in this fashion. This indicates the level of competition between the women even within the same yard which was of considerable benefit to the curers.

The women demonstrated through the interviews a pride in their work and their ability to work hard and fast. The sense of competition between the women meant that even the size of the barrels made by the coopers was of importance:
JdF: Was there a lot of competition between the yards?

RM: Oh yeh! Definitely... And Crews! If your barrels was coming oot, they watched and you watched them, a’body. Ah mean, I used to hate... there was a certain cooper Watt, ye cried him and his barrel – ye’d think a’ barrels wiz the same but they werenae. His barrel had a big bow in it – and they used to take longer to fill up, and there was a certain cooper had a fine neat narrow one, so you was a’right with him. I don’t know aboot yours [to Jim]. I think yours was average, nae sure, yer barrels...

JM: What? Oh aye, aye, aye. Oh my barrels were perfect!

(McNab and McNab, 2007)

Jessie Stewart from Scalloway also remembers the competitive nature of the work:

JS: Oh yeh. There was always competition between crews. We were aye striving to mak as much as we could. And there were aye some good crews who did very well and that. Sometimes – it was kinda difficult if you got ....and one of the workers that was working wi’ you wasna wirkin so hard – that was kinda difficult. But you just had to put up wi’ it cos there was nothing you could do. But there was certainly competition. And – there you go. (Stewart, 2007)

There were also elements of internal supervision, combined with the idea of competition. Bulking the herring as described by Rita McNab obviously increased the work rate considerably, but there were consequences for the curers if the barrel
was discovered by the buyers. The reputation of the curing firm was crucial to ensure that they received trade from overseas, and while it was possible to supervise some aspects of the packing of barrels, generally the women took pride in their work and their ability to gut and pack with speed and this in itself was more effective than external supervision.

The work ethic was particularly important. The type of work itself meant that anyone who was not keen to work, or who wanted an easier life, would have found the work group organisation impossible to evade. Each crew member was required to do their part for the team, and there could be no slacking, and with so many of the farlanes being outdoors, the women could be seen almost at all times. The way in which the work was organised ensured that the maximum work would be done by all members of the crew:

_KC:_ Ye had tae keep nippy. My sister when she was wi' two expert gutters, Gamrie, expert, they were just like gulls weren't they! Oh, ken, they were greedy for a herrin' y'ken!

_IB:_ I wisnae greedy fer a herrin' but I likit tae be yin o' the top yins, 'cos auld Anna says tae me 'Ye havenae only tae be a good worker wi' Bella, ye have tae be the fastest!'

_KC:_ You had tae be quick! We were quick 'n a', we wis quick!

_IB:_ We had a Heilan man -- a great big Hielan' chiel y' see, when we went tae Yarmouth -- Eddie Gordon. And when we went tae Yarmouth, none o' the Broch quines got help. But they a' got help the simmertime and [gutted] a lot mair barrels than us. But when it came tae gaen tae Yarmouth, they hadna'
mair than us. And oor crew wis aye first at the farlances y’see, and they complained tae us. They said we should a’ wait until we wis a’ ready... Aye, the Broch quines wis, and then they ca’d us a’ the greedy brutes and that y’ken!

KC: Oh aye, they coonted yer barrels, that’s richt enough. At nicht, in Lerwick they’d gaen doon and coont yer barrels...

(Coull and Bruce, 2005)

This conversation mainly between the two women from Buckie clearly indicated the level of rivalry which existed between the two communities of Buckie and Fraserburgh, despite their proximity to each other.

5.3 The working environment

The environment in which the women worked was mostly out doors, on the piers or at the curing stations which built up over the years along the shoreline from the piers. In the summer months the women were generally based in the Western Isles or Shetland travelling on down the north-east coast in the late summer and then on to East Anglia for the autumn. The weather conditions impacted heavily with risk of sunburn in the summer months and biting rain, hail and snow encountered in the winter months in Yarmouth, Lowestoft or Hull. As well as the physical aspects of the environment such as the farlances which were developed over the years to provide the most comfortable height at which the women gutted, the clothes which they wore had to
provide them with flexibility, keeping them dry and warm and protecting them from their working environment.

5.3.1 Occupational Clothing

Clothing was of considerable importance to the women, as they were working in a wet and messy environment, and needed clothes which would protect them from the wetness as well as from the sun and in the winter time from the fierce cold, but also let them bend and move easily. In addition, the ability to work quickly with their hands with a sharp blade meant that a way had to be devised to keep their hands safe from cuts, but not to restrict the movement of their fingers. All the interviewees discussed the wearing of cloots. These were strips of cloth, often made from flour sacks, (Hughes, 2005; Coull, 2005; Michie, 2006) which the women bound their fingers with each morning before starting work. As well as keeping their fingers safe from cuts, these bandages provided more grip on the fish as they were lifted by the women to be gutted. The gutters would wear cloots on each of their fingers, but not on their thumbs, while the packers only required them tied around their first two fingers.

Annie Watt began work as a gutter aged 13 in 1905. She described the work wear of the women at the beginning of the twentieth century, and how it changed over the years in which she was working in the industry:

_We wore oilskin skirts and rubber boots. In my young day it was heavy leather boots, but then the rubber ones come in after the First War. The skirt_
fastened on the chest with straps and buttons and kept ye clean. You wore just cast-off clothes, old jackets and skirts and that. Good clothes was nae use because they’d get spoiled. Ye just washed oot what ye wore and put them on again when they were dry. Some o’ the landladies used to put brownpaper or oilcloth around the wall o’ the lodgins, because some o’ the girls were careless; they didna take off their dirty claes when they got in. Packing herrin’ was the cleanest job. Ye’d ony the salt tae worry about.

With the gutting, ye didna cut yeself if ye tied your fingers right with bits o’ rag. And the salt on the hERRIn’ helped ye grip them.... Oh aye, it would eat into your hands. In later years, when I was in Lerwick, I used rubber gloves. You needed a pair o’ gloves every week, but that was nothing; it saved ye tying up your fingers all the time. (Butcher, 1987: 12 – 13)

Despite their more hygienic nature and ease of use, the introduction of rubber gloves following the Second World War was not something which all the women were happy about, as they were so used to working with the cloots on their fingers:

AH: You would never have had rubber gloves?
RS: No I don’t think ever in my time it we had rubber gloves for I mind date year it’s maybe been dat big year at one year at Lowestoft wir hands were terrible sore. Somebody dyud and got wis rubber gloves dat year dat wis just all we never used dem, we likely had to use dem when wir hands turned sore.
AH: Did you think you could just manage better wi de cloots is wi de rubber gloves?
RS: I doubt aa it we ever used de rubber gloves fur wis just fillin up, packin, fur we never could gut in dem, we had to tie up wir fingers for de gutting.

AH: Wis dat because you just kept cutting dem or....

RS: Yeah you wid never manage, without dat. We used te get dat floury bags un tear them up un just tie up your fingers now we wid never manage without. We widda just cutted us a bruck [cut to ribbons]. Un any way you could manage to get hold of the herring better. I never mind much about rubber gloves idder as dat one time d got dem te wis. (Sales, 1995)

While some curers supplied the women with work wear, other women made their own aprons and wore old clothes from fishermen friends or family:

Can you describe your claes that you wore at Yarmouth tae keep yi warm?

NK: A' the thick claes yi quid get a hud o'. Sometimes an aul' jersey fae the fishermen, yer freens like, tae keep yi warm and then yi hid things tae keep yer sleeves clean, fit they ca'd stockin' legs. That's the aul' stockin' legs, yi ken, and yi tucked them in at the top tae keep yer sleeves clean.

And your oilskins?

NK: That's fir they ca'd oilskin quites lang ago and yi hid an apron. Yi got a bit oilskin fae a fisherman and yi cut it intae an apron and then yi hid a hoodie fin it wis rainin.

Did yi work oot in the open in Yarmouth?

NK: Workit oot in the open a' the time and at Lerwick an' a'.

Yi wore boots as well?
NK: Yes we hid wir ain boots. Aye.  (Kaczmarek, 1988)

Jessie Stewart describes how one girl made her own oilskin apron:

*JS*: there was one lady who said she made them from flour bags – you got big bags with the flour – you bought flour by the boll – and she said she made it from flour bags – and then she sewed it – and then she black leaded it – and then she oiled it.  (Stewart, 2007)

Jessie also talked referred to the difficulties of working in wet weather wearing oilskin jackets:

*JS*: ....We never liked the jackets anyway - the jackets had hoods – they were cumbersome – working wi’ dis hard oilskin thing. But if it was rain – you really needed to wear them or you’d be soaked to the skin, so it was a nuisance. It wasn’t so bad if you were just fillin up. You weren’t in such a mad rush than if you were trying to do the gutting – but it was kindo awkward wearing the jacket. And for people that were doing the packing – it was very awkward – getting in and down to the bottom of the barrels wi’ this jacket on – it wisna nice...  (Stewart, 2007)
These two Whalsay women show the clothing which was worn when the weather was wet. The short sleeves allowed them to carry on working with the fish without long sleeves getting in the way, but it is clear that it would have been more awkward to work with the jacket on, particularly to pack the bottoms of the barrels.

There were different practices regarding whether the curers supplied their gutters with work wear, depending on who the women were working for and what period of time they were working in. Katie Coull described the way in which she was able to ensure that she had new footwear at the beginning of a season from the curer, while others ended up with wet feet:

*KC: You just wore older clothes for working and then ye'd yer dress cloes y'see.*
IB: But for working ye'd yer oilies - and we never got our oilies - you'd tae buy them - wir oilskins.

KC: Well, we got oors.

JdF: Did it depend on who you were working for?

IB: She's a younger race y'see!

KC: So we got oor boots and our oilskins. I mind our Margaret - when we wis in Yarmouth kipperin' y'see - and her and somebody else, their beets they were leckin' and she gaid awa tae tell the manny Steve Mercer, he wis the foreman. And she says 'Steve, my feet's weet - ma beets is leckin'. 'Oh, ye'll hae tae see Dodie' that's his nephew in the office. And the twa o' them's awa' - my sister and somebody else, the twa o' thens awa', and they hid tae hand up their feet to their beets, afore he wid gie them a pair o' beets! They hidhnae the savvy to say afore they left Buckie we'r beets is daen, they gae'd awa' wi' auld beets. But ah wis fly, ah'd new ains afore ah went. Whit a laugh when ye think aboot it! (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

The work clothes could also be used to identify the women from different areas, particularly as many of the women made their own clothes. This description of the Shetland women at the beginning of the century also describes the huge skirts which were worn at the beginning of the century:

They had – their wearing apparel was – white flannel petticoat, a red flannel petticoat, and wincy petticoat, a skirt, a big – navy blue serge skirt, and an oilskin petticoat on top of that. And ... they'd gut ... and they'd have a – stockings on, you know, black – home knitted stockings, they'd have a pair of
— hob — or stockings — and ... a short — leather boots. And — everyone and on top they’d have — a — sort of a — a hug me tight affair, that was made of wool and went round and went tied round, that was on top of their shift as they called it. Then on top of that they’d have a spencer. That was another Shetland shawl — Shetland — knitted, come right down around the waistcoat affair, on top of that, and then a big jersey. And — they had a shawl, a small head shawl tied round their neck... (Rushmore, 1975)

After the First World War, the identity of the women from their clothing was less possible as the clothes began to reflect the fashions of the time.

In 1977, Andrew Noble conducted an interview in the 1970s where aspects of fashion were

James Marshall: I remember the mini-skirts came in for the ladies, well, they wore mini skirts in that day — but it was woollen, rough wool, like tweed, be home-spun stuff...they’d big black braid round about the foot of them.
Mr N: The Highland women?

Christian Marshall: Aye, the Highland women, and the men all wore dark blue jerseys, some would have had yellow buttons, some would have had white, some pink, different colours of buttons each side of their neck and they must have been open necks at both sides, and they wore big-heeled boots in those days. (Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

Figure 5.19 Highland women, c.1900s

This photograph shows the ‘Highland Women’ clearly wearing black jerseys as described, with buttons down the front, and several wearing shawls. These women were from Lewis. The photograph was taken in the early 1900s.
When the women were staying in lodgings, the landladies would sometimes paper the walls to protect them from the fish scales which were very hard to remove from all the items of clothing:

When they went back to where they lodged to eat, they always took their oilskins off, which they stood outside the front door. It was impossible to take them inside a house because of the numerous fish scales, which stuck to them, and the smell would have been awful. (Bridgeland, c.1980s)

When the women finished the season in Yarmouth, many had uniforms packed into their kists to enable them to take up positions in domestic service, often in London:

You had to find a domestic job until May. So rather than be landed with some of the half-boiled tribe in the west end of Aberdeen, we sent our kists home and went up to London.

The Hunt Regina Agency was very good but the fee was high; in the 1920s and 1930s many folk were literally starving, those who fought the 1914 War had been badly betrayed, a job of any kind was a job.

In London the same as anywhere we were paid twelve bob a month (60 new pence), but we had our keep. The Cooks in those London mansions had all to be first class.

Three times I worked a winter in London. I regarded it as a secondary education. It was hard, hard work but such an experience. We had only a suitcase, but nearly every herring worker possessed domestic uniform which we took with us. (Fraserburgh Herald, 17th February 1996)
In the later years of the 1940s and on into the 1950s and beyond, the women began to wear trousers, which were far more appropriate for their work. From being clearly identifiable with their own fishing communities, the herring girls were becoming confident, independent, modern women of their day.

5.3.2 Working Conditions

Some of the women, while enjoying some aspects of their lives as herring gutters, found the working conditions difficult to deal with. Kitty Coull from Buckie was one of those, and she explained to me that because it was too much trouble to take off and put on the ‘cloots’ which they required to protect their hands from the salt and the knives, it meant that they had to eat their food, and even go to the toilet with them on, something she found particularly hard to deal with. She eventually changed jobs within the industry and became a kipperer. Bella Bruce, who had been a herring gutter for many years agreed with this, but it had not stopped her from continuing to work in the industry. The conditions within the yards also varied depending on the time period and location. Jessie Stewart recalled the primitive toilets that were available to the herring girls while gutting in Sandwick, Shetland:

JH: There were jetties – and toilets on the jetties – little huts built out on the jetties that stuck out over the sea. That was their toilets! [laughs]

JdF: How did that work?
JS: Well there was a plank, in fact it's what we had when I went to Northroe if I remember right, yah, in Northroe. It was built out on the jetty. There was a floor in it and there was like a bench, and there were five holes in the bench.

JdF: So there could be others in the toilet at the same time?

JS: Five people could be in the toilet at the same time! It was ridiculous. I never mind any more in than one at a time but... there was the five holes...

JdF: If they were desperate!

JS: And the women's one was at one side of the jetty and the men's one was at the other side of the jetty. (Stewart, 2007)

This was similar to the organisation of the toilet facilities in Stronsay, where there was a stone hut built around a hole in the ground, out over the sea.

From the interviews came an over-riding sense that despite the harsh working conditions, the women generally liked the organisation of the work, and their ability to affect some control over it:

KC: Oh, it was crazy work! [laughter] Oh no, Christine [looking over at daughter Christine] - I wouldnae like it if you did that.

IB: But it was jist yer way of life - and I likit it - I tell you - you had a lot of freedom, you wasnae bossed aboot - was ye nae? And the coopers were awfu' nice, well, some of them. But ah mean they didnae tell you - do this, do this, do that, do that...

KC: There was a kind o' freedom.
IB: And then if there wis nae herring, ye wis free to dae wha ye wanted.

(Coull and Bruce, 2005)

It is also clear that the conditions of work were affected considerably by the time period in which the women were working as well as the location. The changing conditions of the work over time and location can be seen clearly in the different images of one of the most important parts of the gutting yards, the farlane.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 5.20 Gutting on the ground**

This photograph is one of the earliest found and it shows women gutting the fish on the ground, on their knees, with no farlanes at all. This photograph was taken in Fife around 1875.
Although dated as around 1900, it can be argued on the basis of the evidence that this is also an earlier photograph from around 1880, as the hoops around the barrel are made of hazel or willow as opposed to metal, and the work wear of the women is amongst the earliest type shown, with no waterproof skirts and aprons. The account of Christian Watt of gutting fish on a sail because there were too many for the farlane also talks of having to gut on her knees, and the problems for women who were pregnant:

The family were very greedy masters; huge gutting stations were going up at the links and Bruce had built on Commerce St. Sometimes the crans of herring were so overpowering the farlands would not hold it all, so were tipped on a sail in the yard and we would go down on our knees and gut them… It was very hard work especially if you were expecting… [Fraser, 1988: 88]
Christian Watt's account is from the earlier period around the 1870s.

Figure 5.22 Lowestoft at the end of the nineteenth century

This is an early photograph of Lowestoft, in which the women can be seen carrying the barrels on their backs. It is unlikely that the barrels were full as they would have been too heavy, but neither were they empty because presumably they would have been rolled with putters as became more usual, but the women carrying barrels is not a practice which was seen continuing into the twentieth century either from visual evidence or interview material. The women can also be seen bending deep down into the farlane to pick up the herring to gut, which was particularly hard on their backs.
The photograph above shows women gutting at the older type of open farlane in Stornoway which went all the way to the ground. The women still had to stoop over to reach the fish at the bottom of the farlane, but the fish were contained within the farlane, rather than being piled up on the ground.
Over the period, the design of the farlanes developed, becoming more like tables which allowed the women to stand up straight to gut the fish. This would have been more comfortable, and also more effective, allowing the women to gut more fish in a shorter space of time.

![Image of farlanes](image)

Figure 5.25 Scarborough Fisher Girls c.1900

The photograph above shows Scarborough around the turn of the century, with the women working at raised farlanes.
Figure 5.26 Working in Wick c.1910

This image shows women working at Wick, again at raised farlanes, around 1910.

Figure 5.27 Covered farlane in Ardglass, Ireland, c.1910

This postcard shows a covered farlane in Ardglass, Ireland, under which the women—and the fish—would have got some protection from the rain. This image could also date from around 1910.
At a Herring Industry conference in Lerwick in June 1913 at which the conditions of work for the herring girls was discussed, the issue of covered farlanes was raised. Somewhat surprisingly, the women preferred to work out of doors, rather than having a partial cover of this type:

Among the other important matters which were discussed the question of covers for farlands or covered-in farlands cropped up. The majority of the gutters prefer to work in the open, preferring the risk of an occasional shower of rain in the open to the constant draughts of a partial shelter. (Fishing News, June 27th 1913)

Figure 5.28 Gutting herring in Gardenstown, c.1940

This is a photograph of Gardenstown in Banffshire around the early 1940s. In it can be seen a somewhat makeshift farlane, with the trough held up with wooden fish
boxes. The scale of the yard is obviously much smaller than the more industrialised images above, and the women are relatively old in comparison with the general age range in earlier photographs. This photograph was taken during the Second World War, and most men and women would have been occupied with war work. The seasonal organisation of the herring gutting was particularly difficult during this time. The season had stopped abruptly in September 1939 at the outbreak of the war, and many boats had been requisitioned by the government.

Figure 5.29 Gutting in the 1950s

This is a more recent photograph, showing the women working in East Anglia in the 1950s.
In this photograph, the farlane design has been modified still further so that the women are barely having to bend at all. The edge slopes down towards the women, and the fish move down the slope as the ones at the bottom are gutted.
The farlane shown above is the mechanised version introduced shortly after the Second World War. It shows a much cleaner process, although the working costume of the women remains remarkably similar to that of the women 50 years before, the apron and short sleeved jumper. The processing was now carried on indoors.

The introduction of the machine caused consternation and confusion amongst many of the more traditional fishworkers who tried to come to terms with the changing nature of their work. Jim McNab’s mother in Shetland did not realise that she was meant to be putting the small and torn herring into a tub at her side – instead having been told to ‘throw them oot’ into the tub – she literally threw them out:

*JM:* ... *there was a gutting machine, and [we] got the women tae work. And the foreman said ‘You’re takin’ over this machine from here’. Anyway – working away, and one of the women never came oot. So he said, ‘I’m going to send yer mother o’er’ and I says ‘That’s a’right.’ So she comes o’er and goes on the machine and I says you must throw all the torn bellies and sma’ herring oot. I meant into a kist. I put kists doon at the side here, for her just to throw them in. Well, I’m workin’ awa’ and – Boom! – Boof! – Boof! – Boof! [hits himself on head and shoulders]  What the?!  And this is what....

*RM:* She had a speed...

*JM:* She was fast but... the herring was coming doon like rain! (McNab and McNab, 2007)
By the 1940s and 1950s the gutting machines began to be seen in more of the yards. Jim and Rita McNab discussed the implications of getting a gutting machine in their yard in Shetland. Rita pointed out that a machine could gut faster than a woman, and yet, the packer was expected to be able to work at the pace of the machine:

RM: You ken whit? I often sit thinkin’ on that. When they stopped the hand gutting, and they gaed onto machines, they said ‘Oh, ye’ll dae a’ right. You’ll have two gutters and a selector and that.’ But they never said you’ll need an extra packer. Did you ever think on that Jim? So you were working, all of a sudden, you was working to two women, who would tire in time. But nae a machine.

JM: Or a selector.

RM: Well, Jeannie Robertson, you wouldnæ have got better than that. The selectors, she stood there — and never missed a tub. And they were a’... she must have felt the weight...

JM: In them days it was about seven selections, you know...

RM: And she got them a’. She was good. She’d have throw oots, she’d have torn bellies, she’d have matties fu’s, large, medium, small — a’ thing. And she would just... she never bent, or straightened.... No, long as she got that fag [points to the corner of her mouth] and she always gaed ‘Phwi!’... I don’t know how ever... But she’d stand like this, and the tubs would be a’ roon her, and she never missed.

JdF: So she was more like a machine than a machine!

JM: Aye, she wis.
RM: And then when I wis at the end, and the herring was comin’ doon and it was getting selected oot, here, there and everywhere, Jeannie was sorting it, I says ‘It’s a’ right getting a machine in and getting two…’ and you could speed that machines up. That machine never tired like the women. So it was the person at the end of the belt, that was the packer that was getting the brunt o’ it. And you hadnae the sense – oh wait a minute! [laughs] You just says ‘Oh, that’s fine!’ And yer doon there sayin’ ‘Where the hell’s a’ the herrin’ coming from?’ And yer trying to catch up and the mair yer puttin’ in the barrel the mair it’s comin’ in. And I says ‘I canny keep this up, I canny!’

JM: It’s funny. You get a’ that modern stuff, the machines and a’ thing, and then it finished, ken. Could it nae happen before? Ken?

RM: You got the machinery, you got gloves, gloves cam’ in.

JM: Could it nae have happened together?

RM: I don’t know what would have happened if the plastic barrels had come in, Jim, we would never have got to the bottom o’ them. We would never have reached them.

JM: Horrible. Horrible things. (McNab and McNab, 2007)

There was a sense here that while aspects of the modernisation of the industry such as the gloves and even to some extent the gutting machines, were seen to be a good thing, the idea of plastic barrels replacing the wooden ones was just too much for a trained cooper. The machines marked the end of the tradition of gutting, with mechanisation speeding up the whole process and the organisation of the crew of three – one packer and two gutters no longer being required.
As well as depending on the time period in which the women were working, the conditions of work varied considerably depending on where the women were based. In Lerwick for example, the women lived above the curing yards in the huts. In Lowestoft, as was shown earlier, they would travel to work on lorries provided by the curers. On Whalsay, the infrastructure around the yards was so basic that the women had to use an overflow pipe to clean their aprons after work, as shown below.

![Figure 5.32 Cleaning the oilskins, 1930s](image)

As well as working at the farlane, carrying the heavy tubs of fish and packing the barrels, there was sometimes other work which the women had to undertake. Bella Bruce from Buckie recalled having to move the barrels of herring around with putters, and also being asked to work barrelling salt when a salt boat came in late one night in Gremista:

> IB: and there wis that time that the salt boat came in and we'd tae go oot and we'd tae scoop the barrels by the light of the moon. It wis a bright moonlight
nicht, and twelve o’ clock at night, two o’ us – we’d a putter each. And we’d had tae gaen two at a barrel - they wis full o’ salt y’see- and we’d tae put them up the brae.

KC: We had tae putt them aince wi’ the herrin. No much wonder we’re no richt noo!

IB: Aifter ye wis doin’ the fillin up –

KC: Ye’d putters and ye’d tae putt the barrels. And they were heavy too – full o’ herrin’. That wasnae richt for women, noo. Naebidy wid dae that noo.

IB: And sometimes ye’d tae lift the little barrellies, ken – we had tae roll them up... (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

This indicates how the curers were able to use their labour force to undertake work other than that which they had signed on to do. As the interview evidence shows, the women would not have expected to have had to undertake this type of additional work with salt, but were not generally in a position to argue with the demands placed upon them. They were, however, expected to move full barrels of herring around, using ‘putters’ to roll them along to where the full barrels were stored, as this photograph from the 1950s shows. This is one of the few photographs found which displays a woman wearing trousers, rather than the traditional apron and skirt:
Figure 5.33 Putting the barrels, Whalsay 1954

Figure 5.34 An earlier photograph from Yarmouth c.1900 Women putting barrels
This is a much earlier photograph of women putting the full barrels, taken in Great Yarmouth c1900-1910. A horse and cart can be seen in the background and the telegraphic infrastructure is not yet in place.

![Figure 5.35 Putting barrels c1920s](image)

This image from the 1920s, shows the women posing for a photograph putting barrels, but not wearing their normal waterproof work gear, although they are wearing cloth aprons. It is likely that this photo was taken on a Monday, when the women would be filling up the barrels, and then moving them around the yard, as opposed to the messier job of gutting the fish.

### 5.3.3 Occupational Injuries

Injuries during the season were relatively commonplace and some interviewees were still able to show the scars on their hands from salt sores which they received at the
gutting. There were a variety of remedies talked about for the salt sores including putting a bread poultice on the salt sore under the bandage, or pieces of soap directly into the wounds. Anne Huntley undertook a series of interviews with women in her home island of Whalsay on Shetland in the 1990s, and here Kitty Kay describes the pain in her back at the end of a long day, and the sores on her hands, and how the women effected their own solutions to problems such as salt burns, by putting soft soap in the holes on their hands created by the salt:

*K.K. Hit wis a hard spiel a’wark dat, sometimes we dyud (went) oot at 6 o’clock aa morning un we were never in for 12 o’clock at night. Your back wis sore, you were all sore, worst of all you wid get yon sore hands. Da salt wid scrub de skin dan you wid get holes in your fingers, it wis terrible un de wir nae sticking plasters dan (laughs)*

*A.H. Nae rubber gloves either naw. K.K. We would take pieces of soap, soften it doon un lay in the hole dan wrap up a bit of cloot (rag) around it.*

*A.H. Did that keep it clean? K.K. It kinda kept de salt oot fur a start maybe some aa Russians got a chunk a’ soap ider herring (laughs) (Kay, 1995)*

There were Mission Stations set up by the Church at many of the larger ports, which provided first aid for the women and the men when required, in particular dressing the women’s hands when they got cuts or salt burns. Other common hazards included splinters from the farlanes themselves, and herring scales which sometimes got into
the women’s eyes. Rita McNab talks about the pain endured and one of the common treatments to get the scale out:

RM: ... But we had the Church o’ Scotland that we could go ta, wi’ wir hands. I never worked wi’ gloves, and I never worked wi’ cloots. But I can honestly say, I never, I think I’d one, oh that one [showing her finger], that was the only one I ever had. It was really sore. It was a salt sore. Like Jim said, you seemed to hit that every time. It must have been when I was goin’ in for the salt, or in for the herrin’. You’d get a lot of splinters, well I did. Gaen in the barrel And I had a scale in my eye once. And that is a bad thing. And I ken it was an auld man, Jockie, at Slaters, and he said he was gaen to lick it oot. And I said ‘No way was he gaen near my eye!’ Because I mind something happened and it was like sandpaper, but he’d got my heid back against the wall, and that was it – I said ‘No way. I’d rather do without!’ I think I finished up gaen to the hospital. But the way he was doin’ wi’ the tip o’ his tongue, it was doon [in the corner of her eye] and then oot that way [along the rim] it felt like a lump o’ sandpaper. But a lump o’ salt in yer eyes... it done ye good though! Yer eyes sparkled after, didn’t they? If ye got a bit salt in yer eye, ye kept [blinking] and it taen ye a while, it was really annoying and yer eyes watered and watered, but it seemed to clean them.

(McNab and McNab, 2007)
Legislation had been introduced in 1926 to try and ensure that healthcare facilities such as the ‘Rest-Home’ shown above, were made available for the women:

According to this Order, facilities must be provided by the Curers for treatment and rest on behalf of their shoreworkers. Also a first-aid dressing station with all the needful accessories: means also whereby workers can rinse hands and clothing after work. These stations must be sufficiently lit and warmed and be in charge of skilled persons. Curers may enter into agreement with others, whereby they can acquire the use of such first-aid dressing stations..... (Herring Curing (Scotland) Welfare Order 1926)

The Church of Scotland Mission Stations and the United Free Church sent women to the busiest fishing ports during the herring fishing to attend to the women and the fishermen and the Mission women treated many of the injuries, from sun burn to strains, but most commonly the salt sores or small cuts from gutting knives which had festered. Seonag Macarthur from Lewis also remembered the Mission Stations:
SM: Oh yes, our arms there would be – the sun would be going away with the skin – and the back of your neck.

JdF: What about your hands?

SM: Well, yes – some of the women had bad hands, the salt was hurting them – cuts were coming on them very bad. We had a nurse to dress them.

JdF: Where was that – Lowestoft?

SM: And everywhere – we had a nurse to dress our hands. (Macarthur, 2007)

In common with missionaries who travelled to the British Colonies, the Church women were sent to the fishing ports to administer both physical and spiritual help to the herring girls:

For years the various Churches .... have sent to the fishing centres lady deputies to minister to the bodily and spiritual needs of the girls. The nominal work of these ladies is to dress the sores and cuts, often very painful, which the girls get in their rapid manipulation of the ‘gutting knife’; to visit them in their temporary homes (which we may remark, en passant, are with few exceptions clean and tidy, and often showing artistic tastes); to have Bible-reading and prayer with them as opportunity offers, and to induce them to attend church and the various meetings organised for their benefit... (The United Free Church of Scotland, Monthly Record, October, 1907)

In 1923 the United Free Church Mission nurse dressed 196 wounded hands in Lerwick in one week. (Record of the United Free Church, 1923) The Churches
provided Mission Stations or Rest Houses in Shetland, Barra and Stornoway along with the East Anglian ports which were considered particularly important to the Churches, as the women were far from home, but closer to the temptations of life in the larger towns.

5.3.4 Children in the Workplace

Although there is almost no mention of children in the written record of the herring industry, it is clear that there were children who travelled with their mothers or parents to the various ports during the season, some being educated at local schools. Reports from schools in Yarmouth mention the influx of children during the fishing season, and Josephine Bridgeland recalls being at school in Yarmouth during this time:

I can remember the Scots fisher lasses arriving in Gorleston and Gt [sic] Yarmouth in the 1920s.... Some came with their children, although the children mainly belonged to the fish buyers. Their accents were almost beyond the comprehension of the local children, and the school teachers had difficulty in understanding them also. I was then a small child, at that time attending for a time, Stradbroke School on Lowestoft Road, Gorleston, and I never did know what they were talking about. We were very envious of their thick beautifully knitted Fair-Isle jumpers, made by their Mothers, which they wore with a kilt of their Clan, and their
long woollen stockings were also knitted by hand. They were dressed totally
different from the rest of us. (Bridgeland, c1980s)

The children were also in the workplace in the earlier period as this photograph taken
around 1900 from Dunbar reveals:

![Image of women working at barrels, Dunbar c.1900]

Figure 5.37 Women working at the barrels, Dunbar c.1900

One girl can be seen, barefooted standing on the edge of the stack of barrels, while a
smaller child can be seen being fed by the women behind the girl.
This photograph is from a later period, possibly the 1940s and it also shows how children could be supervised within the workplace to allow their mothers to earn money at the gutting.

The 'tattie howking' in Scotland was another seasonal employment which required the labour of children, as well as the movement of adults, and the education system was to some extent used to this type of flexible attendance. For some of the women interviewed, they received exemptions from school to allow them to leave early at the age of 14, and start work, or help in the house. The following newspaper report from the John O Groats Journal of 25th July 1913, describes the numbers of women and fish workers arriving in the town of Wick for the herring fishing season, and also the numbers of children:
According to the census there were 340 rooms occupied this season as lodging houses for fish workers, as compared with 355 last season. This season the number of women workers is 638; last year it was 686; men, this year 249, last year, 284. Last year we were in the midst of a scarlet fever epidemic, and that no doubt kept many parents from bringing their children with them; the number was only 98, but this year there are 127 children belonging to the strangers in town. (John O’ Groats Journal, 1913)

While there is little mention of children in formal histories regarding the herring industry they are present in the visual record particularly in private collections, and many of the interviewees also recalled life in the fishing ports as children, or taking children with them to the fishing. Margaret Hughes from Buckie recalls summers spent among the sand dunes in Fraserburgh, with a group of other children, while her mother worked in the gutting yards:

MH: I would have been about 7 or 8, my brother he wis wee, my mither used tae take a flat in Fraserburgh, my father wis fishing there y'see, and she used tae get a flat. And we went doon for the summer holidays. That wis the school holidays, June and July she worked, and we used to go wi’ her. Her brother, my uncle, he was married tae a Stornoway [girl]. He stayed in Stornoway, and his sister in law wis a nurse, and she used to come every year tae Fraserburgh and she had a like a little clinic for if ye hurt yer fingers or onything like that, and she kept an eye, ken. And we were playing there. The locals had their bairns and girls frae other places had their bairns a’ there. And jist along from where they were working in Fraserburgh was piles of
barrels and piles of... the coopers and the woods where we used to play and a' this y'see. And we hae'n a bog doon there, wi' a biscuits, lemonade and anything. And I can mind fine, we were young, we were brought up wi' that - gaen tae the summertime. It was jist the summertime that mother went, the holidays, after she had the family.... Ah, it was great! And Fraserburgh, the great big sands were there and a' things. Ye were never out the water. There were aye some aulder yins there that would look after ye, and you jist aye came and saw yer mother and let her see that you were a' right. That was a life - really good.... (Hughes, 2005)

This shows the communal aspect to childcare which was a common feature of the fishing communities and the way in which older children were given responsibility for the younger ones, to allow their mothers to work. Alison Michie from Fraserburgh talked about the fisher folk taking their children down to Yarmouth when they went down for the season:

\[AM\]: Aye, well, fishermen went wi' their boats and their wives went wi' the bairns doon tae Yarmouth, and they would get lodgings and the kids would go to school in Yarmouth and the wives would go to the gutting. That's how they worked. (Michie, 2006)

For some families it was necessary for the women to continue gutting after having their families to supplement the wages of their fishermen husbands:

\[Q\]: Aefter you were merrit and hid the bairns did you gang tae the gutting?
A: Aye I did jist tae eek oot father's fishing because they only got £2 per week
an they settled up at the eine o the fishin. Ye hid tae dae somethin tae keep the
bairns fed an shod, ye cwidna live on naethin. It wis hard times that time.

(Cowie, 1988)

There was no sense that this was any form of deprivation for the children. But there
was most definitely a sense of communal responsibility towards the children among
the fisher folk. It is also clear from Margaret Hughes' interview amongst others that
there were kinship links stretching between the fishing ports such as Stornoway and
Fraserburgh.

The practise of taking children to the work place continued right up into the 1950s
and 60s. Rita McNab described taking her daughter to work with her, and placing her
inside a barrel to keep her from wandering around the gutting yard.

RM: When we were here [Lerwick], an awful lot o' the bairns, their mothers,
when they were at the gutting, they were doin' the housework for their mother.
the lasses, don't know aboot the boys – the lassies. Then they would come
doon tae oor yard, tae see their mothers, and get their orders and sometimes
they'd have their knitting wi' them. At that time it was a' knitting. Mind Jim,
at Bloomfields they used to have their arms up and they always sit knitting and
they'd look after Gina

JM: We used tae stand Gina in a half barrel in the farlane shed ...

RM: ...when I was working

231
JM: She used tae stand in the half barrel, looking and shouting, ken! (McNab and McNab, 2007)

Rita’s husband Jim, on the other hand, was left at home with an auntie when his mother went off to the gutting:

JM: I was left.

RM: Jim was left by his mother. I took my two wi’ me.

JM: I had to bide wi’ an auntie in the Broch — nice woman she was. But I was left.

RM: You were left a while.

JM: A lot.

RM: And his mother went to Ireland, Stornoway, Yarmouth...

JdF: How did you feel about it as a child?

JM: Ye dinnae. Ye think its just — that’s it. Ye dinnae say to yersel’ my mum left me here....

JdF: Did you have friends who went — did you ever wish you went?

RM: You did what ye was tellt!

JM: But it was lonely, very lonely. I’d nae brothers or sisters or anything.

(McNab and McNab, 2007)
Figure 5.39  Fife photograph showing children at the farlanes c.1900

Figure 5.40  Lowestoft postcard, early 1900s

In this postcard, the woman at the back can be seen holding a baby. This is an early photograph from around the turn of the century in Lowestoft.
The women can be seen waiting for the fish to come in, but knitting to keep busy, and at the side there is the handle of a pram which indicates that one of the women had a baby with her.
This photograph is of a young girl, Ruth Geddes, in Yarmouth in 1923 age 5, in full working costume taking a part in the industry. This was likely to be a way of adapting childcare to fit the circumstances. The child would be occupied undertaking some menial tasks, to ensure that she was still within the care of the group. It also helped to prepare her for the type of work she was likely to become involved in when she was old enough. Maria Gatt from Roschearty recalls starting work with her mother at the age of 12 in 1909, and of travelling to Shetland when she was just 13:

*MG:* Well, when we was 12 years old [1909] we would have been doon at the harbour here working with our mithers, packing. And that's the way we lived. *An' I get awa' tae Balty. [Baltasound, Shetland] on the ten day of May, an' I wasnae 14 till July. I was six weeks in Balty; an' we got 25 shillings a week. That was a' tae get; ye dimma git nae barrel money or nothing an' three pence an hour. An' ye didna get your money until ye came hame for [Whitsun] ... Then we came hame and finished up at the Brock...* (Gatt, 1980)

For the women who were travelling with their children, or who were working in their home ports and had children at home, they had the additional chores of childcare and domestic duties once their day at the gutting came to an end. Rita discussed with her husband Jim, a cooper, how much easier life was for men at the fishing than women:

*RJ:* But you's was spocht – you's, as a cooper. We used to go to work in the morning when I was a packer. And we used to go to our work in the morning to fillin' up. Used to do the fillin' up come rain, hail or snaw, and come in
and I'd need to go home and get Gina and they their breakfast ready. But you used to sit doon in the bothy tae yer breakfast.

JM: Nae here – oh I did yes, I did!

RM: And then at dinner time, I'd tae come hame and make a dinner, he used tae just left the yard and walked in and sit doon... And then at tea time the coopers stayed, no just you – now I think this is the bits that isn't written doon anywhere – in the books. But that was how it was done then. And then at night I'd come hame, I'd tae wash our claithes, same wi' the bairns, cos they'd been playin' and I'd tae get them ready for school. And I'd tae get the tea ready and I'd tae get the washin done, and there's nae baths nae showers, nothing like that. All cauld water – ye'd tae heat the water. And I'd get a that done, and ye used tae say – 'I'm away for a pint'. So nae television, and ye'd to sit and sew and get everything ready for the next day to keep it turnin' o'er. But that's what happened in they days. And if one o' the women had come into the huts and said 'Whaur's Jim?' and I said 'He's away for a pint' well that's awright, but if one came in and said 'Is yer man no goin' out for a pint?' it was 'Oh, he's henpecked!' So you didnae know what tae dae – ye were like.... this, he was either henpecked, or he was selfish... Ye just gaed oot in the morning, and sorted the kids.

JM: It was a different way o' life. (McNab and McNab, 2007)
Despite the amount of work which the women had to do in the gutting yards, if they had families with them, it was still socially felt to be their responsibility to also look after the children and attend to domestic chores.

5.4 Legislation and Politics

In the earlier period, the herring girls were as keen as the curers to ensure that the Factory Acts throughout the nineteenth century did not apply to the processing of herring, as the very nature of the industry required periods of intense work, long hours and often poor conditions. However, as the industry grew towards the end of the century, the women began to feel that they were being unfairly treated by the curers, and that the level of pay and conditions were no longer tolerable.
5.4.1 Legislation relating to fish curing

By 1913, it was clear that the conditions for some of the women, particularly in the later months of the year in East Anglia, were unacceptable, and moves were made to enforce legislation. A conference was held in Lerwick in June with representation from the women and the curers, and this was reported on by the Fishing News at the time:

It was stated that serious complaints had been made as to the conditions of work, particularly in Yarmouth and Lowestoft, and this is not to be wondered at, for at these two ports immense quantities of herrings are cured in a very short season and in very restricted areas. Then, too before the Yarmouth season is over winter has set in, and it can be bitterly cold even in Norfolk…

(Fishing News, June 27th 1913)

The article described discussion relating to the hours of work, with one suggestion that the women should work 14 hours with two hours off for meals, and another suggestion from the women themselves that 12 hours was sufficient:

Eventually, however, a compromise was come to, and it was agreed that the girls working in closed yards in the town should work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. (with two hours off) and from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. (with two and a half hours off) on alternate days, while those working on open plots on the North Denes at Yarmouth should work a uniform day from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. As the season
advances and daylight becomes shorter, the lassies are to take breakfast before
commencing work, and will only be allowed one hour off for dinner. (Fishing
News, June 27th 1913)

Thus, by 1914, it was fully recognised that the conditions of work for the women
were in some cases unacceptable and legislation was required to ensure that they were
not being exploited by the curers.

These arrangements were put into place, but many of the interviewees spoke of the
long hours of work, when they would not get to bed until the herring had all been
gutted. The seasonal nature of the work, and the fact that big landings were not an
everyday occurrence provided an excuse to those legislating for the industry not to
insist on regular hours of work. However, for some of the women who were working
almost all year round, the long hours of work must have been daunting, particularly
during the busiest seasons. If it had not been for the working arrangement, whereby a
busy period at the fishing ensured higher earnings for the women, it is unlikely that
they would have agreed to these somewhat extreme conditions.

5.4.2 Political Action – The Herring Girl Strikes

The first newspaper report of a strike by the women, was in August 1893, and it
took place in Peterhead when a Swedish steamer Dagmar, tried to moor inside the
harbour, laden with a cargo of barrels (The Scotsman, 3rd August 1893). The
landing of these barrels, it was commonly believed, would endanger the
employment of coopers at the various gutting yards in the area. Although this did not affect their own employment, the herring girls took action on the coopers’ behalf. Having unfastened the mooring ropes, and flung objects at the sailors, they then took part in a mass demonstration of several hundred workers, who marched with banners to all the yards to encourage strike action if the boat did not leave the harbour. This action did indeed result in the return of this vessel and another one, to their home country of Sweden.

Although not organised into a formal trade union, the women can be seen to have been particularly effective at working together, and could put considerable pressure on an industry which was dependent upon their labour. This support was also forthcoming on behalf of the fishermen, again part of the same communities as the girls. Thompson (1983) discussed the way in which the women were more able to voice their dissent and to take strike action than their male counterparts on the fishing boats. Most fishermen worked on a share basis and were therefore tied up in a complex system of earning related to percentage of catch and boat shares:

The women herring workers, the 'quines' of the trade, were straightforward employed workers, never entangled in share-earning; so that their consciousness was able to develop more directly, and find expression separately from their men, and so, at certain times, to speak for their communities when the men were silent. (Thompson, 1983: 168)
In effect, the women were able to strike both for themselves and also at times on behalf of the fishermen too. Nadel-Klein also wrote about the strikes as collective action and added:

protests were stimulated not only by poor wages on the quayside but by a growing sense that fishing communities generally were in peril.

(Nadel-Klein, 2003: 75)

An example of how the women were able to act collectively in support of their communities in terms of upholding the traditions and beliefs, was the organisation of a strike to try to end the practice of Sunday fishing. In the 1930s, many of the women, particularly those from the religious areas of the East Coast as well as those from the Free Church, refused to work with Sunday caught herring. As well as reflecting religious sensibilities of the time, this was of financial concern to all involved because the refusal of the Scottish fishermen to work on a Sunday put them at a considerable disadvantage to their English counterparts who fished the Sunday and were able to make landings on the Monday as a result, without the competition of landings from the Scottish boats. The women were able to make a stand, both for their own religious convictions concerning breaking the Sabbath, but also to support the men who were suffering from a very real economic disadvantage. The fishermen were also aware that if they wished to maintain their stance regarding Sunday fishing, then they would require the help of the women:
It is felt that the most effective way of insuring that Sunday-landed or Sunday-caught fish will not be handled is to secure the co-operation of the Scottish fishworkers (The Scotsman, 14th December 1929: 10)

Although there were 4,000 members of The Scottish Fishworkers Friendly Society in 1914 (Thompson, 1983: 170), unions did not become much involved in the herring processing industry until the 1930’s but this did not prevent the women organising strike action on a fairly regular basis, particularly in the years before the First World War and again after the war and indeed at various times through the 1920s and ‘30s right through to the 1950s.

This has also to be put into a context where political action by many workers was also taking place. For example, strike action called in 1913 in Aberdeen by women gutters who wanted to improve their terms, included a procession joining the local granite workers who were also on strike. In the same column of the newspaper report about the herring gutter strikes were reports about strike action by Lanarkshire miners, Kirkcaldy pottery workers, Arbroath shoemakers, Aberdeen coachmakers as well as labourers and fitters from an Ironhirst works in Dumfries (The Scotsman, 17th April 1913) although none of these included women workers.
The photograph above was part of a newspaper report in the Scotsman regarding strike action. It is one of the few visual images which portrays the numbers of people involved in the industry, and gives a sense of the scale of the workforce. Coming generally from small communities along the coastline of northern Scotland, the industrial action was a source of excitement for many of the women, and of empowerment for others. Some of the women were more politicised than others, with women like Maria Gatt of Rosehearty leading the action in the 1930s (Thompson, 1983: 171) Maria Gatt had joined a union in Love Lane in Farserburgh in the 1930s, but she explained that the unions were not particularly effective and they themselves required regular payments, which people could not afford:
The unions you see, the unions in that day... if folk fell ahin; the unions couldn't keep up their union if you wasn't putting in your money. And then you see the union folk was scattered – here, Peterhead, Buckie, Banff... (Gatt; 1980)

Maria explained that it was more effective if the women organised strike action themselves. Other women were not entirely sure what they were striking for but were happy to join in:

*JS:* Yes, yes, - well we was just told that we had to go on strike. All the women was going on strike and we had to go on strike too. So we went on strike too, we dropped things.... But the thing was, we never knew when this strike was going to be off and we never knew when they were going to go back to work again. And we were desperate for work. And the thing is, if you were working in the herring in those days, there were no rubber gloves or them things. You tied up your fingers wi' bandages round your fingers, and you had to be ready to start. You had to have your fingers tied up. So some days we started and went out to see what was doing, and this day we were chased by an Irish girl wi' a knife because she thought we was working – cos she saw us wi' our fingers tied up [laughs] – which was – kinda exciting! [laughs]

*JdF:* How would you know – who would decide to strike?

*JD:* We hadn't a clue, we hadn't a clue really. We've no idea who decided to strike, we were just told. Somebody came along to the yard and told us 'Everybody's on strike – and you've to strike too'. And that was all that was for it. And the Highland women that we had, the older women from the
Western Isles weren’t very happy about it at all. They said – well, they wouldn’t work but they weren’t going out to parade or anything like that. They’d just stay inside till the time came to work, very unhappy about it. But I can remember crowds walking around the street, and the police we could see on horseback, moving among us. I canna remember any violence, but it was there, the potential was there... There were placards up. It was in the news – it was about the time the king abdicated, that was in the papers about the same time. [laughs]

JdF: Why do you think the Highland women were against it?

JS: I think they felt it wisna nice, it wasna a good thing to do. We were just young and we didna care, but I think that they realised that strikes never the most sensible thing. You could do better, and they considered the curers had done the best he could I imagine.

JdF: And yet you got more money?

JS: We got a bit more money. We wanted 17 shillings a week, that was to live on. We got 15 shillings a week. We had to pay six shillings to our landlady when we wis in Yarmouth, so it didna leave us wi a lot. (Stewart, 2007)

There was intimidation involved in some of the strikes, and the Buckie interviewees were particularly keen to emphasise that it was the Fraserburgh women who were most aggressive in leading the strike action and not themselves:

KC: There wis one [strike] when we were in Yarmouth. We wis kipperin at that time and we had tae stop. The Fraserburgh fowk, some o’ them wis rough, weren’t they? So you had tae come oot, ye had to
stop. We wisnae in unions ken.

IB: There were nae unions...

KC: 'Come oot!' they said 'Come oot or ye’re Black Legs! Come out!'...

You had tae stop and when they gaed awa' the manny [the cooper] would say

'Och, come on – start again!' We didnae want tae dae it! (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

There were also newspaper reports of Yarmouth strikes which talked about panes of glass being broken and fish being thrown at women who carried on working. However these would seem to be the exceptions rather than the rule and mostly, the women went on strike – for fun sometimes it would seem (Henderson, 2005), to break the working monotony as well as to try to raise their wages.

The way in which the workplace was organised, with the women working so closely together, and the curing stations generally situated next to each other, meant that if there was a call for strike action, it was very easy and quick for the call for strike action to go round the whole area. If there were specific points of discontent, either related to pay, or to some other issue, it was particularly easy for word to get out and for the general feelings of the girls to gather momentum until the women ceased work and a strike was called. Lightning strikes could happen within minutes of a grievance being voiced, and most often they would occur at the times when it would make the greatest impact, when the herring boats had just arrived, often with good catches, sometimes even when the fish had already been tipped into the farlane. Maria Gatt from Rosehearty was involved in strikes in Yarmouth in the 1920s. The curers would
try hard not to give in to the demands of the women, and as they organised the transport home, the women were forced on this occasion to give up the strike, as they had no means of getting home without the curers:

MG: There was strikes – the first strike was in 1926. And that was in Yarmouth – yes. And we’d to gang back. They had to go back because they’d no money, because when they were at Yarmouth, you see if they’d no money they’d no means o’ getting home. So they had to finish the season, because the curers paid for the transport down to Yarmouth. We’d nae money and nothing to keep them. And then they kept your ticket till the day ye came hame again.

PT: They kept hold of the ticket. Blackmail?

MG: So you had to go on working or you had to pay your own way home, yes. You’d a return ticket, in the Broch in Fraserburgh, and fat ye git to Yarmouth, your curer took the ticket for ye. You see, possession’s nine tenths the law, you see. But then, things got better fa’ his [for us] you see, and that strike that we get oot recht for, we didna – we wouldn’a geng back! (Gatt, 1980)

The regular occurrence of strikes stretching back to the end of the nineteenth century, meant that they had become part of the tradition of the gutting. Those whose mothers or grandmothers had gone to the fishing before them would have heard stories of strike action, and it was seen as an acceptable way of exerting some power through communal action, and a way of respecting the action of the women who had been through the same processes in the past. It was often something which the women
interviewed felt proud to have been a part of, particularly if they had been successful in their aims, although there was also a sense that some women did take things too far. But as was seen from the interview above, considerable pressure could be exerted on the women by the curers and they had to have considerable strength of purpose to carry on with the strikes if the curers were equally adamant that they were not going to meet the requests. Stand-offs were frequent, but generally did not last for long, as it would have been too detrimental to the whole fishing industry if the women did not go back to work.

5.5 Recreation in the Workplace

The idea of work-time and leisure-time being entirely separate is not one which fits with the pattern of herring gutting, both as a result of the different time period in which this study is set, but also because for the women, there was a definite cross-over between the two. Even nowadays there is debate about whether individuals 'live to work' or 'work to live', particularly in relation to women, family life and time spent with children. Herring gutting as an occupation is not one which it would commonly be thought of as being a satisfying job in itself, although there must have been some sense of satisfaction for the women, to see the results of their labour, the barrels of packed herring piling up in the yards around them. Those women with a competitive streak, as suggested above, would enjoy that particular element of the work.
The long hours required by the women, particularly in the period before the First World War, meant that there was little choice for the women regarding whether they worked more or whether they took time off. If there were herring in, they were expected to work. George Soule wrote about the Economics of Leisure and many of his arguments in relation to work and leisure are relevant to the herring girls.

Gains in leisure were made under the market system by deliberate choice of workers for more free time even at the sacrifice of possible greater gains in real income. ... People sell time primarily so that they may acquire enough money income to buy products sold by others. What one does in sold time is "the job". Time sold is commonly thought of as work. Time not sold, "one's own time", "free time," is thought of as leisure, no matter what one does with it. (Soule, 1957: 16)

The whole idea of 'leisure time' was something new to the working classes, and even during time-off, the women would generally spend their time doing something productive such as knitting. This will be discussed more fully in the following chapter. Perhaps the most relevant aspect of Soule's theory regarding leisure is that the herring girls were social beings, whether at work or during their time off. The nature of their work, in groups around the farlane, allowed this sociability to become part of the workplace. But the social aspect of the women's lives, particularly singing and less commonly dancing, did form a part of the workplace.

5.5.1 Music and dance
While dancing was a very popular pastime for the women during their time off, and is well documented, there is also evidence that the women danced in the workplace. This depended to some extent on the specific background of the women involved, as there were some women whose religious beliefs prevented them from dancing whether in public in the workplace or at a formal dance. The women from Lewis for example, would have been from the United Free Church. The following is a clip from an interview undertaken in 1977 in Fraserburgh by Andrew Noble:

*Mr N:* What did you think of the Highlanders, really?

*Mrs M:* They were nice people

*Mr N:* But a bit strange in their ways?

*Mrs M:* Yes, they were more religious, you see. They couldn't see the folks dancing; - and yet they danced themselves but there was an 'open-air board' as you'd say, beside the flagstaff... (Marshall, 1977)
A similar interview extract shows that this practice was common around the coast, with Jim and Rita McNab talking about the women dancing on a concrete slab outside the curing stations in Shetland:

*JM: There used tae be a slab of concrete, that used tae have a shed or something on it which was gone, it was just the flair bit, ye know – a bit square of concrete.*

*RM: They birled away on that!*

*JM: Saturday night and somebody would come doon wi’ an accordion, and start playing, and before ye knew it there was a ‘body dancin’ on this concrete. Yeh! Great!* (McNab and McNab, 2007)

While the photograph clearly shows the women dancing in their workclothes, because the working environment crossed over into the accommodation and social environment, there was less of a division between the two. Indeed, for some of the women, the harshness of the working conditions would have been relieved by the memories of dancing and having fun in exactly the same location.

### 5.5.2 Song in the workplace

Singing at work during this period was also extremely common, but with the visible and audible nature of the herring girl’s work, this was song in a public domain, and song that would carry around the wider work space of the pier and the areas around. An article from the *New Shetlander* (1967 No.81) entitled ‘Benediction’ captures the
spirit of song within the fishing community, in which the author Ronnie Sill remembers an incident in 1924 when he was working in a shop in Gremista, near Lerwick. He recalls how it was a particularly still evening following on from two days of very heavy landing of herring, and he heard a woman’s voice singing the 23rd Psalm, The Lord’s my Shepherd:

I listened spellbound as the first verse progressed, and as one by one, and then in groups, other voices joined in, till by the time the second verse was reached, literally everyone from the North Ness right round the harbour perimeter were singing their hearts out… Work stopped, and even the elements seemed to hold their breaths as that magnificent volume of sound soared to the heavens and was echoed back from the surrounding hills.... I am not a religious person, nor am I over-emotional, but never before, nor since, have I experienced anything that left such a lasting impression on me. (New Shetlander, 1967 No.81)

The same memories are given by many about hearing the singing in the churches, churches which were often packed out with several hundred fishermen and women. People who were children at the time (Fiddler, 2005; MacNeil 2006; Hughes, 2005) and others from the communities into which the herring gutters came also recounted their memories of the women singing at the farlanes. The sheer numbers of people working at the industry during this time meant that when they joined together in song, the effect of the mass choir was particularly memorable. Donald Lawrence MacNeil from Barra remembered singing as an accompaniment to all aspects of work and chores at the time:
DL: Yes, I remember them singing alright. I remember them singing. They did an awful lot of singing. Singing was part of the life. It was nothing new to the islands or Barra. They sung when they milked the cows, and they would go about their chores singing. I remember that quite clearly. (McNeil, 2006)

In the workplace, song would have been used as a way to lift the spirits and to pass the time. It also underlined the bonds between the women, the same songs sung and the repeated pattern of the songs, the use of part-harmonies when it was the same groups of women singing. Song could also be used to re-enforce religious aspects of the women’s identity, or to underline aspects of modernity and fashion in the singing of the most popular songs of the day, or to raise spirits and show a keen sense of humour in the composition of witty verses written on the spot to popular songs. Singing was very much a part of the cultural identity, and for some of the women, the singing became very important – and they carried on after their time at the gutting, in local choirs (Stewart, 2007 and Michie, 2006). One interviewee talked about remembering her mother singing specific songs in the workplace, and how they used song to raise their spirits when they were feeling down:

IdF: There was singing at the gutting?

LH: Oh, yes. Singing, singing all the time. I worked for Corbisons in Mallaig. That’s where the Smiths has their joinery place now, and my mother and Mrs Phemie Ironside –Phemie was a good singer - and my mother sang alto, and when they got fed up my mother would say ‘Come on now Phemie. Let’s have a wee hymn noo. Come away, let’s
have a wee hymn!' So they'd start off with a wee hymn or maybe a
Scots song, and so they'd sing away... My mother's song was 'Red
Sails in the Sunset'. She used to sing her pride and joy!... It was a
modern song at that time... (Henderson, 1995)

Gaelic songs were often sung by the Highland women, and the work-songs from the
island of Lewis in particular, lent themselves to being sung at the farlanes, with one
lead singer singing the verses and the other women joining in the chorus. Because
they tended to be short and repetitive choruses, it was not necessary to speak Gaelic to
be able to join in. Margaret Hughes from Buckie commented on the similarity of the
working process to the waulking songs:

MH: You were jist goin the whole time and there wis a lot of singin' and that.
And like you see the crofters doin' the tweeds and that - there was mair singin'
than anything. (Hughes, 2005)

The singing was something which almost all the interviewees commented on,
particularly memories of hearing the women singing as children:

VG: Oh, they always sang, they always sang, well, when we passed. I don't
suppose they sang all day, but when we passed they were always singing. I
can't remember what they'd sing - I was about 10, 11, 12 then. Oh but the
sound that used to come out of there was lovely and they used to gut with the
tune, keep in rhythm with it. Oh it was marvellous! I thought it was marvellous ....! (Gillespie, 2006)

Others have said that it was not possible to sing and gut to the rhythm because the women all gutted at different speeds. Some women have suggested that they were too busy to sing at all, and they only sang during time off. This is an indication that the pattern was not always the same for all the women, and it is likely that different time periods and locations had different work practices. But the majority of the women recalled song as being a memorable part of their occupational experience. One particular Gaelic song was sung at the farlanes, and it is clear that the rhythm could keep the women going, even if it was not in time with the gutting rhythm:

‘Air Tir an Raoir, air Muir a Nochd’
(‘On Land Last Night, at Sea Tonight’)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Air Tir an Raoir ’s air Muir a Nochd</th>
<th>On Land Last Night, at Sea Tonight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Air tir an raoir ’s air muir a nochd</td>
<td>Ashore last night, at sea tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air tir an raoir ’s air muir a nochd</td>
<td>Ashore last night, at sea tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air tir an raoir ’s air muir a nochd</td>
<td>Ashore last night, at sea tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am fear as docha leamsa</td>
<td>The one I like best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seisd:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S i o a lomsaidh ou di om</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S i o a lomsaidh ou di om</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S i o a lomsaidh ou di om</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S i o a lomsaidh ou-rom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha teid bat’ a nochd gu muir</td>
<td>No boat will head for sea tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha teid bat' a nochd gu muir</td>
<td>No boat will head for sea tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cha teid bat' a nochd gu muir</td>
<td>No boat will head for sea tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tha 'ghaoth ro fhada ' ceann oirr</td>
<td>The wind 's too much against them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S torr dhomh righle ' dhanns a nochd</td>
<td>It's difficult to dance a reel tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S torr dhomh righle ' dhanns a nochd</td>
<td>It's difficult to dance a reel tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S torr dhomh righle ' dhanns a nochd</td>
<td>It's difficult to dance a reel tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gu bheil mo chasan malldach</td>
<td>My legs are feeling leaden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan eil mo leannan ann a seo</td>
<td>My sweetheart isn't here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O chan eil 's cha bhith a nochd</td>
<td>No he's not, and won't be tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan eil mo leannan ann a seo</td>
<td>My sweetheart isn't here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S cha dean mi suas ri strainnsear</td>
<td>And I won't make up to a stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S ann a draibheadh tha mo luaidh</td>
<td>Driving is what my sweetheart does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S ann a draibheadh tha mo luaidh</td>
<td>Driving is what my sweetheart does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S ann a draibheadh tha mo luaidh</td>
<td>Driving is what my sweetheart does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S chan fhaigh e suas ro sheall 'ud</td>
<td>And he won't be here till his watch is over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S an eainsean-rum a tha mo luaidh</td>
<td>My sweetheart 's a deckhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S an eainsean-rum a tha mo luaidh</td>
<td>My sweetheart 's a deckhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S an eainsean-rum a tha mo luaidh</td>
<td>My sweetheart 's a deckhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'S chan fhaigh e suas an gangway</td>
<td>And he can't get up the gangway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Se deckhand a tha ' nam luaidh</td>
<td>My sweetheart's a deckhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Se deckhand a tha ' nam luaidh</td>
<td>My sweetheart's a deckhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Se deckhand a tha ' nam luaidh</td>
<td>My sweetheart's a deckhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan fhaigh e nuas, tha trang ann.</td>
<td>He can't come up, they're too busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honeydew a staigh am baigh</td>
<td>Honeydew coming in the bay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Honeydew a staigh am baigh | Honeydew coming in the bay
Honeydew a staigh am baigh | Honeydew coming in the bay
'Si private aig MacIomhair | Owned privately by MacIver
Fairweather a stigh am baigh | Fairweather coming in the bay
Fairweather a stigh am baigh | Fairweather coming in the bay
Fairweather a stigh am baigh | Fairweather coming in the bay
'S an fhairge suas aìg | And the sea's up to her gunwales
Engine trouble aig mo luaidh | My true love's got engine trouble
Bhrist e sios an druim a' chuain | He broke down out at sea
Engine trouble aig mo luaidh | My true love's got engine trouble
'S chan fhaigh e'n diugh gu lamrig | And he won't make a pier of it today

(MacLeod, c.1960, Scran 000-000-480-334-C)

This song was reputedly sung by the Barra herring gutters, who made up the words depending on who was joining in the song. It was recorded for the archive at the School of Scottish Studies. The humour lies within the lyrics as it tells of men unable to go to sea because of bad weather, and dancing and drinking in the pubs and who were too drunk to ‘get up the gangway’. In the tradition of a bawdy song, the sexuality is barely hidden within the comedy of the lyrics.

The women also sang as they travelled to work, and this interview extract shows how the women would join in the songs, even Gaelic songs which they did not understand.
They must have been memorable times, as Jessie Stewart was able to recall the tune of this song 80 years on:

JS:  It was an open lorry, flat back. We’s a rail around it, and we all stood on the back of the lorry swaying [laughs]

JdF:  Did anyone ever fall off?

JS:  I never knew anybody falling off. We held onto the sides, and we sang – roared and sang this silly Highland thing that the Stornoway girls taught us!

JdF:  Can you remember it?

JS:  [sings] ‘I oh I dum owna misha I doh,

I oh I dum owna mish I doh,

I oh I dum owna misha I doh,

geng nahd oner roy oh’ ......

That was a silly song. I dinna ken whit it meant, but we used to sing it anyway.

JdF:  And you’d sing that first thing in the morning on the lorry?

JS:  On the lorry yes, yes!! [laughs] We always sang on the lorry it was fun.

Cos by that time the Highland lassies were there, and we’d all be on the lorry.

It was good fun. (Stewart, 2007)

Many of the songs sung round the farlane would have been hymns, partly because they were songs with which most of the girls would have been familiar, but also the links between religion and the fishing communities were particularly strong. From the mid nineteenth century, the hymns of Moody and Sankey were popular among the coastal communities of the North East. Following the horrors of the First World War,
the 1920s saw a series of religious revivals along the north east coast. This had a considerable effect upon the fishing communities, with many people converting to non-conformist churches such as the United Free Church. In terms of song singing, it ensured that hymns and other religious songs were often the mainstay of the workplace music.

5.5.3 Knitting

While song can be seen to have been part of the work experience for many of the women, knitting was also another pastime which many of the women engaged in while away at the gutting. It was both part of the working aspect of the women’s lives and also recreation. Knitting had a number of different functions, depending partly on where the women were from. The Shetland women knitted while they were away at the gutting as a continuation of work from home, where they earned money from their knitting, often from an early age (Leask, 2007; Stewart, 2007). The women from the Western Isles and from the north-east also had a strong tradition of knitting, both for themselves and for their families, but not as an additional source of income. Knitting was a respectable occupation, a domestic chore, linking women back to their homes and families and one which allowed the women to be both useful and creative during times where the herring were scarce and they had time ‘on their hands’ waiting for the herring to come in. There was also considerable skill involved in the knitting, with highly complex patterns used, and some elements of competition between the women as they were able to show off their skills. Munro and Compton wrote about the
folkloric aspects of knitting from the fishing communities of the Pentland Firth, and the way in which patterns were passed on:

Like folk songs and folk tales the patterns were never written down but were taught by mother to daughter, grandmother to the bairn at her knee or even by neighbour to interested neighbour. Strangely or perhaps not strangely when you consider it, the most fascinating patterns seem to come from areas away from the largest harbours, from smaller harbours or tiny villages where the knitters seem more cut off or where there are fewer distractions. But you must not think that having learned from her mother, the knitter continued to knit exactly the same pattern for the rest of her life. As stories and songs go on altering, being added to and even being invented, so the patterns would be altering, reaching out to new textures, new variations of light against shade, almost like the sea itself.... a lass who went to the gutting had a chance to get a glimpse at what was being knitted elsewhere. And a glimpse was all a knitter needed to come home with a new idea that in a few weeks would appear for all to see on Donald's back. (Munro and Compton, 1983)
Figure 5.46  Basic Ribbed Gansey (Lovick, 2007)

This photo is from a knitting pattern for the 'Basic Ribbed Gansey' (Lovick, 2007) which would have been the staple jumper knitted by many herring girls for workwear. Sometimes they would knit long sleeves which would be rolled up, and at other times they would knit three-quarter sleeves as shown here, to keep the fish guts and scales away from the material. Often the women would knit their ganseys in bright colours, although the most common photographs of the gutters are seen in black and white. This means that the colourful aspect of the group of women is not appreciated as much as it would have been by contemporary onlookers.
For the Shetland women, knitting was about far more than providing clothes for themselves or their family. On Shetland, many of the women knitted to make money or to barter for goods or services. This was an important aspect of their family economy, and even children were encouraged to learn to knit at an early age:

JS: *We knitted. In any spare time especially in the winter when it was dark and you couldn’t be working outside then – you knitted. You could get groceries for that. You could get actually anything, ’cos the shops would order anything for you.*

JdF: *In return for the knitting?*

JS: *When I was 12, then my parents said I could get any clothes I wanted so long as I knitted for it. So I started to knit for a pair o’ wellies. And I knitted three little jumpers. I got 5 shillings. They had fair isle strips round the bottom, they had ‘Peter Pan’ collar and Fair Isle cuffs and I got 5 shillings for*
a jumper. So I had to knit three jumpers which was 15 shillings to buy my boots. So it took me the whole winter to buy my boots! [laughs] (Stewart, 2007)

The Shetland women were already aware of their ability to earn their own living, having started at a young age with the knitting. The herring gutting for them would have been an additional way to make money, and when the fishing was poor, they were still able to carry on making money by knitting while they were away. The women from other areas, such as the Western Isles and the North East also had a strong tradition of knitting, but this was to make clothes for their families, particularly ganseys for their men at sea, as opposed to knitting to earn additional income. Margaret Hughes talked about taking her knitting with her when she went to the gutting:

MH: Aye you took yer knitting wi' you. You were aye knitting - socks tae yer dad, jerseys tae yersel' ...

JdF: Was there a tradition here for knitting for fishermen?

MH: They ca'd them down here gernseys. We ca'd them ganseys in Buckie - in navy blue. Mother was a great knitter as well. I never knitted any of the finer ones, but I knitted the black and white oiled wool ones, the long sea boot stocking. But then when they started wearing the oilskins trousers they just needed the boot socks. But I knitted all Mitch's jerseys. (Hughes, 2005)

Many of the interviewees were still enthusiastic knitters, and keen to talk about patterns and about how they still knitted for their families and particularly for any
babies born into the family. Knitting was more than just a task or a chore; it was a personal gift, something into which the women could put their time and patience and creativity. As with Margaret, who knitted all of her husband’s jerseys, and other women who knitted for their close families, it was a way to give love and care in a very practical and acceptable way.

5.6 Conclusion

In later years, after the main period of the herring gutting, there were still women involved in the processing in areas like Shetland (Burra History Group, 2007). These women were aware that they were part of a long tradition of women travelling to the gutting, and elements of this tradition were maintained such as the carrying of kists to the work place. One of the women explained that although it would have been easier to take modern suitcases, she wanted to travel with the same kist her mother had used before her. This reveals a sense of pride in the work the women did and identification with their role as herring gutters, as many of their mothers and grandmothers had been before them.

As the evidence showed, the gutting was hard work, and the working conditions were harsh. But the women returned each season to take their part in the industry. As has been discussed, there were social aspects to the occupation. For the majority of the women, it was not the actual work which they enjoyed, and which left lasting and generally happy memories, it was the social aspects and the people they were working alongside – the singing and the dancing, the shared hardships and the communal
living – an occupational community, such as that described by Dona Lee Davis (1986). There was a sense of freedom even within the workplace with interviewees commenting on the feeling that they were working for themselves, despite the supervision of the coopers and curers. The coopers and the women were 'all in the same boat' and often from the same communities and the working conditions were bearable as a result of the socialisation within the workplace. Jim McNab spoke about what kept him working as a cooper despite the hardships which he described:

*JdF:* There must have been something about it that you enjoyed?

*JM:* Yeh – yeh, yeh – that's true. I think it was the folk. Ye ken all the folk.

You were like a band of brothers – a band of brothers and sisters – ye ken whit I mean? Yeh, it was very good when you think back, ken. But hard work – hard, hard work when I wis younger. (McNab and McNab, 2007)

This chapter has taken the interview material and combined it with existing evidence to provide a more complete picture of life at the gutting. It has examined the lives of the women while at work, their sense of identity, the occupational community and the aspects of work which crossed over into the more social aspects. The next chapter will move this theme forward by considering the lives of the women while they were away from the workplace, their living conditions and the recreational aspects of life at the fishing.
Chapter 6  Time off for the Scots Herring Girls

Figure 6.1 Maggie Leask and friends relaxing during time off. (Whalsay, 1930s)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider the social and cultural aspects of the lives of the women outside the workplace, while they were travelling with the herring fishing industry and what they did during their time off. It will concentrate on the social aspects of travel, the organisation of accommodation, both formal and informal recreation and various aspects of community identity. It will also look at the importance of tradition within the occupational role of the herring girls and events which were held to celebrate their way of life.
In *A History of European Women’s Work, 1700 to the Present*, (1998) Deborah Simonton refers to the work of the herring girls and how occupational and recreational roles were combined:

They often enjoyed the freedom that travel and independent wages gave them. With room and board provided, they could return home with a tidy sum of money. They also enjoyed the companionship and pleasure of the work groups. They are remembered as singing, flirting and joking, and one has recalled, ‘it was a free and easy time, you weren’t restricted – like you know, in a factory where there were bosses’. (Simonton, 1998: 126)

For the younger girls in particular, going to the gutting was about more than the financial gains to be made, although in comparison with other work commonly available at the time such as domestic service or shop or factory work, during a good season the women could make significant amounts of money. The evidence from the reminiscences of the women themselves would suggest that a significant attraction of the gutting each season, apart from the money, was the social aspect of their experience. There was a great sense of camaraderie and the shared hardships combined with shared leisure time, which made the work bearable and the whole experience memorable.

**6.1.1 Women from different backgrounds: life stages**

The types of social activities undertaken by the women depended to a large extent on the stage of life which they were at. Thompson (1985) indicates that the majority of
the women going to the gutting – particularly in the period following the First World War, were between the age of leaving school and of getting married. These were generally the only few years in which they did not have the responsibility of a home or family, and had freedom to travel away to work at the gutting. However, this was only one section of the group of gutters. It is clear from the visual record and interviews collected for this research, that there were considerable numbers of married women, as well as women who worked in their home ports, many of whom had families. Along with these women were those who had never married owing to the lack of men after the First World War. Many of these women supported themselves by travelling the fishing and while young they formed a cohort of women who worked right up into their 60s and 70s. So, while it is true that there was a substantial number of young workers, and indeed many of the public photographs and postcards depict these girls who were perhaps more photogenic than the older ones, they do not reflect the group as a whole. This had implications regarding the type of leisure in which they were able to take part.

Figure 6.2 Older women working (Eyemouth, c1950)
This photograph from Shetland shows a much older workforce. Taken c1940s, it is possible that the average age range of the women by this time was higher than it had been in the 1920s and 1930s, and it is also possible that these women were not travelling, but working only in their home port. This would indicate a demographic in the age structure of the women involved and also a fundamental change in the tradition of 'travelling the fishing'.
Although slightly later than the thesis period, this postcard shows herring gutters at Peterhead in 1959 and once again the age range of the women is much greater than in the majority of the earlier photographs and postcards.

Interviewees were keen to talk about their early years in the industry, regardless of how many seasons they were involved, and the fun they had as young women. Roberts (1984) makes the same point when she talks of working class women in the north of England and much of what she says also holds true for the herring girls:

The young workers’ life was not all work, and it is to their youth that the respondents look back with most nostalgia when discussing leisure. We have already seen that they were not free to do as they liked, but this lack of independence also carried with it a comparative lack of responsibilities; they were on the whole freer from household and family chores then as they had been as children – and would later be, whether as wives or mothers, or the housekeepers and nurses of elderly relatives. (Roberts, 1984: 68)
The young women, many of whom came from remote communities would relish the opportunity to visit new places, to mix with a variety of different people while still being within the safe confines of their own community:

This merriment reflected the fact that the gutting season played a vital part in the social lives of these women. And their organisation as migrant labour generated both solidarity and independence in them. It was for many the one time in their whole lives when they could escape briefly from the pressures of home and community. “I was the black sheep of the family... I was longing to go,” as one put it. Or in the words of another:

I was free – because once you were off with the fishing in the year the time was your own and you’d nobody to say, well do this, you see – you were just with the girls; and you would go to the theatre, you could go to dances or anywhere. (Thompson 1985: 11)

There were certainly more opportunities for recreation for those women who travelled to the larger fishing ports than those who stayed at home in the smaller communities of the north east, the Western Isles or the communities in Shetland. One interviewee (Fullerton, 2007) talked about her two aunts in Shetland whose mother had decided which one of her daughters would go away to the gutting and which one would stay at home to help her with the house and the croft. Postcards from the girls between 1906 and 1930 showed how the sister who was at home was keen to hear of the adventures of her sibling, who had the chance to go away to the ‘bright lights’ of Yarmouth and Lowestoft. They reveal a communication pattern between the women, sisters and
friends, and show how people kept in touch at that time. They provide evidence of the work patterns, and the migratory nature of the gutting with cards to ‘Maggie’ from ports in Lerwick, Sandwick, Maywick and Scalloway [all Shetland], and further afield at Gardenstown, Gorleston, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, South Shields, and the Isle of Man. The Shetland connections are very clear, with news from home, information about local cooperers and fishermen being included, and messages passed on to various local groups of men and women, as well as the individual communication of the card itself. This was a fascinating insight into the lives of these two women, and also shows how communication was maintained with home and family, even while the women were away. There was a definite attraction for the young girls to have the experiences which they would have heard about within their communities, of the social life while at the gutting. The work was undoubtedly hard, but it provided the women with the opportunity to see more of life while still contributing to and being in touch with their own communities back home.

For some women as was described in Chapter 5, the work did have to fit around childcare, as they took their children with them to the gutting, and for others the work was an important means of providing for themselves, as older single women. These women have been almost entirely left out of the literature relating to the herring girls. The women who were working from home had to ensure that it fitted in with their normal domestic duties, and the social aspect of their lives would have been markedly different to the younger single women.
6.1.2 Irish Men at the gutting

The social aspect of life would also have been different for the Irish men and boys who came over to work at the herring gutting, who appear very rarely in either the visual or the textual record. While it was rare for Scottish or English men to work with the fish at the farlane, interviewees talk of working with the Irish men, and socialising with them throughout the period:

*JdB*: Were you all from the same place?
*KC*: We was all Buckie.

*IB*: No, no – we had Irish boys. Three Irish boys.

*KC*: The Irish aye used tae work

*IB*: Three Irish loons. They were there – they was in the huts. They wis alright – they workit awa’.

*IB*: There weren’t any workin wi’ us, but they used tae come in and speak tae you and that...

*JdB*: It must have been good fun having a few men amongst you all.

*IB*: They were young lads y’see – we never bothered wi’ them.

*KC*: Ireland wis a poor country – they had tae take the work they could get.

(Coull and Bruce, 2006)

In her book relating memories from her Shetland grandmother who was at the gutting, Susan Telford includes evidence from her grandmother of both Irish men and older women at the gutting, and a much wider sense of the demographic of the gutters:

Some of da fishergirls wir young. Some o dem wir owld. Some of dem wir owre sixty, and some of dem wir nearly seevinty, I suppose. Some o dem wha cam fae da islands, fae Harris, dey wir pretty owld. Dey followed da fishing, but ida wintertime, a course, dey aa hed crofts ta work. Dey wir farmfolk, an ida summertime dey cam tad a fishing. Most o dem wir single. Dey wir aa owld maids, morroless.... (Telford, 1998)

Figure 6.5 Young boy working at a farlane in Whalsay
However, the younger girls were the ones at whom the camera lenses were most often pointed, and they were also the ones who had left home for the first time and on whom the recreation made the biggest impression.

6.1.3 Social practice – recreation during travel

For the majority of the women, the season would begin in Lerwick with the summer herring fishing. For many of the girls they were meeting up again for the first time since the previous year’s season which had often ended in December at the East Anglian fisheries. The journeys were keenly anticipated, with the time spent on trains and ferries catching up with friends from the previous season:

Between the exhausting work for the most of the season and the terrible cold at the end of it, it might seem strange that the girls actually enjoyed the herring season and looked forward to its coming every year. But they did – enormously. Partly it was the fun of going off with a crowd of young people, away on their own, to new places and new adventures. And partly it was just because the work and the conditions were hard that strong bonds of comradeship formed among the crew members... (Dorian, 1985: 72)

The journeys about which most evidence exists in relation to recreation, were those undertaken by rail, the ‘Specials’ - the trains commissioned by the curing firms in the 1920s and 1930s to transport the women south to Yarmouth and Lowestoft. Many of
the interviewees spoke about singing and dancing on the trains, both on the way to the fishing in East Anglia and on the way home:

_JdF:_ I'd heard that on the train there was dancing...?

_VG:_ Oh yes - in the corridor - up and down the aisle - and somebody would hae spoons and somebody had a mooth - a mouth organ - and somebody would have a fiddle and there was a wee - I think it was a melodian - but it was only a little thing - it was all good fun, and you could walk right through - cos it was maybe four carriages - four carriages in the one - but I cant remember if we got past that - if you could get past that into the other ones.

(Gillespie, 2006)

As well as entertainment, the station master at Vauxhall, Newham Timm, told David Buchan how the women would also make food on the train:

The trains left Vauxhall about six o’ clock at night, following each other to Aberdeen. And as soon as the girls got aboard, they turned on the primus stoves and started cooking their teas. Primus stoves in the corridors, aye! Fire risk and all that! And you had to be careful who you put together... But they were a happy-go-lucky lot for all that. (Butcher, 1987: 111)

6.2 Patterns of accommodation

During the autumn and winter herring fishing season in the ports of East Anglia, the accommodation for the women was generally provided by local landladies, who let
out rooms. But in the majority of the Scottish ports, the women would spend the herring season in the various accommodation provided by the firms close to the fishing stations, generally known as 'huts'.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 6.6  Herring Gutters at their huts in Stromness c.1900

6.2.1 Huts and lodgings

As time went on, and by the time period of this thesis, the tradition of the huts had grown up. But in earlier years, curing firms had to sometimes improvise accommodation in more rural locations:
When herring curing began at North Roe, the women were housed in a barn on the property hastily fitted with wooden beds and cooking facilities. In 1892, however, a wooden shed having two rooms was built at Freefield and sent north by sea in September 1893 to provide accommodation for the beachmen in the winter and spring and also for the women in summer. (Nicolson, 1982:123)

This photograph shows the herring girls outside their huts at Gremista, Shetland in 1910. Most of the women can be seen knitting, and there is also a small child in the centre of the photograph. This picture is one of the earliest showing the women during their time off, in this instance, by their huts.

The curers leased pieces of land along the shore, and erected their curing stations to include the gutting yard and also accommodation for gutters, along with other infrastructure they might require. Some of these buildings were more temporary than
others, but the general pattern of the huts was a room with a set of large bunk beds, originally intended to house two crews to a room, with the women sleeping three to a bed. In Lerwick, the growth of the herring fishing from 1890 onwards, meant that the stations stretched right along the waterfront, over a mile out of the town. Margaret Hughes' description of the huts in Shetland was similar to that of many other women throughout the time period of the thesis:

MH Well, when you went there, it was jist empty huts, and where we were there were three huts - right at the top of the stair and you went doon the stairs tae go into your gutting yard - and we were at the top of the stair... and there was three empty huts - there was a table at the window, there was one window - and a table at the window and a bench. So your trunks - y'ken the big trunks that you had, so you had two trunks at this side, and one at the ither side - and there was a partition, it was a good bit up - but you could stood up on yer bed and look ower the thing and into the living room. And this wooden - supposed to be a bed - had wood slats.

JdF And that was your bed?

MH And that was the bed, no mattress or nothing! So we - well the three o' you - you each took things - took all your dishes and your cutlery and rugs and a' things and curtains for the window - you a' took something like that and stuff for your bedding. And there was this great big - what they ca'd a tig - d'ye ken what a tig is? It's a strong linen and we had to - the two of us - before you got sorted or done anything else - you got your bed made up first. So you'd go doon this step intae a store and there was big barrels filled with - we ca'd it caff - but it was chaff - ken whit I mean? - that you had to fill. And this
is what we had tae fill this great big thing - and the two of us trying to get it up noo up the stairs! And when it was on the bed it was like this [hand up high] it was up high until you got in and lay doon and flattened doon.

JdF So you put that underneath....?

MH On top of - on top of the wood and that was your mattress! Oh it was grand - and soft ye ken - cos we used to fill the ... Ma dad and them wi' the boats - they had the long narrow ones that fitted onto the bunks and everytime they came in at the end of the season you filled this... away up tae the farms and get this chaff - caff that we ca'd it....we'd tae fill this thing - for this great big bed - it was a six foot bed right enough - the three of us would sleep in the bed. It was a toss up tae see wha wis goin tae the front - wha was at the back and wha wis in the middle so you'd tae turn about like this....

JdF So, were these temporary huts that were put up?

MH No, no - they were there a' the time. Every season you see. They were built for that - but no water or nothing. There was a tap outside, at the end of that - but you'd tae go and carry your water and that....

Figure 6.8 Inside the huts. Shetland c1930
MH: Aye you got your accommodation as such - but there was nothing in it. We were lucky because there was a skipper stayed across fae us in Buckpool - and see these herring baskets that they've got- well, we used to pack a lot of stuff in that - would hae maybe a basket o' stuff aw the things that I was providing- your bedding and that - you put in your big trunk - but your pots and pans and basins -and that to take wi you - we were lucky cos we just packed that into a basket when we kent we were leaving and the boat would take it hame - no we dinnae have to carry it. You got pictures to put up on your wall - it was just a wooden hut, very very primitive - some of the girls - the aulder ones - they used to paper the wood - they kent it was their hut.

JdF: What did they use to paper the hut?

MH: Wallpaper - wallpaper - we'd a lot o' posters up just to cover up the walls. and there was nothing for your clothes - just hooks in what they ca'd the bedroom bit and that's where you went - I cant mind whether there was an orange box to put your basin on - that's where you'd to wash yerself and a' thing wash your hair an a' things.

JdF: So did you have a toilet?

MH: The toilets - there was a hale row o' toilets where you did the gutting - at the water - there were nae toilets up at the top that I can mind. (Hughes, 2005)

Despite the primitive conditions of the huts, the women took a pride in their living accommodation. There was a strong sense of respectability linked to the cleanliness of their living environment. The huts were extremely basic, but as was explained by
one interviewee, the conditions were not much different to those the women would have had at home. Sharing a bed with the other women in the crew was common practise, and does not seem to have been something which caused much of an issue with the women. As the herring fishing industry began to decline through the 1920s and 30s, and particularly after the Second World War, the women had more space within the huts, with only one crew in each hut, and therefore two beds between the three women instead of just one.

In Mallaig, the huts belonging to the curing firms became an area of the village known as ‘The Point’ or ‘Chinatown’, because of the shanty nature of the accommodation. There were 15 kippering and curing houses, and the women would arrive at the beginning of each season. The following is an account of Lindy Henderson arriving in Mallaig with her family in 1929:

LH: .... My mother says ‘We’re going to Mallaig’. So OK, we came in the train.... The station is packed with people; young people, mostly young people and I thought to myself ‘Oh, must be quite a big place this. But you’re at the back of 10 o’ clock at night and away we goes... And then we goes into this huts and they were wooden huts. You had a closed in stove like your Raeburns, but small and black and the chimney stack, a pipe went up through the roof, out of the roof. That was your fireplace... There was about 300 fishworkers on the Point, because there was fish houses at the time... But oh, the fun! Oh the fun in that Point! ....Just the essentials was in it. But they were kept clean, everybody’s place was clean. (Henderson, 1996)
The huts in Mallaig existed right up until the 1970s and even had individual names at one time such as ‘Smiling Through’ and ‘New York, New York’, which enabled the post-office to differentiate between the huts when they were delivering the mail to the women. Because of the growth of Mallaig as a result of the herring fishing, there was very little accommodation available on a longer term basis, and following the Second World War, these huts became more permanent accommodation for fishing families. Again, cleanliness was something which was of great importance to the women and however basic the accommodation, the women would make sure it was kept as clean as possible, and in conditions where there was no running water, and they were working in a particularly messy industry, this was no mean feat. In Mallaig there was only one tap on ‘The Point’ and at its peak there were around 300 people living there.

*The only running water you had was in the middle of The Point, and everybody went for the cold water. If you were washing what you did was you boiled big pots of water, to wash ... You had a tin bath... So there was one tap at that time ... for all these people, when they were all in at the fishing. When it came time to be washed, here you took your bath, you went to the steam engine for hot water. When the train came in, it used to come right down past the pier ... they would come in with coal too, they used to have chutes for the coal [for the boats]. Then the women, all the single women would go down in droves and ask ‘Can we pick the coal that comes off the chute?’ – ‘Yes, if we get our tea when we come up!’ The boats didn’t go away at the weekend and they would come up to the Point on Saturday night. The men would say ‘when we come up to the Point on Saturday night, if you’ll take us in for a cup of*
’Oh, yes, yes you come up and you’ll get your tea!’ I could never say to come and get your tea, because of my mother!’ (Henderson, 1995)

There is a clear differentiation made here between the single and married women – or girls staying with their mothers like Lindy, and the ability of the single women to entertain the men by providing their tea in return for the coal. Black-leading the little stove was another common chore for the women living in the huts, wherever they were based, and this task was most often carried out on a Monday, which was a quieter day for the women, as the Scottish boats did not tend to work on a Sunday. In Fraserburgh the women also lived in huts, and the following account describes the experiences of one young herring gutter, and the area as it was back in the 1920s:

To us young quinies it was all a great adventure, that area was very nice then there were no sheds and fishhouses along the front of the Braes. The whole front was wild sea grass and clean with seats for folk to sit and watch the sun setting. We had an upstairs hut and the view from our window was magnificent. The roof trusses were unlined, the stone walls were limewashed, but we wallpapered the wooden partition dividing the rooms. (Fraserburgh Herald, 31st January 1996)

The herring girl’s huts can be compared to other seasonal workers’ accommodation of the time such as the hop-pickers who travelled to Kent from areas of East End London during the hop-picking season in September, as described by Grieco (1996). There are many comparisons which can be made of the practice associated with coming to these huts, or sheds and chalets as they were referred to, for the season despite the fact
that the hop-pickers travelled often in family groups as opposed to the working crews of the herring girls. But the hoppers also tried to domesticise their space for the time that they were there, with similar practices such as putting up wallpaper, or painting the huts, and bringing crockery, linen and rugs. The requirement to clean and prepare the huts on arrival was the same for the women at the fishing, and the women at the hopping. The idea that the reputations of the women at the hopping were to some extent based on the cleanliness and organisation of the domestic space was also similar to the experiences of the herring girls:

The pressure to embellish meant that not only was the paid work of women disciplined by reputation but so too was domestic work. It can be argued that domestic standards are a reflection of general work standards and that this display of domestic ardour served to signal work standards to both employer and work groups alike. An organised domestic environment was yet another mechanism by which labour tied itself into the work discipline of the field. (Grieco, 1996: 129)

The requirement to clean and cook for themselves was a part of the experience of life at the gutting during the summer months in the Scottish ports, and considerable amounts of time were required for this in addition to the long days at the gutting. Many women commented on how much better it was not to have to undertake these tasks when they were living in Yarmouth or Hull for the autumn and winter fishing.
6.2.2 Lodgings

When the women moved down to the East Anglian fishery, the temporary accommodation of the huts would not have been sufficient in the colder winter months, and the women generally found lodgings and were looked after by local landladies, who would provide hot meals as well as rooms. In Yarmouth, the women were expected to organise accommodation for themselves and, for the people of Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Hull, this was a way to make some much needed extra money, particularly during the depression years of the 1920s and early 30s. Rooms would be cleaned out, the carpets lifted and the landladies would put up advertisements in their windows showing that they had rooms to let:

They lived handy to their work to be near to the bottom of Baker’s Street, or the Quayside and the place called Gut Meadow, near Pier Plain, where the boats were able to discharge their cargo of herring for the lasses to gut.

Their landladies would clear their front rooms of furniture, which they stored in sheds in their back yards or gardens, and bunk beds were then put up for the girls with a small amount of furniture, which included a table and chairs, and at least six of them shared that one room to live and sleep in.... When they went back to where they lodged to eat, they always took their oilskins off, which they stood outside the front door. It was impossible to take them inside a house because of the numerous fish scales which stuck to them, and the smell would have been awful. (Bridgeland, c.1980)
Some women would go back to the same accommodation each season and got to know their landladies well. In other cases the women would walk around the town looking for accommodation, and would inspect the rooms which they were being offered, and try to gauge how well they were going to be looked after by the landlady who would also be responsible for making their meals during the week:

_J.S._ ... _We arrived in Yarmouth on Sunday morning. And there were cabbies—there was one wi' a horse and cab—and there were taxis—lot of taxis. So we got a taxi to tak us up to King Street... we had no digs, we didn't know where to go for digs. So we're all carrying our luggage, looking for some place that says bed and breakfast—some kind of a sign that we could go... Then we separated, and three of us went one way—and three went another—and then we came to a place—and this lady said she'd take us in. We said there's six of us needing digs—well she said she'd take us in. She took us in gave us a cup of tea—didn't get anything to eat with it—but we took a cup of tea. And she said she'd three Highland Women in—but that she'd put them out and take us in. And we thought no, no, no—we're not going to bide here. If she could do that she could just as well put us out so we left... And then we met the other three and they'd found a place. They'd been at this place before and hadn't thought much of it. But the landlady had said she'd make tea and she'd set it on the table with a loaf—and whatever. We were famished. So we'll go there—away down at the back of the Trawl Market. So that's where we stayed on that occasion._ (Stewart, 2007)
In the lodgings, the women would have their meals made for them, which was considerably easier than having to go back to the huts to prepare dinner after long shifts at the gutting. Jessie Stewart’s account describes how the girls were able to test the catering abilities of their landladies to some extent when searching for lodging. Landladies provided a hot meal except on a Friday or a Saturday when the women often had fish and chips for their dinner. Traditions such as this became part of the social pattern for the women when they were away:

IB: *We bade in the Rows – they ca’d it the Rows in Yarmouth – and the wifie didnae cook on a Setterday – and we ae gaed doon fer a fish supper – and it wis a sixpence...*

KC: *Aye – a fish supper......*

IB: *...a sixpence.*

KC: *No, she took yer money – our landlady did – and she gaed for them.*

IB: *No, we gaed down for oor ain.*

KC: *It wis cod fish – and the cod was richt good.*

IB: *Ah’ ken!*

KC: *That’s what we got on Friday – but did they mak soup and that tae ye? – the landladies that we had – wi’ dough boys in them. We put wir dough boys in oor stew – but they used tae pit them in the soup.*

IB: *Oh, I used tae like the change in cooking, ken? It wis fine!*

JdF: *Compared with having to cook for yourselves....?*

IB: *Aye – oh, aye – see they cookit for you – you boucht yer ain grub – and they cookit it. And they cookit on Sundays tae.*

KC: *Mind you – it wis never a’ the money they must hae got – for takin us*
in...

IB: No, it was only aboot 7 shillings...each

KC: It wis nae a lot o’ money at a’: That Yarmouth fowk wis nice fowk....

(Coull and Bruce, 2005)

Some of the women commented on the differences they found in life in the south. One interviewee who had lodgings for a season in Hull told me about how the man of the house was so strict with his wife, that he would not let her buy shoes for her children. She was shocked at this type of relationship between husband and wife, and she believed it was not something which would have happened back in the fishing community of Peterhead (Henderson, 1995). Others found it a welcome change from home life, and felt that they were well looked after (Hughes, 2006). The tradition of staying in lodgings was one which suited most of the women working at the gutting and the hardship of dealing with the domestic chores was made considerably worse by the colder weather during the autumn season in East Anglia.

6.2.3 Organising the accommodation

While living in the huts, the women had to undertake all the necessary domestic chores and Monday was ‘wash-day’. After filling up the barrels, the women had a routine of doing their washing on a Monday, which was a quiet day as the fleet would not have been at sea on Sunday.

JdF: It was a Monday you would do your washing....?
KC: [nods] After ye'd done yer fillin up - ootside in a tub in a board. One of the tubs that ye'd tae coup yer herring intae - they great big tubs they wis clean - but ye'd tae heat yer water. (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

This in itself was heavy work as a large tub had to be filled with water, and the water would have had to be heated over the stove, which would have required coal. The clothes were scrubbed with a scrubbing board and had to be wrung out by hand, as can be seen in the following photograph taken in Shetland:

Figure 6.9 Wash-day outside the huts (Shetland, c1940s)

When the women were staying in the ports in England, they would often send their washing home, and sometimes include a gift or sweets for the children in their washing bag. They were unable to do their washing while staying in lodging houses
so this became a further opportunity for them to stay connected to their homes and communities in a very personal way, with washing being done by family back home:

From Yarmouth and Lowestoft you always sent home your baggie of clothes for your mother to wash… If you had a little niece or nephew you would pop in one of those soft rag dolls or a trainie or bag of nuts or something. Often you would see at the Vauxhall Station a mountain of bags of folk’s shifts either coming or going to Scotland. It must have generated a lot of money to the Post Office. (Fraserburgh Herald, 31st January 1996)

Margaret Hughes remembers the same tradition with the men of the family, sending home washing for their wives to do:

MH: I remember when they went to Yarmouth they used to send a bag - they would send a bag with all their dirty clothes and then you got Yarmouth rock or a pomegranate and all this, you would look forward to the postman throwing this bag in at the door. (Hughes, 2005)

The railway line connecting the East Anglian fishing ports directly with the Scottish ports along the north east in particular made this communication route available to the communities in a way in which it was not available when the fishing was being undertaken in Shetland or the Western Isles for example.
Christian Marshall from Broadsea, Fraserburgh was interviewed by Andrew Noble in 1977. She talked about the differences between the different groups of women that she encountered at the gutting. While the women identified themselves as herring gutters, first and foremost their identity lay with their own communities and where they themselves were from. There was a strong sense from some interviews that the women saw other groups of gutters as different from themselves, and set apart from themselves either due to their background and culture or related to their age or religious background. Christian commented on how as young girls, they could climb over the roof beams of the huts in Shetland and how in one instance a girl fell on top of a group of Catholic Highlanders who were saying prayers:

_Mrs M:_ ... _We used to watch all that was goin’ on._

_Mr M:_ _Aye, there was that time that.... Them clumped up [climbed up] – they were only jes’ young feel [foolish] quines – there was half a dozen Castle Bay women – they were Catholics – and they was arranged in a circle on the floor sayin’ their Mass –

_Mrs M:_ _Oh, aye – in the mornin’_

_Mr M:_ _The women was Catholics and someone gave Mary a push and she fell down on them – and they give her a punch and threw ‘er out!_ (Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

A Shetland interviewee also talked about how the younger Shetland girls were regarded by the women from the North East:
JS: The young girls from Stornoway – we were great friends wi them. The older women were much more reserved – and the ones from the East Coast were all older women – and they kind of looked down their noses at us.

JdF: Why, do you think?

JS: I think they thought we were foolish – and we probably were.... the east coast ones was fisher folk. They were good people, they really were, good solid people and they were Christian people – and I thinkit they thought we was just very very foolish. They were kinda strict...

JdF: And the girls from the NE – were any of them involved in Religious Revivals?

JS: I think they might have been ... but they were a bit critical of us. They weren'a the kind that you took to some wae – there were nothing really attractive about them there was nothing to mak you like them. We didna dislike them – but we didna feel at home wi them.

JdF: Did they keep themselves to themselves?

JS: Very much so – very much so.

JdF: And were they living in huts amongst you?

JS: This was at Yarmouth – that I encountered them so they were in their ain digs – and we never saw them. We just saw them at work – we never saw them anywhere else. When we went to a service on Sunday – we went to the Open Brethren – because we didna need a collection because we – quite often didna have a collection then. And they hid very good singing – some of the Scots men were lovely singers – and that was really worthwhile – so we sat through some dreary long talks – but we enjoyed the singins. (Stewart, 2007)
It was clear that there were very distinct groupings of women amongst the gutters, by way of both age as well as where the women were from. The women from the crofting communities of Shetland and the Western Isles also had more in common with each other in terms of their background and way of life, than the more fishing based communities of the North East of Scotland. The general evidence from the interviews showed that although the women respected each other, they tended to stay within their own community groups.

*LH:* I don’t think they mixed well - the people from the Islands – they more or less kept themselves to themselves and they used their own language – the Gaelic you know – I know they weren’t allowed to use it in one of the fish houses they worked in.

*JdF:* Do you remember the name of the yard?

*LH:* I think it was Smiths.

*JdF:* Why would that have been?

*LH:* I don’t know why – I don’t know why he wouldn’t allow them to speak in the Gaelic – on the job.

*JdF:* And would they all have had English?

*LH:* Oh, yes, oh aye – they all had English. They were all nice people – I can’t say that there was any – you got people that would ‘f’ and blind – but it was mostly English women – women from Hull. (Henderson, 2005)

Another of the interviewees from the Western Isles also talked about working with crews from all over, but staying in huts and socialising amongst her own group:
SM: Sometimes they were working from every place – from Shetland and a lot of people from Shetland and Fraserburgh, and everywhere.

JdF: Did you mix with the women from other places?

SM: Oh no. They had crews for themselves but we were working for the same curer.

JdF: It must have been quite interesting meeting others...

SM: Oh, yes. Everyone was very nice, but they were staying in huts on their own and we were staying in ours... (Macarthur, 2007)

These are examples of interview evidence from Shetland, the east coast and the Western Isles, showing that although the women were working together, in social situations, they tended to stay within their own groups. Things were slightly different for Rita McNab when she first went to the gutting. She was one of the few women who did not have a fishing tradition to fall back on, and yet she felt that she was accepted by other women in spite of this. She believed that because she was not from a fishing community, it made it possible for the other women to accept her more readily:

JdF: So how did the other girls take to you? Mostly they would have been from a fishing background. Did you mix?

RM: We mixed, we used to have a good laugh. But mostly I would say I liked to be like them, organised. They had their little cloots and their threed and their piece wrapped up for 10 o’clock, and their piece wrapped up for 12 o’clock, and their piece for 3 o’clock. Ken? They had it all there, and we gaed
hame at dinner time, we were aye allowed home at dinner time. But them, they were organised, they were auld hands at it. But they never left you oot on a limb. They never made you feel you weren’t one of them. They made you welcome enough and they would help. (McNab and McNab, 2007)

Rita’s comment that they were ‘auld hands at it’ indicates that the women who had been travelling for many years, or who came from a background of gutting, would also have had pattern of socialisation which had been built up over the years. The tradition of socialising itself to some extent prevented the women mingling together, as in both the work place and in social situations, the ‘normal’ set of experiences was to keep within the community groups.

6.3 Social Activities

Much of the recreation which was described by the women was of an informal nature, particularly in areas where the women lived in the huts. This was sometimes due to the distance from the centre of towns or villages, to the huts where the women were living. Regardless of where the women were based however, all seemed to have had experience of music, song and dance while at the gutting.

6.3.1 Music and song, hut dances, parties and ceilidhs
This photograph shows the more informal nature of dancing at that time. It was not known whether this is a photograph from the fishing season although the women in the photo were herring gutters during the fishing season, but it was taken out of doors and it clearly depicts the informality of the type of dancing talked about by the interviewees, both inside the huts, and in the open air. The following interview was undertaken in 1977, and the interviewee talks about her experiences of dancing while at the gutting at Baltasound just before the First World:

Mr N: You were talking about the dancing? Did they used to dance in the huts when you were gutting?

Mrs M: Oh yes, melodians, there was ... and fiddles, they’d all fiddles, and a melodian and the music goin’ into the small hours.

Mr M: Yes, but I mean, I have often actually in my time. I’ve heard it come across the bay – I’ve heard it lying in my bed here on this point from out t’other side of Braidsea Bay, the music.

Mrs M: Aye, you see the huts was on the bay....
Mr N. People were saying that in Lerwick they used to have the dances in the huts and then stay on for the night?

Mrs M. Aye, they danced and still they didna approve of dancin' in the outside — [but] they were dancin' all the nights! (Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

Her experiences are very similar to other accounts from later in the period, the 1920s and 1930s. Jessie Stewart remembered a dance in the hut to celebrate her birthday in 1935:

JS: ... in 1935, I was 19 and this older wife had decided if we were still here for my birthday we'd have a party. See she'd been away in Bressay for the day — and she come back and she wasna working — why I don't know — but she'd been at Bressay — and she came back — and she'd a bottle of strawberry wine, and a tiny cake you could buy them for about a shilling I think — and this was our party fare. And now we could go oot and buy anything we wanted. So we went to Sluitties and we got some chocolate biscuits — and that was for our party. And we invited the message boy and the other fiddler. And we goed up and invited Davie doon wi his accordion so we hid a band. And we'd nae room tae dance! There were just — it wasna nae bigger than this bit o' space. But we danced in what room there was [laughs] — and the girls frae Burra they came in and danced wi wus... (Stewart, 2007)
This photograph depicts two of the girls enjoying some time off playing music on the steps of their hut. There was no indication of where the photograph was taken, but it is likely to have been in Shetland, with the style of huts shown. Another Shetland interviewee, Kitty Kay, recalled her memories of dancing with foreign fishermen in the huts during the summer:

A.H. When Barbara wis speakin she wis speakin about foo muckle dancing de did. Did you do any dancing?

K.K. Oh man, de lasses danced, I could dance none (wasn't good at it) but de lasses at Hays danced. I mind a crowd of foreigners coming in aye night un Dolly un dem pat on de, de, de gramiphone.

A.H. Oh you had gramiphones too?
K.K. Yeah we had a gramiphone too un de danced yon foriegners waltzed away apon de floor un de couldno speak a wurd o English.

A.H. Un did you all dance we dem?

K.K. Dey wir danced wi dem. Maggie Leask, Dolly un dem, de they danced wi dem, but I couldno dance. (pause), weel, I tried it aa hall maybe here, but I wis never good at it. (Kay, 1995)

The women lived so closely together in the huts that if there was a dance or a ceilidh they would have had little choice but to join in. However, the idea of privacy and individual ‘space’ was not one with which the women had much experience, either at home or at the fishing.

6.3.2 Songs

Many of the women spoke about singing, and many others from the communities remembered the singing of the fisherfolk, both while working and for recreation, in the huts and also at church. The following are some examples of songs sung at the gutting, from Chrissie Smith [b1902] from Caithness:

CS: Oh, Ah used'll hiv a grand time, an when we wis, we wis comin, we didnae get no conveyance till wur work in the mornin. But we got a covered wagon, Ah called it; it wis a lorry wi a hood on it, d'ye know? An we used'll always be singin songs goin in. Oh goodness me it wis grand days.
[sings]

Never mind that old-fashioned mother of yours,
What about your old-fashioned father?
He wears no fine rich clothes
His socks are cotton and they've got no toes
Never mind that old-fashioned mother of yours
In the chorus that you bawl
If it wasn't for your old-fashioned father
She would never be your mother, at all!" [Laughter]

'Oh, Charlie take it away
Oh, Charlie, do what I say
It makes me feel so funny every time we cuddle and kiss
It makes me shiver, it makes me quiver, it fills me full with bliss
Oh, Charlie take it away

Oh, Charlie do what I say
It's the little bit of hair you wear upon your upper lip
It tickles me, Charlie do take it away' [Laughter]

But, oh it's a gay life, right enough. Oh an Ah've travelled a lot... Went off till
e fishins an - for Yarmouth - Ah used'll come back ye see cos e curer paid yer
ticket. When Ah wis young Ah says, 'Ah wish Ah wis twenty'. Then Ah says,
'Whit like will Ah be at thirty? Then forty, fifty, an sixty. An now Ah'll be
eighty-two in a fortnight. Ah'm still goin strong.
[sings]

I'm ninety-four this morning, I am ninety-four today

I'm not as young as I used to be, I'm getting auld and grey

But my heart is young and I'm fond of fun and I'm very proud to say

I'll maybe get married on Thursday though I'm ninety-four today' [Laughter]

(Smith, 1984)

Singing songs together would have helped to provide a unity between the women, both in the workplace and also out of it. It was a communal activity and it further marked the women apart from the communities which they visited for work, as they would have been both visible and audible as they travelled to work on the lorries.

6.3.3 Jokes and Tricks

The interviewees spoke of the lighter side of life both in the huts and also when in Yarmouth. The women spoke about the hut doors being tied shut or chimneys being blocked and Chrissie Smith remembered some tricks which were played on her while in Yarmouth:

We had oilskin coats, an it wis all tucked, ye know, pleated here. A band on it, a bib, an straps. An wan time it wis in Yarmouth - that's another thing Ah'll tell ye (when Ah spoke aboot at oilskin coat) - was wi coopers wis great stuff. An they wir always great wi me, and of course when we come home in is wagon, an e cooper - oh he wis a great lad - an he says, 'Chrissie, I'll lift ye
doon'. He lifted me, an ye see where we judged, there wir a Scotch Wool shop there, an wir judges wis there, an there wir a lamppost wi yin two things on it, ye know, e old-fashioned lamp? An he lifted me an Ah thought he was makin me - he took me strap and he stuck me up on e lamp-post. Here I wis, swingin back an fore. An e fellow came oot. He says, 'In the name o goodness, what ye doin up here?' 'Ah don't know', Ah says, 'They just stuck me up here an left me'. He'd to get a ladder an taken me doon. Oh they used'll do awful tricks on me. (Smith, 1984)

Chrissie remembered another incident when she was the object of the joke, but was also quite happy to play along:

Another time when were in Hull - oh it wis a rough place, all nationalities wis in ere - an we used'll go up till see if e herrin wis in, ye see? An Ah knew all the salesmen, ye see, an at, an they wis laughin an, is fellow came over till me an he wis English. He says, 'Chrissie' he says, 'Will you go up there' he says 'and get that bucket?' An Ah looked - is was a stand wi a platform on it ... He says 'You just stand where you are.' Well, an then he lifted a thing - like a gold thing - an he banged it, an when I looked doon, oh, they were a whole crowd. An he says, 'Now, what's for Tiny?' Heavens! They'd started'll bid on me. But mind ye, Ah got five pound!' [Laughter] (Smith, 1984)

The women from the Western Isles often spoke to each other in Gaelic, confident that others would not understand what they were saying:
JS: We were very friendly with the Stornoway lassies – but we didn’t really mix a lot. It was mainly just at work that we were with them. They were up to tricks too. And they were a guy that was visiting them one night – and they used to say terrible things to this boy – in their language – Gaelic – and they did say something. I didn’t ken what they said, however they got a slap in the face when he returned in the same language. They were quite shocked – and there were screams and howls for a while...

JdF: Did they think he couldn’t understand

JS: They thought he couldn’t understand – they didn’t realise that he had Gaelic connections. [laughs] (Stewart, 2007)

Such behaviour would have helped to provide relief at the time in what was a harsh environment, as well as a shared experience. The women also enjoyed recounting stories which had happened or incidents which they had heard about in other places, both to each other, but also in reminiscence and as part of all the interviews.

6.3.4 Fishermen’s Visits

While the women were staying in the huts, the men from their home communities would come and visit them when the boats were in from sea at the weekend. Seonag Macarthur from Lewis talked about the visits:

SM: The boys would come and see us in the evening. The ones from Stornoway that were away to the herring fishing. At weekends they would be
coming to see us. They weren't going out at weekends then – the boats, no. Just going out in the week. They wouldn’t go out on a Saturday night or Sunday. No, no Sunday fishing. (Macarthur, 2007)

This was another indication that the women, even while away at the fishing, stayed closely within their own home community groups.

MH: When you think back how innocent we ae were - there wis one of the girls had an accordion - and y'ken - and sitting maybe outside huts and that - and maybe playing cards and ae' thing like that - ken - tae pass the time. They used tae come and visit on a Saturday - we never went tae the pictures or ony thing like that for it was too far.... Even the fishermen in the boats kent yer name when they came to empty their herring... (Hughes, 2005)

The boat skippers would sometimes invite the women from their community down to the boats on a Sunday, to have Sunday dinner, which would be cooked for them by the men (Ralston, 2006). Over the years this too became a tradition, and again it underlines the community bonds between the women and the men at the fishing. As with many of the activities which were undertaken even outwith work, the whole crew would go down aboard the boat for dinner. Particularly when they were away in the East Anglian ports, this also acted as a form of protection for the women, who would have felt more vulnerable on their own:
LH: ... When we went out travelling we just chummed up together y'know.
And when we would go to Yarmouth we 'd go up the town and get lost and
then maybe wash our face and hands y'know and go up the town - to the
market - to get our groceries, with a shawl. We all did - with the shawls on.
And the English people would shout - well, the boys 'D'you have a kipper
Maggie?, D'you have a herring Maggie?' ... (Henderson, 2005)

'Sunday Visiting' was directly linked to a similar practice back home. Visiting of
family in particular was a big part of Sunday tradition for the women from all the
different backgrounds. The idea of the skipper inviting the women down to the boat
for Sunday tea, or the women inviting friends or relatives to the huts on a Sunday, can
be set within this longstanding tradition. Davis also describes this type of Sunday
activity in her work on occupational community in a Newfoundland fishing village,
linking this in with the social aspects of life in a fishing community:

    Fridays and Saturday nights are reserved for couples' social activities.
    Sundays are set aside for family visiting. (Davis, 1986: 135)

Although Davis is describing a more modern fishing community based in
Newfoundland in the 1970s, similar evidence exists for the type of activity common
for the women and families when home in the fishing communities of the east coast.
Very little activity was allowed, particularly in the more religious areas, but visiting
of family was one tradition which was carried on. So it is of little surprise that the
activity was carried on even when the communities were on the move, to the fishing
around the coast.
While the women were staying in lodging houses in Yarmouth, the visits from fishermen from their home ports continued, particularly on a Sunday. Evidence would suggest however, that it was not always family, and that some of the girls did have boyfriends while they were away from home. The following extract from a letter written to the Fraserburgh Herald shows how important the notion of respectability, particularly within the family was to the women:

Once we were living in one of these narrow fronted housies on Exmouth Lane, one of the girls was courting a guy her parents did not approve of. Often your male relatives would visit for a cup of tea after the Kirk. The landlady always went to answer the door which opened direct in to the front room. We heard the girl’s father’s voice, we pushed the boyfriend under the kitchen table and pulled the baize tablecloth down almost to the floor, and the poor loon had to crouch there till the mannie had his tea and left.

What fun and banter went on, you had to laugh to try and forget the cold.
(Fraserburgh Herald, 17th February 1996)

This extract is evidence that while there were strict moral codes amongst the girls, particularly from more religious backgrounds, while they were away at the fishing, it was possible to have more freedom from the parental constraints of home.
6.3.5 Excursions and fishing trips

As well as visits from fishermen during the weekend, Sunday walks or 'excursions' became part of the tradition of the travelling, with the fishermen enjoying spending a bit of time ashore, and the women being free from the constraints of the gutting yard, and their cumbersome work-clothes. Evidence from both the interviews and the photographs - particularly those from private collections, show groups of women and men enjoying walks and excursions to various local beauty spots.

Figure 6.12 Sunday Excursions,

Fishermen and women relaxing on their day off c.1930s

These activities were not exclusive to the Scottish fishing community. It was part of the social culture of the time, particularly amongst the working classes (Roberts, 1985).

One activity which is less likely to have been shared with people in other areas was going out at night with the fishermen on the herring boats. Several of the
interviewees described how some of the women would be invited out for trips on the boats with the fishermen (Coull and Bruce 2005; Kay, 2007). Maggie Leask from Shetland talked about some of the women going out on fishing boats:

\[\text{JdF: Did you ever go to sea – to the herring fishing?}\\
\text{ML: No – some of them did – some of them – one night – they’d go one night – out to see whit like it wis. But I never – I wisn’t that chuffed wi’ the sea...}\\
\text{JdF: It must have been quite exciting for them to have a night on the boats}\\
\text{ML: That’s right...}\\
\text{JdF: So was that quite common that they would go out on the boats?}\\
\text{ML: Well there was one or two summers that they did – it wasn’t just awful common I don’t think.}\\
\text{JdF: I suppose if you’re dealing with herring all day – it would be quite nice to see where it comes from.}\\
\text{ML: I suppose – it’s aw richt if yer no sea-sick! (Leask, 2007)}\]

This was not just a practice amongst the Shetland fishermen and women. The following interview is evidence that it happened amongst the fisherfolk from the east coast too:

\[\text{KC: Oor Margaret and Peggy gaed oot in Ainster fishin’ yin nicht in a wee boatey – and this one manny and I says ‘Ah’m nae gaen!’}\\
\text{IB: Fa wis ye wi’?}\\
\text{KC: Buckie Association – they were awa out fishin’. Just catchin’- they gave you a line ah think! Peggy was like that – Peggy Murray.}\\
\]
IB: Oh aye – Peg!

KC: Peggy and oor Margaret gae’d out wi’ them in Ainster – and they gae’d up tae the Manse wi’ the fish

JdF: So when you weren’t working you would be fishing!

IB: It wasnae usual that.

KC: Peggy would go roond tae the pier wi’ a fishing rod.

IB: A hook. She likit footba’ and that kind o’ things.

(Coull and Bruce, 2005)

The two interviews above are evidence that despite the well known superstition that fishermen would not allow women aboard a fishing boat there were in fact many instances when the herring girls were taken out on fishing boats, both for excursions as in this case, but also as a form of transport and as part of the Sunday visiting when they were invited aboard the boats for afternoon tea. The description of Peggy Murray fishing off the pier and liking football is also at odds with the general descriptions of the ‘herring girls’ and shows how there were women who were able to express their individuality even within the occupational and social group. But from the interviews, she was very much an exception to the rule. In terms of recreation generally, things changed over time, and what was a common experience for one group of women might have been a very different experience for others.

6.3.6 Different patterns of recreation
Patterns of recreation changed over the whole period for the women at the gutting, and as was shown in the interview clips above, depended considerably upon where the women were stationed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, electricity was coming to some of the larger ports, and transport changes increasing opportunities for travel around the country. In the smaller coastal villages such as Stronsay in Orkney, which saw a huge increase in population during the summer herring season, the place would come alive, with thousands of workers descending on the two islands, Stronsay and Papa Stronsay. Activities and facilities would spring up during the season to accommodate the herring workers and fishermen who were stationed in the harbour:

_JdF:_ I suppose there would be jobs for girls as well.....

_EF:_ There might have been – in the ice cream shops and things like that, chipshop – but it wasn’t a lot really.

_JdF:_ With all these shops – ice cream shops, chip shops, cinema – what happened to them in the winter?

_EF:_ There was nothing, they just closed down you see. Uh huh – the ice cream shop was just a summer thing and the same with the chip shop. That was just until the end of the season. It wasn’t warranted to go on – you see, there was no trade. Oh heavens I’m frightened to say how many would have been on the island... There would be over a thousand and more, and more – easy. But I remember them on a Monday... there was no fish in til late on Monday. And they would be up walking through the village – dressed. It was strange to see them not in their normal attire at the farlane gutting. Oh it was nice to see them too, strolling along...
JdF: I believe – Nana was saying – some of your family played music with them. Do you know anything of that at all?

EF: Well – I had a brother – Carl. I'm the last of the family – the baby – and the last one that's here. And he used to play in the cinema – it was a one stringed fiddle – a chap fiddle. We lived about three quarters of a mile from the village – and you could hear it as plain as day. He used to play for dances in there. There would have been dances at the weekend sometimes – whether it was Saturday night.... Sunday was a quiet day – the men used to go walking around the shore – just to relax. But if they were clear – on a Sunday they'd be out walking – roond the roads - up the country. Maybe they'd buy fresh milk to take back to the boat. The girls just did the same I suppose. Likely there'd be the occasional dance in the cinema.... And they'd films – but I canna tell you hoo often they put them on – that's what I can't tell you.

(Fiddler, 2005)

In Lerwick, the women from the east coast generally stayed out of town at Gremista, which meant that to take part in events in the town involved a long walk which they were not always prepared to do. Margaret Hughes talked about going into town to the cinema on a couple of occasions, but not to the dances, because of the distance. For the Shetland women who were staying in the huts in Lerwick, it was easier for them to socialise more often if they were closer to town:

JS: Point o' Scotland – that was near whaur we were when we went to Ross – we went nearer there. But Davidsons was the first yard in Lerwick – it was
next to the Malakoff ... Then you had to go further round for Mitchells and the rest just circled round the harbour — there were 31 I think.

JDF: Gosh — 31 yards!

JS: I think so in Lerwick — then there was one in Bressay. 31 was certainly well out past the Point O’ Scotland. None of us would hae wanted to gaen there — it was probably ones that came from Scotland... We got a bus into Lerwick — sixpence on the bus — to get into Lerwick. None of us likit it out there it was too far away. There was nae fun out there. When you were in at the town — then everybody come alang and... there were fishermen that cam alang at the weekends. But there was an awfu lot of young men from Lerwick that we knew that cam alang during the week — keep us going...

(Stewart, 2007)

This shows the importance of the social aspect of life for the women, and how they were able to socialise even when the fishermen were at sea. As local Shetland women, there would be links with many people throughout the town, including those who were not specifically working within the fishing industry. Jessie’s description of women from ‘Scotland’ is further evidence of the differences perceived between women from different places.

Shopping was another activity remembered by many of the women. Especially at the end of a season, the women would often buy crockery or household items to take home from Yarmouth or Lowestoft, along with ornaments or small presents for family or friends. Here, Seonag MacArthur from Lewis remembers buying items to take home:
SM: We'd come back for a few weeks, and go back when the herring started in Lowestoft and Yarmouth. Yes it was very different down there. It was nice. We would get a lot of bargains down in Lowestoft and Yarmouth – yes, a lot of nice things. Dishes and lots of nice things – I'd get tea sets much cheaper and dinner sets and ornaments and clothes, nice clothes in Lowestoft. Taking it home. We had a box taking it with us with clothes – and filling that. And sometimes taking a barrel home with what we couldn't fit – and taking them back to Stornoway.... (Macarthur, 2007)

![Seonag Macarther's ornamental vase from Great Yarmouth c.1930s](image)

Other women spoke of saving during the season to buy specific items of clothing for themselves and presents for others. Violet Gillespie remembers how little money the women had to spare, but how she saved it up to buy her first suit while she was in Great Yarmouth:
VG: It wasn’t a lot. We started off good and it just dribbled away. [laughs]

But they knew that - because seemingly this is what happened with everyone y’know. I used to say ... ‘Better send some money home this week - else I’m frightened to go home!’. But I was saving up ... to get Yarmouth rock made for everyone - y’know. Everyone’s so friendly on the East Coast - or where we stayed - and y’know - ye’d tae buy it. And then I got my first suit and shoes when I was down there - and that took the whole time to save up. You didn’t have any hire purchase - you never got it til you paid for it. That’s what I worked in Yarmouth for that year.... It was cream - like an oatmeal. medium sized heels - no blouse - you just closed the jacket down to here... Oh - we thought we were that - y’know! (Gillespie, 2006)

Some women bought larger items – a piano was transported north from Yarmouth one year on one of the fishing boats:

But coming home at the end of a season skippers were very good to carry any bulky luggage you had home to Scotland. I remember Alex Sim the Insurance Agent had married a Yarmouth wifie and the Headway took home a piano for her. (Fraserburgh Herald, 17th February, 1996)

One season, a party of women were arrested, having been found to have stolen gifts from the Arnotts Store in Great Yarmouth:

One year at Yarmouth a group of hilarious Peterhead women always to be heard singing, suddenly became silent. They were all sent home. The Police
had raided their kists and they were full of presents to take home, all stolen from Arnotts big store. The English did not like us at the best of times, but that sort of thing gave the Scotch a very bad name. (Fraserburgh Herald, 31st January 1996)

As well as a tradition of taking presents home for friends, there was also a tradition of the women being given items to take with them when they were going off to the East Anglian fishing:

KC: Currant loafs and cakes. A' the wifies that we workit wi' doon at ... at the kipperin - they would come wi' a cake - cos ye were gen awa' they would gi' you a cake. But you aye took home a stick o' rock to them, y' see ...

IB: When we wis in Yarmouth - ye aye took hame presents, y' ken. A' body at hame lookin' forward tae it - yer friends like ....

KC: We gaed tae Shields and we took hame wooden dollies - a wooden dollie and a mannie. You've still got yours! [to Bella]

IB: We were kipperin though - at Mack Fishery. And there were a lot o' us - aboot twa hunner o' us - and they wantit - a wooden dollie. And I sent for twa hunner! A great big box came! I had a sister-in-law there y' see - and she gae'd and got them. I think all Buckie had wooden dollies! All the kipperin' quines had them! (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

This demonstrates the importance of ties with family back home, even to the extent that the women were provided with food from home with which to entertain at the weekend. By the 1930s and 40s this tradition had become firmly linked with the travel of the women down to the East Anglian fishing ports.
6.3.7 Promenading

Another activity which is remembered by many of the interviewees is the tradition of walking – or ‘promenading’ – on a Sunday in particular. With the influx of thousands of fish workers, the streets of Yarmouth were extremely busy. Lindy Henderson remembers having to queue to be able to walk along Kings Street, because there were so many people in the town at that time:

*LH: There was two piers – there was the Wellington pier and that’s not the one the dancing was in – there was two piers – Wellingtons – I’ve forgotten the name – where all the fisher people went to dance – I can’t remember the name of that one. [Brittania Pier] The main street was King Street and you had to queue to walk – cos there was so many people in Yarmouth – just thick with people... (Henderson, 2005)*

This type of promenading was a feature of the time off for young people across the country, and did not just apply to the herring workers. The fact that their recreation mirrored that of other young people shows how they were a part of their generation, as opposed to segregated or stigmatized. It was not just fisherfolk who promenaded in the streets. Roberts (1984) discusses the promenades in which the young working class people of the northern towns of England took part:

On summer nights the streets of both large and small English towns were crowded with young people until 10 o’clock or so. Locally there appears to have been no ‘season’ for promenading, nor do any but a very few mention
courting in a public house, these on the whole being mostly for men and a small number of bolder older women. (Roberts, 1984: 72)

Customs such as this were the same amongst northern working class women and the herring girls. Sometimes the walks would take place after church. After the Sunday Service in Yarmouth, groups of fisherfolk would walk together as far as Caister, a village 3 miles outside Yarmouth town:

There was a tradition at Yarmouth after the Sunday service where the women and men would walk in procession singing psalms to Caister and back... When they arrived back at their lodgings the women were allowed to invite their menfolk in for a cup of tea. (Newlands, 1999: 109)

These particular walks were obviously more religious in nature than the promenades in the streets of Yarmouth, which gave the younger women and men in particular further chances to meet one another in a public place. The communal aspect of life, even away at the gutting, was reinforced by opportunities to meet and socialise with people from back home and exchange news and information about friends and family. It also gave the men an opportunity to spend time ashore and off the boats before heading back out to sea on the Sunday night.

6.3.8 Self-regulating supervision

Despite the general feeling of youth and innocence which seems to surround the description of travelling the fishing, there were aspects of the lives of some of the
women which were less discussed during interviews. Interviewees were often very keen to paint a picture of their lives at the gutting, and those of their workmates as entirely innocent and free from any immorality or what would be considered 'loose behaviour'. This was partly due to the reputation given to the women by some who saw only women working out in the open, dirty work, unsupervised – the stigmatisation and stereotyping talked about by Nadel-Klein, and a keenness to redress the balance of perception. However, there were women who took the opportunity to behave in a more open way than they would have been able to at home within their own communities. There were opportunities to consume alcohol for example and visit public houses, when such activity would have been heavily frowned upon back home:

We wirma supposed ta drink, because Shetland wis a dry place. Nae pubs. Dey wir licensed grocers, a course, but nae pubs fir effer da War. Da women didna drink. If dey drank dey wir looked on as horrible. Whan we wir in Yarmouth we wid geng in sometimes an get somebody ta treat wiz, just ta a port an lemon. Dat wis aa we drank. We never hed a lock. We wirma supposed ta be in a pub at aa. If onybody towld wir faiders an midders we wir in a pub we got a god hoiding whan we got hame. But naebody twold because aabody wis ida sam boat. (Telford, 1998)

Newlands (1999) writes about the lack of any immorality amongst the women, citing an interview with Mary Murray from Cellardyke held in the School of Scottish Studies, but further interview evidence (McNab 2007, Kay 2007, Marshall, 1977) suggests that there were some aspects of the behaviour of both women and men which
have not been so well documented. It is also entirely possible that many of them did not realise that there was anything of this nature taking place at the time:

*MH:* .....we were jist 16 when we went to Lerwick - we didnae ken whit sex and ae things wis! (Hughes, 2005)

There were opportunities for the women to have sexual relationships with fishermen, who had often been away from home, and away from the company of women for a substantial amounts of time, and who would if necessary, be prepared to pay for their favours. There were a couple of the interviewees who discussed this side of life which did exist for some of the women. Rita McNab who had worked at the gutting, also had a guesthouse in Yarmouth and was more forthcoming about the types of activities undertaken by some of the women:

*RM:* Well, you’ve heard the saying about folk being coarse but a heart of gold and she was. I mind she came to Yarmouth, here [Shetland] finished and she came to Yarmouth. And I’d a kind of a boarding hoose in Yarmouth and she came to the door, and she come in and she said ‘I’m lookin’ for digs Rita’ and I says ‘The lassie up the road’s takin’ them’ and she said ‘You wouldnae gi’ me digs would you?’ and I says ‘Sandra, if I’d a hundred rooms I wouldnae gie you digs, that’s how we’re friends to this day!’ and she telll a’body that, didn’t she! ‘She says, see that ‘b’ ‘i’ ‘i’ c’ ‘h’ here, she said if she’d a hundred rooms she wouldn’t take me in!’ But we never fell oot aboot it.

*JdF:* And why wouldn’t you take her in? Because she’d have visitors?
RM: Mair than visitors! Whit! No way. I'd have tae have the red lamp outside!

JdF: So do you think there were many women that were living like that?

RM: No. But I would say there's always — be one in every yard. (McNab and McNab, 2007)

Despite the fact that sexual immorality was obviously something very much frowned upon by the majority of the women at the gutting, it is interesting to note that Rita was keen to stress how hard the other woman worked, and how she had a ‘heart of gold’ despite being involved in varying degrees of prostitution while at the fishing. There was a sense of understanding that some women had circumstances which required them to make extra money as and when they could. Prostitution was a way of making more money at the gutting. Another interviewee (Kay, 2007) talked about the huts in Shetland, and how there was one in particular which would host more rowdy ceilidhs and parties than the others. She described how one night when she visited the hut, having heard the music from outside, she realised that there was what she described as ‘an orgy’ going on in one of the rooms, while musicians played in another. It was not clear however whether this was actually prostitution or merely more open forms of sexual recreation for those involved.

Evidence of sexual immorality from the earlier period of the thesis came from another interview undertaken by Andrew Noble in 1977, in which Christian Marshall from Fraserburgh discussed night time entertainment in the huts of Lerwick before the First World War:
Mr N: People were saying that in Lerwick they used to have the dancers in the huts and then stay on for the night?

Mrs M: ....Oh, aye, they did – that’s right – they stayed all night. Aye but not only the young lads, some more of the mair at easy sort of men. You see, in Balta Sound they huts – there was no – nothin... So when we was supposed to be in our beds, you know what we were doin’? We were seein’ who’s comin’ in next door, we climbed up – we’d had a chair – we’d only the one chair in the place – wi’ this chair we’d a turn about till we could see what was goin’ on in the next hut – and they were nac in their beds until it was rising time!

We went into the next... we went in there and we looked over – of course, the Shetland women were still good living – religious type... So we took a chair in and we’d lookin’ over to see what they’re doin but the Wick women – oh!

What a time they had! Ach, an’ the men was aboot! Ach, with the foreign boats and al’ things. What a time they had. We finished our education, eh!?!

Ach, it’s true – what we didna ken, we learnt then! We used to watch all that was goin’ on.... (Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

Christian Marshall goes on to say that despite the fact that some of these men were good living and religious, the girls would never have told others back home:

But we never spilt the beans and neither did they! We’d never have tell’t.

(Marshall and Marshall, 1977)
This is evidence that despite the strong religious background from which the men and women came, life was not always lived within the strict constraints of their religious beliefs. The experience did leave Christian with a feeling of disappointment and lack of respect for these men, particularly when they claimed to be God-fearing and religious when back at home.

6.3.9 Dances

The recreational aspects of the women’s lives show the ways in which they felt they were part of the culture and society of their time, happy to be a part of their own community, but open minded enough to feel part of the wider world. This is perhaps even more the case after the First World War, which brought the outside world much closer to people generally, and also gave them a sense of nationalism and identification with people outside their own tight-knit crofter or fisher communities. The craze for dancing among the working classes took hold in the 1920s and many of the women interviewed remember the dancing at that time—both the informal dancing in the huts or outside as discussed above, but also the formal dances, particularly those in the large dance halls in Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. This was a nationwide phenomenon, and Roberts (1984) discussed the dance craze in the 1920s amongst the working class women of northern England:

Dancing, already very popular before the First World War, became almost a mania in the 1920s, with a proliferation of dance halls..... It was common for girls to go to at least two dances a week. .....working-class dances were very
strictly controlled. The different denominations varied in their attitudes to
dances. (Roberts, 1984: 69-70)

One Shetland woman summed it up for the herring girls:

Dats da enjoyment o wir life – wir young life was dancing and dat!*
(Robertson, 1985)

Both Lindy Henderson originally from Peterhead, and Violet Gillespie from
Fraserburgh also had particularly fond memories of their time dancing when away at
the gutting:

*JdF: I know you were young – but were you able to go out in Scarborough?*
*LH: Oh yes, just I wouldnae be out at nights – the girls wouldn’t allow that. I
just went out with the girls – but eh, I danced! I remember it was like one of
these places where they had the banyards – and the music was playing and
some of the fisher lads were out – and one of them picked me up – just took a
hold of me and danced me round the floor! I didn’t know who he was – just
thought he was one of the fishermen who was there – and I happened to be a
good dancer – that was one thing And he came and pulled me over and he
was dancing to the music in the amusement place.*

*JdF: And was it just mainly the fisher folk that would be out – or was there
others?*
*LH: Oh there was a mixture ... (Henderson, 2005)*
Lindy Henderson was in Yarmouth in the 1920s and 30s while Violet Gillespie’s experiences were from the 1940s and 50s:

*VG*: ...*the Britannia Pier and the Wellington Pier it was always a shilling for a Saturday night... Well Friday was the only day worth working for - you got your pay and you got to the dance!*

*JdF*: Can you describe that - where was it?... what was it like?

*VG*: Well, I used to go to the Goodies on a Friday night - and that was ‘No Jiving Allowed’ that was Ballroom, cos I loved Ballroom dancing y’know. And I used to go there on a Friday night - and I used to go on my own - because none of the rest liked Ballroom dancing - they liked it - but - they wouldn’t go - but somebody told us about it and Jean said ‘Now, you’re going because you like dancing!’ So they used to walk me down and drop me off, then come back and collect me at 11 o clock... (Gillespie, 2006)
This is an early postcard of the Britannia Pier in Great Yarmouth around 1900, and the following postcard shows the same pier in later years c1945. This area of Yarmouth in both the periods depicted held many happy memories for women who had spent seasons at Great Yarmouth, both for the dances and for promenades.

Figure 6.15 Britannia Pier, Great Yarmouth c.1945

In Shetland, the end of the herring fishing season was marked with each yard holding their own celebration – or ‘Foy’ as it was known. This was a mixture of formal and informal recreation, with the women being in charge of catering for the dance, and organising a local band for music. The idea of the Foy was not purely from Shetland however. This interview shows how the idea of celebrating the end of the fishing season possibly came from the Dutch, and was also recognised in Peterhead:

JDB: Oh aye, at's whit they used to call a party in Peterhead, a Foy.

AB: A, but that would been awa further back.

GS: And do they still?

AB: No, no no... A lot of the old scotch words are dyin out ye see.

GS: Well that's Dutch actually. That is actually a Dutch thing that was
brought over here. ...

AB: Well ye see the Dutch come ower first, and gutted the herring, awa back, before the first world war ye see it's afore... The Dutch, at wis the first o the herrin trade in Peterheid ye see.... (Buchan and Buchan, 1994)

Most of those interviewed believed the Foy to have been a Shetland based celebration but this interview evidence suggests that it was not only in Shetland that the end of the fishing season would have been celebrated in this way, and in fact the idea of the Foy was a much older tradition stretching back to when the Dutch fished herring around the northern shores in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Jessie Stewart in Scalloway remembered organising the end of season ‘Foy’, although once again, as is shown in her comments, it was not a tradition carried out by every yard. It is likely that by this time it would have been more common among the Shetland curers and the yards where most of the Shetland women worked:

JS: Most o' the yards had a Foy - at the end of the thing. A party - it was ca'd a Foy - it would be a dance - and there would be a band. But we never hed that at Davidsons. And I canna mind - I was at one when we were at Mitchells ... But em, we did have dances - you did have a party to finish off. (Stewart, 2007)

Maggie Leask from Whalsay also remembered the Foys at the end of the season in Shetland:
ML: At the end of the season we had the got the hall and hed what we call our Foy – and that was a dance night – the whole station – the whole of the workers – we hired that hall – and hed a dance in it – got some boys to play.

JdF: What kind of music?

ML: It was likely accordion and a fiddle – and something like that –

JdF: Do you remember any of the dances?

ML: Oh, generally quadrilles and eightsome reels, waltzes and foxtrots – just anything.

JdF: Would the fishermen come to that as well?

ML: If they were ashore you did – the coopers and a’ would come – well just anybody ken – it just didna matter.

JdF: Food?

ML: Yeh, we had food

JdF: Who would provide the food?

ML: We just paid it among us – just divided up the cost – hire o’ the hall.

JdF: Was that a big night?

ML: Yes it was – it was the finish o’ our season. (Leask, 2007)

Dances were important to many of the women during the weekend, whether in the huts or the more formal dances in Great Yarmouth or Lowestoft or the Foys in Shetland, but so too was religion, and many still attended church on Sunday.
6.3.10 Church attendance patterns

During the time period under discussion, the evidence from the interviews suggests that religion played a major part in the lives of the majority of the women at the fishing. Fishing communities were renowned for their religious background and churches were built to accommodate the fishing communities while they were in East Anglian ports.

Some fishing communities were particularly religious, which did impact more strongly on people's lives, and the majority of the women from Stornoway came from a Free Church background, the women from Shetland were Church of Scotland and the east coast had a mixture of Baptist, Congregationalist, Close Brethren amongst others. Members of the Close Brethren Church, for example could only eat with others from the same church, and there were occasions when men would not even go to sea with others from outside their religion.

In Pultneytown at the height of the industry in the mid nineteenth century, with thousands of workers arriving for the season, there were various churches provided for the varying denominations of fisher folk who descended on the town:

At one time, from the 1840s to the 1860s Wick had the largest Gaelic speaking congregation of any church in the world. Over 1500 people would attend the services and prayer meetings which required 3 ministers at one time to officiate over them. (Sutherland, 1983: 31)
Dorian (1985) describes the observance of religion and the Sabbath from the perspective of the Free Church women from East Sutherland while they were at the gutting:

In spite of the distance from home and the great freedom the fishergirls enjoyed at the fishing stations compared to the strictly supervised life in their home villages, religious observance was scrupulous. No work but the necessary minimum of cooking was done on the Sabbath, and the recreation the fishergirls and boys enjoyed together on Sunday was hymn singing groups. Everyone went to church as a matter of course. Doing no work on the Sabbath was quite a sacrifice, because it was the only free day the girls had. It would have been very convenient to do washing or sewing or cleaning that day, but no such thing happened. Instead those chores were squeezed into corners of the work week, especially Monday... (Dorian, 1985)

Christian Marshall from Fraserburgh described the constraints of coming from a strict religious family, and how this impacted on what freedom was allowed within the family, compared with the freedom the women felt when they were away from home:

*Mr N:* So there was a real contrast when they went away – would you say as a child that in the home life was pretty strict?

*Mrs M:* Oh, strict! My father you did not – if he just put his finger out – we were like mice; we was hidin’. Terrified to move. Oh, he was a strict man.

*Mr N:* What would happen if you disobeyed him though?
Mrs M: Disobeyed him? Many a time I’ve told him more lies, as would sink a ferry boat!

Mr N: I mean, if he’d found out, what would he have done?

Mrs M: I’d have been murdered if he’d found out. If I’d been goin’ to a dance – no, my mother wasn’t like that – my mother was – she would have given and taken, you know – but not him. He was narrow-minded; dancin’ was wicked; picture houses was wicked; everything was wicked; anything but the Bible, and that was right. They were all like that, you see. (Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

Further on in the interview, Christian describes how her father’s strict views changed after he came back from the First World War.

Mrs M: Aye, narrow-mindedness – that was what was wrong. It wasn’t my opinion. After he come back from the War – there were many of us was killed – he seemed to be... he was still religious, but he was a changed man...

Mr M: He saw so much death...

Mrs M: Aye. He never asked a question, ‘Where are you goin’?’. You could go anywhere – but I’ll tell you what he did. He says ‘Now, you come o’age, you got to join a church – it didna matter what kind of Kirk it was – any Church, if you want to be a Catholic you can be it, if you want to be a Protestant you can be it and join the Church of Scotland. Congregational – Episcopal, any one, you see’ But we had to be a member of a church. I says, ‘I’d maybe join the Salvation Army’ – I never was in it – I never was in the Salvation Army – I joined the Old Kirk as we call it – Church of Scotland and
John and Jimmie [brothers] joined the Congregational Church. And our Maggie gae to the Salvational Army – I ken no, did they? – Baptist – she were Baptist – we all joined different Kirks, except just the twa brothers. (Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

Christian continued talking about religion within her community following the 1921 Revival movement which saw conversions right around the North East coast, with fishing communities seemingly being particularly responsive to this type of preaching. Her experiences at Baltasound of what she considered immoral behaviour of fishermen and women in the huts in Shetland described previously had left a lasting impression on her and the perceived hypocrisy of some of those from her own community who claimed to be religious but behaved in this way while away at the fishing, obviously never left her:

Mr N: Do you think that the revival in 1921 – do you think that made much difference to people?

Mrs M: The Revival? It made you sick – hell, to me! I used to see them all flocking awa to this religious meeting – it was held in the Baptist Kirk. And I says ‘I could rather go to a show tonight’ and I did! I go to the pictures – I wouldna go.

Mr N: So you were pretty against it yourself?

Mrs M: Oh, I didna believe in’t. They used to stand on street corners, and shout out to them, and sing hymns – and when they gang awa’ fra there they were worse than anybody. You see I saw it when I was young, in Baltasound, I saw it in Yarmouth. I saw it in Lowestoft. And I just says, ‘Well, I dinna
believe in it'. I'm nae against anybody being religious, or anything of that kind. I just have a mind for myself. But just' standing, preaching, prayin, and then awa' boozin' and all the women – oh, no – I didna believe in that...

(Marshall and Marshall, 1977)

Although there is a lot of discussion regarding the Methodist, Baptist and Brethren Churches within the fishing communities, there were also still quite a number of Catholics. For some there were issues with different religions within one family, but here Margaret Hughes from Buckie describes how her grandfather was a staunch Catholic, and her grandmother a Methodist, but in this case it did not cause too many problems:

MH: My mother was Methodist church- but my grandfather was a staunch Catholic - cos Lossiemouth - there's a lot of Catholics there. ... They built a new chapel in Lossiemouth - but all them years that my grandmother was..... she never went to the chapel. But my grandfather ... when the chapel was built, he kept the keys of Lossie chapel. He says 'I would like if you would come the opening o' it'... So.. they went - and whit ye did at the church - you put yer collection into a plate at the door. And then - they came along wi' a long pole wi' a collection bag - and he says 'Put yer collection into the bag' and she says 'I put my collection into the plate at the door.' And he says 'That wis the holy water!' And she says 'Well my shilling is the only one that's been blessed the day.' ... (Hughes, 2005)
Despite the fact that commentators such as Dorian (1985) suggest that the women would never miss a Sunday service, and that all the women were religious, the interviews show that there was variation amongst the women. Christian Marshall was much more cynical about religion having had her experiences in Baltasound, and other interviews from the later period describe how the women did not always attend church on a Sunday. The following conversation between Bella Bruce and Katie Coull about attending church shows that variation might also be due to the time period in which the women were working, and the lapsing of Sunday observance amongst the fishing fleet generally after the Second World War:

**IB:** The English boats they aye went tae sea on a Sunday – but not the Scots boats – I never workit on a Sunday, no, no. You never workit on a Sunday.

**KC:** We workit at the kipperin on a Sunday after the war, and the manny said ‘Whose all gaen tae the kirk the nicht?’ But we were sae tired, naebody wis gaen – ‘Fas all gaen?’ – ‘No we’re nae gaen, Jim, we’re too tired.’ We wis all run doon. There was rationing and all things ration books and ye werenae gettin’ food ken. Ye wisnae. (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

This indicates a change over time, with post World War 2 showing a slightly more relaxed attitude – particularly in relation to religion. Some Scots boats started to fish on a Sunday in the 1940s. There was a freedom being expressed here too - a freedom from social and religious constraints, which would have affected different groups of fishermen and women in different ways, depending upon their own religious beliefs. Even to this day, many people from Lewis remain staunchly against certain activities taking place on a Sunday. But like the men described at the beginning of the section
by Christian Marshall, there was definitely a feeling of freedom for some of the girls when they were away from home. The women described how they did not feel under such strict obligations as church attendance while they were away - but would revert back to normal community life when back home.

6.3.11 Community Support

As was mentioned above, the women tended to stay within their close groups, crews stayed together and women from communities would also socialise together. This was partly to ensure supervision and it helped to protect the women from unwanted attention which they might have had if they were on their own in an unfamiliar town. This was also upheld by the notion of the importance of the group, community within the fishing fraternity being of more importance than the individual.

Generally, it was the older women who ensured the moral welfare of the younger ones, with many examples of mothers who would not let their daughters go to the gutting unless they were being supervised:

VG: ... But I couldn’t get away to Yarmouth til this Jean and Jess White - this is friends that I’d met in the fish house - unless they were guaranteed to look after me. cos of being so young y’know. [my mother] wouldn’t allow it until I got them to go up and, they were nice respectable women - y’know married - and they said they’d look after me and by golly - they did. You weren’t allowed to do ought - y’know! Course you
were too tired to go out all week anyway. (Gillespie, 2006)

Meanwhile there were those outwith the fishing community who wished to be placed in a position of supervision or control over the women particularly when they were away from home. They were generally connected with the church, and saw the Missions as an extension of the Church Mission work in Colonial outposts such as Africa.

**Sunday in Port.**

Conditions have greatly modified in recent years, and, as in other cases, custom and costume have reacted each upon the other. No longer do the girls, when off duty, advertise their individuality by wearing the garb of their native village. They “dress” and only their tongue betrays them. This fact has set the devoted ladies, who in name of the Church care for these girls, a new problem — namely, how to provide an attractive room as a social and recreational centre near the parts where these girls lodge. It was interesting to see how in Yarmouth this new demand had been met. We spent some hours in a commodious upper room, which until lately was a restaurant, but now decorated with pictures, made cozy with many an easy chair, bright with a good piano, and home-like with small tables at which they can knit, sew, or amuse themselves. One of those wall pictures had a quaint tale. It was really a travel advertisement of the Riviera, but it held the eye one evening lately of some of these lassies. “What’s that?” “Dinna ken, never been in that place.” “Ach,” said another, “that’s one of the farrin pairts whaur they send folks to deo in.” Poor Montone!

The Scotsman 15th November 1929

This report describes a well furnished recreational space provided by the church in Yarmouth. The Mission Stations are well documented and were one way in which the
women could be supervised while also providing the equivalent of industrial 'sick bays' where the women and the men could go to receive treatment for any injuries sustained as part of their work - as described in Chapter 5. But this report describes how the churches had moved into the field of providing recreational facilities most probably to keep the women from the perceived temptations which were available in the larger ports. There also seems to have been a continuing notion from those outside the industry that these were women who required looking after, both in the physical and the spiritual sense. The more formal recreation of dancing particularly in the dance halls of the larger towns caused some concern amongst those who were interested in the welfare of the women - particularly the younger women. This was also the case for other young people of the time in different areas and from different occupational groups. Roberts (1984) refers to the control of dances by the Church for the young people of Lancaster during this period:

Dances were an important meeting-place for young men and women – an assumption made by the dancers themselves, their parents, church officials, masters of ceremonies, and dance promoters alike. But the fear of uncontrolled sexual behaviour was ever-present, and explains both the tight regulations governing the dances and why working-class girls were allowed to go to them. It was preferable to meet young men in such a public and controlled environment than in a secret and potentially dangerous one. (Roberts, 1984: 71)

While there were clearly similarities between the working class young of Lancashire and the young people working at in the fishing industry at this time, the aspects of
discipline and control under which socialising took place generally also underlines the extent of the freedom experienced by the herring girls while working at the fishing.

6.4 **Romance and Marriage: cultural boundaries and community identity**

One of the most important outcomes of the recreational activities of the women, such as dances and promenades both at home and at the gutting, was the opportunity to meet potential husbands. The patterns of courtship and marriage underline the importance of the community, with many women ending up marrying fishermen, and often fishermen from within their own communities or close by.

6.4.1 **A fisherman’s wife**

Marriage was of the utmost importance within all the communities from which the women came, with women having an active part to play in both crofting and fishing families. Extended families and the requirements of labour ashore as well as at sea, ensured that there was a role for every member of the family, and kinship ties were also important. Within the fishing communities, the role of the wife would extend beyond the domestic duties of house and family to net-mending, baiting lines and ensuring that the finances were looked after over the course of the year. This was no simple task, with an occupation which was so dependent on such a variety of factors – the weather, the markets, upkeep of the boats, the crews – and all these had to be considered even before the actual success or failure of the fishing was taken into
account. These communities were entirely dependent on the fishing and so it was necessary to reduce any risks which could be reduced. Jean Strachan from Peterhead recalls how important it was for the fisher people to be able to save money over the year, and consequently how important it was for them to marry from within the fishing community:

*Workmen on wages are poorer because being on wages they’re not accustomed to saving. We were brought up to save. It’s very difficult for a girl whose not been in a fisher family to marry into one. She’s used to a weekly wage. I put the money my husband gave me into the bank, always the bank. My mother did the same. I don’t think fisher people bought second hand clothes. They can knit, darn and patch. Saw a lot of them with patches those days.... None of my family or my husband’s family were ever farmers or farmworkers. (Murray, 1976)*

One way to ensure that the family and the communities could function was to have the skills to meet the needs of a variable season, and variable year – and that fell to the women, who would have learned from their own mothers how to economise, how to work a system of credit and debt over the seasons and make the most of opportunities as they arose. Combined with the skills which they had learned as children baiting and mending, it was felt that to marry out-with the fishing communities would be a real disadvantage to a fishing family. One of the interviewees talked about how hard her mother had to work when she was a child in Buckie, and how she would have preferred if she had stayed home with her:
IM: Aye – they all workit at the fishing. My mither used tae mend the nets too along wi Margaret’s mother – Margaret’s mother and my auntie that stays up at Buckpool. Well her husband had a boat, and these – they had the women tae help them mend the nets. So my mither used tae geng – and so did Margaret’s mother, and mend the nets – ye ken.

JDF: Where would they mend them?

IM: In the house.

JDF: Their own house?

IM: Aye - In Buckpool. They’d a big upstairs y’see – and they kept that bit – jist for the nets – and the wemen used tae geng and mend the nets up there. I never likit it when my mither went out tae mend.

JDF: Why not?

IM: I dinnae ken – I jist likit it when she wis in the hoose – but she hed tae geng and help my auntie and them y’see. (Murray, 2005)
Figure 6.16  Fishing Family c.1890  George Washington Wilson

This photograph of a fishing family captured by George Washington Wilson at the end of the nineteenth century in Elie, Fife, clearly shows how the fishing and preparation required for it was a communal family activity. Here we can see perhaps three generations of the same family, baiting or cleaning the long lines, and the woman is very much a part of the action. Discussion about the fishing, how the season was going, what the plan was over the coming weeks, would have been undertaken during this type of work. This underlines the part which women played in the fishing communities, extending out with the domestic sphere and into the working practices.

Nadel-Klein (2003) discussed the importance of marriage within fishing communities, ‘A Fisher Laddie needs A Fisher Lassie’ and how the women and men relied on each other:
Fishermen consciously sought wives who would be effective helpmates. As one man said to me, “Ye had to marry wi’in the fisherfolk. Ye needed a wife who knew the wark.” (Nadel-Klein, 2003:65)

She went on to make the point that it was not just a question of the men needing the women, but that the work often involved groups of female workers – such as the net mending described in the interview above, and the women felt happiest when working with members of their close family or friends from within their community. They had a shared background within the fishing community, and also experience of working closely together when the men were away at sea.

So village endogamy provided the ideal solution: men and women were assured of mates whose skills and values were compatible with their own while intra-sex solidarity could persist unchallenged. Furthermore ... it reinforced local solidarity in the face of social stigma. (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 66)

This was most certainly the case for the women living along the east coast, but for other women who were also at the gutting, even those with a crofting background often married within their own communities. There are strong comparisons between crofting and fishing communities, with the notion of working alongside family and friends, and having a shared background. So while Nadel-Klein’s point about the requirement within the fishing communities to marry a woman who could play the necessary part within the work place and the economy of the fishing goes some way towards explaining the reasons why marriage normally took place between members
of fishing communities, the pattern is more complex than that indicated. Women
from the crofting communities of Shetland and the Western Isles played an active role
in their local economies too at this time, work which required them to leave the
gutting at the end of the summer to go back to help with the harvest at home.

Figure 6.17 Whalsay girls working at the harvest  c.1930s

Seonag Macarthur from Lewis describes within her own family how the fishing and
crofting worked together, and ensured that there was always work to do:

JdF: You were brought up at the Lochs...

SM: Yes we had a croft — and a cow, and plenty sheeps. My father had plenty
sheeps. He had a boat first — for fishing out in a boat — fishing in Stornoway
— with the boat with nets. Well, yes he was at the herring fishing...

JdF: Did he travel to the east coast?
SM: No he had a boat himself and taking it to Stornoway – there was four or five in the boat. A big boat with sails. I don’t know the name of the boat. There was plenty boats since I was... They were fishing – Columbine and Cailleach Og ...

JdF: When were you born?

SM: March 1906, Cromore... Everyone was working on the croft and at the sheeps or out on the boats. And we were out with the cows – and going to the wells – working at peats. Yes, yes. There was always something to do.

JdF: So what made you decide to go to the herring – how did that come about?

SM: Oh well – you have to go when you leave school. You have to go to some working. With the herring scene I would get home for the harvest – for August time.

JdF: Did you ever want to do anything else ...

SM: No, no – just going down to the fishing – to Wick in summer and to Lowestoft in the winter – and sometimes there was herring in Stornoway...

(Macarthur, 2007)

Although the cultural origins may have been different for the herring girls from different parts of northern Scotland, what they did share was being part of tight-knit communities in which their labour played an important part in the local economy and the income for their families. Nadel-Klein is perhaps comparing the lives of the east coast women with the lives of women in the towns and cities, and perhaps particularly the middle-classes, for whom the cult of domesticity was a major factor in their lives. But as has been shown, the women at the gutting came from various different
backgrounds, and the patterns of courtship and marriage have to be considered for more than one group of women. From the interview evidence, however, it can be assumed that the men from crofting backgrounds were equally likely to marry someone from their own class and background for the same reasons as the men from the fishing communities. And from the interview evidence, the tradition of men visiting the huts or lodgings of women from crofting and farming Shetland, Stornoway and Barra is as strong as the traditions of the east coast fisherfolk:

SM: Dances? We had dances in a hut, yes, the coopers and that's what – yes. Melodian and dancing we had... The boys would be going to the fishing too – they had to go...

JdF: So that would be your entertainment in the evening.

SM: The boys would come and see us in the evening. The ones from Stornoway that were away to the herring fishing. At weekends they would be coming to see us. They weren't going out at weekends then – the boats, no. Just going out in the week. They wouldn't go out on a Saturday night or Sunday. No, no Sunday fishing. Well no – in Stornoway – it was like that...

(Seonag Macarthur, 2007)

The visiting at the huts and lodgings served to underline the already strong community bonds, and helped to ensure that the community roots and links remained strong. These ties would in themselves, help to ensure that the behaviour of both the women and the men was still within the bounds of respectability, even when the women were a long way from home, and sometimes from parental supervision. But it is clear that romances did flourish, but those which were encouraged within the social
groupings were the romances between men and women from the same cultural backgrounds.

6.4.2 Marrying within the fishing community

Despite the fact that the women were living away from home, and had the opportunity to socialise with people out-with their own communities, many of the interviewees ended up marrying men from communities near where they themselves came from. Often they met their future husbands while they were away at the fishing, and nowhere near home at all. One interviewee from Shetland met her husband at the fishing season in Lerwick, but he was originally from a village not far from her own although they had never met:

Js: I wasnae very taen wi’ him when I met him at first. He was carrying on wi’ some wife when I met him first – they were roaring and laughing. When he appeared first I wasnae very attracted to him... There were nothing really very definite but we did kind o’ geng aboot a bit. Then we went to Yarmouth and he turned up there, so that was awright. He took me to the pictures when he was ashore – and that was awright. And then we kind of faded oot a bit o’er the winter. And I think we kept up on correspondence but then we met again the next year and kinda goed on frae there. So that was it. I never got engaged cos he’d been engaged before and when he suggested getting engaged I said no. I thought ‘I’m no geng to have folk saying I’m wearing somebody else’s ring’ so I refused to be engaged. But – war had broken out
and he was going to South Georgia to the whaling. So we decided we'd get married when he came back – if he came back. So he came back in 1940 and we got married in June. And then of course, in Burra, because we had got married, they hadna kent that we were intending to get married. So they reckoned there was some reason for this – because I had got a coat made – they were a dress maker that come to Sandwick. And she was making clothes and I had got her to mak me things because I was tall and it was easier to get it made – far better to get it made. And she decided that I should get a Swagger coat cos that would take off of my height. So I was wearing this Swagger coat you see and they thought I was pregnant. And of course they had to wait, cos we married in 1940 but Ian wasna born til 1942 ...a very long pregnancy – he was like an elephant! [laughs] (Stewart, 2006)

It is clear that Jessie placed considerable importance on ‘what people thought of her’ – both the idea of becoming engaged when her husband had already been engaged, and also the idea that she might already have been pregnant when she got married. This ties in with the idea of group supervision; the importance which is placed on the individual to conform to the expectations of the group. This was an important feature in the lives of the herring girls, both in an occupational and a social setting. Dona Lee Davis theories regarding occupational community are relevant here and she also writes about the marriage patterns within Newfoundland fishing communities:

By marrying within the village, women felt that they were making a commitment to the fishing way of life. This is not a case of “men apart”. Both men and women are linked to the fishery through a complex of
expansive kin networks.... A common traditional Newfoundland expression about making a living in the outports is "the woman is more than 50%." Yet, Grey Rock Harbour women have strengthened their sense of participation in the occupational community by emphasising their role in maintaining the psychological satisfaction and emotional health of their menfolk who work in a demanding, risky, and dangerous occupation. (Davis, 1986: 131)

When the traditions of the fishermen visiting the huts or lodgings on a Saturday, excursions on a Sunday or invitations to dine aboard the boats on a Sunday as discussed above are all considered, it is not so surprising that many young people met their partners at the fishing. As these visits and excursions were often linked to ties of family and community, it is less surprising that the women still tended to marry men from their own communities or backgrounds. This is what they had in common in the first place, and while working away from home, the links to the family were sometimes even stronger. The same situation is discussed by two Buckie interviewees:

_JdF: So when you were up in Lerwick - were there Buckie boats up there working along with you?_

_KC: And English boats frae Lowestoft and that._

_IB: And they used to come up and see you and get their tea._

_JdF: And was there any romances going on?_

_IB: Oh, I suppose there wis. Your brither [to Katie] gaed wi' the Gamrie Quine - her hut and oor hut was thegither._

_KC: Aye, they must have met at the fishin' my brither and Ellen - Ann - she's
Gamrie, Gordonstoun - he went tae Gordonstoun and stayed.

IB: It was Mitchell and Johnnie Barrett used tae come up.

KC: There's twa or three married at Gamrie - and other places. I went tae Mallaig and met that many o' mine! [laughter]

IB: Bella met her...

KC: You met your many 'n a'!

IB: It's Buckpool[he was from] but I met him in Lowestoft the first day of the war! He was in Lowestoft laying mines -

KC: There's a lot of chaps frae here married to ...

JdF: And the town itself - coming over here – there's a lot of farming. Was there a lot of difference between those that worked at the fishing and those that worked on the land – did you get much of a choice?

IB: We used tae call them 'country folk' – and they would called us 'the fishers'.

KC: Aye 'the fishers' – two separate kind o' 'timers'.

JdF: And did you mix?

KC: No, no I wouldnae say – no you wouldnae bother going after a country lad... (Coull and Bruce, 2005)

Margaret Hughes from Buckie remembered meeting her husband in Hartlepool:

MH: ...I remember getting everything washed and packed in yer trunk, ready for Yarmouth when we got a wire saying that we were going to Hartlepool so.

JdF: This was with the same curers?
MH  Aye- so then we got on the train to Hartlepool. There were only three herring boats working there - Pittenweem boats ... I had tae go tae Hartlepool to meet my fate! - [laughs] They were there at Hartlepool...

JdF  So you went down to Hartlepool with the same team?

MH  The same gutting crew. There were just four crews went to Hartlepool ... But these three Pittenweem boats were there.

JdF  Can you mind the names?

MH  There was the Good Design, the Fortunatus and the Courageous - that was the three that was in Hartlepool. So, they were very good - when they got their herring a’ delivered and the boats cleaned up they would - a basket would come up - cos its great big high quays that was in Hartlepool. They would take a basket and we got a kettle for tea - and we got sandwiches and that. We were lucky there, cos we got a cup of tea through the time from them...

JdF  Was that the [boat] crew that made you tea?

MH  Aye they used to come up and that - that’s when my husband’s father - they had the Fortunatus - my husband’s father and brother and him were in that boat. And they used to come back to your digs, and sit and speak. And they would take you tae the pictures - you aye went wi this three - you never went oot on your own. That was in Hartlepool. They had to leave Hartlepool as well when the fishing finished there. The war was imminent at that time ...

(Hughes, 2005)
Margaret went on to marry Mitch and they were together until he died in 1980. One other interviewee, Ina Murray who was in a crew with Margaret had recently lost her husband, whom she had also married during the Second World War, and died shortly after my interview with her. She was born and died in the same house in Yardie, one of the oldest fishermen’s houses in Buckie, and was one of the last of her generation of fisher folk.

6.4.3 Marrying outwith the fishing community

Marrying within the same community or type of community from the interview evidence was the more common experience for the women. But the movement of people around the coast during the season, meant that the women were coming into
contact with people from different backgrounds, and there were occasions when this led to romance and subsequently to marriage. It was not an easy situation for some of them, and there could be considerable opposition from both sides of the family:

_LH:_ If people married from the town into the fisher the families weren’t very happy y’know. It was something like Mallaig in the old days – and the West Coast – if you came into the West Coast from the East Coast and you got married – it was a strain on the families. [Laughs]

(Henderson, 1995)

Chrissie Conquer from Shetland went out with a Dutch fisherman in the 1930s, and she described how her mother’s disapproval put a stop to the relationship:

I went wi a Dutch fellow. I went wi him aa the time he cam, was up at Lerwick for the summer..... went oot da road for walks and back again, and ... always had to be in by 10 o’clock, half pat nine on a Sunday... and when he went away he was writing tae me, and me midder says.. “Stop writing letters in taid at foreign boy,” and I had tae tell him no tae write anymore, I was vexed... he was awfy nice. (Wilding; 2001: 14)

Rita and Jim McNab met on the Isle of Man at the fishing in the early 1950s. Rita was the only interviewee who did not come from a fishing background, and had started work as a gutter in the Isle of Man with two women, a mother and daughter from Glasgow. Jim McNab was a cooper from a fishing family from Fraserburgh,
and had been sent by the curing firm with which he worked from Stornoway because the fishing was very poor down to the Isle of Man, where the fishing was better:

JM: And then the foreman came up – and says ‘Jim, Jim there’s a big fishing in the Isle o’ Man – you’ve got to go down.’ And I said ‘No,’ ken – ‘send somebody else!’, ken? ... and he says ‘No, they want you to go down.’ So I had to go down and I went down and I see Rita and I thinks ‘Nice bit o’ stuff!’

RM: That was Bloomfields we were working with.

JM: We went to the pictures and that – and she asked me to marry her so....

RM: Aye that will be right! [laughs] Aye – you came down from Stornoway....

JM: Seven weeks [in Stornoway] and I never dirtied my hands!

RM: And we were flat oot!

JM: There was a big fishing there – a big fishing...in the Isle of Man – Peel. So we got married in the Isle of Man. I was only there three weeks – three weeks and got married!

JdF: You’d only known each other three weeks?

JM: Yeh, three weeks.

JdF: So what happened – how did you actually meet?

RM: He was my cooper.

JM: She was in my yard... I went down to the yard, first day and George was saying – this is what you’ll be daen, and I had a look round and I seen a black thing like this, sticking oot a barrel... And it was Rita, comin’ oot a barrel!

RM: Packing.

JM: And that’s the first the first time I seen her.
RM: And the funny thing is, they kept saying ‘There’s a big Hielan man coming down from Stornoway’, and all I could picture is someone coming down wi’ kilts and a hammer in his hand and then I paed nae attention, but I think I was still thinkin’ it was a Stornoway man. I didna think he was from Fraserburgh.

JM: And we did seven weeks, we got marriet the fishing finished, and we went down to Yarmouth.

JdF: Tell me, how did your families feel that you’d only known each other three weeks and got married?

JM: They never knew... I sent a letter wi’ one o’ the coopers who was going home, and I said ‘Gie this to my mother will ye?’. And he went roond tae the hoose and he gae it tae my father, and my father opened it and he says – ‘Hey Gina, yer boys getting’ marriet today!’; and she says ‘What boy’s getting married?’ and he says ‘Your boy, your son!’ [laughs]

RM: But I thought at the time...

JM: He took to Rita...

RM: an only son... And if I had went tae Yarmouth, it would have been a big flash. My family was all miners and they was all scattered, and there wis no way they were going to make it down to Yarmouth. And we wis poor as poor, and I thought, rather than come tae mine, or go to Jim’s, we would maarry here – and that kept the two families...[happy]

(McNab and McNab, 2007)

This is a very clear example of the importance placed upon marriage within close communities, including here the mining communities of the west of Scotland, even in
the later period just following the Second World War. Rita and Jim McNab have been married for over 50 years, and still work together in Lerwick running a small herring processing factory.

In August 1939 an article appeared in the Fishing News which highlighted a change in the traditional pattern of courtship and marriage amongst the fisherfolk. Instead of assuming a marriage within the fishing community, the somewhat tongue in cheek report suggested that the girls from fishing communities were now actively seeking to marry and work outwith their communities:

New Outlook of Scottish Fisher Girls – A Report in a national newspaper a few days ago contained the bold statement that Scottish fishergirls do not marry fishermen. It may be true that many of the bonnie lasses who come to the East Coast of England for the herring season have other ideas than gutting and packing herring with nimble hands for all the days they are able to stand the strain and toil of the fish market... But we are told by one of a party now working on the coast, they have not come for the fishing only, they are looking for husbands and in their spare time studying all kinds of subjects far removed from the industry of fishing.... It would be interesting to know if these views are generally held among the young fishergirls of Scotland, or confined to the few who have ambitions beyond the life in which they were reared. We are informed that if we think they marry fishermen we are wrong. They marry artisans, shop assistants, policemen and other useful, hard-working members of society – but not fishermen. Is that so? “There is plenty of money in the
herring season,” said one bright young woman, “but most of us are looking for permanent jobs – or husbands.” (Fishing News, August 12 1939)

For many of the women who did get married, whether to men within their own communities or not, this marked the end of their time travelling the fishing and the beginning of a more domestic role supporting family and children. There were those who travelled with their children, but they were less able to enjoy recreational activities outwith their accommodation, having to deal with both the domestic space and the work place, leaving them with less time or opportunity to enjoy the recreations which they might have done in their younger years.

6.5 Celebrating a tradition

The women were proud of their heritage as herring gutters, with many talking about their mothers and grandmothers who had also been a part of the same tradition – stretching back into the nineteenth century. This was a continuation of the pride in the traditions of communities in general, and of fishing communities in particular:

MH: Mother belonged to Lossiemouth and my father belonged to Buckie. It’s funny - my mother met my father at Buncrana in Ireland. But mother and them - they went all over the place. But most of our ones only went to Lerwick and from Lerwick to Yarmouth or Lowestoft. But mother and them they were
all over the place - Man and Wick, Scrabster - wherever there was a fishing.

They met in Ireland - funny that! (Hughes, 2005)

Adalane Fullerton from Shetland was one of the last herring gutters in Shetland in the 1960s and early 70s. She talked about taking her kist to the gutting, and staying in the huts. This was at a time when it would have been possible to carry her clothes in a more up to date suitcase, but she and the other women who were there, wanted to continue with the tradition of kists, as a link to the tradition and identity of the herring gutters of the past. Adalane had a real sense of pride in the tradition of the gutting, and had kept postcards from her aunt which revealed a communication between two sisters, one of whom had been at the gutting and the other who had stayed home to help her mother with the croft.

The various letters and articles in magazines and newspapers looking back at the herring gutting and the fishing industry during its hey-day also reveal a sense of pride and tradition amongst those involved:

...Then it was a very close-knit society, as so many have said in the Herald, not like the greed and selfishness of today. They were stirring times, but with the depletion of stocks fortune will never bring it back again. (Fraserburgh Herald, 31st January 1996)

There was a variety of different celebrations held during this time to celebrate the herring fishing and some of the fishing towns had a ‘Herring Queen’. A young local

---

5 From a conversation with Adalane Fullarton regarding her time at the gutting, 2007
girl would be picked to represent the town or the fish workers. Maggie Leask from Whalsay in Shetland remembered the Herring Queen celebrations there and had a photograph of the Shetland Queen in 1939:

*There was a Herring Queen or something every summer – there was somebody was crowned queen among the gutters – there was the queen and her attendant – I don’t know. I think it went on every year for a while – I used to ha’ a bit photo – the queen and her attendant.* (Leask, 2007)

![Figure 6.19 Crowning the Shetland Herring Queen 1939](image)

In the left hand corner of this photograph can just be seen one of the Viking Yarlsmen, in full costume, showing a link between the herring fishing and the older Shetland traditions of Up Helly Aa. The tradition of Herring Queens was one which was also upheld in many of the towns around the North East coast of Scotland.

In July 1937, a Herring Queen was crowned at Wick and a pageant held in the town.
WICK 'HERRING CROWNING'

10,000 Spectators Present

"QUEEN" AND HER RETINUE

Wick's first "Herring crowning" ceremony, which was held on Saturday, was the finest pageant ever seen in Caithness, and was witnessed by over ten thousand people. Spectators thronged at the braehead above the harbour to see the "Queen" land from the fishing boat Drift Fisher, with Mr James More, oldest Wick skipper engaged at the herring fishing, in command. The "Queen," Miss Reta Shearer, was welcomed to port by Provost John Harper and the Magistrates in their civic robes.

Fisher girls in working garb and Girl Guides dressed as beekeepers formed a guard of honour. The "Queen" and party proceeded to Argyle Square to join the carnival procession which paraded the main streets of the town, returning to the braehead at nine o'clock for the crowning ceremony.

The Scotsman, 19th July, 1937

The report shows that this was in fact a new event, and a way for the contemporary community to celebrate Wick's long heritage as a herring town. While the celebration in Wick did not have its roots in a lengthy tradition, it lasted into the 1950s:

The last Herring Queen was elected in 1953 the same year as the herring fishing ceased in the traditional way. The celebration continues to this day under the title of the Gala Queen. (Am Baile website, from Anne Dunnett, Lord lieutenant of Caithness)

In Shetland there was also an annual parade for the fishing industry, which included decorated floats which travelled through Lerwick. Rita and Jim McNab were involved with the parades and had two photos, one of which clearly indicates the change which came in the early 1970s when oil processing began off the coast of
Shetland, and quickly became of greater economic importance to the islands than herring:
This photograph indicates the change in the local economy, from herring to oil as recognised by those involved in the industry itself. There is a sense of a celebration of both industries within this photograph, showing the importance of oil as an alternative means of employment for the people of Shetland.

6.6 Conclusion

As we have seen, the recreational aspect of life at the gutting was of great importance to keep the women returning to the gutting, despite the harsh conditions of the job. There was a sociability within the communities at that time which relied on the ability of people to entertain themselves without the requirement of any outside agency. People of the time sang as they worked, whistled and knitted as they walked, and danced when there was the opportunity – even outside and without music (MacNeil, 2006). This was not particular to the herring girls and, rather than marking them apart from society, it showed they were very much a part of it. Comparisons to life in northern towns in Lancashire for example (Roberts, 1985) showed how many of the social practices of the younger herring girls – particularly their obsession with dancing in the 1920s, were directly comparable to the girls in other areas of Britain.

The opportunities for recreation in the East Anglian ports in particular were considerably greater than those which existed in the small rural communities from which many of the women came. They also provided important opportunities to meet potential partners, and the pattern of marriage for the women showed how many of them met their husbands while working away at the gutting.
This chapter has considered the social aspects of life at the gutting, including the travel and the living conditions as well as marriage traditions and celebrations. The photographs which have accompanied the text have provided additional information about the lives of the women at the time, and both expand and enhance the narrative. It is to the visual record that we now turn in Chapter 7, which will consider in more detail how the visual narrative can help to tell the story of the women’s lives at the gutting.
Chapter 7  Visual Narratives

Figure 7.1  Packing Herring in Fraserburgh c.1900

7.1  Introduction: Developing Visual Narratives

This chapter will explore the visual representation of the herring girls and how close these representations were to the reality of the lives of the women. Many thousands of photographs and postcards exist, depicting the women often smiling for the camera, up to their elbows in fish and fish guts, stereotypes for a growing tourist market, or images for their own consumption – sent home with messages from distant ports.

There are also paintings and sketches undertaken by artists at the time which provide an individual’s impression of the spectacle of the fishing industry. As an amateur artist, Constance Astley’s journals contain sketches of life at the end of the nineteenth century, and she captured impressions of the herring girls in Stornoway in 1891:
Figure 7.2 Gutting herring in Stornoway, 1891

Figure 7.3 Stornoway Pier, 1891

Constance was the daughter of the owner of Arisaig Estate and was sailing around the Western Isles with Flora MacLeod of Dunvegan. The herring girls who were being sketched were interested in what Constance Astley was doing and she wrote in her journal:
C’s unfortunately futile attempts to sketch them created much excitement and one or other of the noisy busy groups would break off and come to have a look amusing Miss M by their remarks in Gaelic (Astley, June 1891)

Much information can be gained from images, which can then add to the written record. This chapter will look at the visual images of the women at work, concentrating on the considerable photographic record. It will consider the extent to which these images represented the reality of the experience and also how closely the images represented the women’s own perspective on their identity, as well as the conscious or unconscious way in which visual representation could be used to reflect cultural and social perceptions and relationships.

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.

(Berger, 1972:1)

Visual image has become one of the most popular forms of communication over the past century, and yet the social, cultural and historical importance of image is often overlooked by sociologists, anthropologists and historians. Anthropologist Jay Ruby has written on the subject of encouraging the use of visual image in academic research:
Anthropology is a word-driven discipline. It has tended to ignore the visual-pictorial world perhaps because of distrust of the ability of images to convey abstract ideas. When engaged in ethnography, the researcher must convert the complex experience of fieldwork to words in a notebook and then transform those words into other words shifted through analytic methods and theories. This logocentric approach to understanding denies much of the multisensory experience of trying to know another culture. The promise of visual anthropology is that it might provide an alternative way of perceiving culture-perception constructed through the lens. (Ruby, 1996: 1315)

Within the field of social history as well as anthropology, the ability to learn more about people and communities through visual image should not be underestimated. However, while we are looking at the subject from a modern perspective, one in which television, film and image generally are common place and an intrinsic part of modern life, photography was still relatively new at the beginning of the twentieth century, and either being the subject matter for photographs or involved in the production of photographs was an unusual event for most people. It is necessary to consider the historical and economic conditions during which these images were produced, distributed and used. This chapter will consider photographs taken for public consumption of the women involved in the herring industry and also private collections, which present a somewhat different portrayal of the women and the industry.

7.2 The advent of photography
In 1828 the first acknowledged photograph was taken by the Frenchman Niépce although the technology used was considerably different to that which developed during the course of the century (Sutherland, 1983). In the following years, the processes continued to improve and become more simplified and therefore accessible to larger numbers of people, particularly when it became possible to print onto paper from a negative in the late 1830s. Edinburgh at this time was still at the forefront of new thinking, having been through the Enlightenment period during the second half of the eighteenth century, and it is little surprise with the mixture of science and culture being promoted during this period that photography should become one of the aspects of the new thinking. The formation of the photographic partnership of artist Octavius Hill and engineer Robert Adamson in Edinburgh in 1843, was a matter of chance, but was of considerable importance to the history of photography. They set up their workshop on Calton Hill in Edinburgh:

It was to be the site of some of the most sophisticated photography ever created – in early years on through to the present day. (University of Glasgow Special Collections, c.2008)

The two men brought expertise and skills to the partnership which should have led to its continued success well into the nineteenth century. However, Adamson died at the age of 27, and while Octavius Hill had some success in the following years, it was of little importance compared to the huge quantity of material which both men had produced during the four years of their partnership, with over 3000 photographs being developed.
The considerable expansion and growing importance of the herring industry to both Scotland and the United Kingdom, coincided with the development of photography in Scotland in particular, and this led to what at first glance might have been thought of as an unlikely pairing. Following on from Hill and Adamson, some of the earliest professional photographers in the world were based in Scotland, amongst them Alexander Johnstone (1839-1896), who was based in herring’s ‘boom’ town of Wick, George Washington Wilson (1823-1893) from Aberdeen whose collection of over 40,000 glass negatives is based at Aberdeen University and James Valentine (1815-1879) from Dundee who was influenced by George Washington Wilson. Each of these men established photographic businesses in which their sons became involved, to take them on into the twentieth century. All three towns where the men had been born were also involved in the herring industry and it is of little surprise that the industry and the workers involved in it became the subjects for many photographs produced by the firms of all three men.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the importance of photography as a way of communicating to the general public, and of recording and documenting aspects of culture or pieces of local news was being recognised. The main focus of the Johnstone firm’s work was portraiture, including portraits of local fishermen and women, but Johnstone was also interested in capturing scenes of street life and events (Sutherland, 1983). Washington Wilson was particularly renowned for his landscape photography, and his scenes of fishing boats and harbours all around the coast of Scotland. The firm became the largest printing firm in the world during the second half of the nineteenth century. He captured the work on the piers, showing the
women and men working at the farlanes and with barrels, as well as the boats out at sea. His firm also became involved in photographing native people in the British colonies of South Africa and Australia. (University of Aberdeen Special Collections, c.2008) James Valentine began his photography business in 1851, erecting one of the largest photographic glasshouses in Britain in 1855 in Dundee. (Archives Hub, c.2006) His firm became well known after it was commissioned to take photographs after the Tay Bridge disaster of 1879 for the Court of Inquiry.

Valentine views in the nineteenth century were aimed at the national middle and upper class tourist market, with the production of both drawing room albums containing selections of photographs arranged geographically and individual landscape prints... Subjects concentrated on the genteel tourist sights and places in Scotland, then to England in 1882 and on to fashionable resorts abroad, including Norway, Jamaica, Tangiers, Morocco, Madeira and New Zealand before 1900. (Archives Hub, c.2006)

Valentine became involved in the production of postcards around the turn of the twentieth century, which greatly expanded the business, and many photographers and artists worked for the firm in the early years of the 1900s, explaining the large number of postcards depicting the herring fishing industry still in circulation. Some of the earlier photographs taken by Valentine subsequently became postcards for sale to the general public. Valentines had to gauge the public appetite for specific images, and it is clear that the fishing industry was viewed as appropriate subject matter for both photographs and postcards in a way in which the agricultural industries were not. This was partly to do with the expanding tourist market – with many tourists visiting
coastal towns and resorts, where they may well have come into contact with the herring industry, and the women working on the piers. As a momento, or to send communication home, postcards of this aspect of the industry became increasingly popular.

Figure 7.4 Fisher Girl, Valentine Series, 1905
Figure 7.5 James More’s herring curing station, Wick c.1920, The Johnstone Family Photographers

Figure 7.6 Uyeasound, Unst, Shetland c.1900, George Washington Wilson

The ethnographic nature of the photographs being taken by both Valentine and Wilson, and their travel to other countries to photograph ‘native’ people displays...
another aspect of British history of the time – the British Empire and colonialism. It also portrays the type of stereotyping and stigmatisation which was prevalent towards peoples and cultures in foreign lands, with the images exoticising the subjects, and emphasising their ‘otherness’. During the second half of the nineteenth century, this idea of exploration and of documenting peoples in foreign lands, along with the work of missionaries in Africa, and South America was prevalent, built on the notion of the superiority of culture and civilisation of Britain generally. Photographs were being used in a similar context, to represent differences rather than ‘ordinariness’. Photographs are socially constructed artefacts, telling the viewer about the culture of both those depicted and the photographer (Ruby, 1996). The anthropological study of photos taken last century has led to a movement toward an analysis of the photographic practise of the time, and questions as to the production and consumption of the images.

Carol Williams (2003) discusses how photographs were taken portraying native people in the American Pacific Northwest, with a view that over time they were bound to become assimilated into the western ‘civilised’ culture – and these were some of the reasons why anthropologists were documenting them and their lifestyles. They were capturing on camera a way of life very different to their own, and which they believed was disappearing. In many ways, even the idea that the women at the herring gutting could ever be like the middle class notion of femininity was not thinkable to the class conscious observers of the time. The differences portrayed both in text and in photographs are often what is most obvious – the fixation with the messy nature of their work, the industrial clothes, the grime, the smell. Out of many hundreds of representations there are only a couple which show the women out of
their work clothes and these would not be the images for consumption by the general public. They were very much identified by their work and marvelled at in some respects for their ability to be cheerful while up to their elbows in fish guts – as well as being women whom, to outsiders, looked like they were on their own and many hundreds of miles from home. This idea of the ‘otherness’ that ‘they are not like us’ permeated many of the images of the herring gutters which were taken during the first part of the twentieth century.

Williams (2003) talks about the images of the ‘dirty Siwash Indians’ being more interesting to others than the Indians themselves, and in some respects that may also be said to be the case with the herring girls. The smell of the fish and the slimy nature of the guts and scales was certainly something which was commented on by some of the gutters themselves in interview, but also the way in which they were regarded by others outside the industry. The pictorial representation sanitises the process, there is no sense of smell, no dirt – just representation of the work and the women. Some of the pictures have been likened to images of the Virgin Mary and other religious iconography, but this was far from the reality of the actual workplace and the noise, smell and dirt associated with it. It is only the image and the way the images were composed and viewed, which likened them to religious icons.
It is important to separate the stigmatisation and stereotyping of the nineteenth century researchers and photographers from the continuing study of specific classes within British society which provide considerable areas for sociological and ethnographic research. Ian MacKenzie, a photographer who runs the photographic department of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh wrote about the importance of photography in ethnographic research:

So much of ethnology is about people. If we hear a sound recording of a person, we want to see what he or she looks like. Audio and visual is a connection so basic, that the School [of Scottish Studies] encourages its students to provide an image of their informants, either by taking photographs of the people themselves, or making copies of existing photographs. It is no surprise that much of my fieldwork photography relates to people, and their activities. (MacKenzie 2005: 9)
The upsurge in interest in ethnographic and anthropological field work had an impact on photographers who were conscious that they were documenting a specific cultural aspect of fishing community life which was ever changing. This was very much the case with the fishing industry which so often has had to go through change to maintain its success and the success of those whose lives depended upon it.

The Valentine postcard series of ‘Fisher Life’ from the early 1900s is a particularly good example of a commercial base for undertaking a study of a whole cultural grouping of people. This represented a somewhat nostalgic and romantic view of the lives of the ‘fisher folk’ and did not show the differences between the different groups of people involved whether they were from the North East, the Shetland Islands or the Western Isles for example. In his ‘Fisher Life Studies’, Valentine was referring to the fishing communities of the North East coast of Scotland, who felt themselves to be ‘fisher’ above all else.
Williams (2003) discusses how by 1884, due to the introduction of halftone technology which 'enabled a full range of gray tones to be mechanically reproduced via the printing process' it was possible for photographs to be printed alongside narrative in periodicals and newspapers. The same was happening in Britain with various papers writing accounts of the fishing industry and illustrating them with pictures from the industry, often herring girls smiling for the camera. This provided a very strong image and perhaps those who would not normally have been interested in the workings of the British fishing industry were more likely to read an article accompanied by photographs. An example of a publication which utilised illustration to engage more fully with the readership was The Graphic, a weekly illustrated newspaper.
The Graphic was founded in 1869, by William Luson Thomas who believed that illustrations were a powerful way of engaging the public with issues of the time. The paper covered news from Britain and the Empire, both political and arts events as well as celebrations and articles such as the one above about the work of the ‘Scots Fisher Girls’. The publication was very popular with the general public and over half a million copies were being sold monthly in both Britain and America by the late 1880s. (Collecting House website, c.2007) While the illustrations were undertaken by a team of artists for The Graphic, its success does demonstrates how important illustrations were becoming towards the end of the nineteenth century, and how they were beginning to shape how the general public was responding to visual image at this time.
There were also social and political aspects to the types of photos taken of the fishing industry in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The women workers in particular through the photography were being associated with the industrious nature of the British workforce – and the importance of Britain as an international exporter. There was a sense of national pride in the fact that the herring produced was of the best quality – the ‘Scotch Cure’ - and photos of women with thousands of barrels of packed herring display a sense of pride in industry and Britain as a world export leader. The sense of ‘Britishness’ and pride in the Empire also relates to the herring girl photos as an embodiment of the importance of the herring industry – as a key British export. Therefore photographing and documenting the industry in this way could be seen to be undertaken to display a pride in the Victorian work ethic and industry as well as in the merits of individual labour.

From the boats leaving the harbour for the fishing grounds, to the fish being landed on the pier, to being processed and packed by the women, and then stored on the pier in barrels before being exported, this was a highly visible industry which lent itself to being photographed in a way in which very few other industries did. It was a massive industry with millions of barrels shipped abroad and it was industry which could really be seen to be working. It was not hidden away underground like mining and generally it was not undertaken behind the doors of a factory building.

The herring were extremely perishable, so everything was done as quickly as possible to get the herring packed and barrelled and ready for export. This density of activity resulted in very busy images, very visual and very vibrant, a very busy pier – and then
as quickly as the season would start, it would end and the boats would move on, the
curers would move on and the girls would move on. One day there would be huge
amounts of activity and the next there was practically none. Capturing this on film
would have been seen to be a desirable thing, both for those that knew the industry
and for those who were not so aware of it and for whom the novelty of the workings
of the industry must have really been quite amazing. If the herring fleet and shore
workers had been there all the time in the same ports they would have been less of a
fascination, less of a novelty for local people or for the tourists who were more
regularly frequenting seaside ports.

Williams (2003) makes the point that in order to utilise photographs to do more than
just provide illustration for text, it is necessary to look more closely at the historical
narrative and how, in the case of the Native American Indians about whom she is
writing, to understand how photography constructs cultural and racial differences by
'largely emptying the photographic artefact of the imperial, commercial, government,
or anthropological motivations behind its creation.' Williams goes on to say:

Between parties of unequal status, looking was not an innocent act.
Photographs, as a consequence, are primary historical sources, useful in
unveiling the fluctuating state of agency and disempowerment. To understand
the social value of photography in the colonial environment, the original, often
elusive, purpose or function of the photograph must be part of the overall
equation. (Williams, 2003: 8)

This is also of relevance to the public photographs of the women who were at the
gutting. While not part of a native tribe in one of the British colonies, the fact that
the women were often being portrayed as 'different', as 'fisher' - a different class to
that of the photographers in most cases and also the photographic consumers - the
aspect of stereotyping could clearly be seen within the photographs.

As well as portraying a different class of people for specific audiences, the portrayal
of the herring girls can also be seen to be an example of the collision between art and
industry.

7.3 Reading the Photographs

With this relatively new medium, those who were viewing the photographs,
particularly as part of an article or report in a magazine or newspaper, would assume
that the photograph was displaying a true account of whatever the subject matter was,
with no understanding of the potential for manipulation of the subject or the context.
The photograph was received by audiences as an unbiased, neutral pictorial account,
which would sit alongside a piece of text and there was generally no public
appreciation of the way in which photographs could be manipulated, or staged to
portray specific meanings:

Whereas engravings, the labor-intensive mode of visual representation used in
illustrated papers before the halftone, exposed the material or gestural qualities
of representation, photographs were apprehended as neutral sources untouched
by human bias and representative of real people, things, or events. The
photographer, in turn, was seen as an impartial observer divorced from editorial impulses or cultural bias. In other words, the documentary encounter between the subject and the photographer was mistakenly perceived as antiseptic. (Williams, 2003: 10)

Williams goes on to discuss how the spectator or consumer actively participated in the construction of meaning of the photographic image in a manner beyond the original intentions of the photographer:

...the meanings of photographs were reliant on a specific communal context intelligible to a local audience that consumed them within a particular historical moment.... By reconstructing the situated knowledge of the spectator or consumer.... it is possible to reconnect the historical photograph to the web of social, cultural and political relations in which it was produced, interpreted, and subsequently distributed. (Williams, 2003: 30)

MacKenzie (2005) described the importance of the immediacy of photography, and how a photograph should be taken at the time, in order to capture the true essence of the situation or context:

A crucial aspect of ethnological photography – and this it has in common with most other forms of photography - is that images have to be made at the time, when the event is actually happening. For example, when the storyteller is telling the story, or when the house is still standing and the thatch is in good repair. Other ethnological material can be collected later, drawn from written
sources, or recorded onto tape by people who remember. But ethnological photographs, whether commissioned or made incidentally, have to be taken in real time, at the time. A simple but significant fact, this is why visual recording on still or video in the field of ethnology must be encouraged and not neglected. (MacKenzie, 2005: 5)

One of the images within Mackenzie’s paper is of a Musselburgh Fishwife – Peggy Livingstone – taken in 1988. She is wearing her working clothes and carrying a creel on her back.

![Figure 7.10 Peggy Livingstone, Musselburgh, 1988](image)

This image has been staged having been taken in the studio during a visit by Peggy to the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. Compared to the ones where the subject was actually at work, although the image provides information relating to the style of dress and the working gear including the creel, and carrying technique, along with the
actual face of Peggy herself, the fact that it is staged does somehow detract from the ethnographic value of the photo.

MacKenzie makes a valid point, that for ethnography the photograph should be taken of the person at the time, undertaking some piece of work or social life that is not staged for the photographer. However, there are aspects of history which can be communicated through a photograph even of this type, such as the dress and the stance, and the fact that Peggy herself had been a fishwife, she was not an actor in costume. Other photographs such as those of worktools, or locations where an activity was carried out also provide additional information and illustrate historical texts, giving a greater appreciation of the situation being described than text alone could do:

While the photograph is limited in telling truths about the daily struggles of a single life or community, visual remnants renew a conversation with the present in ways written text fail to do. (Kidd, 1992: ix)

Kidd points out that it is not just the history which the photograph is unwittingly recording, but the photograph itself and the information which comes along with the photograph such as who took it, where and why:

Photographs enable us to recreate a picture of the past and provide us with important evidence for our understanding of social history. Their value, both as historical documents and as a means of recording the present, is immense....The information that accompanies a photograph – its own history
Reading the photographs can involve a number of different questions. Visual anthropologist Marcus Banks, suggests three main categories of questions:

In broad terms social research with picture involves three sets of questions: (i) what is the image of, what is its content? (ii) who took it or made it, when and why? And (iii) how do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it? (Banks, 2005:11)

Other ways in which photographs can be considered are in terms of their content and their context. Banks describes Terence Wright’s approach which is to look through, at and behind the photographs to gain a wider understanding:

For some photographs, or in the eyes of some readers, the content is primarily a matter of information, as though one were looking through a window at some object beyond.... In the eyes of others the way that content is presented is deemed important... The properties of the images, and the interpretation of readers, are not fixed... The content of an image I refer to as its internal narrative – the story, if you will, that the image communicates. This is not necessarily the same as the narrative the image-maker wished to communicate, indeed it can often be markedly different. This is linked to, but analytically separable from, what I call the external narrative. By this I mean the social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the
image is embedded at any moment of viewing. (Banks, 2005: 11)

The following three photographs of the herring industry may be read using the methods suggested by Banks (2005); (i) what is the image of, what is its content? (ii) who took it or made it, when and why? And (iii) how do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it?

![Figure 7.11 Children in the workplace, Ruth Geddes 1923](image)

1) What is the image of and what is its content?

This is a black and white photograph, showing one young child, probably female, dressed in working clothes, including a waterproof pinafore, with her head covered. She is holding a plate with three herring. She stands in front of a group of stacked barrels. The barrels hoops are wooden, and the ground is strewn with fish scales.

2) Who took it or made it, when and why?

There is no information regarding who the photographer was or why it was taken,
although it is likely to have been a professional photographer, as the composition and quality of the image are of a high standard. With a familiarity of the fishing industry, it is clear that this girl is dressed as a herring gutter, and is likely to be travelling with her mother during the herring season. The date of the photo could be estimated as the early 1920s by the style of headwear although the wooden hoops around the barrels were more prevalent before the First World War, and metal hoops were becoming more common. The actual date of the photo is recorded as 1923 with additional information available along the side of the photo. The photo could have been taken to record an image from the fishing industry although there are elements of the photograph which make it appear to have been staged to some extent, in particular the plate of herring which the girl is holding. It was also not a common occurrence for young children to be dressed in working gear and apparently working within the industry. This would indicate that it was possibly taken as one of the images used for postcards showing a positive image of the industry, although the fact that her name was known might indicate that the photograph was either taken by or given to someone who knew the girl.

iii) How do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it?

The text along the side of the photograph provides more information about the girl. She is Ruth Geddes, the date of the photograph is 1923 and it was taken in Great Yarmouth. The photograph was copied from the Time and Tide Museum Archive, and was one of many in a filing cabinet with other photographs of the herring fishing industry, and the women workers in particular. It was relatively common for the women to have photographs taken of them, and sometimes the photographer would
ensure that they would receive a copy of the image. They would have kept these photos as momentoes of their season at the gutting. For those viewing these photographs they would be looking at the photographs made into postcards of the women, or in this case a child, as gutters and distinctively different, and would have send them to relatives and friends while on holiday in whichever port the postcard was found, or kept as a reminder of their holiday.

There is little textual evidence of children being taken with the women to the fishing, but there are many photographs which include children, which would suggest that there were more children in and around the workplace than is documented historically. As was discussed in Chapter 5 it is likely that as a form of childcare, children were given roles to play, and small tasks to do to keep them busy and entertained while their mothers were working. Although if there was textual evidence to suggest that small children were working within the industry, combined with this image, it might be presented as conclusive proof. The child is dressed as an adult. However there is no evidence to suggest that children were actually working at this period of time in the industry, and it would most certainly have been against the law.

This is an example of how the photograph can provide information about the lives of the women which is missing from the written history.
i) What is the image of and what is its content?

This is a black and white postcard. It shows a large industrial landscape, with thousands of barrels stacked in the foreground, and people mingling in among them. In the far distance smoke can be seen and it is just possible to distinguish shipping vessels and masts.

ii) Who took it or made it, when and why?

This is a photograph of the herring industry in Yarmouth taken at the height of the industry and season in 1906, and the image indicates the scale of the industry in a much clearer way than many images. While written text often gives a clear idea of the size of the industry, with hundreds of thousands of barrels being exported, there are few images indicating the vastness of the industry. With knowledge of the industry, it is possible to tell that the figures in the foreground are women and they are either packing or ‘filling-up’ barrels. Each curer would have had a separate area in
which his operations would be undertaken. The barrels are laid out in regular patterns and it is likely that some of the lines along them would be the boundary of each curing area.

The photograph was taken by J. Valentines at a time when the firm were mass producing postcards to sell predominantly to the tourist market.

iii) How do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it?

This particular postcard was purchased from the online auction site Ebay, where postcards are available and purchased particularly by collectors of old postcards. The original image would have been created for the tourist market as a postcard, with people being perhaps more informed about the importance of the industry at the time, than those collecting the images are now. Those who were involved in the industry might keep the postcard as a record of the time, particularly as a record of the scale of the industry at the time. It is a much greater indication of scale than words in a historical account.

Figure 7.13 Lunch time in Yarmouth, c.1930
i) What is the image of and what is its content?

This is a black and white photograph. There are seven people, two men and five women. The men and three women are on a boat at a quayside, while the other two women are sitting on the edge of the quay. All are in working clothes, with the women wearing waterproof skirts, and rubber boots. All the women look to be in their teens or 20s, one of the men is possibly in his 20s while the man standing in the middle of the photograph is slightly older. Only one woman is looking at the camera, two other pairs are engaged in conversation and another woman is looking across as if communicating with someone outside the photograph. The atmosphere of the photograph is light-hearted, and it is possible to assume that there is humorous conversation taking place between the subjects. They are all holding what appears to be food, possibly sandwiches or ice-cream ‘sliders’.

ii) Who took it or made it, when and why?

There is no information regarding who took this photograph. The working clothes of the women would set this photograph around 1930. They are wearing the occupational clothes of herring gutters, and it is likely that they are visiting a local boat during their meal-time break. It is not possible to see whether their fingers are bound, which would indicate that they have already been working. Research indicates that this is a Shetland boat and these are Shetland herring gutters. Despite the quality of the photograph, it may well not have been taken by a professional photographer as it existed in amongst other photographs in a private album. It could have been taken to record a moment in time at the herring fishing in Yarmouth by a friend or family member of the skipper.
iii) How do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it?

The skipper of the boat was the father of Catherine Emslie from Burra, Shetland who had an album which included this photograph. It was taken during the Yarmouth season. Catherine Emslie regards the photo as a reminder of her late father and of his time as skipper of a herring boat. She is proud of his involvement in the industry and the photographs are treasured by her and her family.

The photograph gives a good indication of the closeness of communities, even when the women and men were far from home. As was discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, they socialised together mainly, and kept in touch with family and friends through group communication. Many of the photographs of the herring gutters show them working, few are of the more social times such as the image above. But this is a photograph from a private collection, not taken by a professional photographer to sell to the general public. It tells a different story about the lives of the women and the men at the herring fishing. Once again, it provides information which is not available through text alone. A vast majority of the public images of the herring girls show them hard at work, either packing barrels or gutting herring with the implication of a life of hardship and service while in reality, these women had considerable power and independence within their sphere of work, and even within the working environment there were occasions for socialising with friends and family.

Along with Marcus Bank’s ways of reading photographs, Mackenzie (2005) suggested a further four categories as a useful way of identifying what the photograph has been taken for and therefore what its purpose is: the press or journalistic
photograph; the documentary photograph; the ethnographic photograph and the art photograph. Examples of all four categories can be represented with the photographs of the women in the herring industry, beginning with the journalistic photograph:

![Figure 7.14  Herring Girl Strikes in Yarmouth 1936]

Images of the women in the herring industry exist within archives of newspapers such as *The Scotsman*. The photograph above is a good example of how a photograph can display information even without the text. The importance of the industry, and the number of people employed within it are well represented in this particular image, where a mass of women can be seen to be gathered on the pier in Yarmouth in 1936. Of the category Press Photography, Mackenzie wrote:

The job of the press photographer is to capture that single image that tells the story in one go; that works as a visual headline, instant and complete for the
In ethnographic photographs such as the postcards shown above, the photographer should not make an impact on the scene which he is photographing. There is no sense in these photographs that the working pattern would change whether or not there was a camera present. But for documentary photographs, there has to be some appreciation of what the photograph is actually being taken for. It is not merely recording the scene. The photographs required for a documentary would perhaps be made in a series to provide a specific aspect or angle:

The ethnological photographer aims to be much more neutral in the manner of recording images. Background and other aspects of the scene that a documentary photographer would crop or edit by changing viewpoint or getting in close, the ethnological photographer will allow to be as they are.
This is because these images can be read later by many different audiences or researchers. All the information in an image is potentially useful and may gain in importance with the passing of time. (Mackenzie, 2005)

While an art photographer may use ethnographic areas and subject matter, it is unlikely that they will portray them truthfully in an ethnographic sense. Often they are distorted to provide a certain image, perhaps juxtaposed against an unusual context, or colour added for artistic purposes. In the case of the herring girls, the dirt and grime of the industry has been sanitised to produce artistic images.

![Image of herring girls](image1.jpg) ![Image of herring girls](image2.jpg)

Figure 7.16 Artistic images

These are artistic portrayals of the women, which do not provide a true reflection of the dirt, grime and smell which would have been a part of the experience.
7.4 Professional Photographers and Private Collections

As photography developed, and the process became increasingly simpler, more people became involved in taking photographs and it was not only the professional photographers who were pointing their lenses at the herring girls. There are marked differences between the two types of photograph, and the information which can be gained from them.

Figure 7.17 Public Photographs: Scottish Fishing Girls ‘Gipping’ Herring in Whitby c1905
Angus Macdonald (MacLeod, 1982) talks about the tradition of the ‘excursion’ in the 1920s amongst people from the Western Isles. The idea of excursions, is clearly seen in examples of private photographs from the herring season, when the women were off work. There are groups photographed in various locations which show that there was an organised ‘outing’, even if just organised amongst a group of friends, with a photograph having been taken as a momento of the occasion.

Williams (2003) discussed the importance of distinguishing between ‘public’ and ‘private’ photographs. She believes that it is possible to redress the balance to some extent of the portrayal of images for public consumption and the mass of meanings associated with the more realistic images produced for and by people themselves. She discusses photographic theorist John Berger (Ways of Seeing, 1972) distinction between the two uses of photography, saying that the photograph destined for public view constituted ‘a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event. It offers information but information severed from all lived experience’ (Williams, 2003: 30) while private photographs are less removed from their context of production and reception.

Photographs, particularly those for public consumption can be used to reproduce popular myths about indigenous people - or herring girls for that matter. An example of this would be the lack of men appearing in the photographs of herring gutters over the whole time period. Although there were some considerable numbers of Irish men working in the industry at the gutting, there are very few images of them. The image
which was normally required by the professional photographer was of the 'nimble fingered, picturesque and cheerful' herring girl, and not some big, burly Irish man. Alternative views and perhaps more realistic views of people may be found in their own photographs, while those held in public records, museums or archives are not necessarily a true reflection of the community or individuals lives. Also, because it took so long to set up a camera, most of the photographs that exist from the earlier time period were very much staged. Traditional images of the herring girls for example would have them leaning over the farlane gutting, or if not at work gutting, then they would be seen to be knitting, as the generally accepted view of the women was of them constantly being involved with activity.

7.4.1 Photographs from within the community

Linked to the idea of public and private images, is the idea of whether the person recording the information, either visual, oral or textual, is or is not a part of that community. This links back to the discussion about the first major photographers, and the fact that George Washington Wilson, Alexander Johnstone and James Valentine for example, were all living in or near coastal communities and they would have had an insider understanding of the fishing industry and fishing communities. Mackenzie (2005) also spoke about the challenges of the insider/outsider aspects of research within communities. In capturing images from his home village, the distance which he had from his own community having been away for over three years gave him the distance required to be able to capture the essence of that community on film. This idea that it is difficult to achieve this end from within the community is an
important aspect to photography as part of the ethnological process.

Along with the ability to read photographs by looking at both the content and the context, the reason why the photograph was taken is of considerable importance. The private collections of photographs show a different aspect to the lives of the women and men from the fishing communities. In public photographs and postcards, the women are identified as herring gutters, and the men as fishermen, curers or coopers; they are identified entirely by their occupation. In private photographs, they are shown as members of families, of communities. These photographs are not being taken for or by strangers, they are being taken by friends, often for family back home, or as momentos of their time at the fishing.

Figure 7.19  Mrs McNab with her crew c.1930s

Jim and Rita McNab still run a herring processing factory in Lerwick, although it is now on a small scale. Both have worked in the industry all their lives, and Jim was one of several generations of coopers. This photograph shows Jim McNab’s mother with her crew at the fishing. It is one of a large collection of photographs of family and friends in the industry which the McNabs have. The women in the photograph
can be seen engaging with the photographer in a way which they would be less likely to engage with a professional photographer. In terms of the relationship between the photographer and the subjects, the women are looking directly at the camera and smiling, which indicates a closer relationship. The notion of the ‘look’ or ‘gaze’ (Berger, 1972) has become a recognised way of interpreting images and the psychological relationship of power which exists between the people being photographed and the photographer.

Figure 7.20 Whalsay women outside their homes c.1930

This photograph shows a very informal moment between four women in Whalsay. Unstaged, the photographer has caught the women laughing among themselves, completely at ease with the photographer who can almost be seen to be included within the group.
These two photographs are from a private collection belonging to Maggie Leask in Whalsay. It shows the lighter side of community life in the fishing communities on the Shetland island of Whalsay. Sledging was a feature of recreation around the coast of Scotland in the early part of the century which has now almost completely disappeared due to the lack of snow during the winter. The people in these photographs would have been involved in the herring gutting during the season, but can be viewed in a completely different way when they are photographed engaged in recreational activity, laughing among friends outside a house, or sledging down a hill in Whalsay.

7.5 Women in Photographs

Leneman (1993) discussed the lack of women in photographs historically in her book *Into the Foreground: A Century of Scottish Women in Photographs*. While this may
be the case generally, there are in fact many hundreds of images of women at the gutting. But, partly as a result of the limitations of photography of the time, there are far fewer photographs of women in the domestic sphere. Leneman talks about the photographing of the exotic and unusual, and this was certainly an aspect of the images of the herring girls as was discussed above.

Inevitably, the photographic record is also a distortion. Particularly in the early days of photography, pictures were taken of the unusual, the exceptional, the valued while women's lives were largely composed of the ordinary, the humdrum, the unvalued. It is ironic that we owe some pictures of women – particularly in the Highlands and Islands – to the fact that the humdrum and ordinary in one culture can seem extraordinary to the eyes of an outsider.

(Leneman, 1993: 7)

Not only did the herring girls appear more frequently in public photographs than many other women of the time, they also commissioned portrait photos of themselves often while away at the gutting in Lerwick or in Yarmouth. This became something of a tradition for some of the women. This was also as a result of their unwillingness to be identified only as herring gutters. The portrait photographs allowed them to dress up and display more femininity, in the face of the stereotyping and prejudice they received from some outsiders. It also showed that these women had enough disposable income to be able to pay for a portrait, and if taken at distant ports, these images would have been sent home to family and friends, keeping communication with home and providing a source of information regarding how well they were doing. It was also a way in which the women could take back the power of the
photographers who photographed them while working, and they could be in charge of their own image, what clothes they wore and the way in which they were positioned for the photograph.

Figure 7.22 The Herring Girls in Portrait photographs c.1930s

Above is a portrait photograph of Maggie Leask (2nd from the left) and four other women who went to the gutting in Lerwick for the season in the 1930s. They look well-dressed, feminine and fashionable. Unlike many of their middle class contemporaries, they could afford to buy for themselves some of the most up to date clothes. The photograph below is an earlier portrait photograph including Maggie’s mother, and again, the image is of a group of upstanding, respectable and well-dressed women. These two photographs also show how the idea of having portrait photographs taken had become a tradition with the women, carried on through the generations:
The following photograph also shows how the women displayed through photography the fact that through their labour at the gutting, they could afford to buy some of the most up to date fashion of the day:

Figure 7.24  A gutting crew dressed up for a photograph in the 1920s.
The photograph above is a mixture of both comedy and portrait. It is not clear whether the women were expecting to be photographed from the waist up, in order to hide their work boots, or whether they were happy for their boots to be included in the photograph. From the ‘fun-loving’ aspect of life at the gutting, displayed through the interviews, it is likely that the women were happy for their boots to appear in the photograph for comic purposes.

7.6 Changes over time

The fishing industry was constantly in a state of change, particularly at the turn of the century and photographers could document visually these changes. Angus Macdonald, a photographer from Lewis, was remembered for his ability to capture
this changing lifestyle in the forward of a book of his photographs from Lewis:

[Macdonald] captured the beauty of a sunlit harbour at the same time as his intellect informed him of the necessity to catalogue, in some abiding form, the acceleration of change, being wrought by the intrusion into a pastoral life of all the marvels and mechanisation of the twentieth-century. (Macleod, 1982)

Photographic timelines of the herring fishing industry also provide additional information which is not available in formal histories. In Chapter 5, the height of the farlanes was looked at through photographs from different time periods. This indicated a general change from gutting on the ground, to gutting in enclosed farlanes, and gradually a rise in the level of the farlane until it was built to better suit the women who were gutting, by preventing them having to continually bend to select fish.
These photographs give an indication of the change over time in working conditions. The changes related to location as well as time. The working conditions at Yarmouth and Lowestoft, for example, during the autumn and winter months could be particularly harsh, with the women requiring to wear more clothes, and until improvements were made by the curers, there was considerable mud and water surrounding the farlanes.

7.7 Photographing a way of life at the gutting

While many images exist of the women working at the farlanes, the working conditions of the women, relating to preparing for work or cleaning up after a day's work are rarely seen in photographs. For this reason, the following photograph
showing how women in Whalsay washed their tarpaulin skirts, is an important contribution to the historical record:

Figure 7.27 Washing oilskin aprons, Whalsay c.1930

Due to the requirement for light, it was not easy to take photographs indoors, and so this photograph is one of the few existing which shows the interior of a gutters’ hut. Again, this is an important image in relation to the lack of historical information regarding the living conditions of the women while they were at the gutting.
As was noted in Chapter 5, children are a feature of the interview records which do not appear often in the historical account of the women. But they appear often in the photographic record.

Image of children working in a workplace, early 1900s.

Images of the women knitting while waiting for the fish to come in, or having a tea or
dinner break in the workplace also provide an insight into the lives of the women while they were away from the farlanes.

Figure 7.30 Taking a Break

There is another group of photographs which capture moments when the women are enjoying themselves. They are more likely to be private photographs, taken for the amusement of the people involved. The photographs of the women dancing, playing music, joking around in front of the camera is closer to the aspects of the occupation which the women are happiest to remember, which are related through the interviews, the social aspects of the work which the women really did look forward to.
7.8 Triangulation of Sources

This research has been carried out using a variety of sources, and the availability and use of photographs has been of considerable benefit to provide additional information.
in an area where some aspects of the history of the women who travelled to work at
the herring gutting was missing. The triangulation of sources, particularly the
interview material and the visual record, combined with the fragmentary source
material has provided a crosscheck on the validity of single sources of evidence either
from interview, or contained within a photograph.

The use of different sources of material has provided an account that is richer and
more comprehensive than an account which relied purely on textual narrative. For
example the photographic timeline of the occupational clothing which was undertaken
in Chapter 5 combined with interview accounts of clothing worn by the women
validated the information provided by the women themselves, and also the specific
time period of the photographs. In one interview, an informant described wearing a
piece of thread around her wrist, in order to prevent wrist strain. This she described
as a common belief and practice amongst the women from all the different areas.
There is also a possibility that it is linked to the talismanic use of twisted thread in the
West Highlands, known in Gaelic as ‘snàithle’. Photographs from the time period
she was referring to revealed threads worn around the wrists of some of the women.
The informant was from Shetland, and the photograph shown here is of older women
from Fraserburgh. This practice has not been recorded in any other written texts,
although the information existed in the photographs. Without the interview account,
combined with the photographic record, it would have remained unrecorded.
The practice of knitting amongst the women from all the different areas was referred to often by the women in the interviews, and also appears regularly in the photographs. In interviews with the Shetland women in particular, they discussed how knitting was an important source of extra income. Knitting was more than just a pastime, or a way to earn some extra money; it was something which was taught to Shetland children, girls and boys, from a very early age, and which was carried on by many throughout their lives. In Maggie Leask’s photograph collection, there were many photographs of women knitting, including when they were at home as well as when they were away at the gutting. In fact, Maggie herself was wearing her knitting whisker when she was filmed. The importance of the practice of knitting is not recorded in the formal record, although it appears many times in the photographic record.
7.9 Conclusion

This chapter began with a discussion of the development of photography and how it coincided with the development of the herring industry, both in time and in location of some of the first Scottish photographers. It showed why the industry has been the subject matter for photographers right through the nineteenth century and throughout the time period of this research. Discussion followed regarding the importance of photography as an ethnographic and anthropological methodology both historically, and in the present day. Consideration was then given to a number of different theoretical positions with regard to the context and content of photographs, and how the image is produced and conceived. This was followed by a discussion regarding the importance of ‘reading’ the photograph and ways in which this provides additional information which can add to the historical account.

One of the most important findings as revealed within this chapter is how the
photographic images - the visual narrative can add to the history of the women, providing an additional layer of information which has not previously been considered. The reasons behind the production of the images and the way in which the subject is portrayed also told us something about the perceptions of the women at the herring gutting, as well as how they used photography to portray themselves.

The photograph is a historical document in its own right. It is an image produced at the time which can convey historical information regarding all the themes under consideration within the thesis: travel and communication links; working or living conditions, and recreation and culture. Most importantly, the photographs put together within this thesis help to reveal some of the hidden history of the lives of the herring gutters. This chapter has demonstrated that the use of visual combined with the oral and the textual provides a fuller account of the lives of the herring gutters than any single source could do, and as a consequence adds to the available historical record.
8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the visual representations of the herring girls were considered. This chapter takes the theme of representation further and considers both the representation and preservation of the fishing communities within a heritage context. There are a number of key factors to consider, not least the issue of identity, which has been a theme which has threaded its way throughout the thesis, the identity of the fishing community and the women in particular both from their own perception, and from outside. While the previous chapters have considered the perceptions of those outside the industry at the time, this chapter investigates the portrayal of the fishing
community and herring girls within heritage centres, museums and exhibitions from a modern perspective.

Heritage centres became more popular during the 1980s and 90s with 'fisher museums' forming a part of that trend to include Wick, Oban, Mallaig and Buckie amongst others (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 212). The importance of heritage worldwide is discussed by Lowenthal (1999) in an article entitled Heritage Stewardship and the Amateur Tradition in APT Bulletin:

Heritage enriches all of our lives and provides us with a sense of identity and community. Over the last two or three decades it has become increasingly salient not only in this country but throughout the world. Nowhere are people not concerned with the retrieval, maintenance, restoration, and, above all, the creation of their heritage. And this expanded involvement incorporates both tangible and intangible heritage. (Lowenthal, 1999: 7)

Lowenthal also discusses the common portrayal of heritage as a static and unchanging entity:

...flux is inevitable. Time-honored goals of eternity and stability and permanence have to be discarded as unreachable. (Lowenthal 1999: 7)

Fishing communities are particularly prone to change and development, and often the heritage portrays the older traditions associated with the industry while disregarding the modern fishing methods. Indeed, many of the modern high-catch methods
associated with the fishery do not sit easily alongside the popular environmental views of our own time, giving an added reason to portray only aspects of the fishing which are culturally and environmentally acceptable today.

In her book *Fishing for Heritage* (2003), Jane Nadel-Klein considers how the fishing communities are becoming increasingly involved in the heritage industry, as a result of the demise of fishing in many villages particularly in the north-east of Scotland. Throughout the world, the fishing communities have been seen as somewhat separate within the nations to which they belong, and their traditions and way of life have increasingly become part of a heritage industry, trying to preserve aspects of this tradition which is seen to be changing and in some cases disappearing. With the decline in the herring fishing over the second half of the twentieth century in Scotland, the existence of the traditional fishing communities was put under threat, and the industry in many villages disappeared, all that is left in some cases being the stone harbours and fishermen’s cottages. Some villages have local heritage centres which contain remnants of the industry in both materials and interpretative displays, locally run and locally sourced - memories and materials to provide a portrayal of days gone by. Nadel-Klein notes that for these centres and museums to be successful, they rely on the tourist market to visit the building – or site, and to engage with the whole notion of heritage portrayal:

Heritage tourism requires that tourists and heritage producers share what Wilk (1995: 111) calls a “structure of common difference”. To consume heritage, tourists must be committed to certain ideas, among them that: a) the past is valuable and endangered: b) culture can be embodied, captured, commodified
and put on display; c) the past can be authentically represented thus eliding the fact that “the past, as it is materially embodied in museums and heritage sites, is inescapably a product of the present which organizes it” (Bennett 1995: 129); and d) everyone can participate in and compete for heritage and its economic benefits. (Nadel-Klein 2003: 174)

There are critics of this type of heritage portrayal, who claim that this turns villages and indeed in the case of Scotland, a whole nation, into some type of visitor attraction, rather than focusing on the industry and economy of the country as it is today.

To see Scotland becoming a theme park means not only that the images of Scottish peoples, industry and ways of life produced and seen in museums and visitor centers are inauthentic and essentializing, but also that the Scottish people must increasingly accept and adopt these images as real or at least relevant. (Nadel-Klein 2003: 175)

In Theatres of Memory (1994), Samuel argues the case for ‘heritage’ being the way in which the ‘common man’ can portray history for themselves. He criticises those who look down on the notion of heritage as not being pure history for that reason:

Intellectually, on the other hand, ‘heritage’ has had a very bad press, and it is widely accused of wanting to commodify the past and turn it into tourist kitsch. Aesthetes of both Right and Left, though especially perhaps the latter, have found it offensive, accusing it of packaging the past, and presenting a ‘Disneyfied’ version of history in place of the real thing. Purists have objected
to the schemes promoted in its name, arguing that it blurs the line between entertainment and education and warning that, as with church restoration in the nineteenth century, it will replace real-life survivals with simulacra of an original that never was. (Samuel, 1994: 259)

However, he does not appear to register that for some in communities such as fishing communities, the people themselves do not like the idea that their history has been taken from them and is being portrayed in heritage centres, for a tourist market – not for them or their people. The idea that ‘heritage’ is an inheritance, and like family possessions passed on from one generation to another is under threat as communities break up and young people move away from home to go to college or look for work. The ‘inheritance’ is being passed on to those who may not understand or be aware of the significance of some of the detail or minutiae, and much is being lost.

The complexities of the communities, the changes over time, and many aspects of the lives of the women within the fishing communities which have been highlighted within this thesis are very difficult to accurately portray within a heritage centre or at a specific site. The difficulties of choosing specific artefacts to exhibit and which aspects of the industry should take precedence over others, are all challenges facing the heritage industry. The term ‘fishing community’ itself covers a vastly different selection of societies even within Scotland itself, and the way in which villages or towns portray the heritage of their past also takes very different forms. The very nature of the industry and the movement of people associated with it make it difficult to define. Lowenthal makes the point that people should be more open to the mixture of cultures and heritage which form the basis for most societies:
Purity is another heritage shibboleth. We need to take pride in heritage that is not pure, but a mixture of legacies from many cultures. For the most part we value heritage that is our own, not like anybody else’s. So we strive to protect it against other people – outsiders, contaminators. Yet – and in the United States more than ever – heritage is increasingly multicultural. Every heritage is in fact the product of a commingling of cultures. The notion that it was made by just one people, or revered by just one people, or maintained by just one people is an illusion. And heritage is all the better for being mixed. (Lowenthal 1999: 8)

Despite the mingling of cultures which certainly takes place within the fishing industry, as was seen with the herring girls, sometimes far from home and yet sticking to their own group, for the close knit fishing communities, the idea of opening up to ‘outsiders’ can be seen to be an issue. When the heritage is not controlled by those to whom it belongs, there are issues of portrayal of one minority culture by another more powerful or incoming culture. This is the case to some extent with the heritage centres in and around the fishing villages of northern Scotland. Many of these villages have seen the local population dwindle, while incomers from other parts of the country, or indeed the world, have moved in, and taken charge of the local heritage. In Buckie for example, a cassette was made for the Drifter Project and the voice used to describe the heritage was that of an Invernessian. Local people were justifiably aggrieved, as was shown in the yearly report from the local community council:
The Buckie ‘Drifter’ and the audio tapes - The tapes were produced by an English firm engaged by the former manager... The accent they chose to use as authentic Buckie was that of people in Inverness. (Buckie Community Council, 1995)

The very dialect was seen to be taken from the people of the town by ‘professionals’ taking their heritage from them, and this was seen as a misrepresentation of their own sense of identity. Lowenthal makes the point that heritage should belong to everyone and matter to everyone. If outsiders are excluded, then they cannot help:

[to] treasure and protect it and show that it matters not just exclusively to one group but to everybody. ......Heritage management and celebration are also increasingly littered with agonizing ethical dilemmas. Who owns the past? To whom should it belong? Problems of ownership and control constrain heritage use and study. (Lowenthal, 1999: 8)

It is obviously important and necessary to include local people in the portrayal of local heritage and to use as much authenticity in the portrayal as is possible. The idea of heritage portrayal and heritage preservation can be joined together, so that local people feel that they have a part to play in the preservation of their own heritage, and that this can be combined with the portrayal of their culture in legitimate ways to visitors from outside. The alienation of one section of the community from the portrayal of their own cultural heritage can lead to far-reaching problems. In Buckie, Nadel-Klein described the difficulties encountered when the local Heritage Cottage
group were not fully involved with the government-funded Buckie Drifter Project, to the extent that they were not even invited to the opening of the Drifter Project:

Some claimed that the Drifter’s designers had ignored local expertise and created a superficial display......

However, the worst insult was the first manager’s failure to invite members of the Buckie Heritage Society to the gala opening ceremony. This was a faux pas of epic proportions. Word of it sped down the coast so that I heard of it not only in Buckie but in Anstruther as well. A number of fishermen now refused to set foot inside the Drifter and only one or two agreed to work with the Drifter as local experts. (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 207)

While Lowenthal is right to argue that heritage is a moving and changing concept which has to be strongly linked to the present (Lowenthal, 1999: 9), it is clear that there is a need to capture some aspects of heritage which are disappearing fast. Many aspects of the lives and experiences of the herring girls, for example which have not been documented in the formal histories, would leave little trace if they had not been recorded for this thesis, and by others for a variety of projects and publications. People’s memories and experiences make up part of the heritage, and without making an effort to capture them, when a way of life has come to an end, it is important to ensure that this is done or they can very quickly become lost. Connections between the past and present are also fundamental but without having the record and preserving the information at the point of disappearance, no connections could be made.

---

4 Margaret Grieco T&S Network website, Paul Thompson fieldwork interviews, Gillian Munro fieldwork interviews and recent research by Jane Liffen, Anne Coombs, Frances Wilkins. Anne Huntley
8.2 Contemporary views of the past

The increasing interest in local and occupational heritage in Scotland has grown out of a variety of factors - the decline of the heavy industries such as mining and fishing and a desire to capture aspects to preserve and portray it; an increase in the tourist market and an opportunity to bolster local economies through local culture and heritage, combined with a desire to maintain some form of separate identity, and link back to earlier times. As Nadel-Klein also notes, there is an additional element within Highland history:

Moreover, English attempts in the eighteenth century to repress certain elements of highland culture, notably in language and dress, have never been forgotten. Many who do not support the Scottish National Party's independence agenda nonetheless assert a strong feeling of Scottishness. (Nadel-Klein 2003: 177)

As has been noted in earlier chapters, even Scottish people who came from fishing communities and came together at the herring fishing, often came from areas with markedly different cultures, with differences of language, religion and economy. Within Scotland, as has been discussed in earlier chapters, the fishing community itself was distinct from the mainstream communities, particularly along the north-east
coast of Scotland. This shows the real difficulty in defining Scottishness, which also impacts on the definitions of the fishing community as a whole within the nation.

It is clear that identity is a key aspect to how a community can be perceived by those outside, along with its desired portrayal from within. The fishing communities are also complex in that the heritage itself incorporates the ‘traditions’ of the past combined with the modernised, technology driven and far from picturesque industry which exists today. Which aspects to portray? In photographs for example, the herring girls in the 1920s are pictured outside at the farlanes, gutting fish while smiling for the camera. There are far fewer photographs of the women in the factories in the 1950s and 60s with the gutting machines, wearing the required industrial clothing of hair nets and rubber gloves. The herring girls and their representation through postcards in particular were among the first aspects of fishing community representation to be part of the new heritage industry.

During the first half of the twentieth century, fishing communities and ‘fisher folk’ were separated to a large extent, physically from the ‘towns’ or ‘country’ folk, living next to them. But when it came to setting up a fishery-based museum in Yarmouth, there was a reversal of this trend, with local people wanting to be associated more closely with the fishing community. This aspect of representation, of both the town and the communities was highlighted in the book Museum Revolutions: How museums Change and are Changed (Knell, Macleod and Watson, 2007) with a chapter by Sheila Watson entitled ‘History museums, community identities and a sense of places rewriting histories’. In this chapter she discusses the Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth, and the consultation with the local community regarding
what the museum should include. The community were keen to be identified with the fishing community and had been asked to consider what they would like to be included in the new museum:

The 2000 focus group report summarised the vision, revealing a complex aspiration for the museum that involved the visual, the act of remembering and the experiential:
Recreate the Quayside, recreate the atmosphere, noise, bustle, smell, etc. People are more important than the process. Tell their stories, living conditions, housing; make it realistic – dangers and discomforts and hardships. Show the scale – the whole of Yarmouth transformed by immigrants and the whole Quayside bustling and exciting...(Watson 2000a: 3)

Regardless of socio-economic background, everyone had equal regard for the fishing industry. Those who were too young to remember it, or had nothing to do with it, still talked about it as enthusiastically as those who had participated in it, earned income from it or witnessed the great fishing fleets. A historical narrative had emerged from a consensual view of the past. (Knell, Macleod and Watson, 2007: 163)

Watson points out that only 5.6% of the population had been directly employed by the fishing industry although more would have been dependent upon it. The herring gutters were mainly Scottish who did not form part of the permanent population. Also, after the demise of the industry, Watson noted there was no public outcry at the time, with other industries springing up to take its place, and no downturn in the prosperity of the town. And yet, the local community were keen to remember this
aspect of their history in the rebuilding of the Time and Tide Museum. Local people had talked about their experiences of watching the Scots girls working, looking at the river full of boat; the industry was ‘visible and accessible’:

The visual aspect of the fishing industry is, perhaps, the key to understanding its importance in the popular imagination and its contribution to identity rooted in a sense of place. (Knell, Macleod and Watson, 2007: 166)

Watsons discussed how the industry had grown in the perceptions of its importance to Yarmouth, and how this might be linked with the current decline:

Thus the identity of Yarmouth has become rooted in an essentialist myth centred on the importance of a fishing industry, which only some within living memory had witnessed. The creation of a new museum within a space that had formerly been dedicated to fish processing, and emphasising the importance of the fishing industry to the history of the town, was a way for local people to express an identity of which they could be proud. (Knell, Macleod and Watson, 2007: 169)

This is in marked contrast to the idea of marginalisation of fishing communities, which may well have been the case at the time when the industry was at its height in Yarmouth. Here we have a community which is keen to claim a part of the traditions and heritage of the fishing community and the fishing industry and to display that pride in the building of a new museum to celebrate Yarmouth’s part in the industry. In the next section we will consider the portrayal of the heritage within the museums.
8.3 Representation of lived history in public spaces

Museums and heritage centres have a hard task both to ensure that they are economically viable, and also keeping abreast of the visitor expectations and the new means of interpreting and representing different artefacts or cultures which are constantly being updated. The idea of using technology innovatively to try and engage and entertain the public is becoming more important than the preservation of different aspects of material culture:

This reflects the increased emphasis being placed on new approaches to educating, entertaining and engaging existing and potential museum and gallery consumers. This has long term implications for museum and gallery buildings, how collections are interpreted and presented to the public, the inclusion of additional visitor services and commercial activities which in turn has an impact on employment. (Museums Galleries Scotland August 2008: 117)

In terms of fishing communities generally, there has been increasing representation within heritage centres and museums throughout the past 30 years. The idea of ‘tradition’ and the differences which have historically set fishing communities apart have become what is interesting to the general public, in the same sense that photographers portrayed the ‘exotic’ or ‘different’ in the photographs of the late nineteenth century. As with the written history, however, in terms of their importance
within the industry, the women do not always receive the attention which they merit within heritage centres. While they may feature in photographs, the herring boats, and fishing gear are generally more predominantly showcased within centres.

8.3.1 The Time and Tide Museum, Yarmouth and the Shetland Museum, Lerwick

The Time and Tide Museum was opened in 2004, in a converted Victorian herring curing works, next to the medieval town walls. The industrial nature of the building adds to the authenticity of the exhibitions and displays. The smokehouse still has a smell of smoked fish, and the walls show how the process of smoking was undertaken. The use of sails to cover the courtyard at the entrance to the museum building is also evocative of the history and nature of the industry and the museum itself. The emphasis of the museum is the herring fishing industry, and a street is recreated – the Yarmouth Row based on the successful fishing year of 1913 – which tries to give an impression of life in that area at that time, including sound clips and light which add a further dimension to the normally static nature of displays and collections in heritage centres. The collection is dominated by fishing equipment and although herring fishing is the main industry represented there is only one display panel dedicated to the herring girls. This once again points to the lack of recognition which the women have received and indicates that it is not only written documentation which fails to recognise the significant part played by women in the fishing industry. There is an issue of gender which cannot be overlooked, with the fishing industry being represented predominantly in respect of the fishermen.
themselves, although the coopers also receive fair recognition. Despite the fact that many thousands of women were working at the herring in Yarmouth, the history of the women at the gutting does not receive a fair coverage within the exhibition space in the museum. This is particularly notable within a museum which is devoted to this particular aspect of fishing as a whole, the two hundred years in which herring were the most important export.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 8.2 Information panel from Time and Tide Museum*

However, the Time and Tide archive – The Maritime Heritage East – has a good maritime library collection along with thousands of photographs, papers and letters, including material relating to the Scots Herring Girls, which can be accessed by researchers. But in terms of the heritage portrayal of the women within the museum, there is little attention paid to their work and lives while down in Yarmouth.

Grieco (2008) also found that in the new Shetland Museum, the herring gutters did not have a significant representation:
Shetland has seen major investment in ‘heritage’ activities and hosts a modern purpose built museum with auditorium and conference facilities of the first order: it has a first class archive of photographic images of herring girls but the archiving of documents associated with the herring girls into an accessible path for community use has still to take place. Interestingly, Shetland saw monies provided by HIE for the restoration of herring gutters’ huts and this was done to a very high standard. These huts are under five minutes walking distance from Shetland’s spectacular museum but there is no sign leading to them or indicating their presence and there is no documentation proximate to these herring gutter huts (which now have the appearance and function of a modern office environment) to indicate their history or provide a visual image of their past appearance (even though the museum holds excellent old photographs which would do the job very well indeed). (Grieco, 2008)

However, since it’s reopening in 2007, the Shetland Museum has seen a huge increase in visitor numbers, and numbers accessing the archives.

Since its re-opening Shetland’s Museum and Archive has secured record figures which has had a positive impact on Shetland as a destination. In 2007 a total of 171, 550 visits to all of the island’s visitor attractions were secured for the year which accounts for a 41% increase on the previous year. The museum and archive recorded 55,142 visits for the seven month period to December 2007 which
represents an increase of 59% when compared to full-year performance prior to development. (Museums Galleries Scotland August 2008: 108)

Museums are not a thing of the past, but the interpretation within them, and the opportunities to present material in a different and entertaining way, is increasing all the time. Grieco’s discussion on the opportunity to join up different heritage centres into a heritage trail would work particularly well in Shetland, firstly with the gutters’ huts being included within the interpretation of the migratory nature of the work of the gutters, but also with other museums around the Shetland Islands, many of which were directly involved in the herring fishing industry.

8.3.2 The Scottish Fisheries Museum, Anstruther and The Heritage Centre, Mallaig

The Scottish Fisheries Museum in Anstruther, Fife, is Scotland’s largest museum dedicated to the fisheries. It holds miscellaneous records and over 13000 photographs along with fishermen’s costumes, paintings and model boats. It comprises of a number of different buildings around a courtyard, most of the displays relating to the fishing or the fishermen themselves. But it also has a display area dedicated to the women who were gutting the fish, showing two models of women gutting and one packing a barrel with herring.
Although these figures are very much ‘display’ and there is no opportunity to touch or walk around them, they do at least give a three dimensional impression of the work of the women at that time. Presentation of this type is not capable of displaying the scale of the industry nor the speed at which the women worked, nor changes over time. But it does give some recognition of the important part the women played in the industry.

This is a representation of a herring girl in Mallaig Heritage Centre in May 2009.
Although there are still women in the village who worked at the herring, little care has been taken to represent them authentically here, with the apron being made from a black bin-bag, and even the hands – the most vital part of the gutter – are missing. Mallaig was an important herring port in the 1930s and 40s and even had a herring fishing into the 1960s and 70s. However, despite the fact that the museum is run mainly by local volunteers, there appears to be a lack of involvement with the local fishing community which could have provided authentic items of clothing for the display.

8.3.3 The Stornoway Herring Girls Statues
Another way in which the public consciousness is reminded of the local heritage is through the placing of memorials or statues in the actual environment. In the case of Stornoway, rather than a bland memorial, the decision was taken to commemorate the work of the herring girls with a pair of bronze statues, depicting the women working at the herring. In 2003, Stornoway Amenity Trust commissioned the making and installation of two bronze statues of herring girls in the early twentieth century, to be placed on North Beach Quay and South Beach Quay as a permanent reminder of the part Stornoway played in the herring industry. They were designed by Charles Engebretsen and Ginny Hutchinson from Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen. The figures are life-size and depict the women working at the herring, one gutting and one carrying a basket of fish. To ensure authenticity, the artists undertook considerable research into the clothing of the women, and actually made the tweed and wool skirts and procured an authentic oilskin apron. The figures were then modelled and using both clay and plaster casting an original sculpture was created. This was then cast in wax and then the final bronze casting was undertaken. The figures were unveiled in October 2003 by Sandy Matheson, Lord Lieutenant for the Western Isles.
They are a lasting memorial to the part which Stornoway played in the herring industry as well as to the thousands of women from the islands who were involved over the years. Last year, the Stornoway Port Authority recognised the importance of the local heritage as a tourist marketing tool, and mounted an impressive display in
the ferry terminal building celebrating Stornoway’s part in the herring fishing industry, including images of the herring girls.

Figure 8.7 Fishergirl statue, Nairn Harbour

Another town which has celebrated its ‘fisher’ tradition using a statue of a Fisherwoman, is Nairn. This statue was unveiled in 2007, and depicts a local fisherwoman, as opposed to one of the herring gutters. But once again, it displays ways in which the local heritage can be captured in an alternative way.

8.4 Intangible Culture

While museums and heritage centres can capture some aspects of the heritage associated with the herring girls, many aspects of their lives and the culture associated with their lives and experiences is far harder to portray. The experience of their lives, the traditions which grew up around the migratory occupation, and the social aspects
which were an intrinsic part of the lifestyle can be more readily associated with the idea of intangible culture:

‘Cultural heritage’ has become a familiar concept, and one that can evoke strong associations. If individuals are asked to articulate what this heritage actually is, or where it can be found, it is likely that museums, galleries, monuments and historical buildings will feature prominently among responses. In short, there is a common belief that heritage resides in material artefacts or ‘things’ that have cultural significance and that can also be seen, examined and, in some cases at least, touched. However, cultural heritage does not just consist of collections and monuments: it also encompasses traditions that go beyond the material and are living expressions inherited by groups and communities from their ancestors and, in turn, transmitted to their descendants. This is ‘intangible cultural heritage’. (McCleery, McCleery, Gunn and Hill, 2008)

Intangible heritage is more often associated with events and practices being undertaken today, but it can also be applied to the practices of the past. The collection of the oral reminiscences of the herring girls can be seen to be the collecting of intangible cultural heritage, which includes the language used, the dialect of different areas of Scotland, along with the relating of social practice and rituals associated with the herring gutting. The opportunity to engage local communities in preserving their own culture and heritage has been increased over the past 15 years with the funding available from the National Lottery. There is a specific branch of funding which is targeted at community heritage preservation – the Heritage Lottery Fund, which
provides small grants to local groups to enable them to undertake projects. Where projects can combine local enthusiasm and input, with professional research and support, the wealth of local knowledge can be garnered to ensure that it can be preserved in a form which makes it accessible to both tourists and local people alike.

### 8.4.1 Mallaig Oral History Project

The Mallaig Oral History Project is a two-year project which was initiated by local fishermen who recognised that the fishing industry in the village was in decline, and that there had been no attempt to capture some of the memories and stories from those who had been involved, both locally and those who had travelled from and to the east coast. Mallaig is particularly unique in that it was only brought into existence as a fishing port when the railway was built in 1901 – primarily for the herring fishing industry - to connect it to the southern markets. The majority of the population is descended from fishing families from the east-coast, and others from the Western Isles, who moved to the area when the fishing opened up. There are also those whose heritage is based mainly on the crofting traditions. But this is not apparent to the outside observer. It is particularly interesting how the two cultures mixed over the past century, while still maintaining pride in their own backgrounds and culture, and this is currently being collected and documented through this oral history project. It was only as a result of funding being available through the Heritage Lottery Fund, that people’s memories and experiences from this unique background were able to be captured, and archived. The project seeks to ensure that the local community feel involved and have the opportunity to participate, both as interviewers and
interviewees. The younger generation have also been asked to take part, and to undertake interviews amongst themselves, focusing on their experiences of growing up in the community, and the changes which they perceive, which will provide heritage material for future generations.

Engaging communities in this type of local project raises a sense of self awareness and pride. It focuses on the local memories, capturing local traditions along with the sense that the community is a part of a wider fishing community, stretching back over to the east-coast or to the western isles and the links and ties which many people have with the communities there. Because Mallaig has a later historical involvement with the herring industry, which extended into the 1970s and 80s, there are still those women and men who can talk directly about their involvement either at sea, or in the processing of the fish.

8.4.2 The Herring Festival, Siglufjörður, Iceland

Figure 8.8 Siglufjörður Herring Museum
In Iceland, the heritage of the herring industry is celebrated by way of an annual festival which takes place in Siglufjörður, in the north of Iceland, in August. A reenactment of the lives of the herring girls takes place as part of the celebration, with actors playing the parts of the women, and the men, the curers and coopers – although it was made clear that in fact, some of those actors had actually worked in the herring industry themselves. The herring fishing industry in Iceland lasted for almost 100 years, between 1867 and 1968. Siglufjörður was regarded as the world capital of the herring fisheries in the 1960s, a fishery run by the Norwegians. Siglufjörður was the site of Iceland’s first herring processing plant in 1911.

![Figure 8.9 Gutting herring at Siglufjörður](image)

Herring became increasingly important to the Icelandic economy with thousands of local people involved in the fishery, and during the first half of the twentieth century,
it accounted for between 25 and 35% of the total export earnings from Iceland (Icelandic Herring Era Museum Website, 1998-2006). Interviewees from Iceland, Anna Olafsdottir and Palmi Gunnerson talked about the ‘herring adventure’ as a ‘boom’ time, a klondyke experience, similar to the gold rush in America (Olafsdottir and Gunnerson, 2006). The Herring Festival tries to recreate the height of the industry and celebrates the part that herring played in the economy. It is held in the middle of August each year in Siglufjörður, with many local people taking part. The recreation of the herring days is carried out as a street theatre, from the original barracks where the women were housed which are now part of the museum, down onto the street in front, where the processing machines are set up. Although the fish are not hand-gutted, there are many aspects of the working practice which are similar to those of the Scottish women. There is a street festival atmosphere, with music in the town’s square. This type of heritage portrayal is particularly effective at creating a sense of community spirit, and a recognition of the heritage of the area. It is held annually and as a result is a period when people visit the local area to celebrate local culture and tradition.

8.4.3 Heritage Trails

While the herring industry lasted longer in Iceland, there are few women left now in Scotland who had direct experience of working as herring gutters as a migratory occupation. The very fact that these women were not based in one place, but moved around, makes the heritage portrayal more complex. An accurate portrayal would reflect this movement but heritage centres and museums tend to portray static
exhibitions, static accounts, which cannot easily give the sense of movement, or of the seasonality of the industry. Grieco (2008) highlights the challenges facing heritage practice, and the opportunities which exist to creatively use existing means to provide heritage both for local people and for the ever increasing tourist markets. Her first points relate to the opportunity to display heritage more effectively on the local and regional transport routes, trains and ferries in particular. While people are effectively a captive market, and are looking for information about the areas through which they are travelling, it is an ideal opportunity to fill this need and provide information regarding the culture and heritage along the journey:

Tourists travel on Scotland’s ferries with little to alert them to the significant history of the places they journey past in a period when technology can be readily harnessed to providing rich information on past history and present activities with consequences for a stronger anchoring of tourism.....

The absence of adequate heritage signing on Scotland’s ferries despite the presence of heavy and vital tourist traffic is matched by the absence of heritage signing, on Scotland’s equally important scenic railways. (Grieco, 2008)

This is clearly an opportunity to highlight local heritage, as well as to encourage tourists to visit some of the less well known areas or coastal villages, having been given more information about them. Grieco goes on to make the point that the development of technology would make this type of heritage activity relatively easy and very accessible, using global positioning satellite for example, to pinpoint areas
for which information could be made available, so that the information was truly reflecting the areas as the journey progressed:

Ferries, trains, buses and planes can all play a part in inclusive heritage practice – they can become channels through which the experience of communities – which are often simply travelled through – can become relayed with greater richness but without the very often unaffordable expense of maintaining a separate physical location for cultural dissemination – where physical museums are not practicable such virtual museums become possible. Inclusive heritage practice should make use of the virtual and the mobile to enable the small, the remote and the sparse to be properly represented and reconsidered. (Grieco 2008)

As well as linking up journeys with heritage information, the idea of taking the small heritage displays in the small villages around the coast in particular, and ensuring that there are links between them, and to larger museums and centres, which can advertise their existence and what they have on display or within their local collections, is one which could easily be adopted and make a difference to the visitor numbers in all of the centres. Some attempts have been made to do this, and on a larger scale, the Maritime Museums of Scotland is made up of three museums on the Clyde – Braehead, Dumbarton and Irvine. These museums focus on the maritime aspects of shipbuilding and engines rather than a focus on the social history contained within many small local heritage centres. These museums are able to work with each other to use parts of their collections to produce exhibitions, and to advertise to visitors.
This could be done very effectively with smaller museums and heritage centres around Scotland, and this information could be linked to the larger museums to provide a very effective network. Grieco (2008) also makes this point for the heritage exhibition on the small island of Stronsay, in Orkney which was one of the largest herring stations during the first half of the twentieth century.

The idea of portraying the history of the herring girls using a trail, which would lead visitors down the coast following the same pattern as the occupational migration, is one which would more readily capture the essence of the experience of the women themselves than would a static display or collection of artefacts. This could incorporate heritage centres and museums that are already in existence along with buildings, harbours and piers, and combine with modern technology to allow people to access material such as clips of video or oral history narratives, or relevant photographic material to enhance the overall experience. A heritage network would help to plug the gap in the generally poor heritage portrayal of the herring girls. Creative thinking and the use of technology can combine to produce exciting opportunities to preserve and maintain the heritage record of this type of employment history. With technology it is possible to produce heritage information in a huge variety of ways, which can be accessed by the individual, wherever they are.

8.4.4 Technology and Heritage
In her report on *Museums Galleries Scotland: Impacts on Communities*, 2008, Margaret Graham pointed out that it is necessary for museums to embrace the new technology as a way of disseminating information to the public:

Museums and galleries in Scotland recognise the importance of the new technologies in marketing and promotion. They are actively involved in disseminating information online which includes.... Digitised images and virtual audience experiences.... Marketing and promoting a range of museum exhibitions, activities and events as well as the local area... (Graham, 2008: 26)

Graham also makes the point that for museums which have been forced to close down for economic reasons and do not have premises open to the public, the opportunity to provide a virtual museum experience, utilising some of the collections and information held within the museum should not be overlooked. The process of digitisation of many important collections in Scotland, including some of the material held within the archives of the School of Scottish Studies is of immense benefit to researchers, who can access this material from almost anywhere in the world.

Online archives are particularly useful sources of material, but if these are taken a stage further, and a particular aspect of history is focussed upon, the idea of knowledge networks, and the online collection of all types of information related to that particular topic can provide a particularly rich source of material. The online Transport and Society Network – www.geocities.com/transport_and_society/ has a section entitled *Scottish transport history: migration, mobility and work amongst the*
herring lassies, which includes a huge variety of information about the herring girls. Digitally based information has been collected together to provide an accessible record of a previously neglected group of migratory workers. The site includes sources and links to photographs, paintings, poetry and song, film clips, oral history transcription, an e-thesis, and multiple links to sites relating to the fishing industry in Scotland, Ireland and abroad. The Newfoundland Salt Fisheries for example is an online exhibition which was included to show a best practice example. Combined onto one site, these online resources show how beneficial technology can be to build a more holistic picture of the lives of the herring girls, and can include materials, such as family photographs or reminiscences, which would not necessarily receive the attention or be appropriate within the exhibitions of a more formal museum or heritage centre. The idea of knowledge networks has been around for sometime:

...the ability of individuals or groups to share a common cyber space or cyber desk allows for levels of iteration and incremental contribution to knowledge building not readily achievable in a physical environment.... Imagine for a moment communities scattered around the sea-board of Scotland wanting to capture and record the history of the herring girls and their travels around the coastline of Scotland before the domestic presence of online technologies – it would have been a very difficult task. Imagine the same task with on-line technologies, family photographs and old letters readily scanned in and developed as personal pages with an 'index' location which groups and displays the total set of links. Indeed, such projects have already begun to develop... (Transport and Society Network Website, 2006)
Online knowledge networks are not without their challenges however, as links are often broken as websites move, or are updated or become outdated. They require constant updating and management, and as they continue to grow, can become less manageable as a result. There is also a need to ensure the validity of the material and that there are the references available for the different types of information if they are to be utilised for formal research purposes. However, despite the difficulties, the very nature of the networks ensures that there are huge amounts of materials which would not otherwise be readily accessible and this greatly increases the all-round knowledge about the subject matter and means that a researcher does not have to depend only on the formal literature. In the case of the herring gutters, relying on the formal literature would have produced very little material for research. As a result, the existence of websites and online networks helps to preserve the record, bringing fragments together along with more formal discussion, and providing a much more rounded understanding of the experience of the women, both from the inside and from the outside.

Another online archive which promotes the digital collection of various forms of material relating to Scotland’s history and heritage is SCRAN – [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk). Scran was formed in 1996 by The National Museums Scotland together with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and The Scottish Museums Council to provide access to digitalised materials representing material culture and history. It works with over 300 cultural institutions in Scotland and the UK. It was set up by the Millennium Commission Lottery Fund which funded the digitisation of a variety of collections from cultural organisations. SCRAN collaborates with museums, galleries, archives and the media along with private
collections, and has grown considerably over the past five years, receiving almost 1,000,000 hits per day. The digitisation of the archives of various organisations, and of reports is of particular relevance to research in areas such as the Scottish fishing industry. Combined with many thousands of photographic images, the wealth of material available is considerable, and accessible through license agreement to anyone throughout the world. The database is searchable which enables many different types of materials to be considered for research purposes across the whole of the archive, just by entering a search word.

Technology is developing all the time, and it is now possible to access the internet via mobile phones. This has enabled a number of different creative ideas to be developed involving access to heritage. Google recently advertised a website which provides information combined with maps for heritage sites around the world:

New! Explore famous World Heritage sites and landmarks with Google Maps and Street View (www.google.co.uk, 2009)

A combination of heritage trails and online resources means that wherever a person is, if they have access to a mobile phone or other online gadget, they can receive information. The idea of heritage portrayal has moved outwith museums or heritage centres – out of the buildings, and into the open or built environment. It could incorporate audio, video and photographs and almost anything that would be possible via the internet. This provides the opportunity for the development of businesses who deal specifically with the writing and distribution of material using this medium. One such company, Audio Trails, www.audiotrails.co.uk produces information which can be accessed using ipods, MP3 players and mobile phones. While specialising in
tourist or nature trails, the company provides interpretation to suit the needs of their clients. This information can cover a huge variety of topics, and be provided for a variety of different audiences and age groups. It can incorporate both audio and visual and can include old film footage, or oral history reminiscence for example. While it is not yet online, it shows the potential for heritage portrayal combined with this type of technology. Over 90% of mobile phones can use Bluetooth and one National Park in Grassington has just begun to use this means to provide a free guide to the park at any time of day to visitors to the area. (Audiotrails, 2009)

The power of seeing images or hearing voices connected with specific spaces would be of considerable advantage to the heritage market. Heritage maps can be added to ensure that the person can connect the specific area with the information being provided. The application of this type of technology could be far-reaching, with many possibilities for ensuring that previously under-represented groups within history such as the herring girls, could be part of a cultural heritage revolution, in which dusty displays and static exhibitions become a thing of the past. In this way, technology can be seen to have the potential both to preserve and display heritage and our understandings of the culture and history in all forms, including that of the women who worked in the herring fishing industry in Scotland.

8.5 Conclusion: heritage for the present and the future

Most of the women who were interviewed from the north-east in particular, described themselves as ‘Fisher’, and there was a feeling of pride in their background and the
traditions of the fishing community. There was also a sense of sadness in that they are currently watching the demise of the fishing industry and the importance it once had nationally. Coupled with that, within fishing communities now, there is a reticence about seeing tourism as a valid replacement for an industry which employed many thousands nationwide, and which produced food for consumption and for export. In villages where there is still a working fishing industry, there are also issues around the continuance of a dirty and noisy industry, alongside a desire to attract tourists, who generally prefer a peaceful and picturesque location for their holidays. While there is a desire to maintain heritage and to preserve something of the culture and traditions of a proud community of people, they are being asked to do this in conjunction with the idea of heritage as consumption for the tourist market. This is often the main way of extracting funding either for cultural events or heritage portrayal, the requirement to prove that it will benefit the tourist market.

For some, the tourist market has taken over from what is considered by some as the 'real' industry in villages and towns, and instead of being an area dependent on its own labours and industry, these villages and towns become mere tourist attractions, close to the water and often picturesque. The promotion of tourism locally in some places has been seen to have been carried out at the expense of the fishing industry. Nadel-Klein's comments regarding the Canadian government subsidies for heritage centres in areas where the fisheries are in decline:

...a fisheries crisis extends across the North Atlantic. Not surprisingly, heritage centers are following in its wake. Canadian government subsidies have encouraged the development of outport tourism in Newfoundland, for
example but these have not successfully replaced either the economic or the social benefits of an active fishery. Davis notes that some residents say bitterly that they now live on "a reservation" (Davis, personal communication).

Filmmaker Richard Wheeler's (1994) documentary about the town of Lunenbert, Nova Scotia, visits a fisheries museum, commenting that "fisheries museums are beginning to replace the fisheries". (Nadel-Klein, 2003: 210)

There is an added dimension to the heritage portrayal for some that live within fishing villages - while they are keen to maintain their own heritage, they would prefer to do this for themselves and for their children, and not just to increase the tourist market. The question of who the heritage is for, who is the consumer, is of paramount importance in this instance. Lowenthal (1999) wants to see the portrayal of heritage more firmly linked with life today and as part of a continuation:

...nothing can be reversed. Everything lives in history. No artefact can be maintained in stasis. Nothing done can be wholly undone.

In most aspects of life we accept this. We have long seen time as a one-way stream. Shakespeare's Richard II wishes to call back yesterday, to bid time return and he laments that this cannot be done. We must cease to lament. Heritage is better stewarded when seen as part of life rather than standing outside of life, eternal, permanent, and remote. (Lowenthal, 1999: 8)

The fisher folk themselves want to be involved in a narrative with the present as well as a celebration of the past, and this is the reason why many of them are willing to
participate in oral history interviews, where their memories and experiences of a specific time and a specific industry are considered by people now, as well as their own children’s children in the future. It is a way of incorporating people into the formation of history and understandings, a conversation with the past, which cannot be done using formal history alone. Oral history – and in particular filmed oral history interviews - as a means of collecting and portraying heritage, provides considerable opportunities to inform people now and in the future about the lives and experiences of the women at the gutting. Our own culture is a highly visual one which is increasingly used to visual communication. The application of technology to heritage portrayal provides numerous opportunities to educate and inform in an engaging manner.

As the close knit fishing communities become more fragmented and communities change and move around more, it is less possible for those with the closest links to the heritage to be in a position to look after it. This is likely to be increasingly the case in the years to come. Heritage has to be able to take account of the future, and the way in which people can look after it. Pride in local communities exists regardless of whether a person was born and brought up there although the links to the past generations in the same town or area are no longer present. Heritage collection, preservation and portrayal will therefore become even more important as memories of times past are not so easily transmitted to future generations. Lowenthal discusses the importance of stewardship for heritage practice, and how vital public support is, combined with the positive encouragement of heritage practice amongst local communities:
Commitment to stewardship is especially difficult in modern, post-industrial society. There is the increasing mobility of a population that feels cut off from its roots. Without public support, I have suggested, heritage atrophies. It is only when it is populist that it has vital, as distinct from mercenary, value, or mere antiquarian interest. Where heritage is defined or run simply by an elite, or where too few people have a symbolic stake in it, stewardship remains precarious... (Lowenthal, 1999: 9)

Oral history projects such as the one underway currently in Mallaig are of immense importance to ensure that people and communities have an opportunity to take a part in portraying their own history and heritage. The videos and tapes of reminiscences from the project will be held in the local archive, for both local and public use, now and in the future, with the use of video making the material more accessible to a wider range of people.

In order to ensure that the heritage of the fishing communities and of the women who travelled to the gutting has a future, it is vital to ensure that the past is well attended to, both through formal academic research and also through popular heritage enterprise within the communities themselves. Networking museums and centres and historic sites locally and nationally through heritage trails and combined exhibitions; networking through online communities and knowledge networks, and generally increasing people’s engagement with the past in creative ways will lead to better heritage portrayals than have been previously available. It will also ensure that groups such as the herring girls, who have been under-represented both in written history and heritage portrayal in the past can receive the recognition that they deserve.
Their own reminiscences reflect more closely their lives and experiences than any museum display could do, and combined with technology – whether as part of a display in a heritage centre or museum, online as part of a heritage website, or by using an Ipod or mobile phone outdoors perhaps while standing on an old harbour or pier, it will connect people today with a way of life that is gone but will not be forgotten.
Chapter 9  Conclusions

Figure 9.1 Herring Girls relaxing on the barrels

9.1 Introduction

This thesis set out with the objective of documenting the untold history of herring girl labour and making a significant contribution to sociological and historical understanding of the lives of the herring girls between 1900 and 1950. These objectives have been met through consideration of a wide variety of materials and from the oral testimony of some of the few women who are left who experienced this migratory occupation. The key themes of employment and working conditions, recreation and culture, and image and identity have been considered and documented. Notably, the visual representation of the herring girls also became an important
feature of the thesis and its analysis uncovers a number of different aspects of the history of these women which were previously hidden from public view.

As documented in Chapter 3, the herring industry was a large-scale and important industry in Britain increasingly throughout the nineteenth century and throughout the period of the thesis, and the women who processed the fish were a vital part of that industry. And yet they have remained secondary in importance in the literature to the men working within the industry, in particular the fishermen, remaining in the background despite the fact that the industry depended upon their labours to process the fish and pack them into barrels for export. As was noted in Chapter 2, there are books devoted to the herring fishing, in particular Gray (1978) *The Fishing Communities of Scotland*, or the Shetland-focused *Shetland Life and Trade* by Hance Smith (1984), or Angus Martin (2001) *The North Herring Fishing* none of which give much attention to the women who worked at the processing. Whilst there are solitary accounts of women who were at the gutting, notably *Dear Greemista* by Margaret Bochel (1979) and *In a World a' Wir Ane* by Susan Telford (2000), which provide information about individual women and their experiences, in terms of the social history of the herring gutting there is very little literature available indeed. There is clearly a missing account in both formal histories and even in the heritage portrayal, which can nevertheless be found in the fragments of contemporary media, journals and articles, combined with the testimony of the women themselves and the visual images.

By bringing together these fragmented sources into a single account, the life and times of the Scots Herring Girls has been transformed from a set of fragmentary accounts
into an integrated and whole analysis by way of the careful collation of previously unused materials and the diligent collection of oral and visual evidence. This chapter presents the key findings and contributions of this thesis in the context of the missing record of the women who worked in the fishing industry - the herring gutters.

9.2 Key findings and contributions

This thesis presents a social history of the occupation of herring girls, using a wide range of sources and material, including the formal literature, individual oral and written accounts, newspaper articles and reports, visual images and other fragments. Unique evidence of the communication structures between herring girls and their social networks at home were discovered in the course of the research. A key example, was the discovery of the postcards reported in Chapter 6 which were sent between the two sisters from Shetland when one was at the gutting and the other had to remain at home to help her mother with the croft work. This provided an insight not just into the communication between two sisters at the time, but also with additional oral information provided by their grand niece (Fullerton, 2007), regarding how the sister who was left at home felt about missing out on the adventure. The set of postcard communications represents one source in an extensive range of different types and sources of evidence which have been woven together to provide a more comprehensive account than previously provided within the existing literature and analysis.
Other key examples within this range of sources included the article from *The New Shetlander* which described an evening in Gremista in August 1924 discussed in Chapter 5. The description of the activities which were taking place as well as of the communal singing of the 23rd Psalm, provided a very vivid account of a single moment in time in the history of the industry which helps to give a sense of what life was really like during this time. Also Josephine Bridgeland’s memories of the ‘Scots Girls’ in Yarmouth from the archives of the Time and Tide Museum provided an interesting sketch of the lives of the herring girls from a nurse’s perspective. The private photograph collections of Maggie Leask and the McNabs were of particular note, and gave a remarkable insight into life at the time, from the community perspective. At the very heart of the thesis were the oral accounts from the women themselves, both collected specifically and those searched out in other archives. The opportunity to speak to some of the women themselves made the personal histories much more immediate than reading second-hand accounts of their lives. Such materials have provided the information to piece together a very detailed social history account of the work place and the social aspects of life at the gutting.

The methodology was of the utmost importance. This thesis has used the voices of the women from the communities to portray their own history, their own memories and experiences and photos of the time they spent at the gutting. Through this testimony the account of their working lives has become more valid than through drawing conclusions from statistics or second hand evidence alone. It binds the history to those about whom the history is being written, and it creates a picture of life and experience which can be combined with other accounts or portrayals to produce a valid and authentic history. The oral testimony of the women is what they want to
say, what they have to tell about the experience of the herring industry during this period. The written accounts, the popular media, the formal histories and even the statistics are from the voices of other people. They include what other people want to say – and in the case of the maritime literature in particular what they did not say, about the women at the gutting. The combination of oral history interviews undertaken for this thesis and the records of interviews undertaken in years gone by have provided a rich source of information from which the history of the women can be pieced together. The triangulation of sources through the use of the visual record provides a further richness to the account.

9.3 The Importance of Recreation

The question of why the women went to the gutting was put to the interviewees, and it became clear that it was not just a lack of choice, or the economic benefits which were important. One aspect of life which has not previously been highlighted in other literature is the importance of the social aspect of the life, both within and outwith the workplace. Almost every interview talks about the importance of singing and dancing in the workplace, in the huts or during time away in East Anglia, and there was a strong sense of communal hardship combined with communal pleasure. The discussion about an ‘occupational community’ in Chapter 5 also highlighted the social bonds which formed between workers. The evidence from the women themselves points to the importance of recreation. One interviewee described ‘working for Friday – when you could get off and go to the dance...’ (Gillespie, 2006), and that is echoed in many other interviews. The harsh nature of the work had to be
counteracted by the opportunity to have fun or the women would not have returned each season. The women were strongly identified with their occupation, but the dances in particular gave them an opportunity to dress up, and to go out and enjoy life as part of the wider community or society. The types of recreation available to the women obviously varied depending on their location, but even where dance halls were not available, music and dancing was an activity which happened with regularity - on the concrete slabs outside the gutting yards after a hard days work, or within the confines of the huts of Stronsay, Barra or Shetland.

Socialising while at the gutting also provided the women with an important opportunity for romance, and the majority of those interviewed met their future husbands while they were working away. Because they so often stayed within their community groups while at the gutting, even while out at the dances, many of the women met men while in East Anglia or Ireland who actually came from their own part of the world as described in Chapter 6. But the occupational migration did lead to more mixing between the fishing communities generally, with links forming between people, women through the gutting groups and men through the fishing crews. Many of the women and men interviewed referred to relatives in various different fishing ports who were there as a direct result of romances and marriage between people involved in the herring industry.

Recreation was a vital part of the whole experience of the gutting, and a main factor in the decision of the women to go. For those who had not been before, there were the stories told to them by others about the positive aspects of life at the gutting. And
for those who had already been, the lasting memories from previous seasons were of the positive aspects - the social life.

9.4 Identity: Perceptions and Portrayals

The material collected as part of the research has also provided information which allows us to consider the portrayal of the women, and how they were perceived. The notion of identity is an important one within the thesis, and Chapter 4 looked directly at the perceptions of those people outside the industry, and how they portrayed the women. There is a juxtaposition of ideas with the burden of evidence showing that the portrayal was a mixture of repugnance at the nature of the occupation, and a sense of marvel at the ability of the women to function within this type of workplace. This contrasts with the women’s own perceptions of their place within their communities and within the industry generally. The notion that this was a ‘stereotyped, stigmatised and marginalised community’ as put forward by Nadel-Klein (1988, 2003) is not one which the evidence collected for this thesis would fully uphold. While there were certainly elements of stigmatisation, there was also evidence that the outside perception was relatively positive, if sometimes uninformed, with the idea that the fisher folk were perhaps different, but regarded as a proud class of people with longstanding traditions. The information from the Time and Tide Museum consultation (2000) showed a community there who actively sought to identify themselves with the fisher community, as a community to be proud of and to portray as a main part of the town’s heritage.
Many of the women had a very positive outlook to their work, which came directly from the feeling that they were self-employed workers, contributing in a worthwhile way to their communities back home. They could smile for the cameras, laugh and joke and sing while working up to their elbows in fish guts, because for every fish they gutted, they earned more money. Their efforts were directly tied in to their earnings and their sense of power was quite literally in their hands.

From the media of the day, the newspaper reports and the articles in magazines or journal entries, the public portrayal of the women, although generally positive and respectful, was still paternalistic in tone and nature, and it did not convey the vital part which the women played in the industry. It did not always portray them in the way in which the evidence shows that they viewed themselves. The only time that the newspaper accounts hint at the idea that the women were in fact in a strong position within the industry is when they were reporting on the strike action. It was then that the women could be seen to be exerting their powerful position within the industry, which required their labour as soon as the fish were landed on the pier. It was seen from the evidence both from their own accounts but also in newspaper reports that this action tended to be taken in a relatively light-hearted way, but the underlying power of the women could not be denied. They could make demands which the curers were forced at least on some occasions to meet because of their vital role in the industry.
9.5 Occupational and Social Community

The organisation of the work group of three, and the grouping of women in the gutting yards was also shown to be of importance. As well as being of benefit to the actual practice of gutting and packing, it also provided the women with support both during their working hours and in their accommodation or during time socialising. The women did not tend to go out on their own when they were away from home. They were portrayed and identified as a group and they were seen as a group.

This gave the women a level of protection which they would not have had if the work had been of a more individual nature. They could and did look after one another. Despite the fact that they were travelling around the country, and working in difficult environments alongside men who were also away from home, there is no evidence of harassment of the women either from the men within the industry or from other people outwith the industry.

The occupational grouping and the social grouping helped to protect the women, as well as increasing their sense of power – as was also shown through the organisation of strike action. Indeed the evidence shows that it was the young fishermen who could feel uncomfortable or daunted having to pass close by the farlanes as it was likely that they would get teased by the women working there (Ralston, 2006). The curers were also well aware that despite the light hearted nature of some of the strikes, the women were serious in their demands for better conditions for themselves or others within the industry, and did indeed hold considerable power in a way in which
women and workers in other industries did not. So those within the industry, the fishermen and the curers, were well aware of the power of the women.

9.6 The Importance of Community

Social history must be about both the men and the women in communities and too often in written history, women’s lives have been glossed over or ignored. But neither do studies based only on women and women’s experiences provide a comprehensive enough account of the social history of either women or communities. While it is apparent that the majority of formal histories do not take enough account of the lives and experiences of women, it is equally misleading to portray history from a women-only perspective as has been done by some historians. Working class communities in general and fishing communities in particular depend on every individual playing their part in order for the family or community to survive and flourish.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide considerable information relating to the way the women worked and socialised together while away at the fishing, and how important their home communities were to them. While they were away from home, the women were still playing an important part in the economies of both their families and their communities, and this was recognised within the family and community by both men and women. They were playing an active part. This thesis provides evidence for the ways in which the lives of the men and the women are intrinsically linked, with the
women's labour being required within the fishing industry. The individualism which is such a large part of our world today was not a concept which would have been recognised in the fishing communities in the first half of the twentieth century. Family and community were the priority and it was this which helped to keep these communities and the traditions of the communities together.

Changes over time and location made generalisation difficult and what might have been the case for one group of women was sometimes disputed in interview material by others. Some of those who experienced life at the herring gutting felt that their account was the true account, and were unable to recognise the differences between the different groups of women and the changes which occurred over time. However, despite the complex pattern which emerged from the evidence, the similarities between the accounts, particularly those interviews which had been undertaken in the 1970s compared with my own over the past few years, were striking. There was a real sense of a continuation of a tradition and of the pattern of occupational community for the women who were going to the gutting in the earlier part of the time period and the later period. Even in the 1960s, the last years of the herring gutting in Shetland, the women were respecting the traditions of their mothers and grandmothers by continuing some of their traditions.

9.7 Image and Identity

Chapter 7 considered the representation of the women through visual image, with the images of the women produced for public consumption generally showing a more
sanitised version of the reality of the workplace, the 'picturesque' herring girl, hard working and nimble fingered, smiling for the camera. This was in contrast to the photographs either in private collections or the portrait photographs commissioned by the women themselves, depicting stylish and independent young women with up-to-date hairstyles and dressed in the fashion of the day.

Figure ii: Fashion conscious herring girls from Whalsay, Shetland

Photographs of gutting crews from Shetland, provided images of strength and confidence such as the portrait photographs which were taken home to their families with pride as a memory of their season at the gutting. The very fact that these photos were kept for many years shows how proud their families were of them.

The emergence of photography as a way of capturing images, and the increasing use of the medium which included many photographs of the women working on the piers, was of considerable benefit to the research. The research was enriched by the discovery of photographs which could supplement the memories and experience of the women themselves. Image was also used during the fieldwork as a way of
evoking response and memory from the interviewees. Images over the course of the period, from 1900 through to 1950, also indicate very clearly changes in the industry over this time, which coincided with the developments in photographic technology.

9.8 Heritage Practice

Chapter 8 focused on the heritage portrayal and the way in which the fishing community and the women are seen today. It was clear that the use of technology to expand heritage, to engage and educate new audiences, provides an important opportunity to redress the balance of the portrayal of the women. Their own voices and images could be used by the heritage industry to connect their history to the places where they lived and worked in towns and villages along the coast, either as individual locations or joined up as a heritage trail. The immediacy and the very human nature of their retelling of their experience would be an effective means of portraying their own history, using ipods or mobile phones for the audio and visual elements of the accounts, which could also be located in specific relevant places. Combined with the more traditional portrayal within heritage centres and museums, this would give a richness and an authenticity to the heritage which does not currently exist.

9.9 Conclusion and future research

While this thesis and the recent work of other postgraduate researchers in this particular field including Frances Wilkins, Jane Liffen, Stephen Friend and Anne
Coombs\textsuperscript{5}, goes some way towards redressing the gender imbalance which currently exists in the portrayal of the women who worked in the fishing industry, future research is still required. It was not possible within the scope of this thesis to examine fully some of the complexities which emerged. Work on community history, looking at all the members of the community, would provide a fuller account of the fishing communities than currently exists. The archive of interview material within the School of Scottish Studies for example, which will hopefully become more accessible as digitisation projects are taken forward, and the interview material from large projects such as Paul Thompson’s work on the fishing communities in the 1970s already available through Qualidata, are all rich sources of information which can contribute to future research. My own interview material provides more new and original material which can add to the historical account and will hopefully also be archived and of benefit to future research. I have also shown how the visual aspects of the research and in particular photographs can play an important part in the historical account. This could be an important area for future research which could uncover more aspects of the history of both the women and the communities. Combined with technology this could provide opportunities for the dissemination of historical material to the public, providing the opportunity for social history in particular to gain a more prominent place within the modern world. This in itself would increase the public consciousness of history and allow people to become more involved in their own heritage, both its collection and its consideration.

We have reached a point where there are few people around now who have memories of work before the Second World War and it was a challenge to catch some of the last

\textsuperscript{5} All of whom met and presented papers at the Herring Girls conference at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Skye, September 2006
members of this occupational group – the herring girls – and allow them to portray their own history, through their memories and lived experience. There was a sense of urgency and importance to the fieldwork which did in fact uncover more interviewees than had initially been thought possible.

The history of the women in the fishing industry has received little attention from historians to date. This thesis explored the representations of the Scots Herring Girls through oral, visual and contemporary sources focusing on the period 1900 to 1950. Through fieldwork and a distinctive methodology it considered the complex patterns of identity and perceptions using the voices of the women themselves, and those outside the industry and from the popular media of the time. In so doing, it has provided a fuller account of the lives of the herring girls and captured the memories of some of the last of the women who were actively involved in the industry.

Changes within the industry have seen a huge decline in fishing around the coast of the country, and the herring fishing industry has all but disappeared. Where once ports and harbours around the country were scenes of thriving industry and activity, there is little left of a once important industry which employed many thousands of workers, both at sea and on shore. It has been of considerable importance and a great privilege to retrieve a record of the lives of the herring girls, and their time in the industry from the women themselves who played such a vital role.
Glossary

arles – the contract made between the herring gutting crew and the herring curer

bulk/bulking – when herring were tipped into the barrels without being properly packed.

caff/chaff – straw used for stuffing mattresses, used by both the herring girls for the beds in the huts and by fishermen on board boats

cloots – the cloths required by the women to bind their fingers to protect them from salt and cuts. These were often made from old flour sacks and were cut into strips and then bound round the fingers.

cran – a measure of herring - 37½ imperial gallons, which was approximately 1000 herring

creel – basket for carrying the fish

dab – cut. The women referred to how many ‘dabs’ of the knife it took to gut a herring and at certain times of the year either one or two were required.

denes – area of ground near to the shore

farlane/farlin – wooden trough into which the ungutted herring were poured and at which the herring gutters worked; sometimes also known as ‘farlands’ which could be derived from ‘foreland’ or ‘foreshore’ - an area in front of a beach on which the troughs were originally put for the gutting of the fish.

fish hoose – kipper smoking building or smokehouse

fowk – folk

gipping – gutting

kist – chest or large wooden box. Used by the women to take necessary items to the gutting

long lines – fishing lines with many hooks attached which were fished along the sea bottom to attract bottom feeding fish

loon – a man or a boy

makin – Shetland word for ‘knitting’. A ‘makin belt’ was a belt worn around the waist, used to steady needles as the women knitted

matt fulls – female herring at a certain time of year, full of roe.
matties – female herring not full of roe. Likely to be derives from ‘maatjes’ – the Dutch word for herring without roe.

merrit – married

putter – a pole with a metal tip used to move barrels around the herring stations

quine/quinie – a woman or girl

shod – shoe’d; a saying ‘fed and shod’ which means having enough money to keep you or your dependents fed and clothed

smas – small immature herring
Glossary

*arles* – the contract made between the herring gutting crew and the herring curer

*bulk/bulking* – when herring were tipped into the barrels without being properly packed.

*caff/chaff* – straw used for stuffing mattresses, used by both the herring girls for the beds in the huts and by fishermen on board boats

*cloots* – the cloths required by the women to bind their fingers to protect them from salt and cuts. These were often made from old flour sacks and were cut into strips and then bound round the fingers.

*cran* – a measure of herring - 37½ imperial gallons, which was approximately 1000 herring

*creel* – basket for carrying the fish

*dab* – cut. The women referred to how many ‘dabs’ of the knife it took to gut a herring and at certain times of the year either one or two were required.

*denes* – area of ground near to the shore

*farlane/farlín* – wooden trough into which the ungutted herring were poured and at which the herring gutters worked; sometimes also known as ‘farlands’ which could be derived from ‘foreland’ or ‘foreshore’ - an area in front of a beach on which the troughs were originally put for the gutting of the fish.

*fish hoose* – kipper smoking building or smokehouse

*fowk* – folk

*gipping* – gutting

*kist* – chest or large wooden box. Used by the women to take necessary items to the gutting

*long lines* – fishing lines with many hooks attached which were fished along the sea bottom to attract bottom feeding fish

*loon* – a man or a boy

*makin* – Shetland word for ‘knitting’. A ‘makin belt’ was a belt worn around the waist, used to steady needles as the women knitted

*matt fulls* – female herring at a certain time of year, full of roe.
matties – female herring not full of roe. Likely to be derives from ‘maatjes’ – the Dutch word for herring without roe.

merrit - married

putter – a pole with a metal tip used to move barrels around the herring stations

quine/quinie – a woman or girl

shod - shoe’d; a saying ‘fed and shod’ which means having enough money to keep you or your dependents fed and clothed

smas - small immature herring
References

Abrams, Lynn; Simonton, Deborah; Gordon, Eleanor and Yeo, Eileen (eds) 2006, *Gender in Scottish History since 1700*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press


Charlton, Thomas Lee; Myers, Lois and Sharpless, Rebecca (eds.) (2007)

*History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology.* Plymouth: AltaMira


Gibson, W.M. (1987) *Tales of an Orkney Island (Stronsay Volume 3)*. Kirkwall, Orkney: B.P.P


Mitchell, John (1864) *The Herring: It's Natural History and National Importance*. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas

Munro, Henrietta and Compton, Rae (1983) *They lived by the Sea – Folklore and Ganseys of the Pentland Firth*. Sutherland: Munro and Compton


Soule, George (1957) 'The Economics of Leisure'. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 313 (10): pp. 4-10

Telford, Susan (1998) *In a World A Wir Ane.* Shetland: Shetland Times

Thomson, James (1849) *The Value and Importance of the Scottish Fisheries.*
London/Aberdeen

Routledge and Kegan Paul


Watson, Seòsamh (2007), *Saoghal Bana-mharaiche. Cunntas Beul-aithris mu Bheatha Muinntir an lasgaich ann am Machair Rois.* Brig o’ Turk:
Clann Tuirc

Weld, Charles Richard (1860) *Two Months in Highlands, Orcadia and Skye.* London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts

Williams, Carol (2003) *Framing the West: Race, Gender and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest.* US: Oxford University Press

Wilding, Jayne (ed.) (2001) *We had a good life: Memories of Shetland.* unpublished; Bingham and District Third Age Project

Willmott, Peter and Young, Michael (1957) *Family and Kinship in East London.*
London: Routledge
Newspapers

New Shetlander, 1967 No.81
Fishing News, 27th June 1913
Fishing News, 14th April 1916
Fishing News, 12th August 1939
The Scotsman, 10th June 1826
The Scotsman, 22nd February 1869
The Scotsman, 5th January 1888
The Scotsman, 3rd August 1893
The Scotsman, 17th April 1913
The Scotsman, 17th June 1914
The Scotsman, 23rd April 1920
The Scotsman, 14th October 1921
The Scotsman, 14th August 1925
The Scotsman, 12th November 1926
The Scotsman, 15th November 1929
The Scotsman, 14th December 1929
The Scotsman, 26th October 1936
The Scotsman, 19th July, 1937
The Scotsman, 20th August 1938
The Fraserburgh Herald, 31st January 1996
The Fraserburgh Herald, 17th February 1996
John O' Groats Journal, 25th July 1913
The Graphic, 24th August 1912

Court Records

Inverness High Court, April 1842, Trial of David McKay, Wick, NAS:
AD14/42/447

Official Reports


Fishery Board for Scotland Report 1888: NAS F.8138/6/A

The Annual Report of the Fishery Board for Scotland 1914, part 03, Scran: 000-000-572-622-C; Scottish Fisheries Museum

Report of Fishery Board for Scotland 14th Jan 1888 NAS: AF56/1429

Wick Fishery Office Letters and Reports Book, 1815, part 04, Scran: 000-000-573-669-C; NAS

Factory and Workshop Fish-Curing Trade Report, 1898 part 13, Scran: 000-000-573-786; NAS

Report from HM Chief Inspector into Conveyance of Fish Workers from Aberdeen to Lerwick, May 1927, NAS: AF56/843, F.

The Herring Curing (Scotland) Welfare Order 1926, Scran: 000-000-495-350-C; Dundee City Archives


Buckie Community Council notes, 1995
Church Records
Record of the United Free Church, 1923. School of Scottish Studies
The United Free Church of Scotland, Monthly Record, October, 1907.
School of Scottish Studies
The Missionary Record of the United Free Church, 1913. School of
Scottish Studies

Songs
'Air Tir an Raoir, air Muir a Nochd' Mary Morrison and friends
(singers of song)
Morag MacLeod, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh
(source of original recording) c1960 SCaran 000-000-480-334-C

Unpublished
Astley, Constance (1891) Journal, West Highland Museum, Fort
William

Bridgeland, Josephine (c.1980s) printed article, Time and Tide Museum
Archive, Great Yarmouth

Burton, William J. (1984) Burton House, Admiralty Road, Gt Yarmouth:
the Time and Tide Museum Archive, Gt Yarmouth

Lovick, Elizabeth (2007) Ganseys and Knitting Patterns
<www.northernlace.co.uk>

Shearer, Magnus (c.1950) Letter to Herring Gutters in Whalsay,
Whalsay Heritage Museum, Whalsay, Shetland

Websites
The National Archives of Scotland (c.2010)

Am Baile, Highland History and Culture (c.2007)
www.ambaile.org.uk

University of Glasgow Special Collections (c.2008)
http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/hillandadamson/handa/html

University of Aberdeen Special Library Collections (c.2006)
http://www.abdn.ac.uk/historic/Online_collect.shtml

Archives Hub (c.2006)
http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/news/03021901.html

Photographic archive of J Valentine and Co., Dundee (c.2007)
http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/news/03021901.html

Collecting House (c. 2007) The Graphic magazine.
http://www.collectinghouse.co.uk/the_graphic.htm

Icelandic Herring Museum Era (c.2006)
http://herring.siglo.is/en/advent

Audiotrails Discover Grassington with Bluetooth (c.2009)
www.audiotrails.co.uk

BBC Nation on Film (c.2008)
www.bbc.co.uk/nationonfilm/topics/fishing/background
Herring Fisherwoman - Fish Quay Scenes (1902/b&w/silent) East
Anglian Film Archive
Gutting Fish - Scotch Fisher Girls at Great Yarmouth (1936/b&w/silent)
East Anglian Film Archive
List of Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Location and where born</th>
<th>DOB</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Stewart</td>
<td>1.2.07</td>
<td>Scalloway, Burra Isle, Shetland</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Macdonald</td>
<td>6.6.07</td>
<td>Stornoway, Lewis</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seonag MacArthur</td>
<td>6.6.07</td>
<td>Stornoway, Lewis</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seonag MacArthur</td>
<td>17.10.07</td>
<td>Stornoway, Lewis</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita and Jim McNab</td>
<td>31.1.07</td>
<td>Lerwick, Shetland, Glasgow and Fraserburgh</td>
<td>c1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet Gillespie</td>
<td>4.4.06</td>
<td>Preston, Fraserburgh</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Hughes</td>
<td>11.5.05</td>
<td>Anstruther, Buckie</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Bruce and Katie</td>
<td>2.10.05</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td>1913 and 1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernie Fiddler</td>
<td>15.6.05</td>
<td>Kirkwall, Stronsay</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Kay</td>
<td>30.1.07</td>
<td>Lerwick, Shetland</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Michie</td>
<td>18.4.06</td>
<td>Fraserburgh</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>22.6.05</td>
<td>Mallaig, Peterhead</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>9.12.05</td>
<td>Mallaig, Peterhead</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>29.6.95</td>
<td>Mallaig, Peterhead</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Lawrence MacN</td>
<td>25.1.06</td>
<td>Mallaig, Barra</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archie Reid</td>
<td>15.6.05</td>
<td>Kirkwall</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ina Murray</td>
<td>18.4.06</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie Leask</td>
<td>2.2.07</td>
<td>Whalsay</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Sinclair</td>
<td>5.11.05</td>
<td>Stronsay</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy Ralston</td>
<td>6.11.06</td>
<td>Mallaig, Campbelt</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Henderson</td>
<td>3.3.07</td>
<td>Mallaig</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald MacDonald</td>
<td>29.10.07</td>
<td>Mallaig, Tarbert</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burra Isle History Group Adalane Fullerton</td>
<td>31.1.07</td>
<td>Burra Isle</td>
<td>c1920-1945</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes Ward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan Christie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara Smith</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cissie Goodlad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena Cumming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Lawrenson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Emslie</td>
<td>1.2.07</td>
<td>Burra Isle</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Duncan</td>
<td>10.10.08</td>
<td>Mallaig</td>
<td>c1928</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie MacKellaig</td>
<td>22.3.09</td>
<td>Morar</td>
<td>c1925</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane MacPherson</td>
<td>14.9.08</td>
<td>Mallaig</td>
<td>c1938</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nana Peace</td>
<td>16.6.05</td>
<td>Kirkwall, Strons</td>
<td>c1920</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Watt</td>
<td>6.9.77</td>
<td>Lerwick</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Martin</td>
<td>31.8.77</td>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>c1915</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Mackenzie</td>
<td>31.8.77</td>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>c1915</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Armstrong</td>
<td>31.8.77</td>
<td>Lewis (from Musse)</td>
<td>c1920</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannie and Jess Craig</td>
<td>28.1.78</td>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edith and Bert Williams</td>
<td>28.1.78</td>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
<td>1915/1915</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Rushmore</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Lowestoft</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Trevor Lummis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Parker</td>
<td>c.1975</td>
<td>Lowestoft</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Trevor Lummis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zetta Doran</td>
<td>c.1975</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Alan Howkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr and Mrs Flett</td>
<td>c.1974</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella Jappy</td>
<td>c.1974</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Murray</td>
<td>c.1974</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Stewart</td>
<td>c.1974</td>
<td>Buckie</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lass Bruce</td>
<td>c.1974</td>
<td>Portessie</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Marshall</td>
<td>3.5.82</td>
<td>Fraserburgh</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Gatt</td>
<td>17.9.80</td>
<td>Fraserburgh</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy Geddes</td>
<td>2.2.76</td>
<td>Portessie</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Malcolmson</td>
<td>c.1974</td>
<td>Shetland</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>Paul Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian and James</td>
<td>15.8.77</td>
<td>Fraserburgh</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Andrew Noble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella Muir</td>
<td>30.3.95</td>
<td>Mallaig</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Jill de Fresnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Shearer</td>
<td>14.8.95</td>
<td>Whalsay</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Anne Huntley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitty Kay</td>
<td>2.8.95</td>
<td>Whalsay</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Anne Huntley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ruby Sales 16.2.95 Whalsay 1936 Anne Huntley
Peggy Murray 26.5.81 Lewis 1907 Comunn
Oighrig Nic-a-Ghobhair 26.5.81 Lewis c1905 Comunn
[Henrietta Smith]
Agnes and J.D. Buchan 3.5.95 Peterhead c1905 GS Gavin Sutherland
Mary Flora MacNeil 1970 Barra c1900 TM North East
Daisy Aitchison Feb 1975 Eyemouth c1900 Folklore Archive
Mary MacLean Nov 1987 Carloway, Lewis c1910 HM and MM SSS
Josephine Bridgland c.1980 Great Yarmouth c1900 SA 1970/170/A
Jessie Horsburgh 1980 Cellardyke 1897 AB and AM SSS
(Mrs W. Corstorphine) SA 1975/7/A

Lilja Olafsdottir, Katrin 2.8.06 Vopnafjordur, c1930 - 1945 Jill de Fresnes
Viggisdottir, Iceland
Asta Olafsdottir
Anna Olafsdottir, 3.8.06 Vopnafjordur 1950 and Jill de Fresnes
Palmi Gunnerson Iceland 1955

Njordur Njardvik 3.8.06 Vopnafjordur, c1945 Jill de Fresnes

**List of Archive Visits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archive, Library</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Material collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Fishery Museum, Anstruther</td>
<td>June 2005</td>
<td>Interviews, articles, photographs, books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Archives of Scotland</td>
<td>2006-2009</td>
<td>Fishery Records, Fishery Board statistics, court proceedings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shetland Museum, Lerwick</td>
<td>April 2007</td>
<td>Articles, photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whalsay Museum and Heritage Centre</td>
<td>February 2007</td>
<td>Photographic display, interviews, books and articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckie Drifter Project – and</td>
<td>November 2006</td>
<td>Interviews, photographs, articles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

485
Buckie and District Fishing Heritage
Centre, Buckie

Fraserburgh Heritage Centre, Scotland’s
Lighthouse Centre, Kinnaird Head
Comunn Eachraidh Nis, Habost, Ness and online
Mallaig Heritage Centre, Mallaig
Time and Tide Museum, Great Yarmout
Orkney Museum, Kirkwall
Stronsay Museum, Stronsay, Orkney
Stromness Museum, Orkney
ESDS Qualidata, UK Data Archive, Uni of Essex

School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh
West Highland Museum, Fort William
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh
Online - JSTOR
Online - SCran
Online – The Online Scotsman
Newspaper Archive
Online - Am Baile
Online - Ebay
Online - Transport and Society Network
Online – North East Folklore Archive
Siglufjörður Herring Museum, Iceland

April 2006 Displays and exhibitions, photographs, books
January 2007 Interviews and articles, context material
2005-2009 Photographs, exhibitions, curers records
February 2008 Exhibitions, Archive of photographs, articles
June 2005, December Photographs, books
November 2005 Photographs, books
November 2005 Exhibition, photographs, books
November 2006 Interview material
July 2005, Interview material, photographs, articles,
April 2006 United Free Church Missionary Records
June 2005, Oral History archive
July 2006 Books, articles and journals
Throughout research Books, articles and journals
2005 - 2009 Articles and journals
2005 - 2009 Photographs, articles, reports
2005 - 2007 Reports, articles, photographs, 1815 - 1956
2006 - 2007 Photographs, interviews
2005 - 2008 Books, articles, photographs, postcards
2005 - 2009 Photographs, articles, interviews
2005 - 2006 Interviews and context
August 2006 Exhibition, Festival, archive of photographs, documents, artefacts