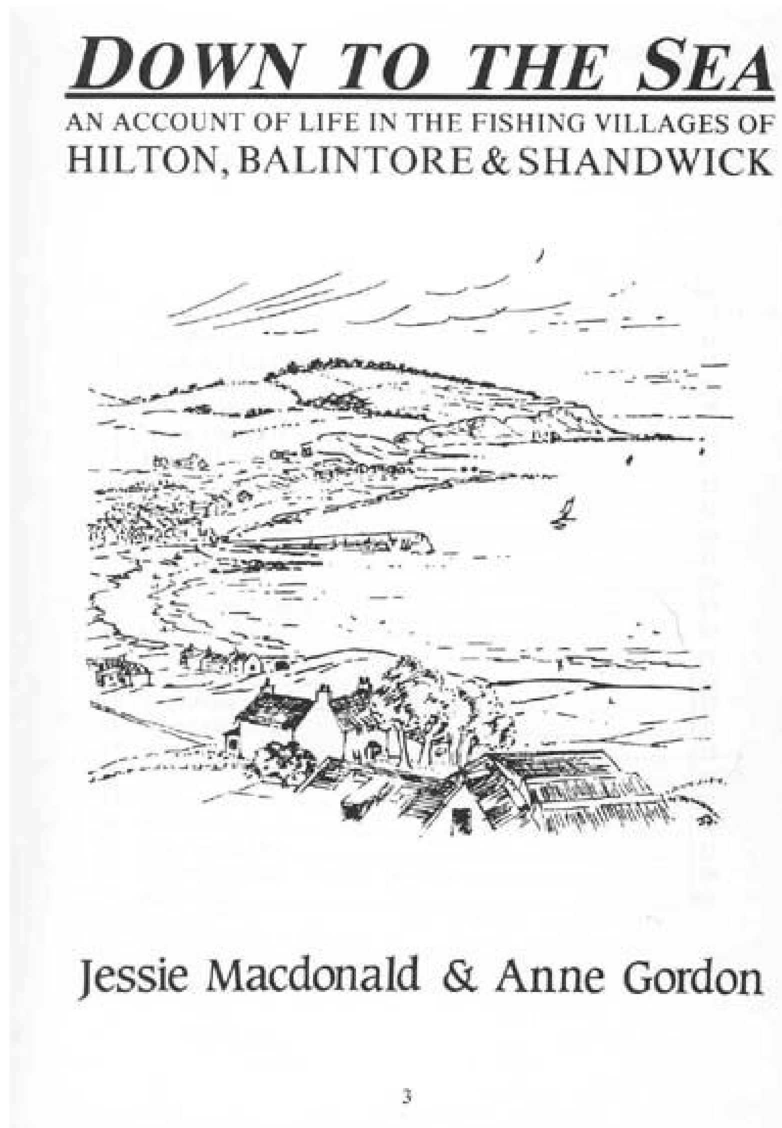
DOWN TO THE SEA

AN ACCOUNT OF LIFE IN THE FISHING VILLAGES OF HILTON, BALINTORE & SHANDWICK

"Down to the Sea"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HILTON, BALINTORE & SHANDWICK

Jessie Macdonald & Anne Gordon

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An account of life in the fishing villages of Hilton, Balintore and Shandwick by Jessie Macdonald and Anne Gordon. [Written in 1971]

Anne Gordon died on 29 September 2015 and RCHS wishes to reiterate appreciation of her willingness to share her work, which is a wonderful legacy to leave behind.

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Foreword

With the passing of the years and the many changes which have taken place, a way of life which the Easter Ross Seaboard villages knew of old is almost forgotten. For that reason we wished to record so far as we could that way of life, in order to preserve something which we consider most valuable.

We believe that an interest in local history is not a matter of looking backwards but something that can give great pleasure in the future. A knowledge of one's home area greatly increases one's pride in it, and we hope therefore that this book will give enjoyment to both residents and newcomers.

The information comes almost entirely from men and women in the three villages who have told us of their own memories and of what their parents and grandparents used to tell them. They have shown the greatest kindness in giving information, lending photographs, books and documents, and without their help this book would never have been compiled. Several people from outside the villages have helped as well and we remember with gratitude the efforts of a former headmaster of Hilton School, Mr. G. Crawford, M.A., to launch a previous project.

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We are also most grateful to Mr. F. J. Foster of Foster Bros., Invergordon, for the enthusiasm and interest he has shown when giving professional help.

This 3rd edition of 'Down to the Sea' has at last made its appearance in formal book form. The demand has been such that I felt that this edition was needed to complete the history of the Seaboard up to the present day, highlighting the changes which resulted in the discovery of oil in the North Sea.

The cover picture is of one who represented her calling in the lean years between the two World Wars when the line fishing was in decline. Her drive and tenacity of purpose helped to keep the economy of the Seaboard on an even keel. Many families were indebted to the fishwives for a living.

Jessie Macdonald   *Anne Gordon*

Introduction

The Easter Ross Seaboard is the stretch of coastline running roughly north-east by south-west from the North Sutor of Cromarty to the tip of the peninsula at Tarbat Ness. It is about fourteen miles in extent and the Seaboard villages - Shandwick, Balintore and Hilton - are admirably situated about half-way along this coast. They are often referred to as 'the villages' or 'the Seaboard'. Hilton and Balintore were on the Cadboll Estate which belonged for many years to the Macleods of Cadboll. When the Estate was sold in 1918, Hilton was bought by Donald Sinclair, Tain, and the feu duties belong to his descendants. Rev. John Ross bought Balintore and his descendants hold the land where there are no buildings and the feu duties. Shandwick Estate belonged to the Misses Ross and passed after their death to the Reids and Duncans. The Duncans' share included Old Shandwick farm and the village, which went then to Mrs. Alice Ross. The farm, those parts of the village not built on and the right to the feu duties now belong to the Gallie family.

A marked characteristic is the raised beach below which the villages are built, flanked on either side by cliffs. To the south-west these cliffs begin at Shandwick Hill (a fine area for botanists) and rise to four hundred feet below the Hill of Nigg. The cliffs running north-east to Tarbat Ness are much less imposing.

Behind the villages lies the rich arable plain of Easter Ross which yields heavy crops of corn and potatoes. Old plans show many lochs in natural hollows in this area, later used as drainage sumps, and one of these appears behind Hilton Farm on the map of 1813. Many fishermen worked on the farms when fishing was out of season or they could not follow their natural calling for any reason.

The climate is very mild for most of the year and the Seaboard is one of the driest parts of Britain. The prevailing wind is south-westerly but a biting east wind can blow during the winter. Sometimes during a dead calm great rolling waves come in, the aftermath of stormy weather in the North Sea, and pound on the sandy beach of Shandwick with great force, sending up fountains of spray on the harbour breakwater, filling the air with noise and a misty vapour. This happened last August 1969 when many holiday-makers stood, fascinated by such a scene, never to be forgotten.

Shandwick lies in the parish of Nigg. It has a particularly fine bay which is very popular with residents and visitors. Just within the parish boundary of Fearn is the Park of Balintore, which was an open space with just one street, Park Street. New building is now joining it to the rest of Balintore which, with Hilton, lies in the Parish of Fearn. Hilton also has a little bay which is not so well known as that at Shandwick.

Prior to the First World War the main occupation of the villages was fishing - herring fishing in season and line fishing during the rest of the year. Between the wars the villages suffered a sea-change in that herring fishing was largely discontinued and white fishing became the mainstay, along with salmon-fishing. But with the coming of the seine-net boat in the 1930's the spawn was removed and the death-knell sounded for white fishing in the Moray Firth and the industry of generations faded away. Lobster and crab fishing are at the moment experiencing a revival but while an occasional small boat fishes in the Firth for herring and haddock in the summer this is more for pleasure than for profit.

Until the turn of this century Gaelic was the general language, persisting longest of all in Shandwick. A number of people speak it still, and many more understand it and use a few words

and phrases. In the text a number of Gaelic words have been used but they have had to be spelt phoenetically.

Chapter 1 - Growth of the communities

There is abundant evidence of the presence of human life on the Seaboard from early days. A short cist containing a crouching skeleton was found in 1945 by Finlay MacLeod when laying water pipes to the Cedar Bungalow at Shandwick (map ref. NH 8558 7465) and he also found several large stones indicating another burial site in the vicinity (map ref. NH 8566 7461) but these he left undisturbed. Other ancient burials were found near the Swedish houses in Balintore and also near Ross Crescent, one at any rate also in a cist, which may date it, and that found by Finlay MacLeod, from the Bronze Age. It is believed that many raids were made on both north and south sides of the Moray Firth and that bloody battles were fought there between the Vikings and the Picts. Slochd Geal (white hollow) in Balintore had a reputation which made timid people afraid to pass by at night and it was only when excavations were made for house-building that human bones were found there, believed to have been the victims of some battle long ago. Traces of a Druid presence may also be found in two local place names. According to W. J. Watson who wrote authoritatively on Ross-shire place names, the word 'druidh' meaning a 'druid' occurs twice in the area, at Port an Druidh, the Druid's port, and Cadha Port an Druidh, path of the Druid's port.2[1] On maps the spelling is given as 'righ', not 'druidh', the version given by Watson. According to the School of Scottish Studies, it is local pronunciation that is of paramount importance in understanding place names as it is it that continues the real tradition of the name, whereas the map name was often supplied to map-makers by either the minister or the schoolmaster who, unfortunately, were seldom local men. Place names were not given without a cause and they usually establish a fact about the place concerned, so in this case it is reasonable to suppose a Druidic influence at some point in the Seaboard area.

1 See References on page 167.

The Picts were active in Easter Ross as a whole as the many Pit- place names show, and they left some of their finest workmanship near the villages. These are the Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll standing stones; a third stood in the Nigg Old Churchyard and is now inside the church. Authorities on the subject say that these are Pictish symbol stones of around 800 A.D. Dr. Isobel Henderson says in her book 'The Picts' that the quality of relief sculpture among the Picts was extremely high and that in the north this technical brilliance was well represented in the Hilton of Cadboll stone, which stood to the west of a chapel at Hilton until it was removed by R. B. A. MacLeod of Cadboll (1818-88) to the grounds of Invergordon Castle. On the demolition of the castle in 1928 it was sent to the British Museum but so loud were the protests about this that it was transferred to the Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh where it now stands, exceedingly handsome and outshining all the other stones around it. Its base is said to have been left behind at Hilton, to have been dressed and incorporated into the lintel of a house and, in spite of much searching it has never been rediscovered. Fortunately the Shandwick stone has not been removed and it still stands in a field just above the west end of that village. It was blown down in 1874 and broken into three pieces but has been repaired with iron banding on its original site, which had a flagstone base added in 1776. The Statistical Account of the 1790's gave its Gaelic name of 'Clach a Charridh' translated as 'stone of the burial place', saying that the area around it has been used until about 1790 as a graveyard and was used once again during the cholera outbreak of 1832. It was referred to at that time in the Nigg Kirk Session minutes as the 'old burying-ground at Clachcarry'. Unbaptized children were buried there well into into the late 1800s2 and according to A. Polson, a local writer on Highland folklore, so were suicides. The graveyard area was ultimately ploughed up by the tenant about 1885. The stone is about eight feet high and bears on the seaward side the Cross, proof that Christianity came early to the area. In the spaces alongside the shaft of the Cross there are animals and what appears to be a figure. The other side shows processions and hunting scenes and also two Pictish symbols, the elephant and the double disc. It is becoming very weathered and the question of how it should be cared for is becoming a matter of urgency.

The Shandwick Stone - prior to conservation

Not surprisingly, such striking stones have stories attached to them which are better known than the facts. Legend has it that they were erected to mark the burial places of three Norse princes who were wrecked on a reef just off Shandwick Bay. Their bodies were washed ashore at Hilton, Shandwick and below Nigg. The story goes that the princes' sister married the Earl of Ross to seal a truce and came to live at Balnagown Castle.

Her complaints of her husband's ill-treatment caused him to banish her to Ballone Castle near Rockfield, but with the help of a servant she managed to contact her father and escape to her home. The Earl went in pursuit but failed to recapture her. Her brothers, the princes, chased him back to Scotland and nearly caught up with him but the wily earl, when nearing the reef, saw a way of escape. He led his pursuers on to it while he himself slipped through a channel, and thus caused the wreck of their boat and the loss of their lives. In stormy weather this channel can still be seen which lends weight to the legend. The reef is called the King's Sons or the Three Kings and also has a Gaelic name, Creag Harail, Harold's Rock, though no one knows who this Harold might be. [2] (It is just inland from this reef that the druid/king place names are found.)

Going back to the religious significance of the stones, another early Christian influence appears in the name of St. Cormac's well near Old Shandwick farm. [1] Cormack was the brother from whom Columba sought King Brude's protection in the 6th century2 and it is said that Columba himself had an establishment near Port Lark. During the Dark Ages, little is known of what went on in Scotland, although a few dates and facts emerge. Norsemen began plundering and raiding, firstly on the west coast, and then on the east, until they held much of the Highland area. Their power was at its height under Thorfinn who died in 1064, after which their influence contracted steadily northwards. Norse supremacy in Easter Ross lasted a mere two hundred years or so and though they came as raiders and conquerors, the people of Shandwick and the other villages take great pride in claiming Norse ancestry. The name Shandwick is certainly of Norse origin, from Sand-vik, and-bay,2 and the surname Vass may be so too, although it is possible that this name may be of Norman extraction, from Vaux or de Valli bus. This is not so impossible as it may sound because Dunskaith Castle, in the adjoining parish of Nigg, is said to be a Norman ring castle although no Norman baron received a grant of land in Ross-shire.

Shandwick is a compact village, with an unusual feature in that two of its streets are in separate halves, presumably because the houses in between have disappeared. Many of the Rosses in Shandwick are said to be descendants of Rosses evicted from Glencalvie near Ardgay during the Highland Clearances of the 19th century, thus bringing new blood into the community. Balintore is the central village. Its name is Gaelic in origin - Bail-an-Todhair, bleaching town, a reminder of the days when flax was grown in the north of Scotland.2 An earlier name is given as Port an Ab - Abbot's Port, Abbotshaven2 and this last name still appears on the title deeds of a house in John Street. The Abbey or Fearn was established in 1238 or 1242 so presumably its Abbots were those referred to. One division of the Abbey lands was called Catboll-Abbot [3] and this name still appears on the title deeds of a house in Park Street.

Being a seaport for a thriving Abbey must have encouraged early development in Balintore. The construction of a road from Hill of Fearn to Balintore in 1819 and the building of the harbour in 1890-96 all contributed to its growth and it is now the main village and focal point of the whole community.

An item in Cadboll Estate papers is thought to be an early reference to what was then called the Fishertown of Hilton - between 1561-66 the rental of Fearn Abbey included, 'The Fishers' 8 acres,

which never payed a penny, but given to them for the purpose of dwelling upon and for furnishing fish to the place and County upon the Countries expenses, [4] which makes it appear that Hilton was specially developed as a fishing village.

By 1610 Hilton was known as Balnaknok from the Gaelic, Bail' a' chnuic, town of the cliffs. [2] The parish records of Fearn list the communicants of both Hilton and Hilltown as though they were separate villages, though possibly a newer addition of Hilton fusing with the older part may be the explanation. A plan of Hilton in 1813 shows only two streets with a total of twenty-four houses. Like Shandwick it provided refuge for victims of the Clearances so that by 1832 there were fifty-eight families, and a later plan of around 1908 shows how great an increase in population there had been during the 19th century. Many of the MacKays now in Hilton came originally from around Helmsdale in Sutherland during that time. Blacktown is shown on the 1813 map as a hamlet on the raised beach above the chapel at Hilton with people living there certainly till the middle of the 19th century. [5] Beyond it lies Cadboll where the ruins of Cadboll Castle still stand. This name is derived from the Norse Kattar-bol, cat-stead, as it seems that the cliffs there were the haunt of wild cats.2 Further east along the shore from Hilton there are the foundations of what may have been an older Hilton, but which are more probably the homes of crofter-fishermen or little farmsteads when the land there was cultivated. A six-inch map of the Seaboard shows the site of a castle just south of Old Shandwick farm. It was built about 1460 by William Ross of Little Allan, great-grandson of the last Earl of Ross, but because there is no evidence of a moat or fosse on the ground, it is not thought to have been built for defensive purposes. The materials of which it was constructed were removed long before 1872. Connected with this castle was a chapel whose walls were still standing about the 1790s [6a] but they gradually disappeared and anything that remained of them and the castle were destroyed in quarrying during the 1939-45 war. What does remain, however, are one or two gravestones in an old graveyard at the farm which adjoined the chapel, which is now mostly under a silage pit.

Hilton also had a chapel whose foundations can still be seen and the chapel well is still in existence. The chapel site is scheduled in terms of the Ancient Monuments Acts. This was St. Mary's Chapel or 'Our Ladyis Chapell' as it was called in 1610, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. [2] The street leading towards it is called Lady Street, and nearby was Bard Mhoire, Mary's Meadow; there was a well called Oure Lady-Well, Lady's rock under Cadboll, and Lady's well near a small graveyard by the chapel where, as at Shandwick, unbaptized children were buried!

Chapter 2 – Sidelights

Until the Church of Scotland was torn asunder by various schisms everyone attended their own parish church. This meant that Shandwick people went to Nigg Old Church while those in Balintore and Hilton went to Fearn Abbey.

The first break with the established church occurred in Nigg in 1754 when a new minister, Patrick Grant, was imposed on the congregation against their wishes as a result of Crown patronage. They flatly refused to accept him as their minister and after considerable wrangling a large part of the congregation seceded and asked the General Associate Presbytery of Perth to take them under their wing. About 1763 the Associate Church obtained a site at Ankerville and built a simple heather-roofed meeting house where they worshipped under Patrick Buchanan from 1765-99. [30]

The heritors, who supported the parish church, were not at all happy about this arrangement and it is said that they decided that Mr. Buchanan should be the last Secession minister in Nigg, and for that reason they pulled down the meeting house. This is not quite accurate as in fact its dismantling only took place when the farmer who had given the Seceders the lease died and his own lease expired, whereupon the laird, Lord Ankerville, claimed site and building and took the stones to build Shandwick House in Kildary. [9]

Pitcalnie Estate then provided a site at Chapelhill for a new church and the congregation carried to it in creels what stones and rubble were left of their meeting house. The new building was finished about 1803, standing parallel to the road, but by 1870 they were unable to have the winter Communion there as it was unsafe for a large congregation. The following summer the building was pulled down and rebuilt in 1872 facing the road, where it still stands. [3O]

This Nigg Associate Church, which became the United Presbyterian Church in 1847, was more than just a secession from Nigg. It included people from other parishes who were dissatisfied with their own ministers' doctrine or had religious problems and the wide area it covered is shown in the districts into which the congregation was divided in 1862: (I) Parish of Tarbat; (2) Balintore and Parish of Fearn; (3) Shandwick to Easter Rarichie; and (4) Wester Rarichie westwards. This explains why so many people from Balintore and Fearn still attend Chapelhill church, [3O] which was re-united with Nigg old Church in 1966.

In Fearn the first split in the church occurred with the Disruption in 1843. A Hilton man, Captain Mackay, was one of those who came out then and took an active part in the building of the first church in which the Free Church congregation worshipped. He became one of the elders and Congregational Treasurer and in 1899 his grandson, D. M. Munro, Glasgow, presented a bell in his memory to the new church which had been built on the old site in 1897.

Many people who were victims of the Clearances were members of the Free Church, but especially those in Hilton. When Hilton was still just one long line of houses it was known as 'Tir Goshen', the land of Goshen, for in every house there was a truly God-fearing man, Israelites spiritually, who were noted all over the Highlands for their Godliness.

The Free Presbyterian congregation worshipped in a corrugated iron church between Tullich and Fearn, now replaced by a church at Hilton.

The United Free Continuing congregation came into being in 1929 when those who refused to join the Church of Scotland, which Chapelhill now was, formed their own group in Balintore. They took over Chapelhill's meeting house there and, at great personal sacrifice, turned it into a fine church and also built a manse. Chapelhill Church built a meeting house in Balintore to replace the one handed over to the United Free Continuing congregation.

People from the villages also attended the Central Church in Fearn before it amalgamated with Fearn Abbey recently. The church played an active part in the life of the people, providing education and relief for the poor, as has been seen in other chapters. In the days when there was no police force, they supplied discipline as well, covering everything from drunkenness and opprobrious language to morals and Sabbath profanation. One particular case was in 1721 when the Presbytery was informed 'that there was a very great Sabbath profanation committed in the parishes of Fearn and Nigg upon the Lord's Day on the 8th of this month (January) by some Custom House officers and a party of soldiers who pressed horses and carried goods in carts, the said day, in the time of Divine Worship, from the Port of Hilton in the Parish of Fearn to the Ferry-side of Cromarty in the Parish of Nigg.' The Presbytery asked for advice as to how they should 'behave thereanent' but in the end it was too difficult to find out to which Kirk Sessions the soldiers belonged, so the matter was dropped. [29]

Quarrying at Balintore c.1930

There were several severe famines, especially 1783 which was known as the Black Year. The grain crop failed and the shortage of meal was so acute that the Government had to step in with supplies. Oddly enough, the parish of Fearn does not seem to have been seriously affected although Nigg on one side and Tarbat on the other were badly hit. Shandwick, however, figures in the list of a hundred and seventeen needy households drawn up by the Nigg Kirk Session. The area was severely affected by a potato famine in 1851, somewhat later than the date usually given.

In the mid-nineteenth century there were several years of bad gales, but the worst one of all was in 1840 when for twelve weeks there was no white fishing all round the coasts. This meant desperate

hunger and there can have been little compensation in the fact that the fishing just afterwards was the best for forty years. [8d] Old people remember being told of the great hardship caused by these gales, and the school log book shows how the great snowstorm of 1895 affected the Seaboard, closing the school for a week.

Parts of the coast presented ideal landing places for smugglers and the presence of Custom House officers at Hilton in 1721 implies that there was a good reason for them being there. Bishop Forbes in his 'Journal' in 1770 mentions that Macleod of Cadboll kept the best wines in his house4 and more recently bottles with the family crest, for home-filling from barrels, were found hidden in the rafters of the grieve's house there, so it appears that the Macleods were not unacquainted with smugglers. A patch of ivy on the cliff below Cadboll is said to cover a tunnel leading up to the house.

The villages had little cover for illicit distilling, but it took place all the same, at least in Shandwick. The Hill of Nigg was a favourite place for this activity. John Matheson, blacksmith at Wester Rarichie about the turn of this century, had a still a little way up the gully from Port an Righ and as late as 1939 barley husks were found lying at the site of the still. His whisky is said to have been excellent!

Even a quiet backwater like the Seaboard felt the heavy hand of the Press Gang and stories are told of how fishermen and press gangers fought a battle of wits from time to time. One one occasion the fishermen managed to land at Geanies and hide in the bracken to evade capture. They made their way home overland eventually and sent a woman at night to bring home the boat, using two oars herself. The press gang had waited until nightfall hoping to catch the crew but finding only a woman they had to let her go. She was called henceforth, in Gaelic, 'Effie of the Two Oars.'

It appears that two old industries were carried on just south of Shandwick - burning of kelp on the shore and quarrying of mill stones from the millstone quarry at Port an Righ. [7]

Chapter 3 - White Fishing I

Herring fishing began in May and continued until late autumn and for the rest of the year the men went white-fishing near home. But when herring fishing began to decline at the start of the First World War white fishing became the main means of livelihood, with salmon fishing a close second.

Almost all equipment was locally made so naturally boat-building was very important. About a hundred years ago Hugh Tarral was a boat-builder in Hilton while in Balintore at the turn of the century there was a boat-building business belonging to George Mackay, who was followed by his son William who carried on to 1925 or so. Manyof the Balintore and Shandwick boats were clinker built In his yard behind Main Street and when they were ready for sea he enlisted the help of ten or twelve men to carry them to the shore. The last yawl he built was during the Russo-Japanese War. It was named Togo in honour of Admiral Togo who commanded the Japanese fleet when they destroyed thirty two Russian vessels in the battle of Tsushima Straits. It was very evident where the sympathies or our sons of the sea lay in 1905.

George Mackay built a few yawls for Hilton but the fishermen there apparently patronised a boat-builder in Inver who had a high reputation for the craft.

A yawl was fifteen to seventeen feet long and the shell is reckoned to have cost £17-£18 in 1910. It had oak ribs and larch planking; larch or spruce was used for the mast, all of which came from local sawmills. One fisherman, aspiring to become a boat-builder, tried his hand at a boat but, sad to say, made such a poor job of it that when launched it refused to sail properly and went round in circles and is still referred to as the One-sided Boat. The boat-builders also made oars of fir, but many of the fishermen could make their own.

A yawl carried one brown sail. Usually the fishermen bought the necessary 44 yards of canvas from Gourock or Greenock, and latterly from Ross's shop in Balintore, and made the sail themselves. The crew sewed them with palm and needle, sitting outside on good days. Eighty to ninety years ago there was a sailmaker in Hilton, John Mackenzie, who made sails for a wide area. When he died they were sometimes bought from George Noble in Avoch, who had come there from Burghead about 1900 to start a sailmaking business. One of his sailmakers still lives in Avoch and remembers making sails for Balintore which were sent there by train.

In Tarbat in 1793 the proprietors of the land supplied a new boat every seven years to be kept up by the crew, in return for a fifth of the catch.6b In 1770 the owners of Easter and Wester Rarichie (Balnagown Estate and Hugh Rose) had the sole right to keep 'fish boats' at Port an Righ, providing housing and firing for the crews, [7] and in 1770 Cadholl Estate owned a valuable white fishing on the Moray Firth.4 This shows that about two hundred years ago the landowners had a close interest in fishing, but in living memory the fishermen were completely independent and jointly owned the yawl and shared the catch equally.

However, when fishermen came home after service in the First World War and resumed white fishing, they decided to go in for motor boats. The first of these, 'Christina Baillie', was bought by the Strachan brothers, (fish merchants) for white fishing. Later the men bought motor boats, really converted sailing boats, from various places along the coast. Such boats were usually beyond their means, so many good friends - merchants, farmers and others - put up the money in some form or

other, and now the boat had to have its share of the catch in order to buy fuel, maintain it and payoff the debt.

At that time the internal combustion engine was a bit of a mystery to the fishermen and they had many troubles usually due to engines being too small for the boat. They knew little or nothing about them but were made aware that there was a magneto somewhere in its innards and faults were always blamed on the 'mag'. Angie the Garage, Fearn, was their mainstay when anything went wrong and his little car could be seen at any hour down on the harbour attending to the mag. He must have been sorely tried many a time when trifles called him out and being a bit of a wit, on one occasion he told a fisherman who made anxious enquiry about the fault, 'There's a twist in the petrol!' These boats started on petrol and ran on paraffin, but for economy's sake the crews often used sail in conjunction with the engine.

Ropes were obtained from the south, often from Leith, but later they too were supplied by the shops. Floats were made from sheep bladders got at the butcher's. They were scraped clean, dried, then blown up and tarned with Archangel tar and closed with a wooden cork. They were light and good but had a distinct disadvantage at times when gulls swooped on them and burst them with their beaks. Cork floats were not popular as they were not so easily seen and became waterlogged so petrol or varnish tins were then made into floats. Glass buoys came in later with the seine net boats.

Couple busy at the baiting, Balintore.

Lines were made up from separate strings which were bought in hanks at the local shops - Wm. Ross in Shandwick, Ross's in Balintore and Denoon's in Hilton. These strings were 60-70 fathoms long and were bought by weight as they came in different thicknesses.

They cost from 2/6d. to 3/-, making the total cost of a line of eight strings somewhere between £1 and £1.4/-. With the introduction of motor boats a line might be increased to ten or even twelve strings, given suitable weather conditions.

In setting up a line the first thing was to stretch the string to get out the tangles, and then bark it to preserve and darken it so that it would not show up in the water. Bark, which looked like lumps of brown coal, was also bought in the local shops. It was put into a tub of hot water and stirred till it melted, then the string was immersed in the brown liquid for a short time. After having 'dripped dry' eight strings were spliced and the business of attaching the hooks began.

The fishermen made measuring rods, cut to an exact size to give them the spacing for the hooks. Hilton men usually had seventy-two hooks to a string but in the other villages they often had rather more. Using the measuring rod (about an arm span), they attached a 'sneed' every so often along the line. This was a piece of line hanging down from the main line and here the 'cheepick' or 'tipping', which held the hook, was fixed. The tipping was made of horse-hair, sometimes got from a farm for 10/- to £1 when a colt was being broken in, sometimes for a few drams in the pub, and often by the fishwives on their rounds who would barter some fish for a 'taily'.

The horse-hair was washed with soda, teazed out and used as required. Several strands were taken and joined at the top and half the number was fixed to a wheel (coillesh) which might be nothing more than a large boot-polish tin filled with lead and a bent nail in it. The other end was held high and the wheel spun. Every now and then the hair had to be felt to test the tension as this had to be just right before doubling it and allowing it to jump into a twist - and hey the brown liquid for a short time. After having 'dripped dry' eight strings were spliced and the business of attaching the hooks began. The fishermen made measuring rods, cut to an exact size to give them the spacing for the hooks. Hilton men usually had seventy-two hooks to a string but in the other villages they often had rather more. Using the measuring rod (about an arm span), they attached a 'sneed' every so often along the line. This was a piece of line hanging down from the main line and here the 'cheepick' or 'tipping', which held the hook, was fixed. The tipping was made of horse-hair, sometimes got from a farm for 10/- to £1 when a colt was being broken in, sometimes for a few drams in the pub, and often by the fishwives on their rounds who would barter some fish for a 'taily'. The horse-hair was washed with soda, teazed out and used as required. Several strands were taken and joined at the top and half the number was fixed to a wheel (coillesh) which might be nothing more than a large boot-polish tin filled with lead and a bent nail in it. The other end was held high and the wheel spun. Every now and then the hair had to felt to test the tension as this had to be just right before doubling it and allowing it to jump into a twist - and hey presto, the tipping! A hundred tippings was a good evening's work.

A sharp instrument called a brog was used to push the tipping into the sneed and then the hook was attached with strong linen thread bought for 1d. to l 1/2d. per hank or reel. When the sneeds and tippings were ready the fishermen worked the line across his knees, splicing them on to it and coiling the completed part of the line on to
the ground. A packet of a hundred hooks cost 6d. about 1900. Lines were not built at any special time of the year, but just when convenience demanded and the wherewithal was available. Each man usually had at least two or three lines.

When setting a line aside to dry off for a time the fishermen redded (cleaned) it in the ordinary way, hooking each hook into the tipping and then he hung it on a horizontal rod until all the hooks were closely together. The line itself hung down in straight loops nearly to the floor of the shed. It looked very tidy in this way and there was no danger of snags when he reversed the hanging process in

readiness for the next baiting. The best pieces of an old line were usually rolled into balls and kept for all sorts of purposes.

Line baiting, son helping.

Not all the fisherman's spare time was used to set up new lines. There were other things to do and the 'upstair' was often, in summer, his workshop in the evenings. During winter evenings he sat in the kitchen-cum-living-room and worked there beside the fire, fashioning line creels for himself, fishwife's creels for his wife or a neighbour, and any other equipment he might need.

To get materials for creels Hilton men walked several miles to the Talich for larch and willow branches. Shandwick and Balintore men got larch from Adams' Dam, blackthorn from Cullisse and willow from above Rarichie. Split cane was bought from the shops at 2/- to 3/- for so many pounds. He peeled the larch and split the willow and soaked them in hot water. Willow could be used split fresh, or steamed if old, and larch and blackthorn were sometimes put in a ditch to prevent them breaking if they were old.

When sufficiently pliable, he made the rim by bending three or four larch branches to the correct shape and tied them tightly in various places with pieces of old line. Briar rose could be used for the rim - after soaking it was bent round iron pegs till it was the right shape. Larch, willow, blackthorn, briar and sometimes cane could all be used for the spars lengthwise, which were then woven with cane which was easier to handle than willow, although willow was used when cane was scarce, as in wartime. The creel was started on the man's knee and finished on the floor, with the man bending over it from his chair. A line creel is about 30 inches long and tapers towards one end so that the line will sheet (shoot) easily.

The fishwife's creel was a different shape and size. The bottom was flattened, the sides symmetrical and rounded ends made to sit upright. It was fairly light in weight with a rope attached which went round the carrier's chest and could be tightened or loosened as desired. It was about 30 inches wide, 15 inches deep and 16 inches across. Some of them had extra ribs strengthening the outside of the base, and both they and the line creels had hand-holds. During creel-making little pieces of cane were swooped upon by the children for all sorts of games, and many a furtive puff was smoked from a cane 'cigarette' at a father's unsuspecting back!

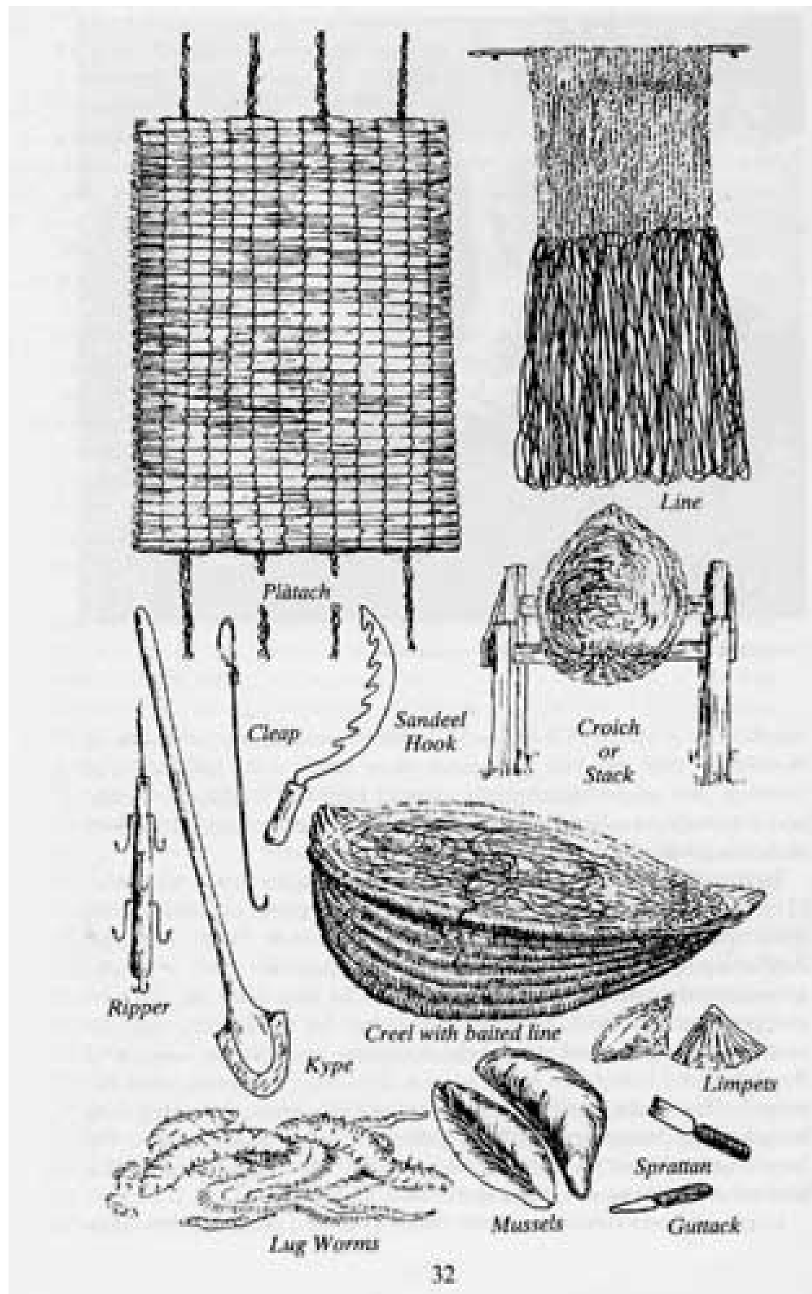
The line basket was not locally made. They were herring baskets divided out at the end of the season among the crew. It was cylindrical, 20 inches in diameter and 2 feet deep, woven with thicker, usually unsplit cane. It was used to hold a line after it was cleaned and ready to be set aside, and any tippings which had lost their hooks were put over the side to be mended. Nor were the fishwives' hand baskets locally made, but were usually acquired at the shops where they had been sent as some form of container. Creels and baskets were very durable and little mending was needed but where required pieces of split cane were used for repairing them.

A 'platach' (rush mat), also called a rashack, was used for placing the line on during baiting, hauling etc. It was made with reeds gathered from the Talich and various farms about the end of August, when they began to wither, and then woven with the balls of old line kept handy for such a purpose. The reeds were cleaned after being dried and seasoned, and cut to about 2-3 feet. They were laid on the floor in bundles of a dozen or so and the fisherman tied the first bundle with a double string in three to four places leaving long ends. Then he took the second bundle and by twisting the double strings round it, one going over and the other under the bundles, he attached it to the first one. He continued to do this until all the bundles were secured in three to four places from top to bottom. He now took more string and wove the bundles in the spaces left so that when his mat was finished he had long lines of weaving thread at regular intervals across the mat, the length of which was to his own taste, but usually about three feet. The long ends which he left at both the beginning and the end - the lashings - were used for tying the platach round his line after hauling at sea.

Gathering bait was women's work although men with no womenfolk had to do it too. Nigg Bay was for long a good source for bait, and in 1841 it and the firths are described thus, 'In Nigg Bay are to be found in abundance in their respective season, cockles and mussels and flounders and sand-eels - and it is here, likewise, where the fishers of Nigg, Fearn and Cromarty and many of those of Banffshire find the bait wherewith they catch cod, haddock and whiting. The neighbouring firths abound with fish - salmon, turbot, cod, haddock, mackerel, whiting, cuddies, crowners, soles, flounders, skate, dog-fish and herring in their season. [8a]

Gutting haddock, on hands and knees, Shandwick.

Lug worms were gathered from June to August from Nigg Bay (Traigh Nic) and a very early start had to be made to get there on time, perhaps leaving home between 1.00 a.m. and 4.00 a.m.depending on the tide. Thus mothers sometimes had to make arrangements with a neighbour or relative to look after the children and get them to school. Two hours each way for the journey and two hours gathering took so much time that sheer necessity drove most of the fishermen latterly to learn to ride a bicycle, complete with oil-lamp for use in the dark, and henceforward this time-consuming darg became less demanding on body and mind. But many a time the bicycle came home on the man's shoulder as the chain coming off a bike was as baffling a problem as the mag. in a boat.



Lug casts were found scattered over the sand and the worms were turned out with a kype and put into a pail. A kype is an ordinary navvy's spade, flattened and curved, with a flat wooden handle about 5 feet long. The bait-gatherers had to watch out for a little fish, not more than four or five

inches long, whose horny stings could temporarily paralyse bare feet. There was no charge for collecting lug. On arrival home they were put Into clean sea-water till they were required for catching plaice and flounders. Baiting with them poisoned the fingers and made them very painful so it was a common sight to see the women with their fingers bandaged during the lug season.

Limpets were used all year round. They were good winter bait and were also often used with or without mussels for catching cod from April to mid May. The rocky shore near home provided a good supply until demand became too great and then journeys were necessary to Geanies, Tarrel, Rockfield and Port an Righ. They are got on an ebb tide and can be lifted off the rocks with a spratan (knife with a well-padded handle). They were shelled at home, using one shell to remove the rest, a chore usually done by children, and put into a basin of clean water to await baiting-time. They improve with keeping for a week or so as the hard rim softens so that the fresh fish take the bait more readily.

Mussels were used all year round, and were obtained from Tain, Inver, Arboll and Fort George, as well as Nigg Bay. Tain charged for its mussels but sometimes people tried to evade payment and Tain Town Council as far back as 1712 were complaining about fishers from Shandwick and elsewhere, 'such as has taken away the mussels.' [9]

They were fairly expensive - in 1835 the price of a boat-load from the Tain scalp was 30/- to 40/-. [10] At Inver and Arboll, where they were free, the women gathered them on the shore into bags and hired a carter to bring them home. Getting mussels from Fort George where they are thought to have been free, meant a boat journey. They sailed there, waited over the mussel scalp till the tide fell, then gathered the mussels into bags and when the tide rose sailed home with them. Each man put his share into his own private scalp on the shore with a little dyke round it. Thin stones were laid temporarily over them - another job for the children - for two days until they latched on to the rocks, but they were removed after that or else the mussels went bad. Here the fishermen had a good supply of bait readily available. They were prised open with a sharp pointed knife, the flesh removed and the hook put through the white 'wart' to hold it, then twisted through the black 'wart' at the other end. Mussel bait, unlike lug, was very pleasant and soothing on the hands. The shells were thrown out on the shore if that was most convenient or else thrown into shell middens behind the house.

Sandeels (sanels) were found just under the surface of the sand near home when the tide was out. They were gathered with a scooping movement of the sanel hook and lifted into a kind of pouch hung round the gatherer's waist or into a pail. The sanel hook has a five-inch wooden handle and a six-inch curved blade with eight teeth which catch the sandeels so that they can be lifted out of the sand. Sprats and young herring, known as garvies, were used as a standby when other bait was scarce and in winter when dark nights made limpet-gathering almost impossible. They were brought from Avoch and later on in this century, Patersons (salmon fishers and former fish-merchants) would send to Wick for them. They were boned, slit in half lengthwise and sliced anglewise, salted with coarse salt, roused (stirred up) in a tub and kept in a half-barrel till required, when one piece was put on each hook.

Very small fish which had been taken on the line was sometimes used as bait, but cockles, buckies and porstans (partan, small green crab) were only used if nothing else was available. Herring gut was very occasionally used this century. Patersons sent to Wick for it also for use by motor boats. It was the best possible bait but did not keep
well and smelt terrible.

Chapter 4 - White Fishing II

The main job in the fisherman's day was the preparation of his line for sea. It had priority over all else and every member of the family participated in some way or other. While he was still at sea his wife might begin opening shells for bait or baiting a spare line and children were expected to open so many mussels before school each day. But it was usually on the man's return from sea about the middle of the morning that the day's work really began.

After he had breakfast, he untied the strings of the platach in which he had coiled up the line as he hauled it in at sea. Now the task of redding it began. He sat on a chair and eased it through his hands and at every tipping he cleaned the hook of used bait, small fish and starfish (crasgag) and twisted it into the tipping. He let the line fall in loops on to another platach on his right hand side ready for his wife to bait. She sat on a low stool on the right of the redded line with basins of shelled bait at her feet and a plate on her lap. She usually wore a canvas or leather apron kept for the purpose. She fed the baited line into the line creel on her right hand side in regular layers, laying the hooks from left to right and then right to left over a bunch of bent grass laid in the creel. She also spread some bent against the lip of the creel behind the layers of baited hooks, and a layer of chopped grass was spread over every layer of hooks to prevent them snagging. When lug were used sand was spread over them but this made the creel very heavy to carry. When the Daily Express became common reading it served a double purpose as it was torn into strips and laid between the layers of hooks.

Baiting a line took roughly two hours and proved a very cold job in wintry weather in draughty kitchens and it was even more difficult when, as sometimes happened, it was done in failing light with the aid of a paraffin lamp or, with an earlier generation, a single candle. In warm weather redding and baiting were done outside to the relief of all concerned.

Often when the children were sitting after school shelling limpets or mussels they whiled away the time and boredom singing all sorts of songs, from Gaelic and English ballads to the latest Redemption hymns learned by mother at the herring fishing. 'Shall we gather at the River' would ring out loud and clear or maybe the romantic 'Far an ro me raoir' in more melodious tones. Sometimes they indulged in guessing games for a change, mother participating too, of course. When all was finished after baiting the kitchen or shed was tidied up and the creel set ready on the croick (creel stand) made of four poles with cross pieces at shoulder height, sloping slightly forwards so that it was easily lifted when setting off to the fishing next morning.

Just before bed-time the fishermen always went out to have a look at the weather. They were excellent weather prophets and would usually know what next day had in store for them. Before going to bed everything was set ready for the morning - big leather sea-boots and stockings stood near the dying fire and oil skins and mogans (mittens) were ready to hand. The men always took a keg of water to sea and enough food for twenty-four hours, usually thick oatcakes and hunks of cheese carried in a pockan mor (canvas bag with drawstring). If there was anything left in the pockan mor when they came home, any children who were about begged for it. It didn't matter how salty or wet the food was - what counted was that it had been out in a boat!

Depending on the tide, the crew rose any time from midnight to dawn, and dressed in warm drawers, jerseys, trousers, short oilskin trousers to the knee and leather, later rubber, thigh boots. Their ordinary bonnets stayed on unless the weather really justified donning a sou'wester. The first man up knocked up his crew and after a cup of tea they hurried away, anxious to be ahead of any other crew, especially if making for a good fishing ground. He put his oilskins and floats on top of

his platach on the creel, lifted it off the croick and set off carrying it to the boat. He had another look at the weather and never failed to consult the barometer at the weather sheddie after it was put there when the harbour was built.

In spite of a great dislike of seeing women on the way to sea the fishermen nevertheless relied on them to help launch the boats. Before Balintore harbour and Hilton jetty were built in the 1890's, boats were beached every day wherever was convenient and they had to be pushed off each morning, mainly by the women, who got their backs under the side of the boat and heaved, to the encouragement of shouts from their menfolk. This was often dangerous as death by drowning of women doing this in the darkness was not unknown. They even had to carry the men aboard pick-a-back to prevent them getting wet at the start of a day's fishing and because their leather boots could not stand the wet and became crinkled if soaked. People still remember seeing this done and in fact it still went on in Shandwick Bay well after the building of the harbour. In fact, everything possible was done for the benefit of the bread-winner, even to the women warming his stockings inside her blouse or jersey if there was no fire.

Women carrying their menfolk ashore.

The men sailed to their fishing grounds, only rowing if there was no wind, when they protected their hands by wearing mogans. They knew the best places to go - sometimes directly in front of the villages, sometimes to Davie's Rock - 'a famous place for haddies' - to Tarbat Ness and even to Helmsdale. Until compasses were introduced they used landmarks. One landmark used Clach Caraidh (Shandwick Stone) and the Old Shandwick farmhouse kitchen - the farmhouse wouldn't do, it had to be the kitchen! All these spots were named in Gaelic which was spoken up to fifty or sixty years ago. They carried no watches but told the time by the sun striking on certain hills - 3.0 o'clock hill, 6.0 o'clock hill and so on. If there was no sun, they just had to guess. Far out at sea, or in fog, skilled men knew where land was by looking at the waves. Every seventh wave is a directional one and land lies at right-angles to this wave. At the chosen spot a float was flung out with a sinker stone and then the line was thrown out from the creel very carefully so that no hooks got entangled. A float went out at every eight hundred hooks lest the line break. The next man's line was then joined and sheeted (cast) till there were four or five altogether. They cast landmarks on the

first float and then took cross-bearings. After trawlers came in about 188213 the fishermen in yawls liked to come along after them as the trawls stirred up the seabed and improved the feeding so that there were plenty fish about. The lines were left down for twenty to thirty minutes and to pass the time they had a smoke, ate their 'piece' or fished with a hand-line for some more haddies.

Shandwick fishwife.

Haddock were caught on hard ground in winter and on a sandy bottom in summer. Sometimes a large cod was caught on the haddie line when a 'cleep' (gaff) was used to lift it in case it broke the line during hauling. Sometimes, though rarely, halibut was caught on a shingly bottom among the haddies. A particularly good area for flounders was off Port an Righ, inside the rocks. Cod were sometimes caught on a ripper, a lead or stone weight with four large hooks hanging around it and used, as the name implies, by ripping it upwards.

When hauling the line began after the interval, the men used oars as sail would have been too fast. While one man hauled his own line another removed the fish and placed them in the creel. The line was coiled on to the appropriate platach and, when fully hauled, was detached from the following one. It was gathered up in the platach and tied firmly with its lashings to carry ashore. Even in the short time that the lines were down dog-fish caused considerable damage by eating the fish on them.

Besides rough weather at sea there was another hazard - the 'kerapan'. No one knows just what it was, but to many of the men it was a very frightening sea-monster. It was very probably a basking shark and certainly it attacked the boats and often the men fled for the nearest land, coming along later for their abandoned lines. They ultimately discovered that throwing a pailful of bilge water into the sea would frighten off the kerapan immediately.

Going out was easier than coming home as they had the prevailing westerly wind behind them. On their return they might have to beat their way back into the wind so they went in close to the little 'ports' or natural inlets along the coast to turn to tack home, a way of beating the wind.

It might happen on the homeward journey that a crew would spot a schooner or coal-boat making for Balintore. They would immediately close with it and persuade the captain to take one of them on as pilot. It was an unwritten law that then the rest of the crew would get taken on at the unloading, a good way of ensuring labour and not causing hard feelings about choosing labour on shore.

There was no apprenticeship for fishermen. When survival depended on quick thinking and efficiency young lads learnt fast and became skilful seamen, and because of this many remarkable escapes took place after Balintore harbour was built as it is difficult to enter in rough weather. If the weather turned very nasty while at sea boats were forced to take refuge in Cromarty or Portmahomack. It was always for skill alone that the skipper was chosen.

When the boats came in on the shore, the catch was brought ashore where it was divided evenly into heaps. Each member of the crew gave a token such as a knife or a pebble to an independent person who put the token on each heap and that heap became that man's share. Very often the youngest child there got the job of putting out the tokens while the men looked the other way. The only exception to this was the Jerusalem haddock, reckoned to be a holy fish, and whoever got one on his line was entitled to keep it. It is a large and striking looking fish, not really a haddock27 and in fact it does not taste as good as ordinary haddock.

There was a time when factors and farmers considered the shore was theirs and they claimed the best haddock out of every creel - an unpleasant custom which was finally stopped when fish-merchants took a hand and insisted that they should pay for what they took like everyone else.

There is little record of how fish was sold in the early days but a certain amount probably went away by sea, as with no railway and poor roads sales overland were very limited. Even so, fisher folk from here were carrying a plentiful supply of haddock, cod, skate, flounders and cuddies in baskets to Kilmuir Easter in 1793.6" In 1763 twenty haddies sold for 1d, but by 1793 during a scarcity the price rose to one for 1d.6d About 1830 the fishers of Shandwick and Fearn (the villages) sailed to Dingwall, moored Peter's Bridge and there sold home-made fish oil direct from the boats, and carried their smoked haddock and salt cod into the town to sell at the Feil Maree (fair.) [11]

The opening of the railway line north of Invergordon in June 1864 caused the tempo of life to quicken on the Seaboard and the fishwife really came into her own as she could get much further afield with her burden of fish. On certain days cadgers (carters) went 'into the country' with a load of fish, often going quite far afield with a spring cart. With the railway they became very busy also carrying passengers, luggage and goods to and from Fearn Station.

The fishermen were utterly dependent on cadgers and fishwives to buy their catch and the price rose or fell as demand indicated. Cadger and fishwife would haggle over what price to pay per hundredweight while the fishermen waited, and it sometimes happened that if a boat was late in coming ashore there would be no sale for the catch as fishwives and cadgers had gone to catch the morning train. Naturally maximum profit came to the man married to a fishwife.

When fish-merchants (curers) began to operate after the First World War, the fortunes of the fishermen started to mend. The first of these was Mackay the Curer, who lived in the Old Police Station at Hilton. He began buying surplus fish when there was a glut and sold it elsewhere, thus keeping the price up so the fishermen were no longer at the mercy of fishwife and cadger and were more secure. Mackay the Curer, who was also a butcher, is said to have had women smoking for him and part-time fishwives selling the speldings.

After the herring yard closed as such, a man named Mitchell bought fish for a short while and smoked it there; and John and Willie Strachan, salmon managers, Main Street, Balintore, began to sell white fish also. They also dried cod up on the bank behind Balintore. Gradually others became interested and in addition to acting as fish-merchants they advanced money for new boats. Such was Mr. J. Paterson, Hilton, who had five or six boats engaged, undertaking to sell their fish, after which the catch from other boats might be accepted. A small charge was imposed for weighing. They used a Model T. Ford to carry the fish from the harbour to their yard at Hilton where twenty to thirty Gaelic-speaking cadgers and fishwives would be ready waiting for it to be auctioned. When scarce it went to the highest bidder, and when plentiful the price of the first box was the price for the day so that the late boat did not suffer as formerly. The buyers had to take a proportion of small as well as large haddocks and what was left over was taken by cart, later lorry, to Fearn Station and loaded on the train for Glasgow. If they were especially large, however, they might be sent to Billingsgate, the London fish market. There was always a ready market for small haddies at 6d. a basin in Inver as they were very short of boats there. Hugh Mackay, a cadger from Hilton, had one boat supplying him and he, as well as the Patersons, delivered the fish to the fishwives'
homes so that they no longer had to carry it all the way from the harbour.

The fisherman's only break from this routine was when all fishing stopped for almost a week during the twice-yearly Sacraments (Communion) Boats were beached on Wednesday night and did not go out again till after the Thanksgiving service which ended at 10 p.m. on the Monday, and usually that afternoon was spent baiting ready to go out on Tuesday morning. After selling the fish the fishermen were free to go home to breakfast and to start all over again the round of redding and baiting. Meanwhile the fishwife began the task of preparing the fish for sale.

Each fishwife owned a bothan (smoking shed), usually near her house, made of wood although later on a few were covered with corrugated iron. The floor was earthen, later causeyed with stones and later still cemented. In the centre was a hollow where the fire was laid and as there was no chimney the smoke filled the bothan, escaping through any chink it could find. A small sliding door at the top allowed the fishwife to see how the smoking progressed.

The split haddocks were hung on speights (spits) - these were round wooden rods, 1 inch in diameter, sometimes sand-papered smooth. The sharp point was pushed through the 'ears' of successive fish and they were hung in rows from side to side resting on runners at each side of the bothan so that the smoke swirled about them. There were two to three levels of runners so that from time to time the lower speights could be changed over with those above, just like cakes in an oven. About six speights hung on each runner. In this way the fish was smoked evenly and when a lovely golden yellow, they were taken and packed ready for sale. Moray Firth speldings had a very wide

reputation, some even being sent fortnightly from Hilton to New York as a special order for Sir Charles Ross of Balnagown.

Before the 'speldings,' as they were called, reached this happy stage a great deal of expert work went into their preparation. After getting them home, the haddocks were gutted and decapitated with a very sharp knife and flung into a shallow tub of fresh water. Sometimes on her knees beside the tub and sometimes seated on a low stool, the fishwife, with young helpers if she was lucky, scrubbed the fish clean, removing all the blood from around the backbone with a double-ended scrubber and put them into a tub of fresh water. Finally they they were returned to the first tub, now emptied and rinsed, where they were salted for about thirty minutes. Some fishwives added a little brown sugar to this pickle - usually provided by their customers - to improve the flavour and colour, but not everyone thought this necessary and did quite well without. Salt was bought at the local shops very cheaply for a penny a pound or even sixpence for a bolster full. The fish guts, thrown on the shore, vanished in the twinkling of an eye down the throats of hungry scavengers waiting patiently on the rocks near by or on the roofs and chimneys of the houses around. They needed no gong to call them to dinner.

At the end of thirty minutes the fish were allowed to drip for a short time on the speights hung between two chairs or on the croick, and they were then put in the smoking shed. The fire had been prepared and lit shortly before and the smoking process got underway. Hardwood blocks, bought from a man at the door for around 3/- a bag, formed the fireplace and some dry tourkens (fir cones) were laid in the hollow thus formed to start the fire. When it really got going, on went a good supply of wet tourkens and dry sawdust from the sawmills. The tourkens were soaked purposely to produce the needed smoke.

The fishwife watched the fire carefully to keep it smoking properly and changed the speights around so that the fish did not become semi-cooked and fall off. Another hazard in one case was children who also kept an eye on proceedings and when they knew the speldings were almost ready they nipped in and took one or two to eat in the privacy of the herring yard. Later on the speight of the older generation was replaced by the tinter, a flat piece of wood about two inches wide and two inches thick and about four feet long, with hooks along both sides sometimes made from turned-up nails. The tinter was better than the speight because it made a smaller hole in the 'ears' of the fish. About six fish hung on each side of the tinter.

Tourkens for smoking were gathered in various fir woods within convenient distance. Hilton fishwives got theirs in the Little Woodie at Cadboll (cut down during the First World War) and in the Beltan, near Cadboll mount, as well as at Calrossie and Balnagown. Balintore and Shandwick fishwives went there also and to Castlecraig, Altnadavan and Pitcalzean. Fir cones had top priority for flavouring the fish but sawdust was used by itself if tourkens were scarce, and they could even be smoked in the praze fireplace described further on. One person, a very Epicurean for speldings, would not touch a fish unless it had that choice tourken flavour and the merest soupcon of salt.

Gathering tourkens was a matter of knowing where to go and getting there first, especially after a gale. The women gathered them in bags and then hired a cart, and later Patersons' lorry, to take them home to be stored in their sheds. An adequate supply had to be collected for winter use as 'You can't get tourkens from under the snow,' as one wise woman observed wrily.

A fishwife did not, of course, go 'to the country' every day. Her weekly schedule might be something like this: Monday, smoking fish and doing the household washing; Tuesday and Wednesday, out to the country; Thursday, smoking and household duties; Friday, out to the country.

The night before she was going out with the fish, she lined her creel with fresh paper and filled it up with layers of sweet-smelling speldings, perhaps a hundredweight or so, and covered them with a white cloth, fastening it under the rim. Her hand-baskets might contain fresh haddocks caught that morning or prepared the day before. When the haddocks were picked up fresh from the boats that morning she usually cleaned them for her customers at their houses, while a welcome cup of tea was being prepared for her. Some fishwives took out only fresh fish, some took mainly speldings and others took a variety of fish in which case they were carried separately so as not to spoil each other. In addition to speldings they prepared smokies which were exactly the same so far as smoking was concerned, but they were not beheaded or split. Kippered herrings were smoked like speldings but the head was split and left on. Cod was usually cut up ready for orders and the roe was sold separately. Salmon fresh or smoked, was only taken for orders. For smoking it was split right down the back, salted and a stick pushed through front and back to hold it open and be sure it was well smoked. Flat fish was sold whole, or else filletted and skinned. Whiting was sold fresh, and sea-cat fresh, dried or salted. Crabs and lobsters were only taken for orders. Sometimes fishwives took out fish smoked for them by neighbours who could not go themselves because of having small children. About fifty years ago a fishwife would be very pleased if she could report a profit of half a crown at the end of the day's journey round the country.

Fishwife on her busy round with hand baskets and creel.

The Seaboard fishwife, thought not so picturesque as her opposite number in Newhaven and elsewhere, was a familiar figure on our town streets and country roads. Into the beginning of this century she wore a mutch, a white bonnet tying below the chin with a frill framing the face. These needed careful ironing with goffering irons but the fishwife's mutch was always as immaculate as her white apron. Her skirts was of navy worsted with two horizontal rows of tucks just above the hem, and she wore a cotton blouse or a jersey and a cardigan. She did not seem to need a shawl or coat, although later on the mutch was replaced by a little woollen head shawl and later still by a

headscarf. Her skirt was usually maxi-length but when she was ready to set out she hitched it up with string until it was higher and the bunched-up skirt and petticoat formed a pad which took the weight of the creel, and she could walk for miles carrying a heavy load of fish without much apparent effort. Seventy to eighty years ago her footwear was sometimes dark blue leather boots to the knee or strong boots or shoes, and black woollen stockings. She carried her purse or canvas pouch in the fold of her hitched-up apron, inside her blouse or tied round her waist with tape.

Fishwives who went to nearby places like Cadboll and Nigg walked the whole way. The rest walked to Fearn Station and took the train there, so they must have been very glad to see transport of one kind or another gradually being put into service during the first twenty-five years of this century. A horse-brake was put on the road by Kennedy Vass, Shandwick. This was a box-cart with a driving seat in front and fitted with two parallel seats running lengthwise where the women sat six aside with the creels in the middle. They availed themselves of this and the cadgers' carts until a bus service was started in 1918 by the late Mr. Dan Mackay. This bus left Portmahomack in the morning, picking up school children en route, and also the fishwives from the Seaboard. All and sundry travelled by it to Tain and it was only when the majority of the women got off at Fearn Station that the other younger and more restless passengers got sufficient leg and elbow room to make the rest of the journey to Tain Academy in comfort.

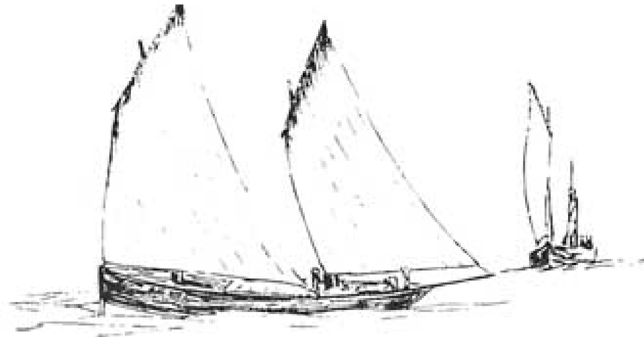
The fishwives got a hand from the porters at the station to heave their creels into the van as they were not allowed to take them in the carriages. Each fishwife had her own area and got off at the appropriate station to walk round her district. They went as far as Invergordon, Alness, Dingwall, Strathpeffer, and even Beauly, and northwards to Tain and Bonar Bridge.

The return journey on the bus after 4.00 p.m. saw the same extreme over-crowding with fishwives piling in at the station, shoving creels and hand baskets in before them to the detriment of schoolboy and schoolgirl legs and arms. The old and the young most certainly did not see eye to eye on these occasions and 'What I have, I hold', was demonstrated if not by voice by action with regard to the few cubic centimetres of space occupied by the sitter. The gossip of the countryside circulated as each fishwife told of her day's experiences. Time was money to these hardy women and the return journey often saw the creel nearly as heavy as when they set out that morning.

The country people, who had meal but little money, often bartered meal for fish, and often there was a gift of meal, vegetables, a piece of venison, fruit such as apples, pears and plums, a few eggs, butter and crowdie. If the creel was fairly empty the fishwife filled it with tourkens on her return route. At least two of these intrepid fishwives still survive - Mrs. B. A. MacAngus, Shore Street, Hilton, and Mrs. Ross, Bank Street, Balintore.

White fish prices have often fluctuated but they were high just after the First World War and an era of prosperity followed. In 1925 the white fishing in the Moray Firth was the best way for many years [12] but recession set in quickly causing great hardship and many fishermen sought work on the land or went into the Merchant Navy. In the 1930's seine net boats were introduced, the first local one belonging to the Woods, 'First', and then 'Euphemia' belonging to William Sutherland. For a few years seine-netting by boats here and elsewhere in the Moray Firth was very profitable, then their depredation of the spawn emptied the Firth and white fishing died away on the Seaboard. The days when it was possible to sit on Cinneach Rock beyond Hilton and catch a hundredweight of good cod on a handline do not seem likely to reappear.

Chapter 5 - Herring Fishing



Herring boats

There is no doubt that men and girls enjoyed going away to the herring fishing. The work was hard and in a poor season unprofitable, but seeing a bit of the world and mixing with people from other parts of Britain was very stimulating. It was an education in itself to those young men and girls who set off year after year for distant places.

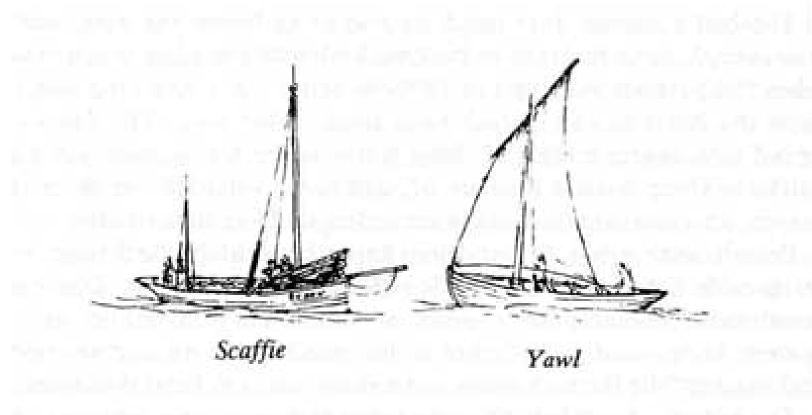
Their annual departure appears in church records - in 1894 Chapelhill Church had a smaller-than-usual attendance 'owing to the young women being away at the fishing in Shetland' and in 1909 Communion was held earlier than usual because it was time for everyone to go to the herring fishing. It was quite an occasion when they left, and friends and relatives downed tools to see them away and the school children took the day off, as the school log shows, to join in the farewells.

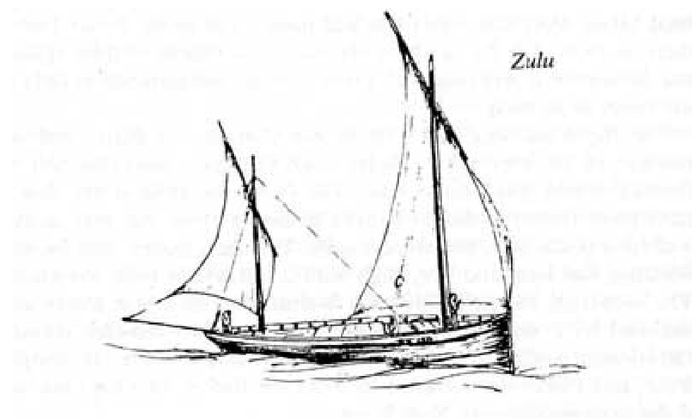
Herring fishing affected the Seaboard villages in three ways - the men who went fishing around the coasts from Shetland to East Anglia; the women and girls going away to work at gutting and packing; and the great days when there was a herring curing yard in Balintore providing a bustle of activity quite unknown today. The herring season began in May in Shetland, then moved nearer home between June and August and carried on down the coast as far as Lowestoft and Yarmouth in the autumn. Where the herring went the men followed. For many years local men have gone after them, sometimes sailing as far as Barra in the Outer Hebrides or even to Ireland in half-decked boats with bunks in the open.

These small boats were locally made but gave way to the clinker-built 'Skaffie' which was common in the Moray Firth till about 1880.13 About that date the 'Zulu' was developed13 and there were a number of these fine boats in the villages, including one named the 'Nonsuch'. These larger boats, from thirty to fifty feet long, were usually bought second-hand from Morayshire. Sometimes the men bought them themselves but more often they were financed by land-owners and farmers who either advanced the money or guaranteed it at the bank, or by Ross's Shop in Balintore who usually provisioned the boats. Repayments of such loans was a first priority at the end of the season.

In the mid-19th century the Portmahomack curer engaged boats in the autumn for the following season with a bounty of five to eight guineas, plus an advance of £10 in May to help them get ready for sea. [8c] As the Portmahomack curer had the Balintore yard for a time this may well have happened here but, if so, no one remembers it. Nets were originally made of hemp by the men

themselves but later on they bought white cotton nets from the Morayshire coast. To preserve them they were tamed (barked) by dipping them into a large drum of dissolved bark, lifting them out with a large hook to drip into another drunk so that nothing was wasted, and drying them over fences. These were known as sink nets as they had weights, often just stones, attached and heavy ropes because the boats were anchored and swung during fishing. Herring stay well down and unweighted nets simply float over the top of them. There might be thirty to forty nets to a boat, divided among the crew, stretching for up to a mile. When hauled, the fish were disentangled from the nets with a good shake.





Sails were made at home by the men, or by sailmakers like John Mackenzie in Hilton, or after 1900 by the sail maker in Avoch. Sails were tamed like the nets, although an odd one might be left white which made it easy for the crew's families to spot their menfolk coming home while still far out at sea. Floats for herring fishing were made of sheepskin. Skins were bought in fairly large quantities from Johnstone the butcher in Balintore, from Tain or Inverness. They had to be steeped in cold water containing lime or soda, then were laid on a table and the woolrubbed off with cork, a wearisome chore often done by the children. They were dried and Archangel tar rubbed on the inside before being bunged with a grooved flat circle of wood, then bound securely with twine and tarred. The floats were too greasy to colour the first season but thereafter the men might take a fancy to have them red or blue or anything else.

The crew consisted of six or seven men and a cookboy who was known in Gaelic as 'the boy with the scoop'. His pay came from catching with a scoop or skimmer any herring that fell from the net during hauling, although occasionally he might be allowed the catch from one net, the last one! The

skipper was chosen for his skill and so experienced did the fishermen become that they could smell the presence of herring and also knew to look for them where their oil turned the sea a milky green.

When the herring were off Shetland the men moved north and lived on the boats. They returned to the villages in mid-summer when the herring were nearby and then they were able to come home every weekend. They went out every Monday morning and returned on Saturday evening and it was a common sight to see a forest of masts at the Balintore and Hilton berths, even though many of the Hilton boats went in to Portmahomack which was a better harbour.

At the weekends they took the opportunity to dry their nets, carrying them on their backs from the boats to any open grassy spaces, or in return for a 'fry' a farmer might allow them to be spread in a field. If they could not be dried for any reason they were occasionally salted to preserve them.

Herring boats were anchored, not beached, at the weekends but during the Sacraments (Communion) they were sometimes hauled up for tarring. Rollers were used to get them up the beach and the lower half was tarred and when dry the boat was rolled down again. The women were enlisted to give an extra shove but as soon as the boat got to the water the stern began to float so the job was not as difficult as it sounds.

When setting off to sea the men had a supply of oatmeal, ships' biscuits from Fletchers in Balintore, whisky in a stone jar with a little tap at the base or in kegs, and any other supplies from Ross's. A story is told of a cook-boy being sent to order provisions. He knew that the crew were very fond of whisky so he thought that several kegs of it and one loaf of bread would be just about right. The skipper was very displeased when he saw what the boy had got. 'What on earth are we going to do with all that bread?' he demanded!

When fishing nearby the men liked if possible to land their catch at Balintore but if this was.not practical they went to the nearest herring yard where the curer had previously engaged to pay so much per cran, divided equally among the crew. When the season ended in the autumn the men returned home. It is said that the boats were hauled up on the bank with the help of a threshing machine and taken down again the same way the next year; but it was more usual for them all to go together to Foulis or PoIlo so that all the men were available to help with the beaching. For the rest of the year they stayed at home and concentrated on white fishing.

Several ex-fisher girls speak of the fun they used to have at the herring fishing and they say how friendly and kind all the other girls were. They were usually about seventeen to eighteen years old when they first went to the gutting and packing. Curers visited the various villages engaging the girls with an 'arles' of 30/- to go to Lerwick, Bressay, Ronaldsvoe, Fraserburgh, Buckie, Peterhead and Aberdeen, as well as other ports, and then south to Lowestoft and Yarmouth.

When the time came to leave home the girls filled their big varnished boxes and went by cart to Fearn Station. Going north they took the train to Wick and went by steamer to Shetland, but going south it was train all the way. It was only very occasionally that they
sailed all the way north from Invergordon. Their fare was paid and they got a free supply of coal. Accommodation was in wooden huts, six to nine girls to a hut, with living quarters downstairs and bunk beds upstairs. Very occasionally they had lodgings in town. Working clothes, including gum boots, oilskins and aprons, were kept in a glory hole. They provided their own cooking utensils and crockery and took it in turns to do the cooking. They were allowed about 10/- a week for lodgings in the various ports about 1910, except for some reason at Fraserburgh.

They were engaged as a 'crew' of three, two gutters and one packer, but each member of the crew could do gutting or packing if necessary. Their cardigans had elbow-length sleeves so that they would not hamper their work. The gutters wound strips of cloth round their fingers to save them from cuts from the sharp 'guttach' with which they slit the fish. After gutting, they threw the different sizes of fish, big, matty or small, into different baskets from which the packer filled the barrels. She worked with a tub of salt alongside her, laying layers of herring and salt alternately till the barrel was full, The barrels were inspected and closed and re-opened a fortnight later once the herring had settled down so that more fish and brine might be added. the bung was put in, the lid secured and the barrels stamped. It was the coopers' job not only to make the barrels but to fetch salt for the packers and to see to the opening and closing of the barrels.

Working from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. a crew could fill about forty barrels a day depending on the size of the herring. Sometimes things were quiet and sometimes there would be a big rush when the boats came in. They were paid 8d. a barrel or £1 for thirty shared out among the crew, but later on they worked for a day's pay. All the figures given relate to about 1900.

In the evenings they sat and knitted and courted. Very often as the fishing romance blossomed into engagement and young people brought home 'fairings' for their future homes, and weddings were frequent after the season. A few married women went to the fishing too, taking their children during the school holidays to, join their husbands in the various ports.

It is thought that the herring yard at Balintore, the 'Big Yard', was built about 1880 although there had been a fish curer, James Fraser, there in 1830.14 It had a short life but a few people in their eighties can remember it working with great activity and stamped barrels set out ready to go away. The Big Yard was just west of the Commercial Hotel and was owned and built by a Mr. Finlay from Caithness who also had the Portmahomack yard for a time. The stones to build it are said to have come from the shore opposite Balintore Hotel but may equally well have come from Balintore quarry. The main gutting and packing building was long and very high with a loft where gear was stored. The cooperage and salt store were in sheds and the whole works were enclosed by a wall with an arched gateway. Two red-tiled cottages ran at right-angles to the road, facing the hotel, where the coopers lived. Later one was occupied by Tom the Bobby who kept law and order from Balintore to Nigg Ferry.

The boats landed their catch on the rocks below the yard and it was carried up to the yard in baskets. Unloading became much easier when the harbour was built in 1890-96 and a crane lifted the baskets from the boats to carts which took them to the yard. The fish were tipped into shutes leading to long tables where the women and girls worked. There were a number of carters who did this work in the season, also carrying coal, sea-ware and so on from time to time.

Barrels were made of imported staves brought by both ship and train, with home grown wood for the tops and bottoms. One man remembers watching the coopers at work. They set staves in the bottom hoop, made a little fire in the middle, put on another hoop and 'slashed' the fire with water to produce steam to bend the staves. The barrels of salt herring prepared in Balintore were sent away by sea and are thought to have gone mainly to Russia. Herring were also kippered at the yard but there is no record of how they were sold.

The yard is said to have closed about 1900 but why it closed is uncertain. Did the herring disappear from local waters or was the yard uneconomic? Large though it seemed to the villages the fact that it employed only thirty to forty local women means that it was small by other standards. It has also

been suggested that the great prosperity which it brought encouraged drunkenness which contributed to its decline.

As an industry herring fishing has always fluctuated. Herring have been well described as 'a whimsical as well as a migrating animal'. [15]They were plentiful between 1702 and 1714 but failed by 1788. [16] Their reappearance in the l800s enabled fishermen to improve their homes and furniture but 'debt was incurred, high ideas raised' and their failure again by 1840 produced a lamentable degree of poverty. [8a]

By the early 1880s they once more returned but over supplies caused a drop in price and with increasing competition from Scandinavian fisheries, there was soon hardship again. In 1883 four hundred fishers from Hilton, Balintore and Shandwick presented a petition to the Napier Commission, stating that they had little land for crops and depended on fishing but were limited in what they could achieve without a suitable harbour or piers. [Marinell Ash, p. 262 of book on Cromarty Firth.] Nevertheless between 1884-88 seventy-one boats and two hundred men from the villages were engaged in fishing, landing a total value for those five years of £10,105. [17]

Once again this brought great prosperity and justified the building of the yard only to have it close in twenty years. But even after its closure the men went herring fishing elsewhere, some finding work on drifters from the Morayshire coast which called at the villages for 'hard men' and others continuing to use their own boats. Herring fishing was
only given up about the time of the First world War.

The herring yard stood idle for many years but children played about it and many a dance took place in its loft. But when it became derelict and dangerous it was demolished in the 1930s and the stones carted, it is said, to Golspie, to build the Post Office in Lairg, to build the United Free Church and Manse in Balintore, to make foundations for oil tanks in Invergordon, to Inverness - and what were left over were put on the shore. No wonder it was called the Big Yard!

There is still a little herring fishing for pleasure in summer but the only visible remains of large-scale herring fishing on the seaboard are a few rotting hulks still to be seen just below Foulis.*

*Long since disappeared [RCHS note]

Chapter 6 - Salmon Fishing

Although the main occupation of the Seaboard was herring and white fishing, by the mid-1900's salmon fishing came close behind. Prior to that any salmon caught are likely to have been river fish or those caught in fairly sheltered waters although it is said that Columba's early settlement fished at Port Lark for salmon in the 6th century.

Salmon fishing belonged to the Crown and the various large estates. The Crown still holds its fishings but those belonging to estates have largely been sold, and as the plan shows the former fishers in Hilton. The earliest known lessees of Crown fishings were Alex. P. Hogarth and Miss C. C. Ross of Old Shandwick as well as Major Rose, whose leases all began in 1866. Hogarths were an Aberdeen firm who for fifty years were tenants of most of the fishings from Aberdeen to Caithness, collecting the fish from the stations in their own smacks. [18]

Prior to 1900 there were salmon fishers, Simpsons, in Balintore, but it is uncertain which fishings they leased. In the early 1900's two brothers called Strachan operated as salmon fishers, and as already mentioned, were fish-merchants too. For a short while they had partners called West who after a time moved to Portmahomack, and later the Strachans left for Peterhead before emigrating, one to New Zealand and the other to North America. George and John Tough followed from Portmahomack. A. & J. Vass are a Balintore family who worked some fishing in the Firth till 1970.

The Moray Firth Fishing Company was formed after the First World War by General Sir Walter Ross of Cromarty and other landowners who pooled their fishings into one company with General Ross as Chairman. Castlecraig, being then on the Cromarty estate, was one of their fishings but they also rented Crown fishings. Their manager on the Seaboard for many years was Mr. George Henderson from Inverbervie who came to Hilton to live, and eventually retired and died there.

For many years Hogarths' resident manager in the Fortrose-Cromarty area was Mr, G, Paterson whose family later took salmon fishings at Cromarty,18 In 1908 they took the Morich fishing and came to live at the Haven, Hilton, but kept up their association with Cromarty. The Paterson family now have almost all the salmon fishing on the Seaboard and employ a fair number of men.

The salmon season normally extends from early February to late August but poor beginnings added to rising costs in recent years have compelled the salmon fishers to start later, even late March. During the off-season a few of the men went to white-fishing but as crews were usually made up by then the majority went to work at corn and potato harvests, ditching and other farm work.

Salmon cobles are difficult to build as they have to be shallow yet seaworthy and they do not appear to have been locally made. The Patersons used to buy theirs from Skinners, Aberdeen, and now get them from Gardenstown. Oars are made from white wood shaped at the sawmills and trimmed at home.

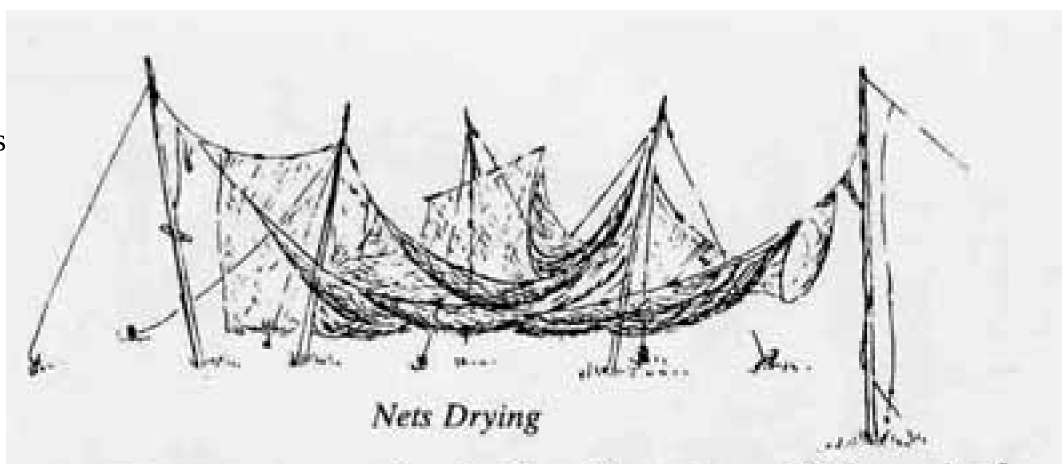
Anchors play an important part holding the poles for the nets. Sometimes old schooner anchors were used while others were made from pieces of railway track, turned up at one end and split into two at the other.

Nets were hand-knitted from cotton twine, using special wooden needles. George Tough used to make beautiful apple-wood needles but the man best remembered for knitting nets was George

Henderson, the Moray Firth Fishing Co. manager. He often passed winter evenings in this way, hands busy going in and out at a steady rate and listening to 'Radio Lyons,' pipe in mouth at the same time. Sometimes a knotty political problem was thrashed out but the capable fingers never halted and he turned out excellent work.

Patersons used to buy hand-knitted nets from Lossiemouth, paying the knitters so much per hank, but nowadays ready-made synthetic netting is used. The men make rope frames, but the netting to shape and sew it on to make bag nets. A disadvantage of synthetic netting is that more salmon are 'hung' (caught in the net by the gills) and much more work is involved in inspecting the nets as hung fish must be found and removed as quickly as possible as they would be bad by next day. These nets are taken ashore and hung up to dry from time to time near the Commercial Hotel and at Patersons' yard, and a very attractive sight they are during the season.

During big tides in March and



Nets Drying

September the remains of poles can be seen in the sand to the west of Shandwick Bay. These are all that is left of stake nets which the Strachan brothers used to catch grilse (young salmon) from June to August. The poles supported net leaders to direct the salmon into a bag at the end. They also carried hand and foot ropes so that the men could go out along them as the tide fell to reach the bag before the water got so low that the fish scaled themselves. Small boys used to go out on the ropes occasionally, much to the rage of the salmon fishers!

Wilkhaven Fishing

Bought from Cadboll Estate by John Paterson & Sons, about 1923. Worked till recently. Bothies in good repair.

Castle Fishing

Bothy in ruins. Bought from Cadboll Estate as above.

Rockfield Fishing

Crown - leased by J. Paterson & Sons at present - worked previously by Strachans, Balintore, and Moray Firth Co., Inverness.

Tarrel

Cadboll- bought by J. Paterson & Sons, and worked at present by Patersons. Previously worked by Moray Firth Fishing Co., Inverness.

Geanies

Crown - leased to J.Paterson & Sons. Previously worked by Tough Bros., Portmahomack, and Moray Firth Fishing Co. Bothy in ruins.

East Hilton Or Skaravack

Cadboll - bought by J. Paterson & Sons. Previously worked by Tough Bros. and Moray Firth Fishing Co.

West Hilton

Cadboll- bought by J. Paterson & Sons. Previously worked by Moray Firth Co.

East & West Balintore

Crown. Leased to A. & J. Vass, Balintore, until 1970. Previously worked by Moray Firth Co., J. Paterson & Sons, Strachans, A.P. Hogarth, 1866 for 2 years; Major Rose, 1866 for 7 years; Capt. Rose, 1873 for 7 years; Maj. Rose, 1880-1890; A. Hogarth, 1891-1900.

Balnagown Estate

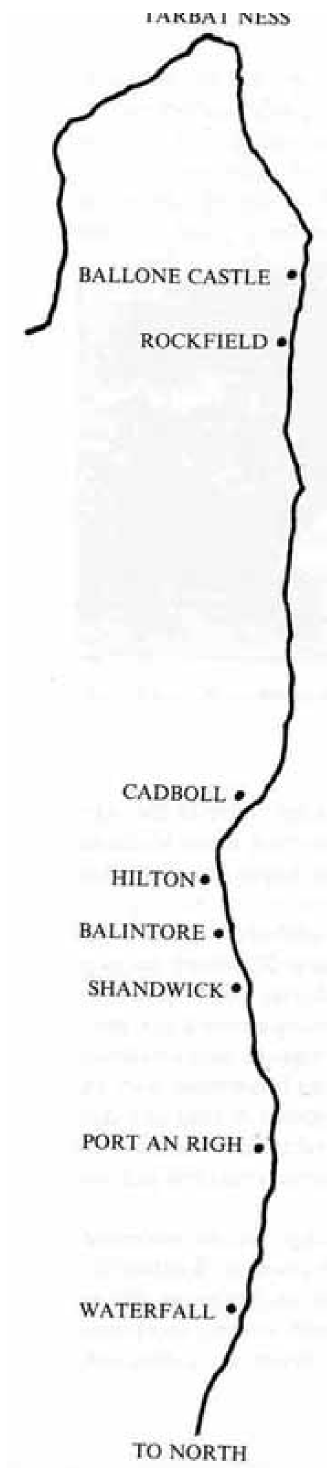
Leased to A. & J. Vass until 1970. Previously worked by J. Paterson & Sons. Bothy in ruins.

Port An Righ

Crown. Leased to A. & J. Vass, until 1970. Previously worked by J. Paterson & Sons; Moray Firth Co.

Castlecraig

Cromarty Estate formerly. Proprietors - Moray Firth Fishing Co. and worked by them at present. Previously worked by J. Patersoil & Sons, and A. & J.Vass.



Seals make great havoc among the salmon and damage nets by following the fish in to eat them and then escaping. The black-backed gull, though detested by fishermen and shepherds alike, tells the salmon fisher when seals are at work as they hang around the spot waiting for their pickings. Porpoises have been seen to toss a salmon in the air before devouring it. They are thought to breed near Port an Righ and it is said that this makes it an unpopular fishing station. Necessity led the Paterson brothers to design and make a seal net or trap whereby they caught the enemy from time to time and put an end to his depredations.

When Hogarth and Tough had salmon fishings on the seaboard they mainly employed fishermen from the west coast of Scotland as the local men were unfamiliar with the work. A bothy in Shore Street, Balintore, was provided for these men, with a living room and kitchen, but later on local men were employed. When the cobles still depended on sail and oars it saved time to have the men based at various bothies along the coast. Thus they were able to visit the nets several times a day and the salmon were carried in to Hilton and Balintore in creels by both men and women, specially engaged for this work. People in Shandwick remember seeing them pausing to rest their heavy creels on a bank before continuing on their way.

Landing salmon in Balintore Harbour. The salmon bothy shows at the right of the Commercial Hotel.

A week's supply of fuel and food was taken by boat to the bothies, and the men lived there. They went home for the weekends, however, sometimes walking over the hill from Castlecraig, sometimes sailing. They walked daily to the bothy at Port an Righ. It no longer exists but several others may be seen along the coast and are now mostly used as stores. They fell into disuse when the introduction of motor boats enabled the crews to operate from Balintore, towing the cobles to the nets, and later on the cobles themselves were fitted with engines.

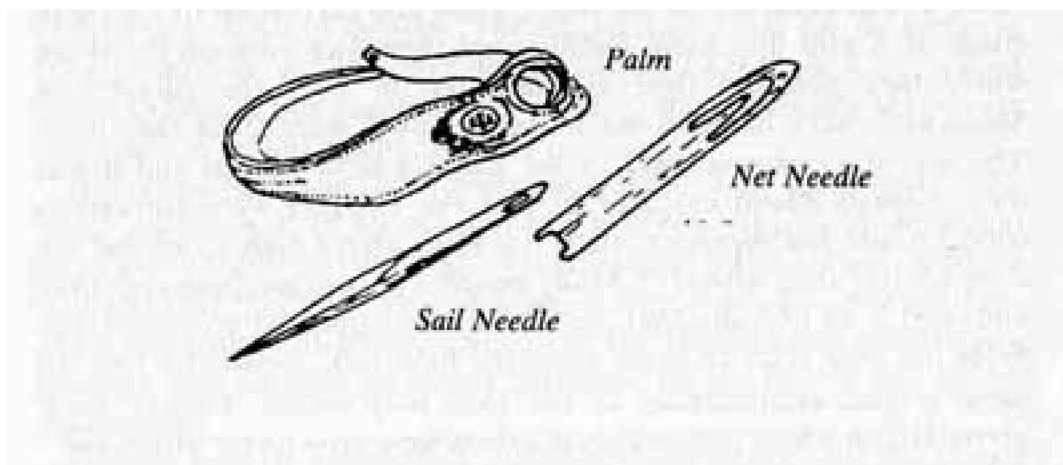
Salmon fishers used to be engaged with a shilling, this 'arles' binding both master and man for the season. This custom has only recently been discontinued, though not before the shilling had been increased to half a crown. The foreman was engaged and given four shillings and it was up to him to choose the other three members of the crew, handing out the 'arles' to each one. Salmon fishers are paid weekly with a bonus for every hundred fish caught. When a crew score the hundred mark and when they bring in the first grilse of the season there is a celebration in the form of a free dram from the boss.

Before the coming of the railway salmon had to be sent away by sea. They were par-boiled and preserved with vinegar and packed in barrels. This method was used for fish for the London market19 and an old man remembers his grandfather speaking of seeing the fish being cooked like

this in the bothies. In Wick salmon fishers still describe the amount of their catch in 'barrels,' a relic of the days when they were sold in this way.

With the introduction of ice and the coming of the railway methods of distribution changed. Ice-houses were built at various places - one just east of Shore Street, Shandwick; one at the bothy in Balintore; and another above the village of Hilton below the main road to Portmahomack. The brae nearby is still known as the Ice-house Brae. This ice-house which belonged to the Patersons has long since disappeared, as have the others, but there is now a modern one at the Patersons' yard.

Mending the nets



The old ice-houses were underground cellars, cold enough to keep ice well into the summer. Strangely enough, before there were machines to make ice winters were always sufficiently severe to ensure a plentiful supply of it at the farm mill dams and in various ponds. It was broken with axes and carted to the ice-houses. Sometimes snow was turned into ice by pressing it into a hard block. With it, the fish could be safely packed and carted to Fearn Station en route for the London market.

Like everything else, prices of salmon have rocketed during the years. An old entry of 1784 in Lady Pitcalnie's account reads, 'Duncan Rain, for a salmon 6d.' As recently as 1935 it was possible to get a cut of salmon at Patersons' yard on a Saturday night for 9d. - 1/- per lb., with much arguing as to who would have the middle cut and who would have the head. Nowadays it is more likely to fetch up to £2.00 per lb. early in the season.

In 1965, lump fish, known as paddles, which are caught in the salmon nets and were considered of no particular value, suddenly took on a new importance. A Scottish firm, Johnstones, Montrose, and a Danish firm, began buying lump fish roes at 1/- per lb. to make an imitation caviare. This exotic experiment apparently was a failure and the unlovely paddles' brief hour of glory ended after a year or two.

Chapter 7 - Shellfish

For some reason shellfish do not occupy an important place in the economics of the Seaboard, nor does anyone remember that they ever did so. This seems strange when fifty thousand lobsters were caught between March and July 1793 around Tarbat Ness and sent south. [6b]

In Nigg, too, there were plenty of lobsters about 1800 but so many of them were caught and sent south to the London market that they soon became scarce.8a Perhaps if the Statistical Accounts for Fearn were a little fuller it might appear that there used to be a thriving lobster fishing on the Seaboard also. From time to time lobsters and crabs were caught and sold in the country as orders but never on any great scale.

In 1910, however, Hugh Mackay, Hilton, began fishing for lobsters from North Sutor to Rockfield and sent them direct to Billingsgate. To start with they were packed in seaweed but this was changed to hardwood shavings and sawdust in which odd packing they survive much better. About 1920 a Mr. Straw from Helmsdale and another man from Nairn used to come and collect any lobsters that were available. Recently there has been a considerable revival and it is said that in 1970 there were lobster pots every twenty yards from North Sutor to Tarbat Ness, and A. Jappy & Sons, Helmsdale, buy them at 10/- per lb.

Crabs were not popular apparently in Hilton and Balintore, but in Shandwick they are said to have been much enjoyed when they were caught by being hooked out with wire from under the rocks.

The school log book shows that as far back as 1987 the children gathered whelks for sale at the annual Fearn market. They also sold them to the local shops who sent them on to Billingsgate. Sometimes groceries were bartered for whelks at the shops and at one period Mackay the Curer, already referred to as the first fish-merchant, exchanged meat for whelks at his butcher's shop. The whelks were always riddled for size and the children would beg the grocers not to riddle them all! They are still being gathered and sent direct to London, though not in any great quantities. Prices fluctuate but at the moment are from £2 to £2.25 per cwt.

During the past few years there was an attempt to fish for prawns but at present this has been discounted.

Chapter 8 - Harbour and Boats

Until the end of the 19th century boats of whatever size had to land on sandy beaches or natural harbours as there was no alternative.

There was such a little harbour at Port an Righ; boats came in just east of the present harbour and tied up to an iron ring in a rock which is still visible under certain conditions; Tom and Mary Port ran parallel to the shore a little further east; Hilton had a port in its sandy bay and Jessie Port lay still farther east.

When a road was built into Balintore in 1819, it had been thought that a harbour would be a logical follow-up but various plans about this over the next twenty years all came to nothing. In 1845 Joseph Mitchell, protege of Thomas Telford and engineer to the Commissioners for Highland Roads and Bridges, proposed building such a harbour which would have cost £8000, paid in proportions of two to one by the Fisheries Board and the laird, Mr. Rose of Tarlogie. Unfortunately Mr. Rose died and the scheme foundered, which explains why Joseph Mitchell makes no reference to it in his Reminiscences. Although the petition, already mentioned, which Seaboard fishermen presented to the Napier Commission in 1883 resulted in that body recommending the building of a harbour at last, at a meeting of between 200-300 fishermen at Hilton in 1885, steam trawling seemed to be the main grievance and Mr. Wallace of Tulloch proposed raising a subscription to buy a large boat so that local fishermen could compete in farther waters. His proposal developed into a plan to buy not one but two boats for £500, a plan which however had to be abandoned as such boats were no use without a suitable harbour and it was not until 1888 that a petition to the Board of Trade to establish a Harbour Turst to build a harbour at last got things moving. (Ret Marinell Ash, p. 264/5 of book on Cromarty Firth.)

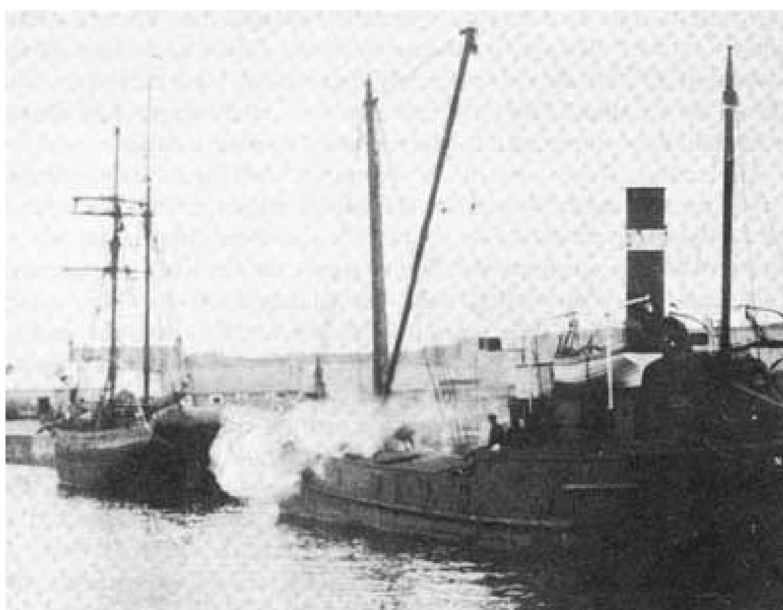
But a spirit of self-help developed at the same time and the first attempt to build a proper harbour was at the Port in Hilton. Before 1890 the fishermen began building its wall, planning that Eilean Mhor should be the breakwater. They carted and carried the large stones which can still be seen at low water but when they found that the authorities would give no help with this back-breaking task - presumably because they were involved with building Balintore harbour - they become so discouraged that the brave attempt was abandoned.

Balintore before the harbour was built.

The decision to build a harbour at Balintore was due to the revival of the herring fishing and the building of the herring yard, already referred to, and because the volume of shipping now amounted to 800 - 1,000 tons, chiefly coal, every year.

The engineers for the harbour were D. and A. Stevenson, Edinburgh, who visited the site during the spring tides and consulted Mr. Finlay the fish-curer, the fisherman and Mr. Jonathan Middleton, Clay of Allan. After doing a marine survey with soundings and probings they said in 1888, 'We consider the site on the whole exceedingly favourable for a boat harbour and we strongly recommend that the pier be carried to the low water mark.'

The first recorded meeting of the Trustees, a voluntary body, was on 10th July, 1889, although obviously they must have been in action before that. The members were Jonathan Middleton, Clay of Allan; John Gordon, Balmuchy; Alex. Wallace, Tullich; Robert Ross, Merchant, Hilton; Rev. Mr. Fraser, Established Church, Fearn; with Wm. Tavish MacTavish as solicitor. At later stages the Board included all the ministers and more people from the villages. The estimated cost of the work was £7,600, the Fishery Board giving a grant of £5,700 and the Harbour Trustees finding the balance of £1,900. The contract was let to George Pirie, Hopeman, whose figure of £6,625 was accepted. Royal assent for the work was given in 1889 and the construction went on during 1890-96. The school children were given time off school to see the first sod cut and all seemed set fair. But by 1893 the engineers reported on the 'run' in the harbour and practically told the Trustees that little could be done to cure it. In 1898 there was concern about the best means of keeping the harbour clear of silt and at one point a dozen men were engaged to clear it. They built wooden steps and barrowed the sand up and tipped it over the side - from where presumably it just washed in again.



Sail and steam in competition, Balintore.

There were many delays and quarrels between the engineers, the inspectors and the contractor, and when the pier was at last finished Finlay the fish-curer raised a claim saying that so much material for the pier had been taken from the edge of the curing yard wall that it was in danger from the sea. The contractors resisted this, saying that they had not gone within twelve feet of the wall of Mr. Finlay's buildings. It is said that most of the stone used came from Balintore quarry. No sooner was

the harbour completed than the Trustees had to report to the Public Works Loan Board that fish curing had been discontinued in Balintore, although in fact it went on for a few years more.

In 1898 Balintore appears in the Mariners' Nautical Almanac's list of lighthouses as having a fixed white light at the outer end of the breakwater. In 1915 the Almanac described the harbour thus: 'Depth of water - spring tides, 11 to 12 feet; neap tides 8 - 9 feet. Dues - small boats 15/ - for season; each visit 6d; vessels 4d. per registered ton; pilotage 3d. per registered ton; large boats 1/6 each visit. Ballast -1/2 1oading, discharging 1/-. Laying out kedge and warp 5/-.' Of the light it says, 'A fixed white flash, but cannot be put on pierhead some nights with heavy sea.'

The harbour was a busy bustling place, handling fish, coal and produce from the farms. The last wooden ship to come in was about 1910. It was a salt boat, 'Leader,' which was washed in sideways and damaged so that the salt loose in the hold became wet. During the First World War, however, trade was greatly reduced and the financial situation became so desperate that in 1922 the Trustees resigned in a body.

On 9th December 1925 the Board of Agriculture offered a grant of three-quarters of the cost of repairing the harbour which the Trustees accepted. In 1930 the Public Works Loan Commission rescinded their claim to principal outstanding amounting to £2,000 plus interest, and the Trustees were just finding their feet when the Second World War broke out. In 1940 the harbour was completely closed to all shipping and vehicular traffic by firstly the military and secondly the naval authorities. The last boat in was a flat-bottomed Dutch one, after which the boom was put across and the harbour protected by a flame-thrower on the pier.

Disuse during the war led to even more silting up and at the end of the war a complicated and involved correspondence began between the Clerk to the Trustees, the War Office, the Admiralty and the Ministry of Transport, each denying responsibility and passing it on to the next. Meanwhile the harbour structure was deteriorating and the basin silting up even more.

With the end of white fishing and the competition of road transport the Trustees must have found the harbour a disheartening business, and in the 1960's the County Council took it over with high hopes of a revival of fishing and possible sea-angling as a tourist attraction, but neither has materialized.

After Hilton's earlier disappointment about their harbour, they finally got a stone jetty about 1898 or 1899. It was built by George Ross, contractor, Rhynie, though it not known who instructed the work to be done. (The information on the building of the harbour and Harbour Trustees comes from an account written by Mr. Ian Ross, Rhynie.)

The Mariners' Nautical Almanac for 1898 lists the following Inverness-registered boats in the villages:

Balintore:

INS	Name	Owner	Keel (feet)
87	Emily	John Skinner	34
207	Band of Hope	Wm. Morrison	34
272	Catherine	D. Vass	35
395	Freuchny	Andrew McKay	34
401	New Exhibition	J. Ross	34
571	Rechabite	Andrew Morrison	36
580	Guiding Star	A. Vass.	34
731	M ' Intosh	Geo. Mackenzie	32
782	Blooming Bunch of Roses	Thomas Vass	34
820	Day Star	Donald Skinner	34
856	Ruby	David Skinner	33
875	Active	John Vass	36
878	Brothers	Donald Mackenzie	34
1372	Prime	Finlay Skinner	33
1415	Break of day	A. Skinner	35
1539	Jean	Alex. McKenzie	48
3331	Grocer	J Vass	35

Shandwick:

INS	Name	Owner	Keel (feet)
795	Prosperity	Andrew Vass	36
1499	Archibald Duff	John Gordon and David Macdonald	35
2102	Anns	Hugh Ross	35

Hilton:

INS	Name	Owner	Keel (feet)
285	Jane Margaret	W. Ross	32
554	Fairy	Finlay Tarrel	35
893	Gem	Donald Sutherland	32
1003	Helens	Donald Ross	33
1199	Again	Donald Patience	35
1396	Ellen	Alex. Sutherland	34
1721	Alert	H. Macdonald	35

1835	Countess of Seafield	D. M'Kenzie	33
3333	Nelly and Margaret	Hugh M'Angus	36
3338	Salim	W. M'Kenzie	32

In 1935 the numbers of boats had greatly decreased and were as follows in the Nautical Almanac:

Shandwick:

INS	Name	Owner	Keel
1976	Elsie	William Vass	2½ tons

Balintore:

INS	Name	Owner	Keel
109	Dolina	D. Skinner	1 ton
162	Elsie	Alex. M'Angus and W. Skinner	1½ tons

Hilton:

INS	Name	Owner	Keel
73	Janet	Wm. Mackay	1.99 tons
230	First	Samuel R. Wood	7.56 tons
269	A. M. Euphemia	A. Sutherland	1.66 tons
281	A. M. Catherine Cowie	D. Ross Son	1.51 tons
295	Happy Return	M. Macdonald	1.83 tons
358	Maggie (Motor)	A. Sutherland	3.28 tons
428	The Rockfield	A. Ross and others	1.99 tons
431	Fern	J. McKenzie and others	3.75 tons
445	P. Pilot	Finlay Ross	3.13 tons
448	A. M. Comfort	John M'Angus	4.57 tons
543	Ivy	W. Macdonald	3.53 tons
554	Jeannie (Motor)	Samuel S. R. Wood	1.59 tons
573	A. M. Fern	Wm. Patience	3.86 tons

Balintore Harbour:

These boats were Scottish fishing boats, classed as sailing boats except where indicated.
Apart from the boats listed here and mentioned in other chapters, there were other boats of which people still speak: Una, Complacent, Martha and May, Helen, Robertson Lizzie, Brilliant, Rebecca, Isabel, Maid of Morveth, Tribe, Mina Sutherland, Majestic, Swiftsure, Delilah, Mabel Macgregor, Betsy Patience, Lydia.

Among the trading schooners calling at Balintore about 1900 were:

Name	Owners/Captains	Port
Columbine	Captain Vass	Inverness
Tollo	Captain Main	Findhorn
Bella	Captain Main	Findhorn
C. W. M. Avon	Captain Bremner	Findhorn
Elizabeth	Captain Main	Findhorn
North Star	---	? Findhorn
Annie	---	Fortrose
Despatch	---	Avoch
Young Fox (ketch)	Captain MacIntosh	Avoch
St Duthus	Captain Merson	Tain
Gem	---	Bonar Bridge
Nairnshire	---	Nairn
Caberfeidh	---	Findhorn
Merinish	---	Thurso
Leoramundo (lost on King’s sons, about 1896)	Captain Taylor	Inverness
Fiona (ketch)	---	Balintore
Rival (ketch)	---	Portmahomack
Alert (ketch)	---	Findhorn
Lily	---	Cromarty
Bonny Lass	---	Cromarty
Cambridge	---	Findhorn or Nairn
Alice	---	Banff

Pomona	Munro Rockfield and others	
Loch Ransa Castle	Ross and Young	Balintore

Chapter 9 - Disasters at Sea

Those who went down to the sea in ships, be it cobles, yawls, motor boats or schooners, did so at great risk, especially in wintertime, and in common with other fishing communities the Seaboard villages had their share of accidents at sea.

The King's Sons reef is submerged at high tide and this, about 1790, caused the loss of a ship from the Orkneys bound for Cromarty, 'which in a fair evening, standing in too near the shore, struck upon the rock and went down directly; the crew having only time to save themselves by the boat. The top of the mast was seen for several weeks above water.' [6a]

This reef claimed a further victim about 1896 or 1897, an Inverness vessel, Leoramundo. In Balintore cemetery there is the gravestone of Samuel Woodford and his son, Henry James, lost on the reef in January 1897. Their ship is not named and they may possibly have been from Leoramundo.

The Linnet was wrecked at Cinn a Bhairt below Cadboll in 1843. She was a schooner of 150-160 tons which had been driven ashore on the Seaboard. There are slightly different versions of what happened after that. One is that a local crew was engaged to take her to Spey Bay for repairs; the other that a local crew was put on board to do salvage work which so lightened her that she took to sea in a gale. In any event, she was dashed on to the rocks below Cadboll in the storm and all the men were lost. This disaster made a tremendous impact on the villages and events were referred to as 'before the Linnet or 'after the Linnet.' A Gaelic poem written at the time by Artar Ross, running to fifty-six verses, still circulates and is sung. A translation of verses 4 and 5 runs:

The big ship that was sailing the oceans,
She came in one gloomy night,
And she was lost in the darkness,
And the storm threw her into Cadboll.
She remained there for a time without moving,
As a broken vessel amongst the hard rocks,
And some tried to lift her up,
And tried to lift her up
And tried her on the ocean, and to work with her.

An interesting little story has come to light in recent years linked to the first wreck of the 'Linnet Mhor'. It seems when the ship was driven on the Cadboll rocks some timely help from Hilton, the nearest village to Cadboll. They rescued the crew and did their best to effect temporary repairs before sailing her to the nearest port which could have been Balintore or across the Moray Firth to Spey Bay.

Unfortunately, lacking both anchor and rudder the ship was doomed when a strong wind arose, and she foundered with all hands. One of the fishermen from Hilton who went to the help of Linnet was a Finlay Skinner. He was the means of saving the captain's life and to show his gratitude he gave Finlay Skinner a gold ring, inscribed S.S. This ring has been handed down through the generations of the Skinner family, and at the present time is the possession of Mrs Beth Skinner, Balintore, the fifth generation. The owner must be a Skinner and if female, named Sophie.

In 1912 the Ella Brewster, a yawl, was so heavily laden with mussels gathered at Fort George that she foundered on the way home. All the crew were drowned save one, Alex. Mackay.

In stormy weather Balintore Harbour can be very difficult to negotiate and in 1928 a life was lost just outside the jetty. The motor boat Pearl was used for towing salmon cobles and on this occasion Pearl and a coble she was towing were waiting outside the harbour for the tide to fill in order to come in. While waiting a sudden storm arose and pulled the anchor so that they were obliged to tie the boat to the head pole of a nearby net. The storm grew so bad that John Paterson got the crew of the motor-boat 'Thrive' to go to the rescue of Pearl, he himself going with them. They circled Pearl, and threw a rope which missed first time, but succeeded at the second cast. They towed Pearl and the coble and were just getting into the safety of the harbour when the tragedy happened. It seems the big waves were coming in threes and as Thrive came in on the third wave the rope snapped on an unexpected fourth wave with the result that Pearl was driven straight on to the rocks at the side of the jetty and wrecked. One of the two men on board, David Skinner, realizing the imminent danger, leaped into the sea and managed to get to the shore. The other, Tommy Vass, was trapped and drowned. The skipper, Hugh Mackay, was presented with a Royal National Lifeboat Institution medal in London by the Prince of Wales, and the rest of the crew, John Paterson, Andrew Sutherland, William Ross and recognition of . . . courageous conduct in putting off from Hilton, Ross-shire, in a motor boat with four other men and at great personal risk rescuing one of the two occupants of the motor fishing boat 'Pearl' which was wrecked in a whole S. gale with heavy sea at Balintore on 20th March 1928.' They also received certificates from the Carnegie Heroic Trust Fund in recognition of heroic endeavour to save human life.

With many men joining the Royal and Merchant navies it was fairly common for families in the villages to lose their loved ones far from home. One family in Hilton lost four generations of eldest sons away at sea, but other losses occurred very close by. Two young fishermen who fell victims to a hungry cruel sea were Finlay Vass and Robbie Cha (Roberston and Charles Wood); the former was drowned outside the harbour and the latter was dragged into the sea by the anchor of a coble.

These are only a few examples of the sea's toll from the Seaboard villages; it must have claimed many more victims.

Chapter 10 - Village Life

A statement in 1793 that 'In. . . every parish throughout the country, the roads are made most convenient for travellers', 6b simply was not true in the villages. The only road at that time was a public one of sorts which ran along the top of the cliff from Tarbat Ness, behind the villages, and so to Cromarty Ferry (the real name for Nigg Ferry.) It is shown on the 1813 map and was known as the 'rockhead road'.6b The various little vennels or alleys between every three or four houses gave access from this road to the sea.

It was only in 1819 that a road from Hill of Fearn to Balintore was built, thanks to the generosity of Hugh Rose of Glastullich who advanced the total cost of £322.4/-. It was reported on 31st August 1819 that 'Thomas Logan has been employed the greater part of this season in forming and gravelling the road from Fearn to Balintore and that he hoped to finish it in fourteen days' time. [2O]   It is interesting that an 'S' bend on this same road is at present being straightened out at an estimated cost of £22,000.12

Such a road made a tremendous difference to the population of the Seaboard, but up to the beginning of this century the three villages of Hilton, Balintore and Shandwick still had no roads linking them with each other and were totally separate communities with little communal feeling. Old people remember when there were only sandy hillocks between each of the villages and tinkers used to camp between Balintore and Hilton.

The road from Hilton School to Hilton village was made first and people have vivid memories of the stones being carted from the shore, spread with clay, sprinkled with water, and the clay flattened and worked in among the stones by a wide brush pulled by a horse. The Hilton - Balintore road was made about 1905 and the extension to Shandwick about 1907. Stones from Balintore and Shandwick quarries were used and clay from Rarichie and Tullich. After this, from time to time road metal (broken stones) was used to cover the clay and even up the surface, and later on it was sprayed with tar and made ready for the steam roller, the delight of the children.

Hilton, Balintore and Shandwick men in the Royal Naval Reserve, 1906.

Names and nicknames given by David Morrison, Fulford Harbour, B.C.,Canada, but not guaranteed for accuracy.
Row 1.1: A. Mackay.

Row 2.1: Wm. Skinner, 'Wowa'; 2 and 3: Danny and Beelie 'Vatt', (Mackenzie), 16 Bank Street; 4: Jock Vorrer, 8 Bank Street; 5: Wm. Sutherland, 'Vullia', Hilton; 6: 'Moses' Morrison; 8: Brother of Wm. Sutherland, Hilton; 9: Hecktor Mackenzie.

Row 3.1: 'Stumpy'; 2: Wm. Vass, 'Goatie', or his brother 'Ort'; 4: Johnnie 'Jeannack' MacAngus, Hilton; 5: A. McKay, 2 Shore Street; 6: David Morrison, 1 Shore Street.

Row 4.1: 'Major'; 2 and 10: D. and W. (Beala) Mackenzie, 1 Port Street; 3. 'Rossi'; 5: David Skinner, 'Russ', Shore Street, Balintore; 6: D. Vass, 'Huge', Shandwick, or his brother; 12: Johndi, Shandwick.

Row 5. 7: D. Mitchell, 'Robb'; 9: David Vass, 'Bolt', Shandwick.

Row 6. 1: Hugh Ross, Hilton, 'Hughie Allie'; 2: Hugh McKay, 'Cear', 'Left-handed', Hilton; 5: Andrew Ross, 'Vullie', Shandwick; 6: Finlay Skinner,' 'Daunie'; 9: George Skinner, 'Crusaire', 4 Shore Street.

Row 7. 1 and 2: Willie and Finlay Ross, 'Leabhain and Filt'.

Row 8. 2: Andrew Ross, 'Reida', 7 Bank Street, Balintore.

Even when the roads were made, there were no streets such as one is familiar with today, only grassy stretches on which houses stood, later being made into tracks of clay and sand which in wet weather were full of rain-filled holes. The streets were pitch dark in winter and when people ran out to chase away mischievous urchins tapping on the windows, they often fell into the holes to the added pleasure of the young rascals.

Although the villages were thus to a great extent apart, there was always some movement from one to the other and even inter-marriage. Even so, what may have applied in one village does not necessarily apply in the others.

When the railway line north of Invergordon was opened in 1864 everyone who possibly could walked up to the station to see the first train pass by. This must have fired their ambitions because after the First World War there was enthusiastic agreement in 1919 for a proposal by Nigg Parish Council to have 'a railway linking up Balintore with Nigg Station, and by a branch line to Nigg Ferry from the Railway, Balintore and Nigg Station with the Ferry.'21 One feels that Dr. Beeching's axe would have fallen by now had this proposal ever come to anything.

The sea on the east side of the harbour has receded quite considerably during this century because it used to be quite common to see seaweed lying on the road in Main Street and Shore Street, Balintore, and for stools to be afloat in Shore Street houses at high tide. However, people tried to build up the shore line with all sorts of rubbish and waste material such as old thatch roofing, ship ballast and so on, which has been most successful even although a freak wave flooded into Main Street in 1956. On the west side of the harbour there is clear evidence over the last twenty to thirty years that the sea is encroaching on the land.

Shore Street, Balintore, showing braze chimneys, c.1900.

Some shops have been forgotten entirely but of those that are remembered, or still survive, the chief one is Ross's Shop (the Big Shop) in Balintore. It now incorporates the Post Office and is still thriving. It is at least a hundred years old and some of its old brass trading tokens are still to be seen. They were possibly made at the foundry in Tain and have figures on them to denote their value, and the letters A. R. for Andrew Ross and B. for Balintore. These tokens are thought to have been used for paying country women who brought in butter, crowdie etc. and they could only be spent at the shop.

Ross's were ships' chandlers besides supplying a wide range of goods for domestic use. Country people also traded with the shop and twice a year at term time when they were paid in cash the shop was especially busy. Even when they left the district some of the farm workers returned to the shop to settle debts and open the next six months' account. The shop ran two vans, one to Nigg Ferry and one to the Cadbollmount area.

Most of the goods arrived in bulk. Tea came in large boxes and was measured into paper bags with a little scoop. Dried fruit, hard soap and sugar also came in bulk. Salt boats came into the harbour and the loose salt was loaded into carts to be taken to the shop.

There is another grocery in Bank Street, Balintore, Skinner's Shop, which is also about a hundred years old and a close rival of Ross's; and a sweetie shop, Bonny's, used to exist near the Big Shop, where the children spent their New Year pennies. There are nostalgic memories of buying a large poke of sweets at ½d. or ld. and two dozen small ginger snaps for 3d. about sixty years ago.

Shandwick had a general shop owned by Mr. William Ross, now run by his son, Hugh. There was also a general shop at the east end of Mid Street run by David Vass, but it is no longer in existence.

There were three bakers in Balintore. Two brothers called Fletcher made excellent loaves which were sold at three for 1/- about the end of the 19th century. They also supplies the herring fleet with ships biscuits in addition to loaves. Girls going to the fishing usually made sure they had a loaf of Fletcher's bread with them, which was surely a tribute to its high quality. Fletchers were followed by Ross's bakery.

New Street, Shandwick, between the wars.

Another baker called Sutherland had his shop in Main Street, and a James Vass had a bakery farther west. This last baker supplied about two hundred loaves a day for orders and also made oatcakes. All the mixing was done by hand and the baking in coal ovens. When the baking was ready the bakers got out their two horses from a stable in the old herring yard and went round the district with vans. Mr. Tom Skinner, a well-known baker now retired in Inverness, trained there.

There was a butcher's shop in each village though Johnstone's shop in Balintore has outlived the others and is now run by the third generation. Mackay the Curer had a butcher's shop in Hilton for a few years and John Vass had one in Shandwick in a shed opposite his house at 2, New Street.

One of the Sutherlands, bakers in Balintore, also had a general shop in Hilton which he sold to James Fraser. James Fraser sent a van round the countryside and had a Post Office as well but it was closed in spite of public protests about 1967/8. Denoon's ran a general shop and ship chandlers in Back Street, Hilton, till about the end of the Second World War. Another small grocery shop on Back Street was owned by Maggie Uisdean (Sutherland) who was so short-sighted that she used to wear three pairs of spectacles simultaneously.

She also sold bread, baked in Hill of Fearn by Gordon's and Leslie's. Bell Geordie (Skinner) had a little shop in a black-roofed shed adjoining her house in Shore Street, Wilton, and sold bread, tobacco, sweets and paraffin oil. Many a child went to Bell's shoppie with a finished school copybook and exchanged it for ½d. worth of sweets.

The pages were used in lieu of paper bags as pokes for further sales of conversation lozenges, gob-stoppers and the like. Phemie Ross sold bread (Gordon's and Leslie's) in addition to doing sewing in a small white-washed cottage long since vanished at the foot of Hilton brae. Another old lady on Back Street, Isabella Skinner (Belsie), eked out a scanty livelihood selling bread to the neighbours.

Gordon's, bakers and grocers in Hill of Fearn, sent a van round the villages, and a baker's van from Portmahomack came too, with very good bread and specializing in a hard biscuit. The visits of the packmen, with linen, knick-knacks, books and clothes were always very welcome. A well-known figure as she tramped from Cadboll to Hilton and Balintore with farm produce for her various customers, was Maggie Gillanders. She was equally burdened on her return journey with groceries for her neighbours.

Hilton Post Office in its heyday with Mr James Fraser, Postmaster/Grocer.

As the festive season approached Maggie was a walking Christmas tree, perhaps with hens slung over her shoulder, a basket of butter on one arm and one of eggs on the other. She had many friends and her goodness of heart was shown in the little gifts she gave to young couples on their wedding day.

Donald Ross, Hilton, mentioned in the Session Minutes of 1845 as providing coffins at 7/- each, may well have been the father of Robert Ross who had a general shop in Hilton near Phemie's and was undertaker as well till about the time of the First World War. He made the coffins in a shed opposite his house and shop and school children often stopped in the passing to watch him at work and play among the tinselly stuff with which he ornamented the black-cloth-covered coffins. One old lady remembers a ship's figurehead which Robert had nailed above his shop door - maybe a trophy of his earlier years! George Mackay, the Balintore boat-builder, also made coffins for the other villages, and the Skinner brothers who were celebrated masons made gravestones around the turn of the century at 1, East Street, Balintore.

Hilton had an inn known as the Hilton Hotel, situated at the extreme east end of Lady Street. It belonged to the Sutherlands and in time when the licence was not renewed it became a dwelling-

house. Today all evidence of its former prestige as an hotel has gone. The stabling has disappeared and only the cellars are left intact beside the house.

In Balintore there were at least two hotels, the Commercial near the entrance to the harbour, and the Balintore Hotel towards the east 'end of the village. These have changed hands from time to time down the years but trade in drams was always brisk, and both are still in use. Well into this century Fearn held a market in mid-July, and in the late 19th century there was also a pig-market there, the only one in the North of Scotland specifically for pigs.

In addition there had been two much earlier markets - a feeing market about a hundred years ago held in the park east of Hilton, and Hugh's Fair which took place at Wester Rarichie on the third Tuesday of November each year. It moved to a new site at Ankerville and died out about a hundred years ago.

Nearly every household kept a pig, bought as a piglet at Fearn market and perhaps kept in the house for the first week till it settled down. They were well cared for and sometimes even were washed to keep them nice and clean. They were fattened on potatoes, scraps, even 'paddles', and resold at the Fearn market or in Tain, but often to Mr. Johnstone, grandfather of the present butcher. He was a pig-dealer as well as a butcher, and shipped a lot of pigs from Invergordon to Newcastle. The fisherfolk could rarely afford to kill a pig for themselves but on occasion would combine with another family when one pig was killed and shared between the two households, the other being sold and the money divided. A shepherd at Cadboll used to be called in to do the pig-killing.

Then as now there was much scope for the practical joker. Pigsties provided an outlet for fun and often the pigs were let loose in the villages and caused much consternation among the owners who heaped imprecations on their incorrigible young, especially if they were bound by a clause in their house feu such as, 'Should any Pigs or Swine be kept on the subject of this Sett, they must be confined and not suffered to go at large through the village. [22]

Many people kept hens and several had a cow. Johnstone the butcher kept goats and many a story is told of these. One billy goat somehow used to get loose at night and wandered through the village with its chain clanking behind it. The superstitious were convinced that the devil was abroad till one, braver than the rest and more curious maybe, determined to face His Satanic Majesty in whatever guise. This was Johnstone's poor old billy goat!

Aged horses were sometimes turned loose to graze around and feed themselves as best they might but sometimes they were killed by axe and buried near the sea between the villages. There were conditions attached to keeping animals on some feus, for instance that any dung and manure made had first of all to be offered to the farm tenants of the estate on the usual terms or as agreed, but failing this it might be disposed of to anyone else. [22]

Pipe-smoking was common, the clay pipe, with thread wound round the stem to prevent cancer of the lip, and the briar being used, with perhaps an expensive meerschaum brought home as a present by a member of the family in the Merchant Navy. Snuff was used by the older generation, women as well as men indulging the habit. It was often passed around in church and according to one writer they sneezed but never missed a word from the pulpit. [23]

During the First World War there was a large army camp stationed at Nigg. Sentries were posted at Balintore to guard the harbour and lived in a nearby bothy and a building near the Post Office. The villagers were very kind to these men and on cold nights put out tea on window ledges for them as

sentry duty forbade them to go inside. Because of the war a great deal of employment came to the Seaboard, building the - forts at North Sutor and later the oil tanks at Invergordon. This brought much-needed prosperity and many modernised their homes, often adding extensions. It also brought surprising sights and the first time one fishwife saw an airship she thought it was a whale flying!

There were few newspapers about but in Hilton anyway news was dispensed by Mr. Sutherland of the Hilton Inn who used to walk to the shop for his 'Scotsman' and on his return trip read out the news all along the street to the people sitting outside baiting lines, and it was thus that they heard of the triumphs and tragedies of the war.

Again during the Second World War, work was plentiful. Many people from the villages served in both wars. For years the men had been in the habit of joining the Royal Navy Reserve, spending some time annually training in Inverness. Consequently, when war broke out these reservists were called up to serve in the Navy. Others went to the Merchant Navy and some to the Army and the Air Force, while many of the girls joined the women's services. They served faithfully, some even laying down their lives, and not a few medals for gallant service were won.

To give but one instance, the Distinguished Service Medal was won by W. Vass, Main Street, Balintore, who was a gunner on S.S. Cyrene. On 22nd October 1916 a German submarine approached and Cyrene's captain thought it wise to hoist the white flag. W. Vass turned a blind eye like Nelson and continued to fire, destroying the submarine. His family prize an official acknowledgement of this incident from the Minister of Shipping.

Sea Scouts, Hilton, c.1914.

During the First World War a band of Sea Scouts was stationed at Hilton, mainly doing coastguard duty. Their leader was Mr. William Nicoll and their little hut was sited to the west of Patersons' yard. The boys were welcomed in the villages and people were very kind to them. When they reached calling-up age they joined the services. The following poem was written by one of these boys, Forrest Robertson, from 'somewhere in France' and sent to Miss Anna Skinner, Hilton, now Mrs. Miller, California. Pte. Robertson did not return from the war.

The Road to Balintore. The thoughts of a soldier on the eve of departure, who has spent a happy part of his life at Hilton and Balintore in Ross-shire.

A rending cry from a far off shore
And a voice both wild and free
Borne by a wind that is wet with spray,
Hark! 'tis a voice from the sea.
I hear it a-calling
In crowded street and busy way.
It sets my blood a-tingling
It calls me but I cannot obey.

I see the boats at anchor riding
In the small and peaceful harbour.
I see the big waves rising, falling,
Ever on in strenuous labour.
They beat on harbour wall and sandy bay,
They lash in vain on the rocky shore,
Sending a voice to fetch me
To the road to Balintore.

Then from Tarrel Cove and Geanies ho!
On to the Hill of Nigg
Comes a voice and bids me go
But I cannot do as bid.
How I long for the ships coming up the firth
From a far of distant shore
And see the land on the other side
From the road to Balintore.

I see the old hill lift his head
In solemn dignity,
As if to guard the dead
Who sleep there in the sea.
I can see old Shandwick Bay
Where the breakers sweep and roar,
Where we boys were wont to play
On the road to Balintore.

I long for the harsh North Easter
Lashing the waves in glee,
Sweeping the spray to the Firth
From his home in the dark North Sea,
To hear the sea come foaming in
And break with sullen roar
On the rocks close by old Hilton
On the road to Balintore.

Why did I leave the happy home
Which meant so much to me,
Ne'er to return and roam
By the side of the wild North Sea.
I long for the little boats to come
And it makes my heart feel sore
To think I'll ne'er again see them
From the road to Balintore.

But when I'm free I'll return
And answer the voice that calls me
That makes my heart so yearn
For the dear old Shandwick Bay,
And for the rocks at Hilton,
Till I hear the voice no more
From along that wind-swept coast
And the road to Balintore.

Chapter 11 - Houses and Furniture

Many houses in the villages are at least two hundred years old, probably more, and are still occupied by descendants of those who built them.

They were all thatched and because this is heavy stuff the walls had to be thick and the construction narrow in order to support it. The walls were built of large round stones gathered wherever they might be found, carried home in creels and bound with either red clay or lime. Red clay came from various clay-holes including one at Easter Rarichie. Before lime was imported from the south the only place where it could be obtained locally was a rich layer of shells about a foot under the sand at Nigg Bay. [88]

Floors were made of grey clay which set harder and more quickly than red and was not so messy. There were plenty sources of it - behind Shandwick village, near the Well of Health and at Tullich. Many people remember these floors and how practical they were for jobs such as baiting as they were easy to clean with a sprinkle of sand and a good brushing. Very few people had flagstones as flooring. Cement was introduced shortly before the First World War and has now been followed by the most modern materials.

Timber for building came from local woods - Shandwick Hill, Cadboll and so on. It was worked with the eetch (adze) except for the couples which might just have the bark removed without being dressed. These couples were inserted right into the wall to give strength. There were no ceilings and people still remember when the rafters were an ideal place to store nets, lines and creels. From time to time dried fish were hung from nails in the rafters, ready to hand and just the thing – no refrigerator necessary! Simple ceilings were made later by tacking on split sacks, sometimes covered with paper and whitewashed. Someone once used newspaper and the daughter of the house was very hurt when her young man looked up and remarked that she'd never be short of news!

Many men built their own homes themselves with the help of neighbours, but a large part of Hilton is said to have been built in the 1840s during the Clearances by a builder, Hugh Tarral. There were several joiners later on. One, Mackenzie, lived above Hilton and of course there was George Mackay who was a joiner in addition to making boats and coffins.

Thatching is skilled work and made for a warm and comfortable house. Most of the men could thatch themselves, but there were also regular thatchers who worked for the villages and the farms. One of these about a hundred years ago was Donald Morrison who lived in Shore Street, Shandwick; a little later there was Hugh Macdonald in Shore Street, Hilton; and more recently Dan Ross in New Street, Shandwick.

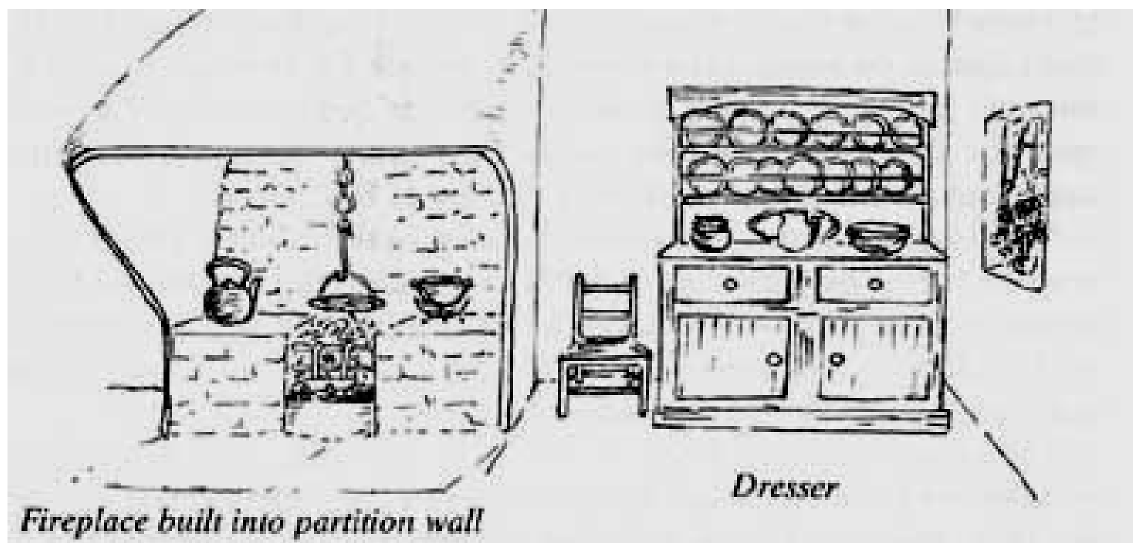
There were several stages in thatching. Fir slabs were laid across the couples about an inch apart. Overlapping divots (turf) were placed on these, the slabs preventing them from sliding off. The thatcher prepared 18 inch long bunches of straw or bent grass, tightly tied with string, and laid them along the base of the roof to form the 'aising'. He laid his ladder far enough out to lie right on the roof and worked from the right gable to the left, thatching sections of 18 inches or so at a time. He worked upwards, laying straw or bent from the bottom of the roof to the top, putting clay in between. As he worked he used a sharp knife to tidy the ends but always allowed the thatch to project over the walls so that drips would not run down the sides of the house in wet weather. Then

he moved his ladder over to the left and did the next section. The straw protruded at the top so when he came to do the back of the house he folded them over into the thatch there.
Bent grass made the best thatch as it is very strong, but it needed more labour to cut and gather and it was often too short to be of use.

Occasionally people went to Nigg Ferry for what they called Point bent which was considered the very best, but generally it was more practical to get straw from nearby farms free of charge and teaze it at home by hand.

Divots could be cut from the banks near home but the very best place to get them was Inver where the grass was like a short springy cushion and was therefore very warm. They were cut with a specially curved spade and taken home by horse and cart. Thatch had a distinct disadvantage in stormy weather - and the Seabord is a windy quarter - so that it was often in danger of lifting with the wind and blowing away, thus causing great distress and inconvenience to the inmates. It was quite a common sight to see ropes or wires stretched over the thatch, weighed down by large boulders rolled up from the shore, and in a storm everyone would be up with sticks and divots trying to hold down their thatch. People who had slated houses before these became common sometimes found themselves giving refuge in bad weather to their neighbours from thatched houses.

Apart from these few early slated houses, the change-over from thatch to other forms of roofing took place within the last fifty years, with one or two thatched houses surviving till after the Second World War. Tarred felt was the first step and some of these roofs still remain, but the majority of the houses now have slates or rubberoid tiles.



Fireplace built into partition wall

An interesting feature of these old houses was the fireplace, and many people remember the hanging chimney or 'praze' as it was called. The chimney was set not in the gable wall but against an inner wall with a canopy overhanging the fireplace. This canopy was a wide wooden hood projecting over the hearth connected by a wooden flue to the chimney, the whole thing made separately and attached to the wall. [24] Miraculously they never seem to have set any houses on fire! The fireplace was on the floor flanked by two 'cheeks' or hobs of rough stones and clay. The chain and crook (hook) for the cooking pot hung from a wooden beam across the flue and could be hooked up or down to raise or lower the pot, depending on how fast it had to boil. So wide was this type of chimney that frying pans had to have lids to save them from droppings from gulls perched above.

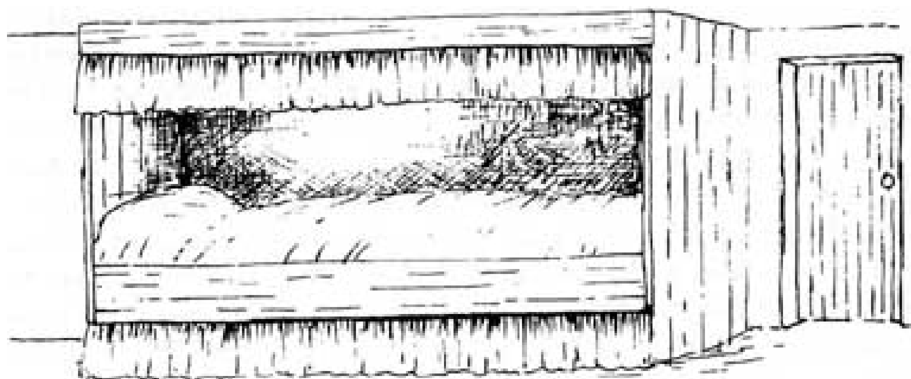
An example of the hanging chimney is thought to exist in a disused house in New Street, Shandwick, and there is a slightly modernized version in a house in Park Street, Balintore. The presence of these fireplaces can be distinguished by their very distinctive little wooden chimneys which are seen in the photograph of Shore Street, Balintore.

A further stage in development was reached when the fire was raised from the floor by a simple iron grate made by the local blacksmith. Later on fireplaces were set in the gable wall with high mantelpieces on which ornaments were placed. Some boasted a brass
rail used mainly for drying small items of the household wash. There were no ovens till about the beginning of this century when more ambitious grates were bought from Wallace & Fraser, Tain.

Most windows were very small, but in some houses where they were larger the original windows still exist although their frames have been renewed. Doors seldom had locks as they were not necessary in such a closely-knit community. The most that was ever done was to put a broom handle through the sneck. (latch).

The large houses in Main Street, Balintore, are thought to have perhaps been improved for herring yard officials but this may not be so. They were certainly there before the herring yard - one has a rent book dating from 1831. In 1861 such a house changed hands for £50 and about 1900 smaller houses were also sold for roughly the same
amount. One would have to pay many times that price for them now.

What was a typical house like at the beginning of this century? The door opened into a lobby with a room on either side, the but and the ben, and a little room at the back called a closet. The door to the closet was usually in the kitchen but occasionally in the lobby. The walls, innocent of plaster, were lime-washed a brilliant white as was the praze and a surround on the clay floor. Sometimes ochre (distemper) was used for decoration, blue or red on the floor, perhaps pink around the lower half of the walls. In the far corner of the kitchen was a box bed, originally all wooden, but later on the doors were taken off and replaced with curtains and pelmet. A type of four-poster bed was made by fixing posts to an ordinary bed, with a frame round the top from which hung an 18 inch valance. With a similar valance round the base of the bed the whole thing looked very attractive.



Box Bed

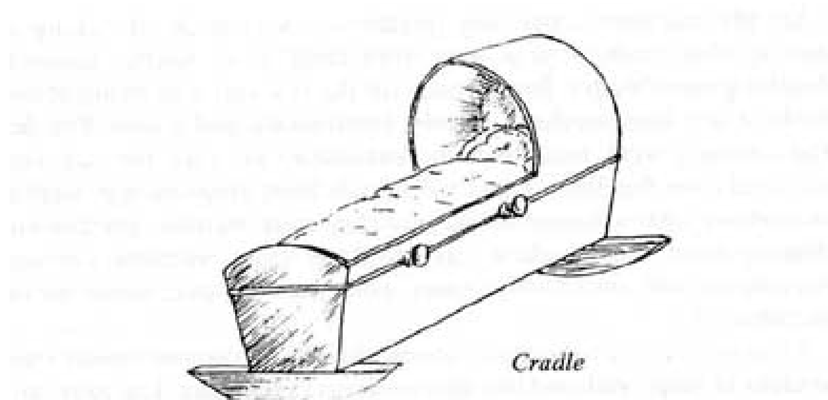
On the bed was a tick bag (mattress cover) made of ticking or cotton, filled twice a year with fresh chaff from nearby farms at threshing time. With a flannel sheet on the tick and a covering of two to three blankets people were very comfortable and warm. The tick and curtains were made by the housewife, as were the rag rugs scattered over the floor. These were made from strips of rags worked on sacking with a button-hook, and they were warmer, prettier and cheaper than any modern rug. Making them entailed frequent popping in and out of neighbours' houses to compare notes on the patterns!

Clootie covers (coorie cloot, cooreeck) were bedcovers woven from household rags gathered by the women. They tore the rags into strips, sewed these together and wound them up into the size of a football. It took from seven to nine of these balls to make a cover, and when they had collected the right number the women carried them in their creels to be woven at the cardie mill at Tain. Sometimes they made patchwork covers themselves at home.

Next to the bed was a dresser of white scrubbed wood, with plates and bowls ranged on the shelves. The dresser had two drawers and two presses (cupboards) underneath where the housewife kept utensils and the food for the family. People remember wooden spoons and ladles, and horn tumblers, spoons and bowls, the latter used for both porridge and tea. These were followed by enamel ware and then modern dishes. A big black pot was a kettle would be handy to hang from the crook.

Most housewives bought bed and table linen during the welcome visits of the packmen, and crockery of all kinds was supplied by Williamson, Tain, who sent a horse and cart round the villages prior to the First World War.

In the middle of the kitchen stood a deal table, either scrubbed white or covered with American cloth. Beneath the window was a shelf where the two water pails stood, as all water had to be carried from the well. Furniture was made locally and people remember stools, chairs and beds made by George Mackay in Balintore. Another carpenter who made tables and chairs was called MacDougall who lived on the way to Hill of Fearn. On one side of the wide fireplace was a settle, a long high-backed bench, where members of the family gathered of a.n evening, and a few chairs and stools completed the furniture. A pair of china dogs, an ornament and a picture or two brightened the bare austere room, souvenirs of happy times at the herring fishing.


Cradle

Beside the fire was the inevitable cradle. Complete with rockers and hood and fitted with knobs for string to hold the baby down, it was rocked with a foot while the mother's hands were busy baiting,

knitting or sewing. A slightly older child might sleep in a crib fitted with rockers, the sides embellished with fretwork and a curtain.

The ben room was a bedroom-cum-parlour, the best room, and only used on special occasions. A large commodious chest of drawers containing the best household linen and Sunday clothes stood there.

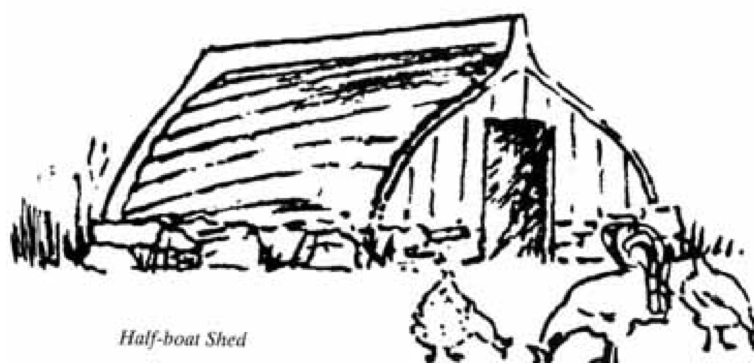
The children slept with their parents in the kitchen or the closet, but the addition of an upstairs room or rooms, usually reached by a ladder, greatly eased the accommodation problem when large families were the rule rather than the exception. This improvement came about in 1913 when the building of the forts at North Sutor brought employment and prosperity.

While some families added to their houses others lived in a 'half house'. They shared a house with another family, sometimes using the same door or perhaps with two doors, side by side. Up to eleven children are known to have been brought up - and well brought up - in a 'half house'.

Sanitation was non-existent but that did not mean there was not hygiene. A bucket in the shed took the place of a W.C. and it was emptied and washed out regularly in the sea. Later on dry closets were used until the public water supply came in the 1950s when modern bathrooms were installed.

In early days lighting was provided by the crusie, an open iron lamp with a rush wick, fed by home-made fish oil. Home-made candles, and later on, bought ones were then used, followed by paraffin lamps which were introduced in the first quarter of this century. Some had a little reflector, and others which for some reason were usually painted red, had a flat back so that they would hang on the wall. A simple way of getting maximum concentration of light was found by Sandy Skinner, the Graiseach, in Hilton. He blacked the lamp glass with soot, leaving only a small portion which threw a clear light on to his shoemaking. Aladdin and Tilley lamps were then introduced, superseded in the 1950s by electricity.

When much of the work like baiting and preparing fish for smoking was done outside, it is not surprising that all the houses face south, which incidentally means that they face the sea. The resulting one-sided streets give a distinct charm to the villages. The indispensable black tarred shed was built opposite the houses and there lines were baited except in the most severe weather, washing done and many other chores. It was also the store for the barrel of salt herring and the fisherman's tackle. Cutting an upturned, old boat in half produced the half-boat shed, which was not only thrifty and practical but also very attractive in a fishing village. It is a great pity that none of them remain.



Half-boat shed.

Chapter 12 - Clothing

In the old days clothes were made from homespun materials produced by the country folk round about, providing a lot of work for weavers and tailors as these figures for the end of the 18th century show. [6a,b,c]

Nigg - 12 weavers, 9 tailors
Tarbat - 12 weavers, 11 tailors
Kilmuir Easter - 15 weavers, 10 tailors

Nor did material cost much in those days - twenty yards of plaids were valued at 10d. in 1765! But this was too good to last and the rise in the price of clothing was particularly mentioned in the Statistical Account for Tarbat where people 'to appear decent and comply with the fashion of the times must have recourse to the shop." for fineries in dress not known to their fathers.

Thus by 1840 or so there were not many weavers left and shops had begun to make their appearance supplying materials for making up at home or by local tailors and dressmakers. These shops stocked red flannel for petticoats, white flannel for vests, white serge for drawers, as well as suit materials and prints. Coloured prints became very popular and could be bought ninety years ago for 6d. per yard while shirting and flannel were 1/-. [25]

In 1883 there was a tailor called Mackintosh in Balintore. [5] There would certainly have been others as well. Some of the later tailors who are still remembered were David Vass in Shandwick; in Hilton there was Andrew Vass who made up flannels, suits and trousers; while Tom Vass in Balintore combined tailoring with the job of postman.

Cromarty couple in typical dress of the turn of the century (1900s)

The fishwife's outfit has already been described, and the photograph of the Cromarty fisherman and his wife show what working clothes were like here about eighty years ago, apart from the pom-pom on the man's cap. This was never worn in the villages. People remember when a man's workaday head-gear was a soft, round, peakless cap superseded eighty or ninety years ago by the 'cheese-cutter' which was like a peaked merchant-navy cap; and they have heard that the men used to wear fur caps, probably the sealskin ones worn many years ago all round the coast by Scottish fishermen. It was common for caps and bonnets to stay on all the time, whether in the house or not.

The men wore mufflers to keep their necks warm, either with red and white spots or grey and white checks. They wore 'Moray Firth blue' ginseys (guernseys) knitted by their wives or other female relations. These jerseys always fastened on the shoulder. The working ginseys were not usually patterned but those kept for best were very elaborate. The girls who went every year to the herring fishing learned from their associates there to knit such patterns as Links of Love, Cat's teeth, Waves of the Sea and cable stitch, and could therefore turn out very fine work. There was, however, no particular pattern associated with the villages here as there is in some other parts of the country. In addition to men's black or grey socks and stockings, the women knitted their own stockings, always black, 4-ply for everyday and a finer pair for Sunday.

The men had strong, dark, woollen, fall-front trousers and heavy working boots. Those who worked on the farms sometimes put straw inside their boots to give protection from the cold. There is no record of the names of early shoemakers though there must have been several, but people remember Finlay Vass in Shandwick who died in the early 1900's. He made boots and shoes and the long leather thigh boots worn at sea by the fishermen. In Balintore there was Sandy Mackay, and also Alex. Morrison who made ladies' shoes as well. In Hilton Sandy Skinner, better known as the 'Graiseach,' was a kenspeckle figure with his white head and beard. He repaired for all and sundry and made fishermen's long boots at 30/- a pair. These boots needed to be skilfully made if they were to be supple, and it is said that the shoemakers could make them 'as soft as a calfs ear.' Even so, they needed regular oiling to keep them this way, and getting them off needed a boot-jack or upturned stood or else great heaving and pulling by the children.

Eighty years ago ordinary boots cost from 3/- to 7/9, and shoes from 2/4 to 6/6 25 so it is not surprising tht most of the children ran around barefoot even in winter as the school log shows. An entry for 17th March, 1976, says, '. . . the little barefoot children did not attend so regular owing to the heavy snow and storm.' Nowadays people only remember going barefoot from May to September and then the strong tackety boots for boys were bought (indispensable when sledging and sliding days came round) and finer button boots for girls. These boots, which lasted throughout the winter and spring, thanks to home-cobbling, were bought at the end of the herring fishing when the father returned with the season's drawings. He and his wife usually went to the Big Shop in Balintore and there bought the winter clothes for the entire family. There was great excitement and anticipation among the children waiting at home to see what they would get - somewhat dampened when their mother set them to work sewing underclothes as a result.

The fisherman's wife was usually a practical and thrifty person and whenever possible made clothes herself for the family, particularly underclothes such as semmits, drawers, knickers and skirts. She sometimes converted old coats into trousers for the boys. Some people got flour bags from the shops, boiled them and bleached off the writing with soda, and turned them into dresses and pinafores. Girls usually wore a flannel petticoat, then a cotton one, a dress and the white frilly pinafore which was popular among them and looked very becoming. Their Sunday wear might include a shop dress for 10/- or so seventy years ago, and perhaps a beret, but hats were not

generally worn till girls were sixteen or seventeen years old: Instead a hair ribbon was worn to tie the plaits.

There were a number of dress-makers in the village who helped greatly with sewing, some by hand but one at any rate, Julia Morrison in New Street, Shandwick, had a sewing machine before the turn of the century. Mrs. Mackenzie, Port Street, Balintore, sewed red flannel petticoats for women, and for the men she made flannel semmits and wide, warm white serge drawers for men; while Phemie Ross in Hilton is said to have made up long flannel shirts.

Boys wore short dark woollen trousers with or without a jacket, a woollen jersey and, especially for Sundays, a white celluloid Peter Pan collar to finish. For Sundays a man wore his black or navy cloth suit which, usually worn for the first time on his wedding day, lasted for the rest of his life. A pair of black elastic-sided boots and later a lacing pair saw the light of day once a week when he went to church. A bowler hat and a starched dickey (shirt front attached with a collar) completed the ensemble. Later on he had a dark shirt with a little check in the pattern. The suit often had a double-breasted waistcoat with revers, and if at all possible the men liked to have a watch with its chain across the waistcoat front.

Group of local girls from the herring fishing.

The girls at the herring fishing brought home not only knitting patterns but haute couture as well, and no doubt thought themselves very grand with their long trailing skirts and elaborate hair-styles. The photograph of a group of them taken about 1900 shows the elegance and fine workmanship of their dresses. People remember seeing their mothers and grandmothers in long skirts, toques, cloaks, tippets with beading and embroidery and lovely 'best' aprons of black velvet trimmed with lace and jet. There were button boots for the feet and elegant bonnets for the head, usually black and trimmed with flowers and tied below the chin with wide watered-silk ribbons.

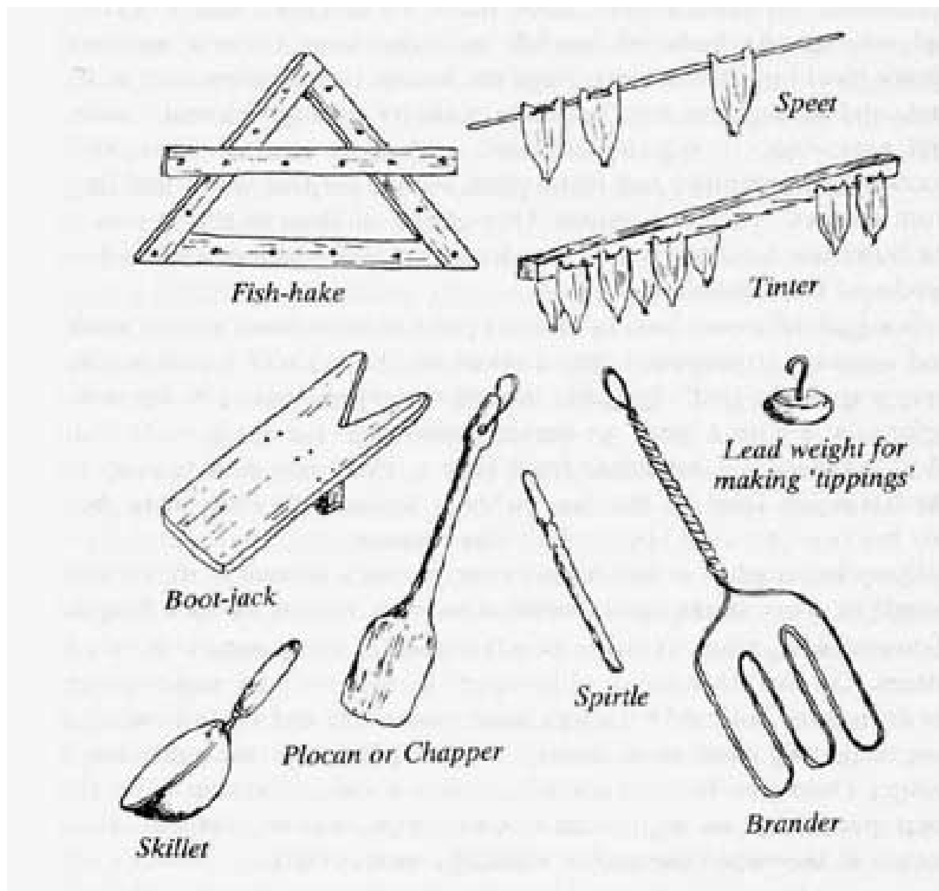
A strange form of attire was worn by a man who returned to the villages after being press-ganged during the Napoleonic Wars. He went fishing barefoot and wearing a kilt, which may very possibly have been the maritime kilt, like petticoat-breeches, which was worn in some fishing villages till the 1820's as a relic of service in the merchant or Royal Navy. [26]

Chapter 13 - Food

A survey of past times would be incomplete without some reference to food. If it was plain it was nourishing and above all cheap. Our forefathers got their vitamins all right thought it is unlikely that they had ever heard of such things.

Oatmeal, potatoes, salt herring and white fish were the staple articles of diet and every household had a 'food bank' in the form of a pit of potatoes and a barrel of salt herring which lasted well into the spring.

The fishermen always sold the best of their catch but kept something back to feed the family. This was the non-commercial fish, either too small or a kind for which there was no market, but which were nevertheless welcome and tasty additions to the menu at home.



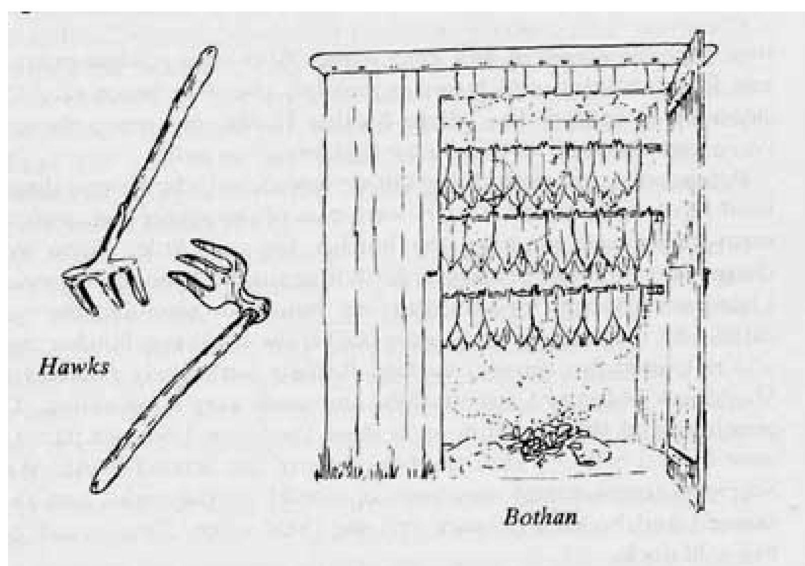
Fish were often eaten fresh but if plentiful they were also dried out of doors to preserve them. Small fish were cleaned, lightly salted, sometimes split, and hung from an ordinary smoking speight fixed to nails on the side of the house or shed as shown in the photograph of Cromarty.

They were sometimes dried on a hake, which was specially made for the job. It was a triangular wooden frame with pegs to which the fish were attached and it too was hung outside like the speight. The fish took a day or two to dry and would then keep for

about a week when they were boiled or roasted on the brander. The brander, a wire arrangement laid on top of a red fire, was a rough forerunner of the modern grill and it was often used for cooking fish as a change from boiling.

Fishertown, Cromarty, c.1890.

Large fish such as cod were split, heavily salted and laid on boards or on the stones on the shore to dry. They were only put out on good days and taken in it wet weather which meant that the drying process might take up to a month. This was worth it, however, as it would then keep for four to five months, stored up in the rafters. Pieces were cut off as required and when boiled were delicious. Gulls were a hazard with both methods of drying and a close look-out had to be kept for them.



Cod could also be dried indoors. After salting it was hooked up inside the canopy of the praze with a piece of fence wire and hung over a red hot fire. The skin became very black but the inside remained beautifully white. Haddock were also dried in the praze, hooked on to nails at the side

where they would not interfere with the pot hanging from the crook; sometimes they were dried on a speight placed right across the fireplace but this was not common.

Ling, catfish, lee and saithe could all be eaten fresh, boiled or cooked on the brander. Gurnard was sometimes skinned, but also boiled spikes and all, and very good it was. It is sometimes known as the 'crooner' because of the groaning noise it makes when captured. [27]

Fluke (flounders) and whiting were delicious. Sliced conger eel was cooked in the same ways but its chief drawback was a mass of tiny bones which made it unsuitable fare for children. Rock turbot (the male lump fish with a pink breast) was only pleasant to eat in early spring before the taste became too strong. Only a small part was edible but that part could be boiled and eaten cold with vinegar when it tasted much like salmon, or it could be fried. It is known as the 'cocky paddle' or by its Gaelic name of mhorcan. The female of the species was never eaten, nor was the dogfish.

The family barrel of salt herring was prepared at home, getting the fish little by little themselves or free of charge from the herring boats at the weekends.

The main meal was about 6.00 p.m. when the day's darg was over and the whole family present. A favourite dish was fish sauce (soup) made with fish stock, onions and potatoes. 'Crappit heid' was made by stuffing the head of a cod or a large haddock with a mixture of oatmeal, onions and its own liver, and cooking it in boiling water. This was a case of 'Waste not, want not,' when the fishwife preparing speldings did not waste the heads she cut off. Potatoes always appeared and 'tatties and herrin'' was a great favourite, and potatoes and milk were a common supper.

The names of the potatoes sound strange today for they have almost vanished from the scene - Champions, Table Talks, Up-to-Dates, Arran Chiefs, Fortyfolds, Langworthys and Blacksmiths. Boiled in brine and water they were even more floury than ever and the skins did not split in cooking. But some children liked when the skins split - these were 'laughing tatties!' When peeled a wooden plocan or chapper was used to mash them, and wooden ladles broke them up in soup.

A popular potato dish, easily prepared and used for breakfast or supper, was potato slices - 'slishacks'. During the Second World War when the need for economy in food was being cried from the house, a recipe appeared in a daily paper. 'Slice cold mashed potatoes and fry both sides until brown in hot fat. Use with bacon etc.' Our slishacks, of course! The village Mother Hubbards knew a thing or two about 'make do' in the kitchen and 'mend' as well.

Potato soup and vegetable broth were made with bones and sheep's head broth and roasted trotters were part of the winter diet, with the main ingredients got from the butcher for very little. These were cheap, nourishing dishes which did not strain the finances overmuch. Lights were bought for very little and boiled for soup and the meat eaten, and liver was fried as usual. Generally speaking, butcher meat was not nearly so popular as fish. Rabbits were freely poached on Shandwick Hill and Cadboll cliffs, and made very good eating. The poachers sold them from door to door for 1/- to 1/6d. per pair and later from 2/6 to 3/- until the beginning of the Second World War. Scarrows (cormorants) were shot or stoned on the rocks, and then skinned and boiled for broth and the meat eaten. They tasted just like wild duck.

Oatmeal sometimes came from the mills at Fearn and Rockfield but was usually bartered for fish with the farm-workers who had plenty meal but little money. Needless to say, porridge featured in the diet, and skirley was another dish made by mixing oatmeal, onions and suet, fried in a pan and eaten with potatoes. Occasionally a housewife, given time and inclination, would prepare white

puddings from oatmeal, suet and onions. One of the children might be sent to the butcher's for a pitcher of blood which when added to the mixture produced black puddings.

For lack of ovens baking was simple. Oatmeal bannocks (rounds) and oatcakes (triangular) were cooked on the brander which in time gave way to the girdle (griddle) though they continued to be browned before the fire on a trivet, or toaster, hooked to the fire bars. In Tain Museum there is a bakestone from Hilton which was used to prop up the baking in front of the fire, either to bake or to brown. In fact, any heavy object could be used for this purpose.

Oatcakes made on the brander were more favoured than 'loaf-bread' by some of the older people who were against the new-fangled 'Tommy' loaf when it was introduced early this century by shop bakers. On the other hand a 'doorstep' with butter and sugar or jam cut from the 'Tommy' with its choice crusts top and bottom was the very height of bliss to a hungry boy or girl. Another snack for a hungry child just home from school was a slice of turnip from the soup pan eaten on an oatcake. Cake was unknown except when bought at the New Year and at weddings, as was fruit.

The earliest reference to vegetables appears in 1610. Andrew Denune had a kailyard then in Hilton 2 showing that early on the fisherfolk appreciated this specific against scurvy. Later on vegetables came from the butcher's garden where a big cabbage cost 1d. about 1900, and turnips came from the nearest farm. Few people had gardens themselves till white fishing had ceased and black sheds were removed and replaced by gardens.

The 'clootiedumpling' was then as now a great favourite all round. It is a boiled suet pudding. The ingredients could be very simple, just flour, suet, a little spice and soda dissolved in water, but if times were prosperous it could be enriched with syrup, treacle, sugar and fruit. The mixture was wrapped up in a damped, floured cloth leaving room for expansion, and boiled for about three hours. It was made on festive occasions such as New Year, weddings and 'treats'. Eaten hot, sprinkled with sugar, it made a meal and the left-overs were fried with bacon and egg or eaten cold.

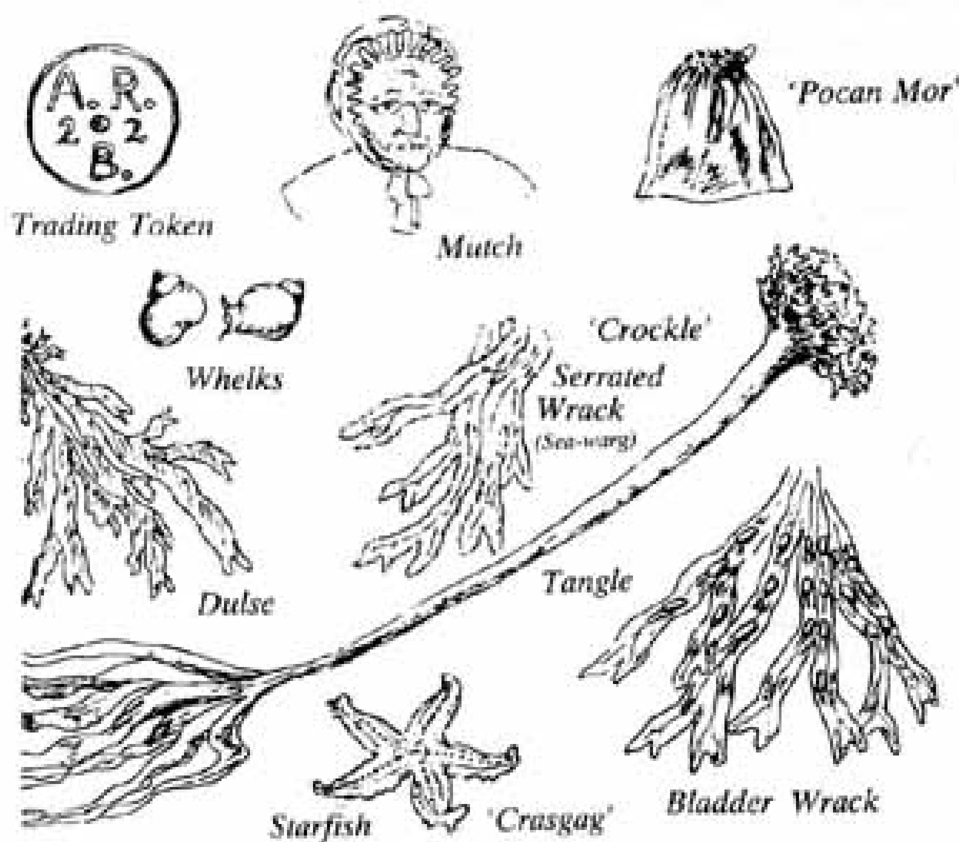
Very little jam was eaten. Syrup and treacle were more popular with the children, often bartered for whelks, while in good times butter and crowdie were bought from the farms or shops and used on oatmeal bannocks.

If no hens were kept, eggs were bought from the farms, but in spring seagulls' eggs were retrieved from the cliffs at the expense of life and limb and made a welcome addition to the diet.

No one ate mussels but they sometimes bought cockles from Johnny the Cockles' cart from Inver. Whelks were washed in several waters, boiled for twenty minutes and removed from the shell with a pin.

The children, as sure-footed as mountain goats on the rocky shore, would sometimes stay the pangs of a healthy hunger with pieces of a rope-like tangle (Cuvie) which they usually peeled with a mussel shell and then crunched. The cone-shaped root or 'cockle' was exceptionally tasty when peeled and could be swapped for marbles, buttons, a pocket-knife and so on. Dulse, a brown seaweed rich in iodine, was also eaten. It tasted best roasted on the brander or dipped into boiling water. Either way it turned green and this slight cooking made it more digestible and less likely to cause choking. A special seaweed, only found near the summer house below Geanies, could be boiled to a jelly. This use of seaweed may be the reason why the majority of the people had such lovely teeth when dental treatment was nil.

Milk came from several local sources apart from the farms, and when the usual supply dried up in winter the people did without entirely until the introduction of the 'tin cow' - Nestle's condensed milk. The Macraes at the Commercial Hotel had a cow, an excellent milker even if she only grazed on the shore and possibly on the washing. The Bonnys in Balintore kept two cows in a black shed behind their shop and sold milk, and a cow or cows were kept between Park Street and Shandwick. Johnstones the butchers also provided goats' milk. Sometimes a fishwife would bring home a bottle, or even a pail, of milk from her round. Old Shandwick Farm ran a pony-drawn milk cart in the 1930s but a constant supply was never reliable until the late Dr. A. K. Mackenzie, Tain, instituted a milk round. This milk came in large cans on a horse-drawn float from Arabella holdings. The villages benefited greatly from this development and as the quantity increased the method of transport improved, as did the health of the people and especially the children.



After the Second World War the Milk Marketing Board began a daily milk delivery to the doorstep, and this constant supply of T. T. milk is of tremendous value.

Chapter 14 - Home Life

From early morning until night-time the fisherman and his family were kept hard at it, but most of all the housewife. Her day might have an early and wet start launching her husband's boat, followed by bait-gathering and perhaps baiting a spare line before he got home, so she was often glad of a pause about 9.0 a.m. to see the children off to school. Baiting took about two hours plus the time needed to gather it, which in the case of lug worm from Nigg Bay, meant a further six hours. Thus eight hours a day could go before she began her domestic duties and they were arduous enough on their own.

Before the thatched roof gave way to felt and then slate, there were no rone pipes therefore no rainwater barrel for water. All water had to be carried in so that wash-day especially could be a very frustrating job if a good supply was not at hand. Children helped here and took it in turn to go to the well, using a gird to lighten the weight of the pails. This was a light wooden frame reinforced at the corners, or it might be just a barrel hoop. The handles of the pails were set against the gird thus keeping the pails away from the legs. Fortunately there were many wells, usually behind the houses, and some were quite deep. The bucket was usually raised and lowered by means of a rope but in some cases a few stone steps led down to the well and one had just to plunge in the pail or scoop water into it with a skillet.

Unfortunately, the proximity of pig-sties to wells was a danger to health and to combat this, Dr. Gillies, Tain, arranged between the First and Second World Wars for the main well in each village to be deepened and given a pump. This one in Balintore was situated where the Rovers' Crescent now stands, then moved to the green. Hilton had a good well which was moved closer to the houses and given a pump which was splendid except in wet weather when the pump was like an island in the sea. There was another pump at the corner of King Street, Hilton, but it froze very readily in cold weather. Shandwick people got their water from Cormac's well near Old Shandwick Farm and from a well behind the village, which unfortunately tended to get very dirty with dead rats and other debris and had to be cleaned out with lime every now and then. Park Street, Balintore, had a tap at the roadside which sometimes took an hour to fill a pail.

Depending on the weather the weekly wash was done in either the kitchen or the shed. The wooden tub was placed on a stand of some kind - a kitchen chair lying on its side was as good as anything - and when the pot of hot water was ready, the woman of the house scrubbed the clothes, using her scrubbing-brush and a wooden stool or a flat piece of wood as a scrubbing board. Whites were boiled with washing-soda in the iron pot and often it was the job of a daughter to stand over the pot with a 'spirtle' to push the clothes down when they tended to rise and overflow. Everything was beautifully clean before being spread on the whins to dry.

Blankets were washed during warm summer weather. In Balintore and Shandwick this was done at home but in Hilton they were lucky to have a burn and there they carried all that was needed for washday - blankets, washing pot, tub and firewood. A fire was lit and the big iron pot, kept for washing only, was put on it and soon the water was hot enough to begin. The youngsters stamped the blankets with great gusto and then helped to wring them prior to spreading them on the whins, with a sharp lookout for hungry bovine eyes in search of a tasty bite of wool.

Usually every stitch was dry as a bone by evening and borne home in triumph, but wet weather meant a kitchen full of damp clothes drying as best they might. Washing lines near the house and

water barrels at the corner were a development that greatly reduced the exhaustion of washday and were at the time comparable to the labour-saving of the modern washing-machine. The sight of washing drying and bleaching in the sunshine must have rejoiced the heart of the weary housewife many a time as she sat and baited the line and thanked her Maker that that job was over for another week. But what of the ironing? That was another day!

Ironing was an arduous job which frayed the temper badly. Fishwives never failed to have an immaculate white apron and up to 1900 or so a beautifully goffered mutch which cannot have made ironing-day any easier. The goffering iron had a little poker in a pocket. The poker was heated in the fire, inserted in the socket, and the frill of the mutch was pressed over it till nicely crimped. Heaters set in the fire to be put inside a box-iron and flat irons heated before the fire on the 'toaster' tended to prevent the heat of the fire from spreading through the room and many a groan was heard when this chore was in operation. First came the fisherman's Sunday dickeys which were starched and ranged on the brass rail to finish off and woe betide the innocent who edged too near the fire. 'Keep away from the dickeys' was like a signature tune and keep away he did, at the expense of cold fingers and toes.

Fuel was always a problem. It was only about the 1840's that coal became generally available and until then, in an area that had no peat, people depended on whins, broom and driftwood. Even after coal began to be used, women from Shandwick and possibly from Balintore as well, used to go to Shandwick Hill about 5.0 a.m. on summer mornings to collect whins, which the gamekeepers had burnt, to use as kindling. The sticks were gathered into a bundle and tied with a 'chower,' a rope with an iron ring at one end. This was looped round the bundle which was hitched over the shoulder to be carried home. Fishwives sometimes gathered sticks in their creels, as in the photograph, and it is said that fish were sometimes tradecd for peat in areas like Edderton. Anyone with a cart took that to collect fuel in the various woods, such as Cadboll wood which was planted about 1825, and the Beltan near the Moss.

Cadger and wife return with firewood from the country.

Fishwife bringing home firewood and a pail of milk

The only time coal arrived free was in 1917 when a coal boat, 'Elm,' was wrecked thirty yards from Port Benn a cheum, and Hilton people found it a godsend for years, and went out with creels after every storm to collect what had been washed up.

Housework was not a chore as minimum furniture meant little work, but cooking, baking, knitting and sewing were all fitted somehow into the day's schedule. If a housewife was also a fishwife another job came her way, preparing fish for sale 'on the country.' It was indeed 'all hands on deck' and a large family was a distinct advantage for this respect at least. Leisure was an almost unknown luxury for the wolf was never far from the door at any time.

During the Sacraments there was no fishing and therefore supplies of fish for the family had to be smoked beforehand to last the week, but stormy weather could be a time of great hardship and hunger.

Before the welfare state, the sick, the handicapped and widows were hard pressed indeed. In early days they depended on the charity of the church which in the early 19th century distributed from 3/6 to 5/- to the needy once a year in January. By the middle of that century the maximum annual allowance had gone up to 10/- in the parish of Fearn, with the insane and blind receiving 5/-. Around 1900 a widow with three children received 10/- monthly from the Parish Council, which rose by the time of the First World War to 5/- to 6- a week for widows with young children - 'not enough to feed a cat,' as one so succinctly put it. Widows on this meagre allowance sometimes earned a few small fish from the lines at redding time by singing Gaelic psalms or the 'Linnet' poem to people baiting, moving on from one group to another, literally singing for their supper.

Poverty and hardship brought out the best in people and there were good neighbours, helping each other in sickness and bereavement and showing great kindness to elderly folk in sharing fish, coal and anything else they could afford.

In addition to everything else, the housewife might have illness in the home to cope with. Smallpox was the worst disease for young people in the 18th century, killing in Tarbat seventy-five children in 1757, forty-six in 1768 and thirty-eight in 1791.6b. Little wonder then that in 1806-7, Rev. John

Munro, minister of Chapelhill Church, was urging vaccination [3] though Nigg Parish Council were still having trouble with vaccination defaulters a hundred years later. [21]

T .B. and King's Evil (scrofula) were common within the last hundred years and a kind of eczema which forced men to give up fishing. There was an outbreak of smallpox about 1870, scarlet fever was raging in 1875, and in 1879 and 1883 there was severe cases of whooping cough and measles. The school was closed for six weeks in 1884 because of sickness and deaths and in 1900 there was typhoid fever. Diptheria was common and with so many illnesses there were many deaths among young children.

In death and in childbirth everyone depended on the 'howdy' who was called upon at all hours and, tired as she might be, out she would go to give all the help she could. These women had an inborn medical skill and that there was very little spesis says much for their abilities. The appointment of District Nurses in the 1920's was a great boon, however, and families no longer depended on the howdy and home-made cures.

Outside jobs for womenfolk included those to do with the fishing like gathering bait and tourkens and cutting reeds for platachs, which are dealt with in the chapter on white fishing. But another outside job which involved all the family was the potato rig. Each household had a rig on nearby farms - Hilton, Old Shandwick, Easter Rarichie, Cadboll, Tullich, Balmuchy and so on - which they tended themselves after the farmer had ploughed the field. A rig was about 11 feet wide and ran the length of the field, maybe 100-120 yards. The figures for the rent of a rig vary widely from 7/- to £1. The family used a hawk to clean it of weeds and manured with seaware or guano bought from the farmers.

Gathering seaware was a big job and according to an article in the Highland Monthly 1889-90 it began on 'war day', usually the first of April. It was collected on the shore, dried and carried up to the rig in creels. It is said that some families had their own strip on the shore where they gathered their supplies, but in 1841 the villagers in Shandwick were not allowed to take drifted ware from the shore. This was the exclusive right of the Estate's farm tenants and it was only if small quantities came in that the villagers were allowed to collect it into heaps not less than 100 yards above high water and use it or sell it if they wished. [22] Many people cut sea ware from the rocks and used it so liberally that the farmers had splendid crops in those fields the next year! In some cases the fisherfolk apparently had the same ground continuously as the 1813 map shows 'Fishers' land' above Hilton where presumably potatoes were grown year after year. In autumn the potatoes were lifted and carried home in creels, everyone helping, and put into pits which were covered with bracken. Older children earned some money lifting potatoes on the farms - the rate for a twelve hour day sixty years ago was 1/-.

But by Saturday night all the chores for the week were finished. A double supply of fresh water was carried in, because carrying of water on the Sabbath was an offence rigorously punished by the church for many years. Boots and shoes were cleaned, shaving and beard-trimming done, and each child had head and body washed in the big zinc bath before the fire, with fresh clean clothes ready set out for Sunday morning. Sufficient food and fuel had to be available to last until Monday. A horse-drawn bread-van went round the villages on Saturday evening and all made sure of their supply even if it meant waiting until 10.0 p.m. for the van to arrive. With a home-baking of girdle scones and pancakes there was no fear of going short. Vegetables were cut and prepared for the next day. A pot of Scotch broth followed by meat and potatoes was a typical Sunday dinner with the left-overs, if any, used on Monday.

On Sunday, the parents and children of school age walked to church in Sunday best. Children did not play outside that day. After dinner the parents rested although those belonging to the Free Church might go to the 'lundaith' (reading) when the elder read at the meeting house. The children attended an non-denominational Sunday school at 4.00 p.m. run by Mr. Watt and later by Mr. Walter Balfour and some of the elders. At 6.00 p.m. all but the oldest, the youngest and the sick attended the evening services at the meeting house in Park or at Hilton School, where until recent times the Church of Scotland, United Free Church and Free Church held services each Sunday on a rota system. Occasionally in summer there were outdoor services in the field behind Hilton and later in front of Hilton School.

Before bedtime one important duty remained. This was family worship, 'taking the Books'. Every household followed this custom and the solemn strains of psalm tunes - for example, Covenanters, Coleshill or Balerma - rising and falling on the Sabbath calm were like a benison on the villages, and very moving. God had provided them with their daily bread, had keep them from the perils of the sea, and they did not forget to give thanks and seek his care for another week. In some homes the Books were taken each night in that way but not in all. Weeknight prayer meetings were held in various houses, with an elder 'keeping the meeting' and those attending bringing their own stools. Grace was always said before meals with the eldest man present given the right to say it.

The rest provided by Sunday was very welcome even if it did mean catching up on Monday morning with the Sunday dishes which were always left unwashed in the dresser until then. Commander Wolfe-Murray was a familiar figure. He was a keen evangelist who rode out regularly from Tain on a very high bicycle. He gathered a crowd by singing a chorus in his fine, powerful voice, then preached a short sermon and afterwards sat with the children teaching them choruses.

There were various revival movements when missionaries visited the villages, preaching to big crowds and making them converts. The last of these was when Young and MacKee came out about 1920.

Every Thursday evening, except in the summer, Rev. George Mackay held a Bible Class for post-Sunday School children in the Free Church meeting house. He took this opportunity to coach them, in collaboration with Mr. Watt at school, for the Shorter Catechism section of the welfare of Youth examinations.

Chapter 15 - The Cholera Epidemic

The information on the cholera epidemic of 1832 comes mainly from the 'Inverness Courier' and 'Church Chronicles of Nigg.'

The disease broke out in India in 1826, gradually spreading westwards until by 1832 it had reached France and England. It moved up to the south of Scotland and was brought north. to Helmsdale about July of that year by a boat from Prestonpans during the herring fishing.

It spread very quickly through fishing communities on the east coast and in the Seaboard villages reached its climax in the third week of August, after which it died down equally quickly.

The first case was in Shandwick where a fisherman died by 2nd August. By the 8th several cases had appeared in Hilton and through they were not often fatal at that stage the 'Courier' reported, 'So great is the terror attendant upon the pestilence that the people can hardly be persuaded to bury those who die of it. A number of Chelsea-out-pensioners have been sworn in as constables to guard the inlets to the burgh of Tain with instructions not to admit a single person from the infected districts.' In other words a 'cordon sanitaire' was thrown round the infected areas and people were cooped up in their respective villages.

On 15th August the 'Courier' said of Hilton, 'The pestilence still rages here but in a comparatively mild manner. During the last week there were a good many cases but the deaths were not numerous. A few cases still remain.' But by the following week the picture had changed completely and the newspaper reported, 'The disease here has assumed a very serious aspect. On the 17th, twenty-one cases occurred and on the 18th, five deaths.' During the few days up to 20th August, twenty-one people died in Hilton and twenty others had little hope of recovery out of a total there of fifty-eight families. On the 22nd, seven were buried and five on the 23rd, by which time a total of twenty-seven had died there.

The pattern was the same in Balintore - seven died there on the 19th with many new cases. It was at its height on Wednesday 22nd when fifteen people died and many others caught it; at this point some of the people took to the fields and put up tents for themselves there to escape the infection. The worst was past however and on the 24th only four died. By the 27th with one death, two new cases and ten patients recovering things were on the mend.

In Shandwick three people died on the 19th and the 'Courier' reported that there had been two cases on the 22nd both of whom were recovering. On 29th August the disease was dying out and the newspaper report was able to say, 'Accounts from here are still favourable.'

Shandwick seems to have got off more lightly than Hilton and Balintore which may be due to the fact that it came under the Nigg Board of Health. Being aware of the gradual progress of cholera through Europe and into Britain, Nigg's Board of Health appointed inspectors at least eight months before the illness arrived. Their first meeting on 10th January 1832 was to hear their inspector's reports on the cleanliness and health of the district. On 3ist March, four months before the outbreak, they decided to buy medicines and instruct the inspectors in their use and they also appointed a medical man.

When the first suspected case died in Shandwick, Nigg Kirk Session acted quickly. They petitioned several J.Ps to prevent his burial in Nigg Churchyard lest carrying an infected body through the countryside might spread the infection. As the mortcloth had been used for this man's coffin it was 'quarantined' for fourteen days as a precaution and its use for cholera victims was forbidden.

Nigg Board of Health met in August and made several sound arrangements. Where a death occurred they decreed that the house had to be fumigated, the furniture washed and the clothing burnt. To save carrying corpses long distances they arranged that cholera victims from the Shandwick end of the parish should be interred at the old burying-ground at Clach Caraidh. Constables were to be sworn in for each end of the parish to watch 'the present seat of the disease where there are two patients who are to be completely isolated,' for which the constables were to be paid 6d. per night for extra duty. In spite of all these precautions cholera is said to have been very severe in Nigg, especially at Culnald and Nigg Ferry, but there is no record of the total number of deaths. In Shandwick at least it appears that the efforts of the Board of Health met with success.

There must have been some overlapping of medical help in Shandwick and Balintore as the 'Courier' reported on 15th August that Charles Ross, a very intelligent local man, was appointed to attend the sick in both villages. (Could he have been one of Nigg Board's inspectors, trained in the use of medicines?) His treatment was simple but successful and the people were readier to accept his prescriptions than those of a 'regularly bred physician' which was just! as well as it was exceedingly difficult to find doctors willing to attend cholera patients.

A letter to the 'Courier' dated 20th August complained that no medical help was available apart from two visits by Dr. Munro Tain on the 9th and 11th August before the disease really reached its peak. Out of four doctors in Tain only one, Dr. Macandie, would attend cholera cases, and he was so anxious to help that when it broke out in Portmahomack he went and stayed there so as to be on the spot. Mr. Murray, a banker in Tain, made every effort to get a doctor and finally sent for Dr. John Stewart of Inverness. Shortly afterwards, the Government, at the request of Mr. Macleod of Cadboll, sent a Dr. Evans to look after the patients in Portmahomack, Hilton, Balintore and Shandwick, but as this was in late August the disease was abating and he found Dr. Stewart's patients in a fair way.

With this lack of medical care it is little wonder that the letterwriter to the 'Courier' went on to reprimand those responsible: 'The sufferings of the poor people at these villages alluded to are most heart-rending and can only be alleviated by a more efficient discharge of their duty by the Board of Health established at Fearn.'

There is no final total of the cholera victims in the villages but adding up those given in the 'Courier' there were at lest fifty-seven, and probably more. Even so they escaped more lightly than other places - half the population of Inver died and a fifth of those in Portmahomack. According to Hugh Miller the disease took a worse form in Easter Ross than in any other part of Great Britain.

As already said the cholera died down quickly and one reason for this is attributed to the courage of two men who saw it as a cloud, caught it in a sheet and buried it between a hillock and the sea, just west of the Big Yard. The same thing is said to have happened in Nigg, where the cholera was buried in the churchyard and the 'Cholera Stone' covering it may still be seen.

It is thought that the burial place for cholera victims from the Hilton area was at Cadbollmount and that their gravestones could be seen within living memory, but they have now been covered up.

Chapter 16 - Home Medicine

With medical help neither free nor easy to get, the villagers depended on themselves and each other in illness. Many people were diffident to admit to being blood-stoppers, pain-curers and the like, but at a time when there was no professional help it was a merciful Providence that gave certain people these remarkable skills.

Blood-stoppers were found in the villages certainly as late as 1925 - indeed, there is said to be one still who unfortunately no longer practises the art. Most of them could work without visiting the patient. They might kneel down where they were or go outside for a while and then return to say that the bleeding had stopped, which it always had. A few came to the patient and in these cases it is suggested that they might have used cobwebs which act as a haemostat when applied to bleeding. It is thought that blood-stoppers used a spell which was a verse of Scripture containing pronouns which were replaced with the victim's name, but of course this is not known for a fact. Whatever it was, the power was handed on from man to woman and vice versa and now all have died with the secret, except possibly one.

Others had the power to cure strained backs by walking on them, a primitive form of massage, and this ability belonged to those born feet first or with a cowl.

Bone-setters were naturally also in demand. Walter Munro the Wheeler, a cartwright-joiner at North Balmuchy, was one; John Matheson, a blacksmith at Wester Rarichie, may have been another. There was one who lived near Evanton but a visit to him meant a train journey with a walk to and from the station at either end, possibly carrying a child. Pain could even be cured by certain people, but now that modern medicine has taken over these remarkable powers have gone.

A common disease was King's Evil (scrofula), a form of tuberculosis affecting the neck. It was prevalent even into this century and one cure for it involved taking the patient to a corpse when the dead hand was laid on the affected part. Ivy leaves could also be applied and a poultice of hot boiled turnips was really effective though bursting glands might cause bad scarring.

A cure for TB which took place in living memory was the burying alive at midnight of a black cockerel by the seventh son of a seventh son. Extraordinary though it sounds it cured the victim. Powdered deer horn was also administered for TB.

An attempt to cure a mentally-ill girl about a hundred years ago again involved the use of a cockerel. It was bound and buried alive under the hearth stone of the house while a psalm was read and a prayer offered up for her cure. There is no record of the result but it is an interesting example of the combination of religion and superstition.

Many homely remedies were used. Singing over the patient, for instance the minister singing psalms, was considered efficacious and, of course, red flannel was thought to be invaluable. Flaked hard soap mixed with sugar made a good poultice for drawing poison and cabbage bree was good for skin complaints. A crushed plantain leaf would heal a cut if applied firmly and left to peel off itself. Dockens soothed sore feet and nettle stings, while brown paper was applied to a bad chest and cold tea to a sore eye.

Various natural oils and fats were used for rheumatism. Seals were sometimes skinned and their fat rendered down for this purpose; and the conger eel provides a small amount of tripe-like flesh

which was melted near the fire in earthenware jars and when well rubbed in gave great relief. These oils and fats were good for sprains too - the only trouble with them was the appalling smell.

There was a lot of whooping-cough, as the school log book shows, and one cure for it was carrying the patient across running water. In Hilton this meant going up to an iron gate behind Denoon's shop, over running water, up to the ice-house and back - and it worked!

Many forms of illness were attributed to the Evil Eye though in all probability they were completely natural. Certain people were thought to have this power and if they were suspected of putting the bad eye on someone an antidote was to go to the Well of Health in Shandwick, or to other wells, for waters, speaking to no-one going or returning. The water was sometimes held in a wooden ladle, but not always, to be 'silvered' with a silver coin, a wedding ring and perhaps copper. This water was then used to bath the patient, or was drunk by him or sprinkled over him. Fire was also used to ward off the Evil Eye. Hot ashes were thrown after anyone thought to have put on the Eye or a curse, but if anyone thought that the eye was in process concerned.

Wise women, and men too, prepared remedies by special request and the tinker women who visited the villages now and then were particularly skilled at these cures. A wise woman performed a cure by putting on a garter at the sick-bed. When she heard that the patient was getting better, she removed the garter knowing that it had done its work. Garters were not only used to cure; they were used here and throughout Scotland to induce illness as well, and in that case nothing was so effective as to say that the patient was better, whether true or not. The chances were that the garter would be removed and then the patient had a chance to recover.

Warts must have been very common as there were a variety of cures. The milk from spurge and scelag (charlock) was rubbed on with good effect, and silk thread could be tied round them till they came off. Meat was sometimes rubbed on the wart and then buried, and as it decayed so did the wart. Rubbing with a snail or a fasting spittle (first saliva of the morning) was effective, and there was an intriguing cure involving saying a certain name, turning round three times and rubbing the sole of the boot!

A purely local wart cure belonged to Hilton and they kept it to themselves. There is a stone alongside the chapel there, with a hollow in the top, known as the Wart Wellie. The water which gathers in the hollow was firmly believed to cure warts when rubbed on them. Considering that warts are said to mean riches it is surprising that everyone was so anxious to be rid of them, except for one child who used to rub pigs' blood from the butcher's on to her hands in the hope that she would get them!

Chapter 17 - Customs

Among the most interesting customs are those to do with marriage, always an opportunity for great festivity in the fishing villages. There were special seasons when weddings were more frequent than others. At the end of the herring fishing, for example, when the men and girls returns richer or poorer according to their luck during the season, they became engaged and as many as four or five weddings might take place in a week. This came to an end with the First World War.

As soon as there was a young man in the offing the girl began to fill her bottom drawer so that by the time of the wedding she had clothes, blankets and ornaments. Simple household utensils came as gifts because engagements were the concern of everyone in the village and nearly all contributed to the wedding feast and gave a gift as well.

5 New Street
Shandwick
07th September 1899.

There is a Contract of marriage between the designed parties Viz Nicholas Ross residing at 9 Main Street Balintore and Margaret Morrison residing at 18 New St. Shandwick. Any of the said named parties failing to implement the said Contract will be liable to a penalty of a Hundred Marks Scott.

N Ross

A G Ross Margaret Morrison

Ina Morrison

Witnesses

Marriage Contract, 1899

News of the engagement went round immediately. The first requirement was the signing of the marriage contract in the presence of an elder. This was really an engagement contract and failure to implement it without good reason meant a fine payable to the Church.

The contract of 1899 is interesting not only for itself but also for its use of the Scots merk as a possible fine, showing that by this time the contract was purely formal as the merk officially went out of use on the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. The contract was also called the 'coonat', a form of the word 'covenant'.

During the time when the wedding banns were read in church on three successive Sundays, people rubbed shoulders with the young couple, rather like modern birthday bumps.

The feet-washing ceremony was held the night before the wedding when relatives and friends of both bride and groom met in one or other of their homes and celebrated the forthcoming wedding. In Shandwick the Gaelic name 'reiteach' was used for this ceremony into this century. In certain cases it is said that contract and reiteach were all one but an old lady confirms that they were two separate occasions. The bride's feet were washed and the young man had to submit to having his feet washed with soot, blacklead and even tar. Some of these practices are being carried on to this day.

Invitations were delivered by word of mouth and when the great day came the bride's party assembled at her house, the groom's at his. They met and walked in a joint procession to the church, six or seven couples arm in arm, sometimes led by a piper and almost certainly accompanied by hordes of children. On leaving home the bride or her family scattered coppers for which there was a great scramble by the children, a practice which occurred in Shandwick very recently. On the way home from church the young couple again threw coins and sweets to the children. The sweet-throwing was called 'scootching' and the sweets were nearly always 'Conversations' - lozenges of various shapes and colours inscribed with tender messages which helped the shy young people to do without words.

On her return from church the bride stood at the door of her parents' home while her mother poured over her head a napkin full of small pieces of bread, cheese, cake and oatcake, a symbolic wishing of plenty for her. Salt was sometimes thrown over bride and groom, both these customs occurring in Shandwick till about 1916.

Before receptions in hotels became the fashion, the wedding feast was at the bride's home. There was broth, meat or fowls with potatoes, a dumpling with fruit in it, tea, and of course drams, dancing and singing. As the wedding was an event when youth and age shared in the enjoyment, those older people who has not been especially invited to the feast and the children who had to be left out of the list of guests, had a special feast for themselves in the evening or next day. Singing and dancing to the music of fiddle, melodeon and pipes whirled the hours away.

The first boat coming into harbour on the day of a wedding sailed as near inshore as was safe, hoisted a flag, and then the crew came ashore to get a dram from the wedding party, a custom that only went out when the white fishing ceased.

There were usually certain people who liked to make up the bridal bed. When the bride had undressed and got into her nightdress she kept on one black stocking with half-a-crown in the toe and, kneeling on the bed facing the wall, she threw it over her left shoulder. Whoever caught it would be the next to marry. Everyone had the freedom of the house and prepared it for the young couple with the result that strange things happened at the wrong moment, like the chaff tick collapsing as they got into bed or bells clanging from below it. If the young couple could manage to slip away in the dark to where they meant to spend the night so much the better for them as there were no honeymoons in those days.

Some weddings went on for days. One such began in Balintore with the wedding feast, then the procession marched to Hilton for Saturday, Sunday and Monday, and all marched back to Balintore on Tuesday, all in excellent spirits of one kind of another. After all this there followed the 'kirkin" - the first visit to church of the young couple, followed by a meal and usually a fairly convivial time, which custom also continued into this century.

Marriages were followed by births and here too there were special customs and requirements. When the babies were small it was common to sew a silver threepenny bit into the special little garment they wore to keep their tummies in. Like the silvered water already mentioned this gave protection to the little one. Visitors to the baby were offered bread, cheese, tea and perhaps a dram. A rabbit skin worn on the mother's chest at weaning time was advised by tinker women.

The baby was carried for baptism to the church, meeting house or even to an outdoor service unless it or the mother was ill when theservice would be performed at home. Little as they had to spare, everyone liked to slip a silver coin to a baby on its way to the service. Till about sixty years ago all the girls used to put a pin in the baby's dress which they collected afterwards and stuck in a piece of cloth, to be placed under their pillows to make them dream of their sweethearts. If a mother died in, or as a result of, childbirth, then the baby was baptized over the coffin, which meant that its father stood on one side of the coffin holding the baby while the minister stood on the other side. Ministers used to like to give their name to the first baby they baptized in a new charge.

Because a baby born with a cowl was said to be safe from drowning the cowl itself was carefully preserved, possibly in a vase on the mantelpiece, and even though people might offer to buy it to protect themselves no-one would part with something so precious. And as new lives came to the villages, others went from them. It was said that life departed on the outgoing tide and if the tide was missed then the dying person had to wait for the next one. Then windows and doors were opened to let the spirit depart, and the bed and table shrouded with special white sheets used only for funerals. Women often prepared long in advance the special white night dress which was to be their winding-sheet. The corpse lay on the bed, perhaps with a small dish of salt placed upon it, usually in the living room, and everyone came to pay their last respects. It was usual to touch a corpse with the left hand so as not to dream of them. The body was never left alone and the lykewake, or constant watch over the dead, continued from the time of death until the funeral. Great hospitality was shown to the visitors so that sometimes lykewakes became occasions of merrymaking, as church records show.

No-one remembers the linen mortcloch being used to cover coffins but records show that the parish mortcloth was being hired in the villages at 2/6d. a time about 1800-10 5 and later still in Shandwick. [30] The proceeds from the hire contributed to poor relief in the parish. It was no longer used when it became usual to have better-made coffins, black for adults and white for babies and children.

Before Balintore cemetery was opened about 1885, and enlarged about 1903 and again in 1951, burials took place at Nigg Old Churchyard and at Fearn Abbey. The coffin was carried the whole way there and because every available man was needed for this task all local boats were beached for funerals. There were regular stopping places on the way for rest and refreshment, but frequent changes of bearers occurred all along the route. Till within eighty years or so unbaptized infants were buried beside Shandwick Stone and near Hilton chapel.

Occasionally bread, cheese and whisky were offered to the funeral party at the churchyard gate. Meanwhile at home a message was sent to the women living in the street to come for a drink of whisky or port, which they might refuse if they wished. The men had their dram when they returned, followed usually by a meal.

Like the mortcloth, no-one remembers the mort bell being rung to announce funerals but it appears in the table of fees which Session Clerks and Church Officers in this Synod were allowed to charge in 1808: Digging a grave and bell for an adult 3/-; the same for a person under twelve years 1/6d.; marriage fees were 5/- or 3/- baptism cost 1/-. These latter fees were divided between the parish; baptism cost 1/-. These latter fees were divided between the Session Clerk and the Church Officer in the proportion of two to one.

After the Reformation the old festivals of the church were discouraged so that Christmas Day was not celebrated [24] and school did not close until the New Year. 1891 was the first year it closed for a week's Christmas and New Year holidays, starting on December 25th. Old New Year's Day (January 12th) was referred to as 'New Year (Old Style)' in the school log book, and it was kept in Hilton within the last seventy to eighty years. The children had a school holiday that day too until 1892.

The children's stockings were hung up on Hogmanay and the contents enjoyed the following morning, usually an apple and an orange, a slice of cake, and perhaps a pink sugar pig. If at all possible there was a penny in the toe, but visitors on that day generally gave pennies to the children so that they were able to enjoy New Year's Day with something in their pockets to spend at the 'wee shoppies' which were never closed.

The New Year holiday was the highlight of the year. People worked hard from Monday to Saturday all the year round, interrupted only by the Sacrament respite and the occasional funeral, so that a break at the New Year meant a grand celebration and because whisky was cheap it was grand indeed. Heavy drinking went on, a form of escapism sometimes, an added enjoyment at other times, depending on prevailing economic circumstances. The first-footer was heartily welcomed if he was a dark man but not so much so if red-headed or a woman. He invariably carried his bottle and drams went round and round. Heads went round and round also and footsteps staggered as the day advanced until sweet oblivion descended, usually in some other house than one's own.

The traditional New Year breakfast dish consisted of fresh haddocks, usually boiled, with a dram for the grown-ups and lemonade or fruit wine for the children. The fish was part of the catch of the previous day when each man got his share. One was never sure whether or not the New Year haddie would be forthcoming if the weather was stormy, which made it all the more welcome when it did appear on the table.

Hallowe'en was a special night when bonfires were lit and many ingenious pranks played. Water barrels at the corners of houses were sure to be over-turned, creels with baited lines were taken off the croicks and set on the ground, the baited lines were sometimes ravelled, door snecks were tied together, and often a divot was placed on the top of a chimney with imaginable results for the inmates seated round the fire.

Young people dressed up to go and visit neighbours' houses but these' 'guisers' gave no entertainment and were given nothing as they went round. There was little or nothing to give. On dark nights the turtnip lantern stood in good stead and was seen to advantage if there was no wind.

There was a special Hallowe'en game - the youngsters tied a cabbage or a turnip on a string and swung it in the doorways. When the householder stooped to catch it, it was quickly pulled away and out and off ran the guisers, enjoying the fun. Anyone well up in the art of catching the turnip or cabbage got behind the door and slammed it at the right moment. It then belonged to them and the laugh was on the other side! At home this was a night when they looked for marriage omens, putting two hazelnuts in the fire. If they jumped apart this was a bad sign for matrimony but if they remained together all was well.

Chapter 18 - Folklore

Folklore is the study of ancient beliefs and customs which have survived till modern times, and many of the folk customs in the Seaboard villages are found in fishing communities all round Britain and abroad.

In the good old days belief in fairies was .common, but there are still people who declare that they have seen the little people in various places and in various forms. Some of them appeared as young girls, skipping and dancing in coloured finery till they disappeared into a gully near Wester Rarichie; others were seen near the Well of Health and some are also said to dance round the fairy ring at Hilton. One lot were the size of whisky bottles and carried green umbrellas - and may perhaps be attributable to the contents of the bottles!

Legend has it that there is a pot of gold buried under the well below Cadboll. People often dig for it in spite of the fact that whoever finds it will die within three days.

There is a saying, 'A hairy man's a happy man, a hairy wife's a witch'. Witches were said to appear as hares and could always be shot with a silver sixpence, and an old lady remembers that when her great-grandfather shot a hare in the eye, the woman suspected of being a witch had to stay in bed for several months afterwards with a bad eye. Some people had the power of second sight and could foretell death by seeing phantom funerals.

Customs associated with fishing were legion. It was unlucky to mention certain words such as salmon, rabbit, hare and pig or to refer to a minister while at sea. No-one liked to take a minister out in a boat or to meet one on the way to sea - the antidote was to step off the road and stay off it all the way to the boat. It is a strange fact that even in deeply religious seafaring communities there is an ancient and almost universal dislike of meeting a clergyman on the way to the boats or near to them. [26] A fisherman would neither sing nor whistle at sea as either would call up the wind, but they could whistle for wind if becalmed and might even stick a knife in the mast to call it up. No-one has heard of wise women knotting cords to bring wind although this was done in Portmahomack. [26] Rather than say the word 'Salmon' fishermen said 'pink fish' or 'red one', and salmon fishers said 'twelve and one' rather than 'thirteen'.

Fishermen never liked to meet women on the way to the boats as this meant that they would have no luck, but there were certain women, and men too, who were considered so very unlucky that the fishermen turned back for the day if they met them. It was worst of all to meet such people on a Monday, but it was essential to speak to them and preferably to be the first to speak.

Fishermen did' not like to see dead objects near anything to do with fishing, such as crates of rabbits at the station when sending off salmon, nor did they like to see cripples nor people with flat feet. Luck was a precious commodity and everyone took precautions against giving their luck away. They never liked to give away anything at all on a Monday lest their luck went too. Generally speaking, on land it was better to give rather than to lend, but this did not apply at sea. Sometimes a crew which had caught little might ask for something from a crew which had done well in order to get their luck, but if they asked for a fill of tobacco, for instance, they would be lent a pipe instead which had to be returned, bringing the luck back with it. It was unlucky to give a light, and especially so on a Monday morning, so if anyone found themselves in the position of having to give a match they first of all broke the end of it. Fishing luck might be induced by pouring water back

and forth from tub to tub. If someone came in during the setting up of a line it was usual to ask them to add a few hooks and to wish luck to the line, and when baiting it was lucky to spit on the bait. But if 'certain people' came in during baiting the end of the line was put in the fire to ward off their evil effect. Old people used to say that it was unlucky to save anyone from drowning as the sea must have its victims, but nevertheless they did save them. People spat on new boots - in fact, they spat on everything, and they liked to put a coin into a new purse and in the pocket of a new pair of trousers as hansel, an inaugural gift.

Friday then as now was considered unlucky and no-one started a new job that day. No-one liked to see the new moon through glass, but when seeing it they liked to turn something in their pockets, preferably money. Others still bow to the new moon, for the good reason that their parents and grandparents always did so. It was unlucky to sleep with the moon on one's face, to give a sharp instrument lest it cut friendship, to sing before breakfast, to sew on buttons on Sunday and of course to fish on Sunday.

Horseshoes are everywhere regarded as lucky and in the villages they were too. They might be outside the door or nailed to a mast or to the bow of a coble. Buckie shells were often kept on the hearth or on the mantelpiece. Bread and fish bones were never burned but the saying, 'Keep hair, keep care' meant that hair was always burned. Rowan trees had a place in people's beliefs. They kept evil from any house near which they grew so everyone liked to have a rowan in sight of the door. One old lady remembers a branch of rowan being pushed through the sneck of the door at either Hallowe'en or the New Year. But elder trees were another matter - no-one dared fall asleep under them lest they never re-awaken.

A lump of coal was considered lucky if carried into a house by a first-footer at New Year, and might be given in a bucket as a wedding present. It was usual to leave a fire burning and the house clean for people coming into a house after one left it, but it was unlucky to carry salt from one house to another, or to borrow it.

Boats were always turned clockwise and many people like to have their ornaments, such as jugs and teapots, pointing to the right. Stirring clockwise is usual too and some people like to put on the right sock and shoe first.

Gulls are considered lucky because they clean up the shore and because, as the 'Ocean Eagle', they show that land is near. No-one would kill a gull though the children used to catch them with baited hooks and keep them. No-one sailed in a boat if they saw a rat leaving it, nor would they kill a rat in case it happened to be off their own boat. People liked to see geese flying north, presumably because it indicated that spring was at hand, but it was unlucky to hear the first cuckoo of the year on an empty stomach or if it cuckooed less than five times.

People used to drop pennies into a little hollow just west of Ross Crescent, Balintore, which was always thought to be somewhat eerie - a form of propitiation.

Colour has always had a place in folklore and it has been traditional to paint salmon boats blue, although Patersons' confound this by painting theirs grey! Fishing boats were usually bright blue, white and black, and very occasionally green, though green is generally not considered to be a lucky colour.

One man living this century maintained firmly, in spite of much scoffing, that he had seen a mermaid. Various phenomena were believed to indicate the weather - the Merry Dancers (Aurora

Borealis) meant wind, and a ring round the moon meant that a gale would soon blow up from the direction where the ring was broken. A 'cock-eyed moon', one with a greenish-yellow halo, was a sure sign of stormy weather.

The customs, beliefs and cures in this chapter and those on Home Medicine and Customs have all been perpetuated by folk memory although the reasons for them have been forgotten long ago. The various uses of fire, water, metal, salt, right-hand turns, spitting and so on were all based on ancient reasons which make them much more understandable.

For instance, when people progressed from using stone and wooden tools to using metal, they naturally thought that metals were very powerful and wonderful substances, and hence they believed that they could produce many miracles if properly magnetized. [26] Metals were used in several cures like 'silvered water'. Iron appears in the phrase 'Cold Iron' used to ward off evil and also in the horse-shoe, which was doubly effective as it combined iron and the shape of the crescent moon. [26] Naturally the moon which gave light at night was as wonderful as the sun to early man. Saliva was the very centre of soul power and the essence of oneself [26] and therefore gave powerful protection.

Salt was a highly valued commodity with a saving and preserving quality and blessed salt has been used for liturgical purposes from very early times to keep away evil spirits. [26] Fire is a religious symbol, enlightening and warming humanity, with the power to purge air, earth and sea of unclean and hostile influences. [26] Throwing of coins was a form of propitiation and the offering of bread, cheese and whisky was quasi-sacramental. [26] Where there was a spring or a well with water bubbling forth there was life, and where there was life there was a spirit28 and thus running water was venerated because of the impression of power within it. [24] So strong was this veneration that early Christian missionaries dedicated special wells to saints [24] and perhaps St. Cormac's well was one such. The right-hand turn, the sunwise movement, is the good way; the contrary movement is the way of evil. [28]

Chapter 19 - Education

In spite of an Act passed in 1646 requiring heritors (land-owners) to provide schools in their parishes, a. report on Easter Ross in 1717 said, '. . . the people are illiterate and speak nothing but Irish. [29] By this time, however, the parish of Fearn had a legal school and another was needed at Meikle Allan, but nothing was said about the villages. [29] In 1841 the New Statistical Account said of Fearn, 'There are two schools in the parish but two more are required, one at Hilton and one at Wester Geanies.'

After 1841 what is generally thought to have been a Free Church School was founded in Hilton. It was adjacent to the present Free Church meeting-house, with the schoolroom where the modern meeting house now is and the schoolmaster living in the west end. The dual purpose of education and religion in these Free Church schools ceased when compulsory education was introduced by the Education Act of 1872, but it seems likely however that this little school continued to be used under the Act for a few years, as in 1876 the school log says, 'Our school room too small for so many children, and it was only in the following year that Hilton Public School, as it was then called, was formally opened by the School Board.

Hilton Public School, pre 1960 (now demolished)

Hilton Public School, opened 1877, pre 1960 (now demolished)

The new school up on the hill had three class-rooms - a large infant room 56 feet long and two smaller ones. The pupils-teachers had a small back-room which later on became the staff-room. The roll jumped from sixty-five in the little school under Mr. William Macdonald and a female assistant in 1876 to two hundred and forty in the new school in 1877 with a staff of a headmaster, Mr. Alex. Mackenzie, Mr. Macdonald as assistant master, a sewing mistress and a monitor. The monitors were pupil-teachers who, on reaching school-leaving age, stayed on to do a four-year apprenticeship, taking exams in Tain each year to qualify for an entrance certificate to
Training College.

From time to time in this record mention has been made of the help given by the children at field work and in the daily fishing activities. How did this affect their schooling? From the school log book one learns that the bane of the teacher's life was absenteeism. It was the cri du coeur of the headmaster year after year and with good reason, as some children were at field work the whole time from April to the New Year. No wonder one of the school inspectors referred to a 'formidable amount of absenteeism, probably without
parallel in that inspection district. [33]

The first entry in the log book in May 1875 says that attendance was very irregular for the following reasons - Fearn mid-summer market, barking the nets, girls being seen off to the herring fishing and children gathering whelks for the Fearn market. In January 1876 the entry reads, 'The irregular attendance of the children of this place is very disheartening. In stormy weather they pour in and when the weather is good they stay away.' This was particularly worrying because it meant that the school grant might be cut down.

Shandwick, being in the parish of Nigg, should have sent its pupils to Chapelhill School but the way was doubtless much too long for little feet to travel so they came to Hilton instead, forty-two of them in 1886. Their attendance was so irregular that year that Nigg School Board were asked to co-operate in seeing that it improved, even if prosecution was the only answer. The 'vigorous compulsory measures' of Nigg School Board greatly improved the situation the following year, but from then on the Compulsory Officer, or Default Officer, seems to have been kept pretty busy in all three villages and prosecutions were fairly common. [33]

To start with the annual holidays consisted of about a month's 'Harvest play' for the whole of August, or partly August and partly September, plus a few days at the New Year and a few more for the Old New Year. It was because the children's help was vital to so many jobs at home that they simply played truant when necessary and in 1890 the school began to accept this fact and closed for a few days in April for gathering seaware and planting potatoes, and closed again in October for nine days for potato-lifting, in addition to the normal New year and summer holidays.

In 1891 they altered the holidays completely to suit the people's needs - the summer holiday was done away with entirely and school closed for three weeks in April and a month in October, with a few days at the New Year. Thus the modern Easter holiday developed when the school authorities legalized the children's unofficial departure for potato-planting. The autumn tattie-holiday continued until recently and it was not long before the summer holiday returned too.

The children's progress was retarded not only by absenteeism but by the frequently official closures of the school as well. The half-yearly Communion meant a week off school and it might be closed for as much as six to seven weeks at a time for illness. The log also shows that it was closed for a day at a time so that the master might go to a funeral, to allow the teachers to sign a call to a minister, for inductions, bad weather and the visit of the Moderator of the General Assembly.

In 1878 Mr. Macdonald left to go to Elphin School and Mr. Mackenzie again took charge, to be succeeded in 1888 by Mr. J. Watt, M.A., who married one of the teachers, Miss Macdonald, in 1893, and served for a period of forty years before retiring in 1927. He came from Aberdeenshire and had no Gaelic which was unfortunate as that language was the dominant one of the Seaboard. In accordance with official policy at the time he discouraged its use among the scholars. Gaelic proved a stumbling-block in the class-room as one can understand, and in 1902 part of the school inspector's report for that session said, 'The bilingual difficulty (which affects children from the villages) has been taken into account when awarding the grant.'

School photograph c. 1920 with Mr J. Watt, Headmaster

School photograph c.1920 with Mr J Watt, Headmaster

With the help of the Default Officer, the introduction in 1889 of prizes for attendance and after a long struggle against indifference, Mr. Watt at last began to imbue parents and pupils alike with a sense of importance of book learning and the school attendance gradually improved. The Hilton children now always came up the school brae in good time, the Balintore pupils with a slightly longer road via the churchyard arrived later, while those from Shandwick came in later still to the constant exasperation of the teachers, whose only consolation was that they were better late than never.

Excerpts from the schools inspectors' reports making interesting reading and emphasize the difficulties experienced by the teachers. One was over-crowding - in 1899 an inspector found 129 children in a room 33 feet by 16 feet. Another was the lack of text and copy books - 'The difficulty of getting parents to supply books at all and the fact that books are in some instances beyond the capacity of the children necessarily retard progress.' They did at least have slates (which were used until the 1930's) and progress was made so that the report of 1890 said, 'On the whole the school is in a hopeful condition and under the hardworking and painstaking Headmaster it can hardly fail to

make further improvement.' This it did and two years later the inspector reported, 'The school is conducted with exceptional ability and the results are in all circumstances remarkably good. Higher grant recommended. [33]

The natural ability of many of the boys and girls began to show and Hilton, 'the school on the hill,' acquired a reputation for good work under Mr. Watt, who believed in the salutary 'pandy' when necessary. Satisfactory pupils earned a handsome Certificate of Merit from the Scotch Education Department. One example from 1898 still exists, beautifully bound in green leather, tooled in gold, written in copper-plate and signed by Mr. Watt.

Merit Certificate 1920.

During this time a new wing was added and the roll increased until by 1914 there were five qualified assistant teachers besides the headmaster. A number of pupils continued their education at Invergordon Academy. After the First World War higher education came within the reach of more and more children and a bus service to and from Tain enabled parents to send them to the Academy there for three to six years. Many of these took their 'Highers' and after a college or university course entered the professions.

Mr. G. Crawford, M.A., succeeded Mr. Watt in 1927 and carried on the tradition which kept the school in the forefront in matters educational.

The school became the nerve centre of the Seaboard and a keen interest in it replaced the old indifference of the fisherfolk. Extra buildings were added and as the curriculum became enlarged so did the staff and in 1948 children from neighbouring primary schools were centred there as Junior Secondary pupils.

Today Hilton boasts a brand new school built more or less on the old site in 1960, incorporating primary and junior secondary departments. It is superbly fitted out with every modern piece of equipment and has a modern kitchen supplying school dinners not only to its own pupils but also to several nearby schools. This kitchen replaced that at Portmahomack which supplied these meals when the service was introduced after the Second World War.

The present headmaster, Mr. G. M. Ross, M.A., who succeeded Mr. Crawford in 1953, has a large qualified staff plus visiting teachers, and an excellent all-round education is given up to the age of fifteen to sixteen years. In the field of sport Hilton School keeps the flag flying and is very successful in inter-school events.

Brighter pupils still attend Tain Royal Academy for their senior secondary education and substantial Government grants now make it possible for larger numbers of more able scholars to go to University or Technical College.

Unfortunately, the population of the Seaboard has decreased quite considerably in the past four decades and that fact is clearly seen in a shrinking school population. A decision has been made this year (1971) to close the junior secondary department of the school so that it will then be a primary school. The junior secondary pupils will go to Tain Royal Academy with the senior secondary pupils. Whether the setting up of British Aluminium's smelter at Invergordon and all that that may mean in labour requirements will boost the population of the Seaboard villages and their neighbourhood, and hence the school, is as yet in the future.

Chapter 20 - Recreation

Generally speaking, there was not much time for play or amusement, yet with home-made pleasures, simple games and the visits of itinerant entertainers life doesn't seem to have been dull.

During the long dark winter evenings the ceilidh was very popular. Neighbours simply dropped in to each other's houses and passed the evening telling stories and singing, accompanied on the melodeon and fiddle, or even the trump (Jew's harp.)

The festive season was invariably the New Year, not Christmas, and then the children might be asked to a 'treat' or party at a neighbour's house. There was a splendid tea prepared for them and in the centre of the table was a steaming duff. Afterwards they sang and recited, played games and generally enjoyed themselves. It was a great thing to be asked to a treat.

Occasionally special events occurred - on July 23rd 1878, for example, all the school children were invited to a treat at Invergordon Castle by Mr. Macleod of Cadboll, and the following year there was a celebration of his son's majority. In 1887 all the children were entertained at a fete to mark Queen Victoria's Jubilee.

Throughout the year there were congregational soirees organized by the Church of Scotland, the United Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church at Chapelhill. These were highlights in the life of the people and very enjoyable. Speakers and singers were invited and the local choirs, who had held choir practices throughout the winter months under the able leadership of Mr. D. Mackenzie, Cadboll, sang hymns and anthems. There was always tea and 'baggies.' The Sunday School picnic, then as now, was also a red-letter day to the children.

But the outstanding event of the year for the children was the school picnic, held on the last day of the session on the site of the new cemetery. It coincided with the prize-giving. Every pupil was dressed in his or her best, the girls in their white lacy pinafores and a new hair ribbon complete with button-hole rose got from, in Hilton, an old man, Sandy Ally, who had a sweet-smelling rose bush at his cottage door in Braefoot. Boys wore their usual school outfit and footwear consisted of a pair of 'gutta perchas' (plimsolls) or simply bare feet, all the better for the races run during the proceedings.

Two huge urns were filled with water and heated on fires lit and tended by some of the teachers assisted by one or two 'mums' (Mrs. Duncan, Mrs. Ross and Miss Urquhart) from Balintore. Tea and baggies were handed round the classes seated on the grass. A programme of sports preceded the refreshments and the afternoon's activities ended with the prize-giving. Thereafter the V.I.Ps and the children dispersed, the latter in high glee because five weeks' holiday stretched into the dim and distant future before them. This picnic is said to have been provided annually from funds sent by a former pupil who had emigrated to South Africa.

During the long, warm days of the summer holiday bathing and paddling would occupy most of the free time of the younger generation, with the very small ones building sand castles on the beach. Singing games were many and in the school playground particularly there could be heard such rhymes as 'The Farmer's in his Dell,' 'Oranges and Lemons,' and others:

'Eetle, ottle, black bottle,
Eetle, ottle, out.
If you want a piece and jam
Just walk out.'
or
'Once in China there lived a great man,
His name was Chie-er-ac-chi-chi-cho . .'
or
'Scotty, Melotty, King of the Jews,
Sold his wife for a pair of shoes,
When the shoes began to wear
Scotty Melotty began to swear.'
or
'Queen, Queen Caroline,
Dipped her hair in turpentine.
Turpentine made it shine,
Queen, Queen Caroline.'
or a ring game:
'Water, water, water-flower,
Growing up so high,
We are all maidens, but we must all die,
Except (name of a girl) the fairest of us all.
She can dance and she can sing,
And she can turn her back to the ring.'

Apart from a ball there were few toys so games had the minimum of equipment. They played Port (Hop Scotch) on the school's wide door-step, or Spider's Web, drawn on a sandy part of an otherwise stony playground. They hopped neatly into the sections of the web and having completed the full round into the centre could write their initials in one 'box!' The next player had to hop over that space, made well-nigh impossible if the name was written near the centre where the 'boxes' were much smaller and narrower. The player with the largest number of initialled 'boxes' won. Boys often played marbles or raced each other on the roadway with girds or hoops.

Every Friday night the Little Templars, the junior branch of the I.O.G.T. (Independent Order of Good Templars) met in the school under the leadership of Mrs. Watt, the headmaster's wife. They paid 1d. to join and had talks and readings on the benefits of temperance and the horrors of drink. Those of the children who were office-bearers had a splendid regalia - red velvet collars edged with gold braid and I.O.G.T. written on them. The chaplain was supplied with a prayer book from which he or she read the appropriate passages, mainly Scripture texts e.g. 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.' The programme consisted of songs and recitations volunteered by the youthful audience. There was an adult branch as well, 'The Fishermen's Rescue Lodge,' which met regularly and every year a concert was held in the school under the auspices of the I.O.G.T.

After the First World War an army hut was obtained and sited opposite where the Free Presbyterian Church now stands in Hilton. Here very popular dances were held on Friday evenings. The 'band' consisted of a well-known fiddler, commonly known as Scotty. Some years later this dance hall was mysteriously burnt down and the weekly dance ended but young people regarded it as fun having to walk to Nigg, Arabella or Fearn to attend a dance. Before the First World War dances were often held in the old herring yard loft until it became too dangerous to use for such a purpose. A canteen

hut near the site of the Seaboard Memorial Hall was used after the Second World War for dances and whist drives till it was no longer safe.

Entertainment came to the school before the First World War in the person of the conjuror. When Happy Sandy's visit was announced every child made sure they had the necessary ld. given willingly by a parent out of the scanty store. His visit was an 'occasion' and the children were enthralled by his magic. Swallowing fire and pulling ribbons from his mouth never failed to fascinate his youthful audience and they were sorry to see him take his leave - with a heavy pouch of coppers - for the next school. The magic lantern, a simple slide projector as it really was, was very popular though poor in quality compared with its modern equivalent.

The ventriloquist with his talking dolls was another treat and the children sat in awe and wonder, convinced that the little figures could really talk and sing.

From time to time the villages were visited by travelling showmen of one kind of another. The dancing bear and his master always gathered a crowd. The scissors-grinder and his monkey were hailed with delight as the antics of the dressed-up animal never failed to fascinate young and old. When the monkey went round using his red pill-box cap as a collecting box the pennies rained in and everybody was happy.

Melodeon Nell, or Nellie the Togles, as she was often called, came around regularly. She attempted to sing, play and dance, none of which she could do well and she was regarded with pity by the villagers who gave her a few coppers for her pains.

A more accomplished figure than the aforementioned one was Tipperary, or Paddy as he was also called, being Irish. He was dressed in national costume - green swallowtail coat, breeches of white corduroy, a gay red waistcoat, green stockings and buckled shoes. While he sang and danced he twirled a shillenlagh. His song seemed to be:

'I'm Irish, ye understand,
Tipperary I was born,
And I have come from Paddy's land,
To reap and mow the corn.'

Every autumn as the evenings were closing in, the breathless whisper went round, 'the Shows are coming.' Sure enough, down the Balintore brae were seen coming the gaily painted wagons and caravans of the travelling shows known as 'circuses,' though Dick's was the only one to have small animals in cages and acrobats who performed on the green. Evenings of fun on the swingboats, the side-shows, shooting galleries or at the hoop-la stalls gave endless delight to all ages and added colour and music to an otherwise drab existence. Mothers trying to get their offspring home to supper and bed acknowledged defeat many a time. Names like Dick's, Bidall's, Hughson's and Hercher's had a magic ring about them and year after year, especially between the wars they never failed to arrive and set up their fun fairs on the green Balintore.

During the First World War concerts were held now and then in aid of the Red Cross, and often children took part in the programmes. Those who could sing, and many could, or recite were trained by Miss Anna Skinner, Hilton, now living in California. Shyness was overcome and the budding artistes trod the boards with tremendous enthusiasm. 'Caller Herrin" rang out by the young 'fishwife' dressed for the part complete with miniature creel. Where it existed the dramatic talent was further developed by Mr. Crawford, the schoolmaster. He trained drama groups recruited from the local

branch of the S.W.R.I. and presented them at the annual Community Drama Festivals, and Hilton W.R.I. once came second in Tain and third in Dingwall. The 'try-out' or first night concert was always held in Fearn Hall and was the draw for the entire countryside.

Mr. Crawford organized a Boy Scout Troop and during the Second World War he trained R.A.F. cadets among his older boys; and one of the teachers, Miss Elizabeth Macdonald, was associated with a Girl Guide company. Mr. Crawford was indefatigable and constantly organized whist drives and dances in the school, putting the money aside to help to build a hall. After 1918 an interest in football developed and the first team,

Seaside Swifts, was begun by Captain Dewer, a wealthy Lanarkshire man who holidayed in Tain and took a great interest in promoting sport in the villages. He obtained a pitch for the team just east of Hilton and provided goal posts and their blue and white strip. Later on the Swifts gave way to the Seaside Rovers who had their pitch behind Balintore, now the site of Rovers' Crescent, and many a lively game was played there with all three villages represented. Captain Dewar is thought also to have given a sum of money towards the building of a hall, and these efforts, along with those of other people, resulted in the building of the Seaboard Memorial hall in 1958.

In addition, Captain Dewar presented gold brooches to the first three girls in the swimming races. This occasion was the forerunner of the regatta and gala day which is now the outstanding day of the year, the culmination of Balintore Carnival Week.

Later on around 1948 a Hilton lad W. A. Ross, now a lieutenant in the R. N. and himself an ardent footballer and staunch supporter of the Seaside Rovers as they were then called, donated jerseys and shorts to the current team along with a First-Aid kit. These were much appreciated by the Club and put to good use for many seasons.

Today the team is known as the Balintore Football team with their own new pitch and pavilion up to the crest above the village and continuing to give a good account of themselves throughout the Highlands.

Balintore Football Club

The Ross-shire Journal of 11th September, 1925, reports a gala day in Balintore in which there was a race for local fishermen with a handsome silver cup presented by Captain Dewar. Six boats took part and the report says, ' A fairly strong breeze blew from the north, and the boats gave a splendid account of themselves over the three-mile course, showing wonderful sailing capacity and skilful seamanship. All boats, considering their comparatively small dimensions, made very creditable time. The results were:

1. The Elsie, Balintore. (John Vass)
2. Dolina, Balintore. (David Skinner)
3. Happy Return, Hilton. (Hugh Macdonald)

Chapter 21 - The Present Day

It has been seen in preceding chapters of this account how the tenor of life changed in the villages after the First World War. The old order was fast passing away, yielding place to a new order of life which accelerated after the Second World War. What was good enough in Grandma's day was no longer tolerated by her grandchildren who had no nostalgic urge to stay with the past.

The lean years of the thirties gave way to the boom years immediately following the war and prosperity was enjoyed to a varying degree by all. During the war the building of Fearn aerodrome and Nigg Camp and the rebuilding of North Sutor fort provided work for many able-bodied men who were beyond the call-up age and this was a welcome break.

Women and girls served in the works' canteen during the building of the drome until such time as a number of them were called to the services. A workmen's hut built between Balintore and Hilton to accommodate some of the non-local labour force was left intact after the drome had been built and was then used as a canteen for the Forces there. Many village women worked there on a rota system in the evenings providing a hot snack for the serving men and women in the area. After the war this canteen was used for a number of years in lieu of a proper hall for dances, whist drives and so on. It was demolished after the Seaboard Memorial Hall was built near by and opened on 30th July 1958.

This beautiful new hall was erected as a memorial to all those who made the supreme sacrifice during two world wards, and it soon became the centre of all social activities on the Seaboard and neighbourhood. From time to time the Red Cross avail themselves of it as a centre for chiropody services to the elderly, as a child welfare clinic and also to meet blood donors. Part of the money raised by dances, concerts and other functions is used by the Hall Committee to increase the amenities of the Seaboard, besides maintaining the hall itself. For example, children's playgrounds have been built at strategic points in Balintore and Hilton, a bowling green in front of the hall is nearing completion and a fine caravan site was made near Shandwick Bay which accommodates many caravans during the summer season.

**SPEECH BY THE LATE MR TOM SKINNER, INVERNESS
ON OPENING THE SEABOARD COMMUNITY HALL 1958**

> "I can go back in memory to the time when there was no road between the villages, only a track. In fact, there were two tracks, one where the present road is, therefore nearer the sea. The top road was dangerous on account of the sand pits, of which there were quite a few. The shore one was more difficult to pick out at night in the darkness and, as it was so near to the edge of the beach, people often fell on the stones.
>
> "I always thought, even as a youth, that steps should be taken to have lamps from the west end of Shandwick to the east end of Hilton to guide the fishermen on their way to and from Balintore harbour. Now, I have been told, that you may soon have that amenity also. Electric lighting has been a boon, as has also the laying of water pipes and the very necessary sanitation and plumbing.

"I also remember when there was no Balintore harbour or Hilton slipway. How much more beneficial the harbour would have been if it had been put out 35 to 40 feet further, to prevent the sand silting up the entrance.

"I remember having our school picnics and being taken in farm carts. Those were Red Letter days for us. The houses in the villages were almost all thatched. The very writing pens are changed. From quill to steel and from steel to self-filling and now to ball point. A later one still is on the market, a kind of foam rubber, something like blotting-paper. You dip it in, lift it out and its ready. Gone are the days when the couplet 'They come as a boon and a blessing to me, The Pickwick, the Owl and the Waverley Pen was in almost every school-book.

"Need I go back to memory any more? I was almost the first person in the parish to have a bicycle and certainly the very first person in the whole district who went to church on a bicycle. On the Monday following this historic event, elders from another denomination were at my father's house to see if it was true and came to see me on the Saturday to try and get me to refrain from repeating such a performance. It was very quickly forgotten when someone took ill, suddenly, on a Sunday and I was called upon to run to Tain or Portmahomack for a doctor and later had to go back for the medicine prescribed. I wonder how the rural churches would be filled to-day if there were no bicycles, cars or buses.

"You may well ask what all this has to do with the opening of a hall, and my answer is this. We are living in a progressive age and those things which suited our grand-parents or our parents our out-dated, or out-moded according to the requirements of the present day. Your Committee very wisely decided that a hall would be a good thing to have and if they have had many disappointments and rebuffs on the way these have been overcome and here you see this beautiful building now complete.

"I want to make sympathetic reference to one who, while he was alive, devoted much of his energy towards the realisation of this project. I refer to the late Mr Gordon Crawford, MA. Headmaster; one who rose above all doubts and difficulties and whose vitality and enthusiasm were an inspiration. He is remembered with deep gratitude.

"The Committee which has now carried on the work is, I understand, composed of at least one representative from each club or organisation in the villages. That is as it should be and as I hope, it always will be. To mention any by name may be invidious, but I cannot let this opportunity pass without mentioning the names of your Chairman, District Councillor Mr William MacDonald, the Secretary, Mr Gregor Ross and the Treasurer, Mr William Paterson all of whom have given a great deal of their time, energy and substance towards the furtherance of this worthy cause.

"It gives me much pleasure to declare the Seaboard Memorial Hall open and to wish it, and all of you, a happy future."

During this time there were changes in the various shops. In Hilton, Denoons, which had been taken over in the twenties by William Vass, son-in-law of George Henderson the salmon manager, closed.

George Davage bought a house in Back Street and turned one room into a little shop selling cigarettes, tobacco, sweets and newspapers. He also had a lending library with books from Foyles. This shop was taken over by Tom Macleod who now runs it as a modern grocery, the only surviving shop in Hilton.

In Balintore, Bonny's shop, after changing hands several times, is now a painter's and decorator's business belonging to Alastair Vass, Hill of Fearn". Tom Macleod, mentioned above, took over the Clan Bakery as a grocery, and Jackie Macrae, starting after the war as a cobbler, has a modern shop stocking clothing, gifts and so on. The old-established shops - Johnstone's, Ross's, and Skinner's, are still thriving.

Greater opportunities in education have become available to boys and girls at University and college, and among the various trades in the neighbourhood openings occur for boys who wish to earn a living as bricklayers, masons, painters, mechanics etc. Girls likewise have the same opportunities and many become hair-dressers, clerkesses, shop assistants, and not a few enter the nursing profession. All this spells prosperity in one form or another and, inevitably, young people instead of going away to seek their fortune as of yore, stay in the villages and marry there. Thus we see the demand for more houses and the gradual growth of Hilton and Balintore. Many council houses have been built in both these villages and, more recently, homes for pensioners were also built in Balintore and have proved very satisfactory.

In the late 1940's the march of progress took a mighty leap forward. Electric power was laid on, and hard on its heels, running water. The grandchildren of a hard-working fisherfolk made the most of this great opportunity and took it in their stride. In no time cottages were improved and enlarged to the extent of extra bedrooms, modern kitchen and bathroom with all mod cons.

Modern furniture became a 'must' for the young housewife and she has endeavoured to keep in step and fashion ever since. The standard of life kept rising steadily with the heavier pay packet and radio, followed after a few years by T.V, became commonplace. Today in the early 1970s the fridge and the deep freeze have become no less commonplace. The motor car, which nearly every home posesses, has enabled the housewife to go further afield, e.g. to Dingwall and Inverness, to do her shopping and to avail herself of the benefits of the supermarkets. Distance is no longer a barrier. With labour-saving devices such as washing machines and electric irons, to mention only two, the modern housewife has much more leisure and so can find time for other interests, such as evening classes in dress-making, cookery and woodwork.

The black sheds so indispensable in Granny's day have been removed and pretty gardens have taken their place. The villages look much more attractive for that reason, as summer visitors have often remarked. Much has still to be done in this direction but there is no reason to believe that the march of progress is likely to be halted now.

During the 1960's a much-needed want was met. The Seaboard was lit up. No longer were the villagers to stumble along the dark roads and streets or depend on a full-moon to go visiting! Street lamps had come at last, and what a boon!

Road surfaces have been greatly improved and side-walks supplied in many streets, though more are needed. A telephone kiosk in each village has provided a further communication link with the outside world though, unfortunately, the only Post Office in Hilton has been closed down.

The National Health Service (1948) and all that that meant in medical care for all classes and conditions of British citizens was another great step forward. Gone for ever was the demoralising fear of illness in the home when, as in the early days of this century, the wherewithal to pay the doctor was not to hand. An ambulance runs to clinics in Dingwall and Inverness two or three times a week and, of course, is on hand for emergency. One doctor is resident in Hill of Fearn village while others live in Tain, and a surgery at Fearn is available for patients wishing to consult Dr. Graham or his partner, Dr. Macleod. Perhaps a surgery situated in Balintore, for instance, would be more convenient, especially for those patients dependent on 'lifts' from Fearn after 6.00 p.m. A resident dentist at Tain and a part-time optician have also made life much easier for the old and young.

A District Nursing Sister, Miss Cameron, lives at the Nurse's Cottage in Nigg and visits patients in the three villages daily, making the old her special care. She also pays a monthly visit to the school and sees that a reasonable standard of cleanliness is maintained. Some old folks in Shandwick enjoy the benefit of the Meals on Wheels service which one hopes will spread to the other villages in the near future as it is very worthwhile.

For the Seaboard in general there is a women's club called the Seaboard Villages' Improvement Association, which concentrates on providing the over-70's with a present of coal and firewood at Christmas time. The club is mainly composed of housewives in the three villages and meets monthly in the Seaboard Memorial Hall to hear a speaker, watch a demonstration, and enjoy a social cup of tea. The school population enjoy a summer picnic as the Association's, guests.

The building of the distillery at Invergordon in the 1960's provided a great deal of work for tradesmen and others belonging to the Seaboard and added to the general well-being. The presence of British Aluminium's smelter, already referred to, has meant increased prosperity and nourishes a hope that many ancillary industries may yet become a reality and so bring about a level of prosperity never known before in this corner of the Highlands.

A long felt requirement in each village was a really strong bus shelter, one which would withstand wind and weather, and alas! the vandal. Shelters of a kind had been erected some years ago but were not strong enough to withstand the pressures, elemental and otherwise. Down by the harbour at Balintore public conveniences have been built mainly for the benefit of the increasing holiday population and also the many caravanners who come to Shandwick Bay.

One other improvement must not be overlooked. For many years public outcry has been made over the deteriorating state of the public road through the village of Shandwick. Heavy lorries going to and from Invergordon on construction work, in addition to the normal motor transport of the villages, took heavy toll of the road which was becoming really dangerous. Not a moment too soon the County Council got going and now a very bad corner has been taken away and a brand new road runs through the village to the relief and pleasure of the inhabitants.

Such are the outstanding changes which have been taking place in our villages during this second half of the 20th century. Time and change are busy and move relentlessly forward, and this account is closed with the hope that the people of the Seaboard will remember, while enjoying the mixed blessings of an affluent society, that the ease and comfort they now have was not always thus.

Chapter 22 - The Present Day - Further Changes on the Seaboard 1979

During the past decade considerable changes have taken place on the seaboard following the discovery of oil in the North Sea. One very important decision taken by the current authorities was the siting of oil-rig building facilities at Nigg Bay later known as the Highlands Fabricators (Hi-Fab).

As a result many workers had to be brought in to augment the local labour force available, and accommodation in the villages as elsewhere in Easter Ross was strained to bursting point. Consequently many of these men were accommodated to start with on two cruise liners moored at Nigg until housing was provided in the vicinity, after which these ships were withdrawn.

Now an era of great activity set in. As part of a large housing programme priority was given to a new Council estate in Balintore - nigh 200 modern houses were built to a Scandinavian design, roomy and comfortable with all mod-cons. The main street through the scheme was named Abbotshaven thus reviving the old name for Balintore, which was the 'port' of the Abbey at Fearn many centuries ago. (see Chap. on Growth of Communities).

During the oil boom in the 1970s the prosperity of the Seaboard flourished. This was seen in the erection of many private houses, and also in extensions made to many existing houses, thereby adding to the attractive appearance of the villages as the years passed. The re-surfacing and the widening of the road through the three villages which comprised the Seaboard proved a much-needed facility in time to meet the increase in population, and all that that entailed.

Hence some of the village shops were enlarged and modernised to keep pace with the times. Unfortunately as time passed the Shandwick shop closed down, also the shop in Hilton which latter closure was a bitter blow to the old folks as the Hilton sub-post-office had been closed some years earlier.

The new well equipped school which had been built in 1960 was now well able to accommodate the growing school population and by 1977 had increased to 197 pupils. Today a decade later the total stands at 188, as there is no Junior Secondary department and all past Primary pupils proceed to Tain Royal Academy for their secondary education for the next 3-6 years. They travel by school bus each possessing his and her pass ticket. (see Chapter on Education)

Following on the drop in oil prices (1975) world-wide, there were unfortunate repercussions here in Easter Ross. The labour market became unsteady resulting in much unemployment. This set-back followed in the heels of the closure of the Aluminium Smelter at Invergordon, itself a bitter blow to the Highlands when hundreds of workers were made redundant. The uncertainty of work at Hi-Fab remains, and the future does not appear too rosy at the moment, February, 1988.

In the early 1980s oil was discovered in the outer Moray Firth (the Beatrice Field) and a pipeline leading to Nigg from it was laid through the inner Moray Firth making land-fall at Shandwick Bay. Oil tanks to receive the oil had been built near the oil-rig building base.

School photograph 1988, Hilton Primary.

All this activity eased the labour situation for a time together with important improvements within the Seaboard - e.g. a new Fire Station, an improved Sewerage System and a Football pitch and Pavilion.

The greatly increased traffic to Nigg made it inevitable that something be done to the roads. Now we have a splendid modern road leading to Nigg from the villages, and the familiar but dangerous 'cross-roads' above Balintore has vanished for ever.

From time to time one hears of new enterprises being started with Government help thus providing hopeful opportunities for young people and so present a challenge to the rising generation on the Seaboard. A ship-chandler's business has opened near the harbour in Balintore called King's Marine. The ever-expanding firm of W. H. MacKay & Son, Structural Engineers, Balmuchy also benefits the area.

During this prosperous and busy decade an interesting development worthy of mention took place in Hilton. The Fearn Free Church congregation, led and encouraged by their minister Rev. N. MacDonald MA decided that they needed a new church building. This was to be situated in Hilton village where the bulk of the congregation live, more convenient in every way for an ageing people than the original church, some distance away in the middle of the Parish of Fearn. An attractive church was built, furnished and dedicated in 1979.

On 30th May last year (1987) a very unusual Service of Thanksgiving was held in Chapelhill Parish Church. The occasion was to mark the centenary of a distinguished scholar born near Balintore in 1842, the Rev. John Ross DD and missionary to N. China and Korea and 100 years of organised Bible work in Korea. The Rev. K. MacFarlane, minister of the Abbey and Chapelhill united charge pays tribute to the great man and describes him as Missionary and Translator and founder of both the Protestant Church in N.Manchuria and Korea. Among much else he completed the translation of the New Testament Scriptures into Korean in 1887. At the memorial service in Chapelhill a number of Korean Christians were present and participated in the Service, living

witnesses to the influence of the Gospel which Dr.Ross's missionary labours in N. China and Korea had stimulated.

Hilton-Fearn Free Church of Scotland.

An interesting point in connection with this distinguished family is that two streets in Balintore are named John Street and Hugh Street respectively after Dr. John Ross and his father/brother Hugh. Rev. T. Patterson of the United Free Church in Balintore became Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Free Church in 1987 and was gifted with his robes at a ceremony in the church.

On the social side there have been several important developments to date. In 1985 an 'Over-60's Club' was formed - which has given great pleasure and meets fortnightly in the Seaboard Hall. Two years later a Community House was opened in the Abbotshaven Housing Scheme, rent free by the District Council and funded by the then Manpower Services Commission. Adult classes in various subjects held during the week are proving very worth-while and most enjoyable as well as practical. It has become a focal point in the Community and reflects great credit on the young people who run it.

The Seaboard Improvements Association formed more than twenty years ago still carries on going from strength to strength and welcomes women of all ages. Among its activities, it helps to run the Meals-on-Wheels Service throughout the Seaboard, Fearn and Nigg.

This record would be incomplete without some further mention of the Shandwick Stone. It was good news to learn last year (1987) that a Trust had been formed for the future preservation of the

monument. The Trust is called the Shandwick Stone (Clach a Charridh Slab) Trust, and its aim is to raise £10,000 for that purpose. The stone is to be provided with a glazed shelter and remain in its original position and so will remain a visible landmark as always. The work of restoration will be carried out by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Department of the Scottish Development Department (SDD) at Edinburgh. About £6,000 has been collected up to date in various ways, and much of the credit is due to the tireless energy of the Trust team: Chairwoman, Miss L. Ewart; Mrs. I. Mackenzie; Mr. R. Mackenzie; Mrs. M. McRailt; Mr. I. Macpherson.

Turning to housing we find that the face of the Seaboard like Topsy 'has growed out o'knowledge'. The three villages have expanded on all sides both in the public and private domain. A Sheltered Housing Scheme has been built in Balintore on the sea side of the main road over-looking part of the harbour and the Bay - a very pleasing lay-out. The open ground between the villages has been developed, and no longer are they distinct and separate communities as of old.

The Seaboard is well-served by its medical team now centered in Tain Health Centre, and facilities are available to meet the needs of old and young when called upon.

Near the new Fire Station already mentioned above Balintore, a Football Playing-field was laid and a Pavilion built (1981). Football and hockey continue to absorb the energies of both sexes with considerable credit while smaller boys and girls have their own particular groups of Scouts, Guides, Cubs and Brownies. Public-spirited men and women meet and train their respective groups, not forgetting the encouragement of Fellowship meetings as well.

Seaboard 1st Majorettes.

A troop of girls aged between 3-12 years called the Seaboard 1st Majorettes was formed in 1985. They are being trained to give displays during the Summer season at galas, and so far have met with great success. They look very smart in their red, gold and blue uniforms, and complete with baton look very professional.

Amid all the forgone activity of one kind or another on the Seaboard the promotion of tourism has not been over-looked. Natural attractions are on the whole limited but there is a very fine sandy beach at Shandwick Bay, very popular during the holiday season. The harbour has always been a magnet to youthful fishermen of the villages and now that exciting developments are taking place at the harbour there will be additional mooring space in the centre by means of a floating pontoon structure which should appeal to locally based fishing boats. Already this newly developed structure is giving great satisfaction and further developments will be all the more welcome as more and larger vessels put the new facilities to good use.

A group called the Balintore Harbour User's Association is the controlling body in charge of these exciting developments in our area. The proprietors of the Commercial Inn and Balintore Hotel respectively are interested in the well being of the Seaboard, and we wish them every success.

Balintore Green has been the subject of much discussion over the years. It is sadly in need of a face-lift and plans have been drawn up by the District Council to do just that. In the old days this was the area where children of all ages gathered to welcome the arrival of the 'shows' as the long nights drew in, (see chapter on Recreation). The old village pump will be retained, re-furbished and set in a secure base in the Green. The Green has now been given its face-life (1988) and welcomed as a great success, enhancing its surroundings.

The year 1988 must be regarded by the Fearn Abbey congregation and its minister Rev. K. MacFarlane and his lady as an outstanding year. Quite recently the congregation celebrated their double 25th Anniversary, as Mrs. MacFarlane had been President of the Abbey Guild during that time. They were presented with a handsome painting of the Abbey done by a talented artist from the Seaboard. A fair number of the villagers are members and adherents of the Abbey. This year also marks the 10th anniversary of the union of Chapelhill and Abbey congregations.

Finally last but by no means least, 1988 marks the 750th anniversary of the founding of Fearn Abbey. To mark the auspicious occasion the Hydro-Electric Company have arranged to floodlight the Abbey for a year. Various fund-raising activities are being engaged in by the congregations for the benefit of the Abbey during this special anniversary year.

Before finally closing this record of the many great and small changes which have occurred during the last decade we, the joint authors would like to take this opportunity of thanking the general public for their loyal and continuing support during its first and second editions. This third-edition will, we hope, make its appearance in the not-too-distant future and meet with an equally enthusiastic response. Our special thanks go to three young people, Jean MacKenzie, Maureen Ross, both of Balintore and Alison MacKenzie of Tain who readily helped with information and thus we completed the record more easily and quickly.

We end on a note of high hope for the Seaboard. The oil industry at Nigg has taken on a new lease of life after a period of decline and so the hope of full employment is once more becoming a reality. The Shandwick Stone has just been removed to Edinburgh for
.restoration and the Trust Committee has to be congratulated on reaching that important stage in its maintenance. Thereafter it will be returned to its original site and protected from the elements by a glazed shelter.

Thus, in conclusion we can only sum up by showing from our survey how - 'Chance and change are busy ever'.

References for Down to the Sea

(Unfortunately, the Parish of Fearn is very poorly written up in both the Statistical Account and the New Statistical Account and therefore assumptions about Fearn have been drawn from the much fuller information given in both these accounts for Tarbat, Nigg, Tain, Kilmuir-Easter and Avoch.)

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27. 'Sea Fishes' by A. Laurence Wells.
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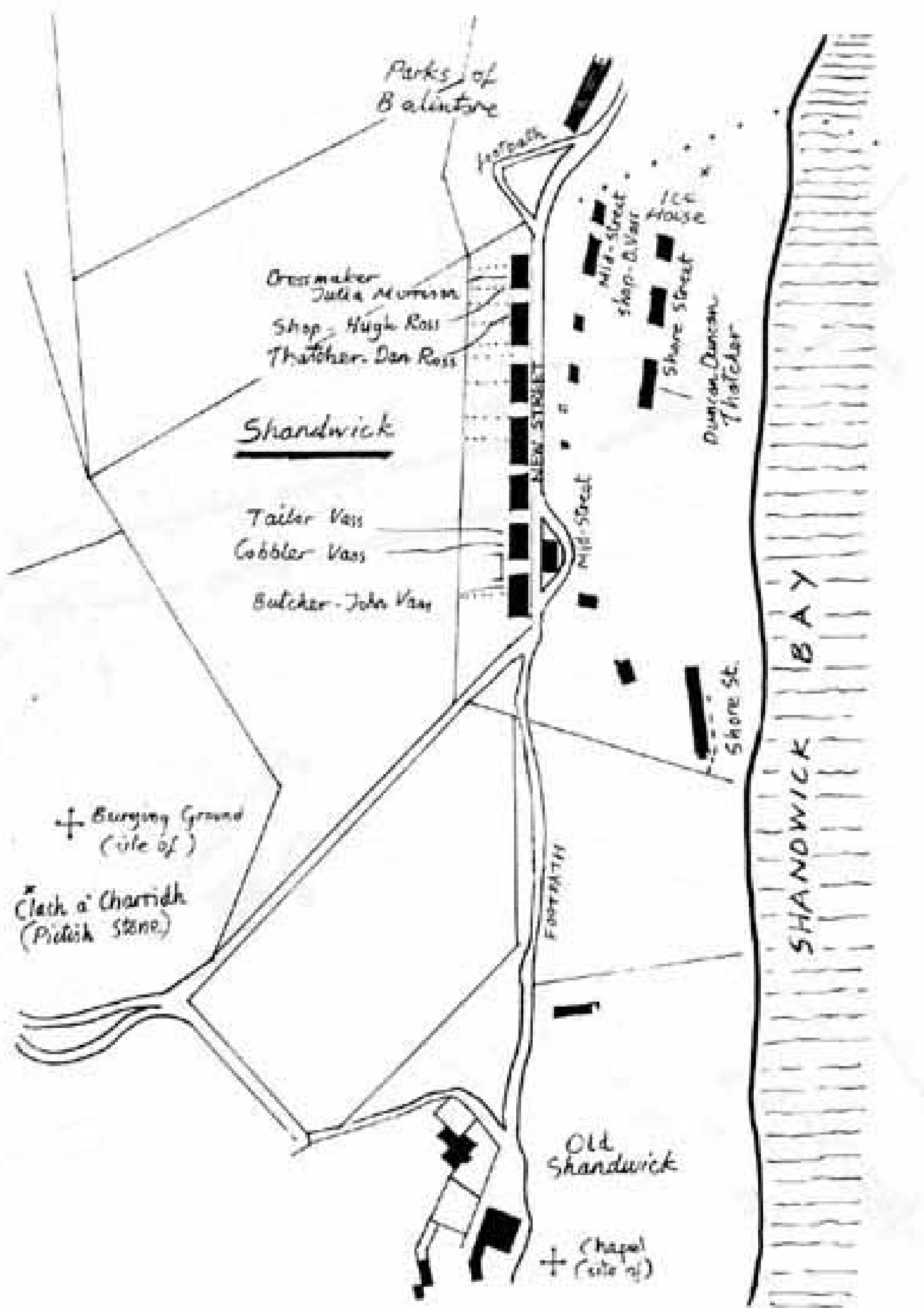
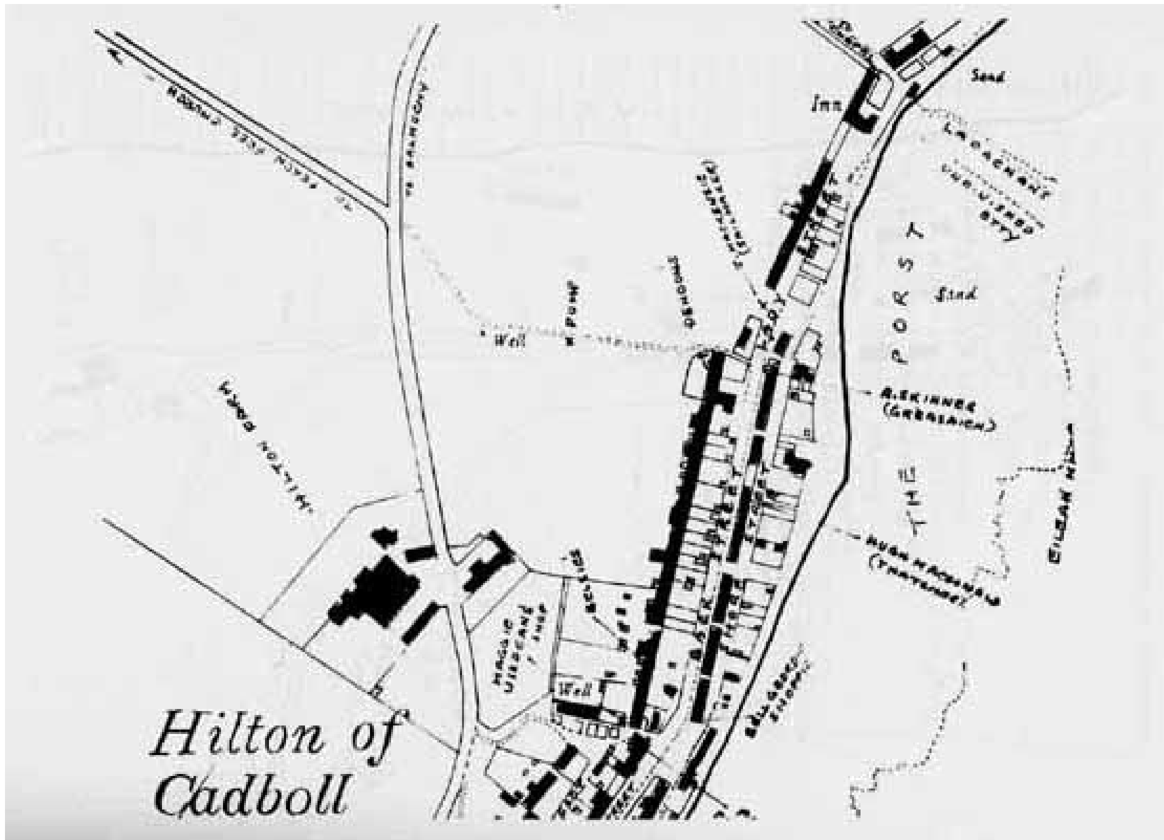
32. 'Inverness Courier.'
33. Log book of Hilton Public School, 1875-1895.
34. 'This Noble Harbour' (Provisional Title) - late Dr. Ash (forthcoming).

Maps

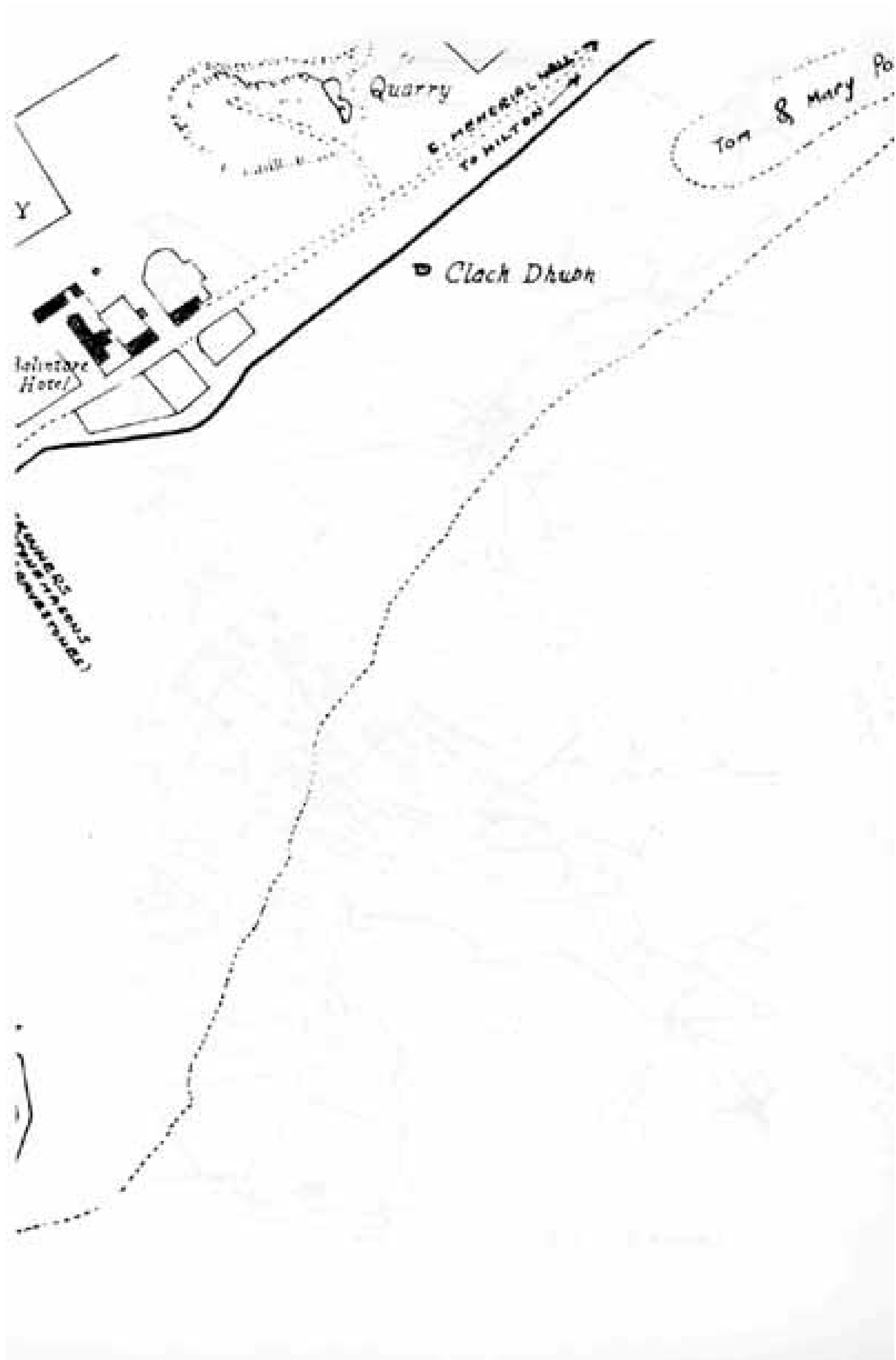


Shandwick



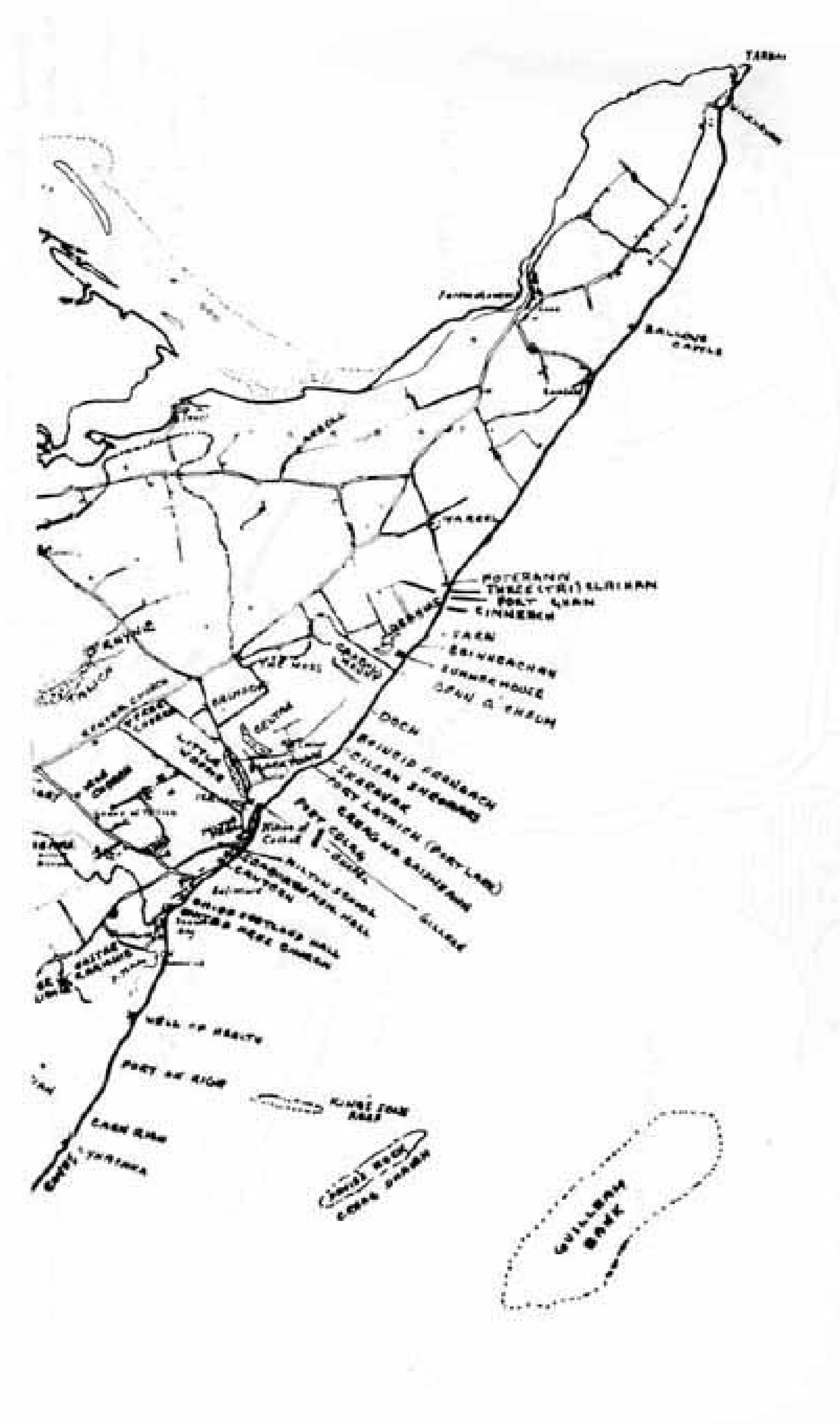
Hilton of Cadboll

Hilton of Cadboll (West)



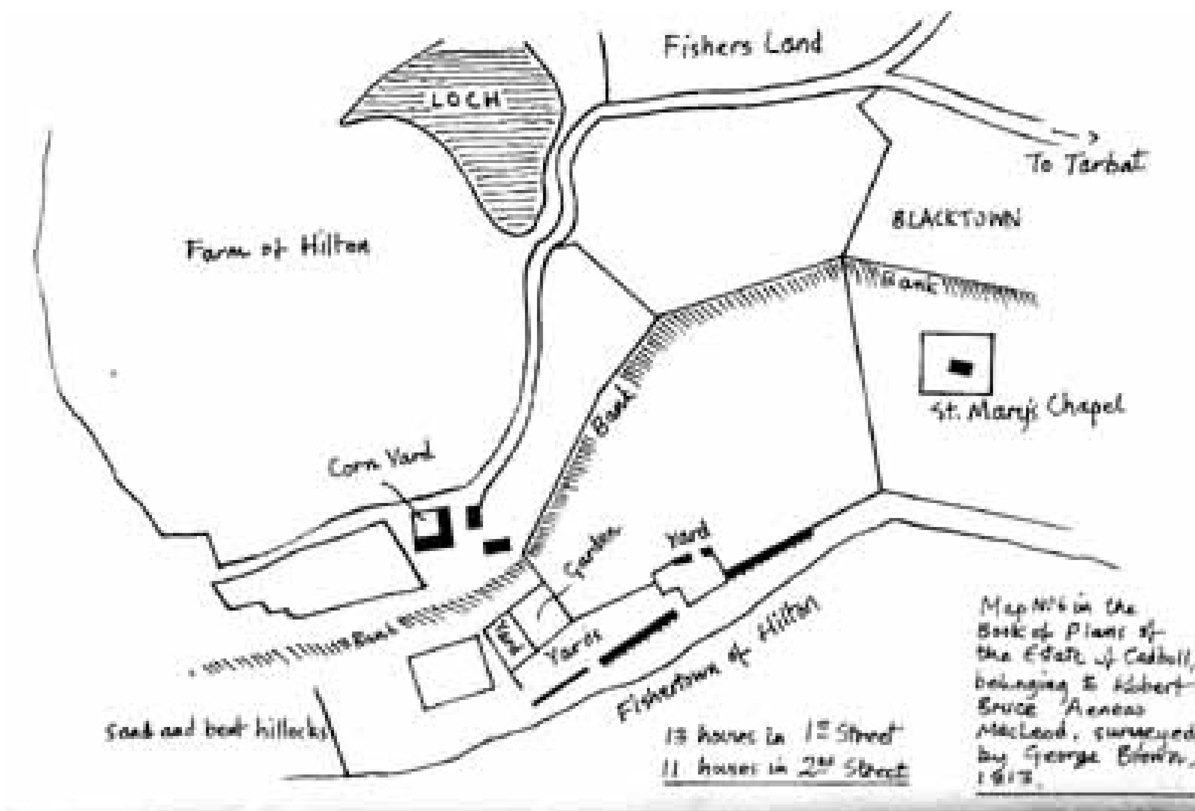
Balintore (East)

Balintore (West)



Seaboard Villages - North

Seaboard Villages - South



Hilton Village 1813

This is map number 6 in the Book of Plans of the Estate of Cadboll belonging to Robert Bruce Aeneas Macleod, surveyed by George Brown 1813.

Some of the titles used on the map are: sand and bent hillocks, yard, garden, bank, Fishertown of Hilton, 13 houses in 1st Street and 11 houses in 2nd Street.

Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society would like to acknowledge thanks to Anne Gordon for permission to present the contents of this book on our website.