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When Herring Was King? Boom and Recession in Shetland, 1880–1893

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I know Arne mainly through the Scottish Society for Northern Studies; I was secretary when he was president from 2012 to 2015. But we have more in common than that. We are both from fishing backgrounds, he from Veiholmen, a small island community in the municipality of Smøla, in the western part of Norway – even further north than my hometown, Lerwick in Shetland. Before he became an academic, Arne was a fisherman, as were my Shetland-based male ancestors. My chapter recognises that connection and explores a time when Scotland and Norway were competitors in the herring trade.

Introduction

That herring was the king of fish is an ancient, widespread, and popular idea. This metaphor has been used about Shetland to imply that herring, the most important fish, ruled as the economic mainstay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ The boom in the herring fishery is also well known;

1. E.g. Halcrow 1994: 146; Fenton 1978: 603–615; Irvine 1985: 151–163.

in ‘one of the most spectacular episodes in the whole history of fisheries in Britain’, it escalated from the late 1870s to a peak in 1905 and ended abruptly, though temporarily, with the First World War.² The effects were far-reaching: ‘the herring fishery in Shetland after 1880 [...] permeated into every aspect of the life of the islands’.³ This period has been portrayed as when Shetland emerged from economic backwardness and deprivation into the modern world. Herring has often been cast as the catalyst and financier of this development – for example, ‘the herring boom [...] was a major event in Shetland and did much to change and modernise the islands; and most important it lifted living standards to a new and higher level’.⁴

But it was not a story of continuous prosperity: ‘Though history tends to show the period from 1880 onwards as a time of unbroken success [...] there were numerous downs as well as ups [...] It was far from being the universal bonanza which history tends to imply’.⁵ Six hectic years of phenomenal growth were followed by a longer recession (Figure 1).

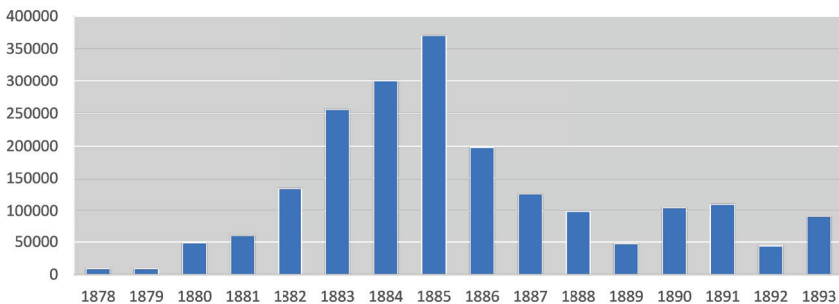


Figure 1: Herring cured in Shetland (barrels). Source: Fishery Board for Scotland.

2. Coull 2007: 114.

3. Goodlad 1971: 196.

4. Coull 2006: 17. See also Halcrow 1994: 146; Nicolson 1978: 122–123; Irvine 1985: 151; Coull 2007: 119.

5. Irvine 1985: 154, 162.

Writers have been unsure how significant this was. Goodlad did not mention it at all; Halcrow merely hinted that ‘lean times were to come’; Nicolson reported ‘a serious decline’, although ‘the slump [...] was no more than a temporary setback it had a serious effect on Shetland’s economy’.⁶ Hance Smith referred impassively to ‘a certain lack of adjustment’ and ‘periodic crises in the balance of supply and demand in the herring industry’, though also to ‘the great slump between 1886 and 1894’.⁷ Coull saw it as part of a general picture: ‘one of the downward fluctuations that is included in the experience of every herring fishery’, though it hit Shetland particularly hard.⁸ Brian Smith referred to it in the context of land-tenure legislation, but Gray gave the longest account.⁹ In 1884, over-production caused a sudden drop in market prices, and in 1885 and 1886, rates to fishermen diminished. In 1887, banks foreclosed on some curers – the businesses which bought herring from fishermen, salted, sold, and shipped them – and the scale of fishing began to be curtailed. Fleets, landings, and prices remained well below the levels of the early 1880s, and differences developed both between parts of Scotland and even between parts of Shetland.

With hindsight, therefore, these years have been perceived as a blip in the upward curve of the herring industry, but of course, at the time, people did not have that perspective. Analysing the effects on Shetland’s economy and society in the context of other contemporary events, this chapter shows how Shetlanders reacted, how they viewed their situation, and how they survived the recession.

6. Halcrow 1994: 139; Nicolson 1987: 31, 44.

7. Smith 1984: 177, 196.

8. Coull 2007: 120; Coull 1988: 28.

9. Smith 2000: 78; Gray 1978: 206–207.

Exploiting the boom

Herring had been caught around Shetland for centuries, but commercially mainly by Dutch fishermen. A local fishery from the 1820s, using half-decked boats, declined rapidly from 1839, and continued only as 'a pale reflection' with sixerns, the local six-oared boats which usually fished with longlines for ling and cod at the 'haaf' (i.e. the deep or open sea fishery).¹⁰ In contrast, on the east coast of Scotland, the herring fishery had grown by the 1870s into a significant industry, using larger boats and drift nets.

Shetlanders doubted the suitability of these vessels for local waters.¹¹ But in 1875, some Orcadian crews tried their luck.¹² In the next few years, more boats and curers arrived, and Shetlanders joined in.¹³ Expansion was swift – in 1879, over 200 boats landed herring in Shetland, 1880 was 'a year of bonanza', and in 1881, the average catch per boat was the highest in Scotland.¹⁴ The Fishery Board commented that, in 1882, 'the prosperity which attended the herring fishing in the Shetland district [...] was extraordinary'.¹⁵ The catches rocketed, as did the number of boats involved (Figure 2). Shetland offered many suitable sheltered anchorages for 'stations', where

10. Goodlad 1971: 171–177; Halcrow 1994: 130–133; Smith 1984: 109, 113–114.

11. Gray 1978: 201; Tudor 1883: 139–140.

12. Coull 2007: 114.

13. *Ibid.*: 115.

14. *Ibid.*: 116–117; *The Shetland Times* [hereafter *ST*], 17 September 1881, 2. Average catches per boat were often quoted. The statistics were problematic due to varying fleet numbers and different types of boat, but were useful for comparisons between time periods.

15. Parliamentary Papers [hereafter *PP*]. 1883. XVIII. Annual Report of the Fishery Board for Scotland [hereafter *FBS*] 1882. xxvi.

fish were gutted, salted, and packed into barrels; by 1884, there were 123.¹⁶

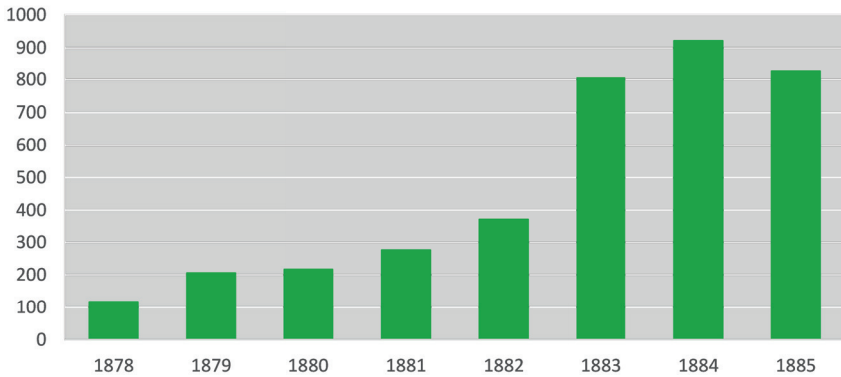


Figure 2: The number of boats at the Shetland herring fishing (in one sample week).

Source: Fishery Board for Scotland.

The fishing and curing methods and the Eastern European markets were already well developed. Shetland became ‘part of a great seasonal migration of activity around the British coasts’, filling a gap between the west and east coast fisheries.¹⁷ The season was divided into two parts. The first, in May and June, to the west and north, attracted the widest participation from ‘strangers’; the second, on the east and south, involved mainly local boats. Shetlanders participated with alacrity. In 1885, there were nearly 400 Shetland-owned decked drifters.¹⁸ Some fishermen were able to buy them outright, showing a new willingness and ability to risk the capital.¹⁹ Many other people bought shares; traders hired or financed them through

16. PP. 1884–85. XVI. FBS 1884. xvii.

17. Goodlad 1971: 178.

18. *The Shetland News* [hereafter *SN*], 26 September 1885, 5.

19. The *SN* 1887 Calendar shows over seventy out of 360 boats owned by the crew, but the owners of over eighty others were unknown.

the half-catch system.²⁰ Sheriff Rampini described it: 'a spirit of enterprise, almost approaching rashness, has seized all classes [...] All Shetland thinks, talks, smells of nothing but fish'.²¹

The number of local fishermen did not increase significantly; generally, they transferred from other fisheries as the potential earnings could be much greater.²² The practice, called an 'engagement', was for a crew to agree with a curer to deliver their catch, often to a maximum or 'complement', for a set period at an agreed price.²³ The fishermen were probably also attracted by the greater comfort and safety: the fishing was generally nearer shore, less onerous, and allowed weekends at home. Some sixerns fished herring in the late season.

Not only fishermen benefited; there were unprecedented employment opportunities (Figure 3). Ships were, of course, used to transport people, equipment, barrels, and salt, though foreign vessels generally carried the cured herring. Barrels, initially imported, were later made in Shetland, and decked boats were built. Stations entailed the construction of piers, stores, and accommodation. Gutting and packing provided, perhaps for the first time, cash payments for women. Many came from outside Shetland, but a growing number of locals were employed, often working and living away from home in a new social environment. In 1881, *The Shetland Times* welcomed the increased money in circulation and increased prosperity.²⁴

20. 'Half-catch' refers to the process of dividing the proceeds after deducting expenses, half for the owner and half for the crew.

21. Rampini 1884: 68.

22. Halcrow 1994: 139; PP. 1884. XXIV. Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland [hereafter Napier Commission]. 1206.

23. Coull 1987; 2007: 121–128.

24. *ST*, 31 December 1881, 2.

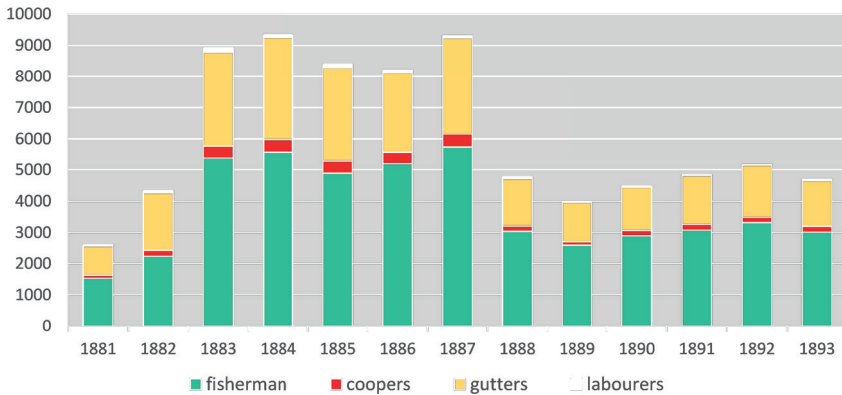


Figure 3: People employed in the Shetland herring fishing (in one sample week).

Source: Fishery Board for Scotland.

The ancillary effects were widespread:

Curing stations and piers have to be provided, houses for coopers and gutters have to be erected, provisions of all kinds have to be imported [...] Every kind of farm produce in great demand [...] Merchants have had their business greatly increased, and the demand for workpeople has been largely in excess of the supply. All classes have got a share.²⁵

Landlords benefited from fishermen being able to pay their rents, while some ‘have reaped a rich harvest in letting building stances and ground for the prosecution of the fishing’.²⁶

The Shetland Times claimed ‘[t]he trade of the Islands has received a great impetus [...] much to the benefit of the poorer classes both in town and country’.²⁷ Lerwick experienced a great boost with many stations and incoming workers; business

25. Russell 1887: 111.

26. Ibid.

27. *ST*, 30 September 1882, 2.

premises, houses, and an ambitious harbour scheme were built.²⁸ But stations were established in many places with the early and late seasons concentrated in different areas. Baltasound in Unst was described as ‘an infant herringopolis’ with ‘station after station, pier after pier’.²⁹

While the fishery was significant on a national scale, it was of outstanding local importance. Commentators then and now have no doubt that it ‘ushered in a period of prosperity in the islands’, at least in comparative terms.³⁰ In 1880, the Fishery Officer wrote: ‘This development of the herring fishing has raised these islands to a height of material prosperity hitherto unknown in their history’.³¹ According to *The People’s Journal*, Shetlanders believed a great future was in store.³² The Fishery Board Report for 1884 observed ‘the great development of the herring fishery in Shetland has had a marked effect in improving the condition of the people’.³³ But in 1883, the Napier Commission had been warned: ‘Were it coming an unsuccessful season, the effect and consequence to the people [...] would be very serious’.³⁴ This prediction was soon to be tested.

Suffering the recession

In Scotland, the plentiful 1884 catch was composed mainly of small, immature fish. High engagement prices had encouraged an early start, and curers struggled to process the surfeit; the

28. Irvine 1985: 166–167, 170–177; Nicolson 1987: 27–28.

29. *ST*, 26 May 1883, 2.

30. Coull 1988: 25.

31. Coull 2007: 119.

32. *ST*, 10 February 1883, 3.

33. PP. 1885. XVI. FBS 1884. xii–xiii.

34. PP. 1884. XXIV. Napier Commission. 1204.

market was glutted. In Shetland, the total catch also increased again, and the quality of herring was the best in Scotland.³⁵ But, with a larger fleet, the average catch decreased; while some boats prospered, others could hardly pay expenses. For curers, the results were 'almost disastrous, heavy losses being universal'.³⁶

In 1885, fishing started later to avoid repetition.³⁷ But the number of curers was exceeded with three new stations, and the even greater catch was again sometimes too much for the curers; some made little or no profit.³⁸ With fewer boats, the average catch, though variable, was the highest ever, and despite lower prices, the season was generally very successful for fishermen.³⁹ For the Scottish trade, however, it was a catastrophe. The curers were short of capital, and market prices fell again, a substantial proportion of the catch being small, unsellable herring.⁴⁰ The Fishery Board commented that no year had ever proved as disastrous as the last two.⁴¹

The causes seemed clear – too many fish, poor quality, some disputes about duties and with agents, competition from the Netherlands and Scandinavia, and payments to fishermen which did not reflect demand. For the next decade, Scottish production was smaller, but only at most reduced to 65%, while Shetland's plunged to 13% in 1889, recovered to nearly 30% in 1890 and 1891, before falling again to 8.5% in 1892 (Figure 4). The continued recession in Shetland, therefore, was on a different scale and had different causes from the shorter-lived market problem.

35. PP. 1885. XVI. FBS 1884. xiv.

36. *ST*, 27 December 1884, 2.

37. *ST*, 26 September 1885, 2.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. PP. 1886. XV. FBS 1885. xi–xii.

41. *Ibid.*: xii.

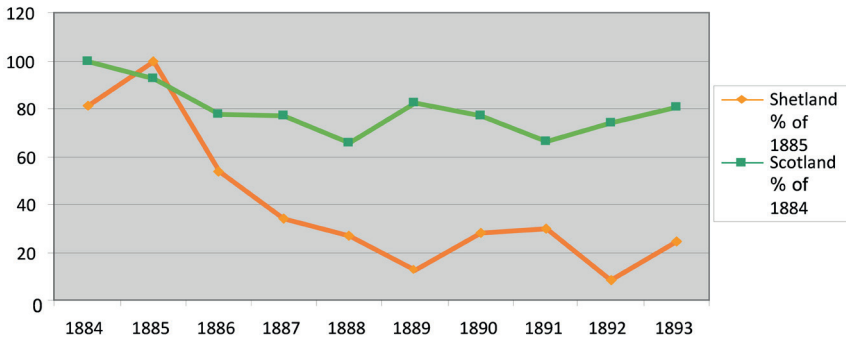


Figure 4: Herring cured as a percentage of maximum.

Source: Fishery Board for Scotland.

Bad weather was sometimes a problem, as in 1886. Herring was scarcer, which fishermen blamed on the prevalence of dogfish; they ate herring and destroyed nets by becoming entangled in them.

The effects of the varying catches and prices were not straightforward, since the proceeds were split between the fishermen and curers, and between locals and 'strangers'. Curers bore the brunt of the market collapse because, when catches were small, they still had to pay costs for rents, transport, and labour, or, as in 1890, despite improved catches, quality was poor and market prices low.⁴² Many went bankrupt.⁴³ The number of stations reduced by half from 1885 to 1891, and sometimes external curers left early.⁴⁴

While fishermen suffered most when curers defaulted, the obvious way to reduce costs was to pay fishermen less. But they also incurred costs, and in 1886 and 1887, they threatened to stay ashore until the curers caved in.⁴⁵ Later, they were

42. *ST*, 13 September 1890, 2.

43. Gray 1978: 148.

44. *ST*, 13 September 1890, 2.

45. *ST*, 18 September 1886, 3; *SN*, 11 June 1887, 4; PP. 1888. XXVIII. FBS 1887. xx.

reluctant to fish without engagements.⁴⁶ But prices fell and ‘complements’ were reduced. The total value, therefore, fell even more than the catch (Figures 5 and 1).

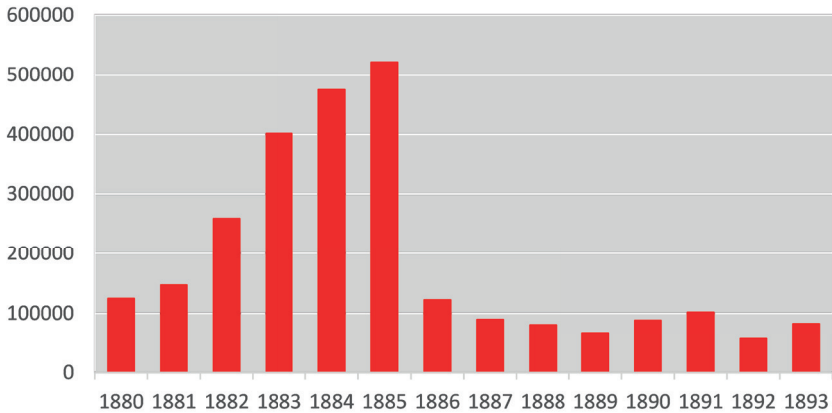


Figure 5: Value (to fishermen) of all fishing (£). Source: *Shetland Times*, *Shetland News*, Fishery Board for Scotland.

It took some time to sink in that the problems were not short-lived, and in 1887, even more boats and men participated. Thereafter, activity was influenced both by the prevailing circumstances and the previous year's fishing. For example, 1889's poor earnings discouraged fishermen and curers in 1890. In several years, the east coast boats left as soon as dogfish appeared, meaning the Fishery Board's statistics for boats fishing around Shetland (based on a single week) could be misleadingly high. The average catch per boat dwindled until 1889, recovered well in 1890, only to fall steeply again in the next two years (Figure 6).

But these numbers concealed great discrepancies; in 1887, catches per boat varied from 440 to 1.25 crans; in 1889, 'three-quarters had not seen a herring'; and in 1892, over twenty boats landed nothing in the early season, only two landed over 200

46. E.g. *ST*, 15 September 1888, 2; 31 December 1889, 2.

crans, and most under fifty.⁴⁷ The ‘stranger’ crews were thought to be more successful, as they persevered despite low catches and were more likely to update their gear than the undercapitalised Shetlanders.⁴⁸ Then again, although the early fishing lasted barely two weeks in 1890, prices improved later; so, with fewer external boats, more of the income stayed in Shetland.⁴⁹ Some fishermen who had taken out loans on boats under a government scheme struggled to repay. By 1893, 25% were still outstanding, and two boats had been returned; the local fleet of first-class boats was reduced by a quarter, and there were thirty not in use.⁵⁰

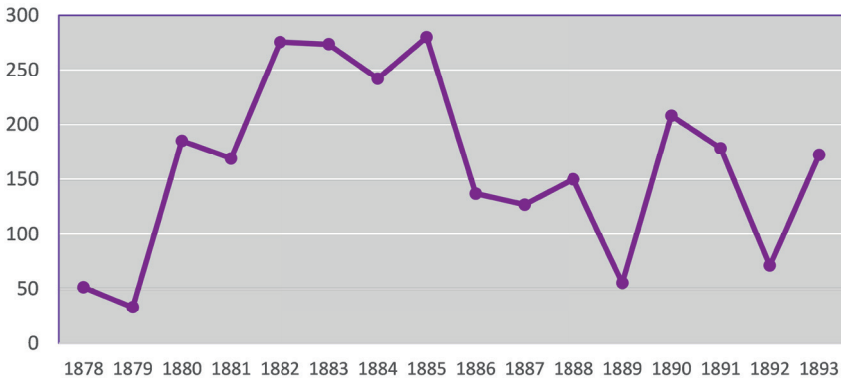


Figure 6: Average catch per boat (crans). Source: *Shetland Times*, *Shetland News*.

In Lerwick, trade was depressed. By 1887, construction of new buildings had stopped, and employment opportunities reduced.⁵¹ No more decked boats were built, and during some winters, the coopers had little work.⁵² In 1890, however, *The*

47. Fresh herring was measured in crans, a volume measurement roughly equivalent to 37.5 imperial gallons. *SN*, 17 September 1887, 4; *ST*, 14 September 1889, 2; 10 September 1892, 2.

48. *ST*, 15 September 1888, 2.

49. *SN*, 27 December 1890, 4.

50. PP. 1894. III. FBS. 1893. 44, 130.

51. *SN*, 31 December 1887, 4.

52. *ST*, 27 December 1890, 2; 28 December 1889, 2.

Shetland News reported: 'Workers of all kinds have been busily employed, a good deal of money has been put into circulation, and on all hands there had been a feeling that better times had come at last'.⁵³

But this was a fleeting recovery. The catch rose again in 1891, but prices fell, and this season was not a success.⁵⁴ In 1892, the fishing hit rock bottom. The combined failure of fishing and crops threatened to push the economy over the edge. In early 1893, seed corn was scarce and was provided by government grants and the Society of Friends.⁵⁵

Then, the herring catch improved and, despite fluctuations, generally continued to do so until 1905. Shetland had come through this recession. What, however, was contemporary opinion of the fickle fortunes of herring fishing?

The voice of the people

The best source for what ordinary people thought about their conditions is the evidence given at the hearings in 1889 and 1892 of the Crofters Commission, established by the 1886 Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act. This was primarily about land issues such as rent rises and other charges, housing conditions, and the confiscation of the common grazing. A large percentage of crofters had applied for assessment.⁵⁶ Fishing was an essential part of the context and, just as the boom had enabled many people to pay their rent, reductions had now become more critical. Unsurprisingly, the Commission heard of 'exceptionally disastrous fishing failures', how in recent years

53. *SN*, 13 September 1890, 4.

54. *ST*, 10 September 1891, 2.

55. *ST*, 18 March 1893, 3; 22 July 1893, 3.

56. PP. 1890. LVIII. Report by the Crofters Commission for 1889. 256.

the fishing had not paid well, how some who had bought shares in boats were in debt, and how others were not likely to be paid as curers had gone bankrupt.⁵⁷ Although non-payment of rent may have been due to the expectation of the cancellation of arrears and even to collusion and intimidation, many maintained they could not afford it. The claims succeeded: in 1889, 1,330 rents were reduced by an average of 28%, and 60% of arrears were cancelled, followed in 1892 by another 706 reductions by an average of 30% and cancellation of 78% of arrears.⁵⁸

What is striking is not so much what was said as the attitude of the applicants. This evidence provides a better indication of the views of ordinary people than the Truck or Napier Commissions in 1872 and 1883. Then, landlords could still evict, and few crofters were willing to speak out.⁵⁹ Now, hearings were crowded, and witnesses were encouraged. Most clearly enjoyed the opportunity to decry their landlords or factors in public; stories were told of injustices, mostly in times when fishing tenures still applied. There were more active manifestations of this new confidence – for example, in disputes and court cases with John Bruce, one of the most reactionary and unpopular landlords.⁶⁰

Security of tenure had made the most difference to these attitudes, but other aspects of recent experience also mattered. Witnesses to the Napier Commission had been treated with respect, and legislation had been the outcome. The franchise had been extended in 1885.⁶¹ Newspapers had also contributed by reporting the Crofters Commission's operations, visits

57. *SN*, 31 August 1889, 5; 14 September 1889, 5.

58. PP. 1893–94. LXXI. Report by the Crofters Commission for 1892. 109.

59. Irvine 1985: 33, 60; Tudor 1883: 177; Smith 2000: 76.

60. Renwantz 1980; Sutherland 1989; Smith 2003.

61. Tindley 2002: 95–96.

by crofters' leaders, and debates about the circumstances; *The Shetland Times* had encouraged crofters to make applications.⁶²

But the herring boom had also been influential. It boosted confidence to be free from debt or just to know the price for fish in advance, perhaps bargaining for higher prices, and to choose to sell fish to someone who was not connected with land tenure. As early as 1883, it was reported that 'the men are fast achieving a position which will enable them to dictate their own terms to the curers', and fishermen held their first public meeting about prices and bounties.⁶³ This challenged out-of-date views: 'that this immeasurably poor and down-trodden thrall should be practically dictating his own terms to his quondam masters' would give rise to incredulity.⁶⁴ Remarkably, this continued in the recession. The men who 'went on strike' in 1891 had learned about organising resistance, having a spokesman and a committee representative of different areas, and the importance of communication – using the bellman to drum up support.⁶⁵ A branch of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union was established the same month.⁶⁶ A similar 'strike' followed next spring in Whalsay, when fishermen's refusal to accept prices for cod and ling led to the despatch of a gunboat by the overreacting authorities.⁶⁷

While incoming curers were credited with raising prices and other benefits, there had also been other increased contacts with the outside world.⁶⁸ Shetland became known as a principal location of the fishing economy, not just a backward society of antiquarian interest.

62. *Ibid.*: 96–97; *ST*, 31 July 1886, 2; *SN*, 3 September 1887, 4.

63. *ST*, 10 February 1883, 3 (from *The People's Journal*); *ST*, 27 October 1883, 2.

64. Rampini 1984: 65.

65. Ratter 1983.

66. *SN*, 22 August 1891, 4.

67. *ST*, 23 April 1892, 2.

68. PP. 1884. XXIV. Napier Commission. 1219, 1282, 1287.

Both visits of the Crofters Commission coincided with the nadirs of the herring recession. Nevertheless, a lawyer representing crofters predicted: 'today is the dawn of a new order of things, and henceforth a spirit of independence and a sense of security and freedom, will spring up among the crofters in Shetland'.⁶⁹ The herring industry, by providing new opportunities and increasing earnings, had facilitated this transformation. It is perhaps too much to say that Shetland society became 'vociferous in demanding its rights and expressing its views'.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the change in a short period was remarkable.

The debate in the newspapers

The main sources of contemporary views are the two local newspapers, which provided both reports on events and commentary. *The Shetland Times*, launched in 1872, published local news, letters, and reports from Scottish and national newspapers, as did *The Shetland News* from 1885. Both are rich sources for social and economic conditions, particularly in their year-end summaries. For fishing, there were weekly reports, and a longer one at the end of the summer season, also covering mainland ports and European markets.

As a source, newspapers are complex. 'A text, a record of historical events, a representation of society and a chronicle of contemporary opinions, aspirations and debates [...] also a business enterprise, a professional organization, a platform for advertisements and itself a commodity', their content should not be accepted without scrutiny.⁷¹ Here they reflected different political views: *The Shetland Times* was liberal, *The*

69. *SN*, 31 August 1889, 5.

70. Fryer 1995: 96.

71. Vella 2009: 93–94.

Shetland News conservative. The competition provides a check on the accuracy of information, though there were rarely major discrepancies on news. Despite overlap, both newspapers were supported, but, while it is very likely that most people were aware of the content, it cannot be assumed that they reflected the views of the entire population. They carried reports from rural districts but were published in Lerwick, and had a certain bias towards the town.

During the early 1880s, they were upbeat and enthusiastic about the herring boom. In the 1885 year-end review, however, *The Shetland Times* assessed the situation:

The two great elements in the material prosperity of Shetland – the crops and the fishings – have been undoubtedly failures in the bygone year [...]. The several previous fortunate seasons ought to have left so much in hand everywhere in our islands, that one bad season should be tided over without much difficulty and without rendering it necessary to appeal for that charitable aid which is the last resort of every community with proper notions of self-support and independence.⁷²

This introduced recurring themes: both fishing and crops were required to sustain the population, the boom had provided enough surplus to cover a poor season, and seeking outside aid was to be discouraged. Another, agreed by both newspapers, was the interdependence of social classes: ‘in the body social as well as in the body individual – if one member suffer, all the others suffer with it. If curers are ruined – there’s an end of our fishing industries’.⁷³ Unfortunately, there was not just one poor season, and *The Shetland News* saw 1886 as ‘one of the most trying periods our

72. *ST*, 4 January 1886, 2.

73. *Ibid.*

Islands have ever passed through [...] the result is that the bulk of the population has had to endure much privation and many hardships'.⁷⁴ But the newspapers conceded that 'few if any have been reduced to absolute want'.⁷⁵ By 1887, however, there were reports of impoverishment. 'Our fishermen came up with a bound', lamented *The Shetland News*, 'and they are apparently going down as fast'.⁷⁶

Fishermen were encouraged not to depend on the short herring season.⁷⁷ The newspapers disagreed, however, on the scale of the hardship and how people could cope. *The Shetland News* tended to minimise deprivation and thought people could work their way out of difficulty. *The Shetland Times* painted a bleaker picture; crofters had small landholdings and faced high rents as well as unprofitable fishing.

There was a lively discussion in 1888. *The Shetland News* asserted that, with hard work, fishing and a croft could adequately sustain a family; crops would produce food for most of the year; and the sale of a pony would pay rent and taxes, allowing the fishing income to buy a small amount of 'luxuries'.⁷⁸ *The Shetland Times* was adamant: 'No one can visit the country districts just now and fail to recognise the state of poverty in which the crofters are situated'.⁷⁹ Having collected information on income, it summarised: 'the bulk of the crofting population of Shetland are neither well fed nor well clothed, and the less said about their house accommodation the better'.⁸⁰ *The Shetland News*, producing its own examples,

74. *SN*, 1 January 1887, 4.

75. *ST*, 1 January 1887, 2; *SN*, 1 January 1887, 4.

76. *SN*, 17 September 1887, 4.

77. *SN*, 14 August 1886, 4.

78. *SN*, 22 September 1888, 4.

79. *ST*, 6 October 1888, 2.

80. *ST*, 13 October 1888, 2.

maintained that ‘the condition of the people is not as near pauperism as *The Shetland Times* would have us believe’.⁸¹ *The Shetland Times* argued that many crofters lived on poor land and that the herring had left more in debt; potentially over 40% would be bankrupt if pressed for payment.⁸² *The Shetland News* countered that crofters had a multiplicity of sources of income and now security of tenure, and that *The Shetland Times* was backward-looking and preaching ‘a gospel of despair’.⁸³

In their year-end reports, both newspapers modified their stance. *The Shetland News* acknowledged: ‘there has been such a constant run of ill-luck lately, that every effort has been required to make ends meet’.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, *The Shetland Times* admitted: ‘However, the cry of “hard times” is not so loud, nor so general as it was last year at this time’.⁸⁵

The newspapers’ ideological differences help balance perspective, but they could be so engrossed in argument that it clouded the picture. They were also inconsistent. Although they denied ‘absolute want’, they admitted poverty, hardship, and even ‘destitution’.⁸⁶ There was an aversion to creating a bad impression and a pride in Shetland’s survival.⁸⁷ *The Shetland News* contrasted the Shetlanders’ willingness to seek external employment with the apathy of the Irish and Western Highlanders.⁸⁸ *The Leeds Mercury*’s claim that Shetlanders had ‘nothing but starvation staring them in the face’ was deemed ‘a most astounding statement’.⁸⁹

81. *SN*, 20 October 1888, 4; 3 November 1888, 4.

82. *ST*, 27 October 1888, 2; 10 November 1888, 2.

83. *SN*, 3 November 1888, 4; 17 November 1888, 4.

84. *SN*, 29 December 1888, 4.

85. *ST*, 29 December 1888, 2.

86. *SN*, 31 December 1887, 4.

87. *SN*, 6 October 1888, 2.

88. *SN*, 31 December 1887, 4.

89. *SN*, 3 December 1892, 4.

Both newspapers referred to the psychological effect of the herring fishing. The bustle and optimism of the boom gave way to disillusionment: 'when that time is recalled, few but will regret that all these expectations were doomed to disappointment, and that the golden hopes then formed should have been completely blasted'.⁹⁰ The recession brought discouragement: 'the trade seemed to be devoid of the energy and life which formerly characterised it', and the fishermen 'pursued the late fishing in a half-hearted, apathetic, "düless" [slothful] fashion'.⁹¹ In contrast, the improvement in 1890, *The Shetland News* claimed, 'has put new life into everything. Shetland was beginning to look as though it were plague-stricken'.⁹² More prosaically, *The Shetland Times* reported 'everyone seemed to rejoice in the prosperous turn events had taken [...] Matters are assuming a more hopeful tone all round'.⁹³ Of course, newspapers can influence as well as reflect popular views.

The Shetland Times suggested that 'it is always darkest before the dawn'; but unfortunately that was in 1891, just before 1892 showed how dark it could get.⁹⁴ Then, it summarised: 'Men have hoped and persevered; persevered until now it is almost hopeless; and there seems little but ruin and destitution ahead'.⁹⁵ *The Shetland News*, though stressing 'anything like starvation among the people as a class is fortunately a stretch of the imagination', admitted 'misfortunes have told heavily on the bulk of the population'.⁹⁶

90. *ST*, 28 December 1889, 2.

91. *ST*, 15 September 1888, 2; *SN*, 15 September 1888, 4.

92. *SN*, 9 August 1890, 4.

93. *ST*, 13 September 1890, 2.

94. *ST*, 26 December 1891, 2.

95. *ST*, 27 August 1892, 2.

96. *SN*, 3 December 1892, 4; 31 December 1892, 2.

The higher catches in 1893 brought new hope. *The Shetland News* decided: ‘The result is to leave the county in a very much better condition than it was at the close of 1892’, while *The Shetland Times* thought: ‘All things considered, the county of Shetland is fairly well off’ and ‘The pinch of “hard times” is still felt, but it is not so general as it was two or three years back’.⁹⁷

Means of survival

Given that commentators claimed the herring fishery was the mainstay of the economy, how did Shetlanders survive the recession? An assessment in *The Shetland News* provides clues:

When we consider all the things that can be done to support a Shetland family – farming, fishing, sailing, and knitting – [...] the toiler in the far north has many things to be thankful for [...] Forty or sixty years ago, the failure of one branch was sufficient to cause desolation and famine [...] This is not the case now-a-days.⁹⁸

Even in the worst year, the herring catch was four times the 1879 total (Figure 1), and this was still the most valuable fishery. The statistics must be treated with caution. Since many of the curers and fishermen came from outside, most of the revenue generated directly left Shetland.⁹⁹ The total catch and value were unreliable indicators of the profitability for local fishermen, who were partly protected by the engagement system and benefitted most if the late fishing was successful.

97. *SN*, 30 December 1893, 4; *ST*, 18 November 1893, 2; 30 December 1893, 2.

98. *SN*, 27 December 1890, 4.

99. Coull 1988: 37.

The curers bore initial costs and the risks involved in selling the fish, and prices were determined by various factors, including the quantity and quality of fish on the market and conditions in consumer countries. The recession, however, affected other employment and general trade. But the boom had been short-lived, and the habits and resources of the past remained.

Herring was never the only fishing. Participation in the haaf had declined especially after fifty-eight men died in a storm in 1881, but sixerns returned briefly to favour with new boats built in 1889 and a large fleet in 1892.¹⁰⁰ The introduction of decked boats had initiated a cod and ling fishing from March until June that also encouraged a longer season for sixerns. The 'smack' fishing in Faroese and Icelandic waters had already been on the decline before the boom had attracted manpower away, but it revived with about twenty vessels and new grounds.¹⁰¹ Despite transport difficulties, the inshore winter fishing expanded for haddocks to be sold fresh.¹⁰² So commercial fishing was becoming more of a year-round activity. Nevertheless, the best indicator of the prosperity of fishing was the combined value, and it dropped immensely (Figure 5).

And fishing was never the only occupation. Whaling had greatly declined, but – despite being rarely quantified in the newspapers – the contribution to the economy of employment in the Merchant Navy was substantial.¹⁰³ Though hard and dangerous, it was not seasonal, paid a guaranteed wage, and could be combined with other work. Perhaps the majority of Shetland men served some time at sea, although this was not fully visible in the censuses. Numbers dropped during the boom

100. Halcrow 1994: 75–80; *ST*, 30 July 1881, 2; *SN*, 28 December 1889, 4; 31 December 1892, 4.

101. Goodlad 2017: 38–40.

102. Smith 1884: 168.

103. Smith 1984: 158–159.

years, but *The Shetland Times* reckoned 20% of crofters went to sea in the winter of 1888 to 1889.¹⁰⁴ Opportunities were not always limitless. Foreign seamen were being employed at low wages, and trade union activity, with strikes in 1889 and 1892, caused disruption. In early 1893 – a very critical time for Shetland – 500 British ships were not in use.¹⁰⁵

Another sometimes underappreciated source of income was knitting. Nearly all women, except the affluent, knitted for sale, and more so when there was no gutting.¹⁰⁶ *The Shetland News* asserted in 1892 that ‘it would be not too much to say that their industry comes in to stave off what would otherwise often be a state of absolute want’.¹⁰⁷

Most Shetlanders still lived in agricultural communities with subsistence crops and some stock for sale, though not all had land. The recession was always worst when crops, particularly corn and potatoes, failed – as, for example, in 1885, when *The Shetland Times* reported: ‘Thus both strings of our bow gave way’.¹⁰⁸ In 1886 and 1888, although the corn was poor, potatoes did well; 1887’s crops were good; and 1889’s fine summer produced the best yields for a long time, stock prices rose, and the condition of crofters improved. From 1890, however, poor harvests culminated in 1892 with the loss of many sheep and the failure of both grain and potatoes. This was the lowest point.

It is difficult to evaluate the significance of the crofters’ rent reductions, although they were doubtless welcome. The removal of the threat of eviction was also a great relief, but tenants had already been free from tenures that compelled them to fish for their landlord before the herring boom; otherwise, it could not

104. Halcrow 1994: 137; *ST*, 6 April 1889, 2.

105. *SN*, 6 July 1889, 4; *ST*, 14 January 1893, 2.

106. Fryer 1995.

107. *SN*, 31 December 1892, 4.

108. *ST*, 2 January 1886, 2.

have occurred. In 1883, the Napier Commission was told of only a few cases where compulsion still existed.¹⁰⁹ Russell, a minister, credited this partly to public opinion and partly to improvements in fishing.¹¹⁰ The change has not been entirely explained; Brian Smith wrote: 'It thus becomes a mystery how it disappeared as rapidly as it did'.¹¹¹

One effect of the boom, however, was a decrease in the form of truck enforced by landlords and factors.¹¹² Although the Truck Commission of 1872 did not result in relevant legislation, the publicity seems to have had some effect. The Napier Commission reported that truck was disappearing 'before the forces of increasing intelligence, public opinion and commercial competition'.¹¹³ Hance Smith also considered that the increasing mobility of labour during the herring boom was a major cause.¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, truck did not disappear overnight. Tudor reported that, despite new shops, the fact that 'many evils arising from the system still survive is undoubted'.¹¹⁵ Herring fishermen were still not paid until after the season: curers and merchants still provided boats and goods on credit.¹¹⁶ If a curer owned or part-owned a boat, the crew would have to sell their catch to that particular curer.¹¹⁷ In some places, there

109. PP. 1884. XXIV. Napier Commission. 1224, 1434, 1320.

110. Russell 1887: 144.

111. Smith 2000: 77.

112. In this form of truck, tenants, as a condition of landholding, might have to sell fish and other produce exclusively to the landlord or his nominee and buy boats, fishing gear, and other goods from him. Rent might also be included in the arrangement, which was sometimes enforced by threats of eviction. Smith 2000: 65–80.

113. PP. 1884. XXII. Napier Commission. 48.

114. Smith 1984: 156–158; Irvine 2005: 162. See also Coull 1998: 34; Gray 1978: 1, 200.

115. Tudor 1883: 131.

116. Halcrow 1994: 137; PP. 1884. XXIV. Napier Commission. 1283, 1238.

117. *Ibid.*: 1205, 1238, 1282–1283.

was no choice, as a curer or merchant was able to prevent the establishment of competitive businesses.¹¹⁸ The difference now was that fishermen knew the price for fish in advance and, provided proceeds exceeded debts, received cash.¹¹⁹ Men who owned their boat outright were free to fish for whomever they wished, and might get better prices, though they did not vary by much and were reported in the newspapers.¹²⁰ Curers from outside Shetland were less likely to be interested in long-term economic ties to fishermen. But the practice of maintaining integrated boat and family accounts with merchants endured. Credit was still supporting those who were struggling.

Some people, however, found the struggle too difficult or envisaged better opportunities elsewhere and chose to leave. This had been the case for some time, but had been retarded by the boom; Russell thought that 'economic causes have stopped the tide of emigration from Shetland'.¹²¹ In 1883, an Australian emigration agent found his task very difficult.¹²² The net loss between the 1881 and 1891 censuses has been calculated at 10%, less than in the previous decade but probably concentrated in the last four years.¹²³ Then, the newspapers frequently referred to people emigrating, mainly young men. The external opportunities – the Merchant Navy and emigration – were seen as the saviours of Shetland.

This period in Shetland's history saw many changes, some related to the herring fishery and some not. One outcome was recognition of the potential of government assistance. Another commission enquiring into conditions was lobbied by the

118. *Ibid.*: 1355–1362, 1392.

119. *Ibid.*: 1223–1224, 1283, 1286–1287, 1322.

120. *Ibid.*: 1284, 1222–1223, 1238.

121. Russell 1887: 112.

122. *ST*, 5 August 1882, 2.

123. Barclay 1967: 53.

County Council with a list of requirements relating, for example, to steamer services, roads, harbours, and telegraph facilities, many of which were recommended.¹²⁴ The Western Highlands and Islands (Scotland) Works Acts 1891 was of limited value, but some government grants were also forthcoming in 1893.¹²⁵

There was, therefore, some flexibility in the Shetland economy. The range of sources of income, though none were lucrative, made an overall evaluation difficult. Even then, there were differences of opinion, evident in the newspapers. Shetland had experienced poor fisheries many times before and so the expectation was that catches would pick up again. Even in the worst years, there were good catches, and some crews did well, but there was nearly a decade of generally hard times. Rent reductions in 1889 and 1890's expanded herring catch improved the situation temporarily, but another year like 1892 could have been catastrophic.

Conclusion

In 1891, *The Shetland Times* described the herring boom and recession: 'the wave of prosperity which reached Shetland recently [...] receded, and [...] left wrack and confusion in its train'.¹²⁶ The boom was a major upheaval, and the recession seemed all the more acute because it followed this unparalleled widespread success. It accelerated change which contemporaries attributed to herring. The recession retarded some of

124. *SN*, 27 December 1890, 4; *ST*, 27 December 1890, 2; Irvine 1985: 194; PP 1890–91. XLIV. Second Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into Certain Matters affecting the interests of the Western Highlands and Islands, 5, 10; Tindley 2002: 59–63.

125. *Ibid.*: 63–64; *SN*, 30 December 1893, 4.

126. *ST*, 1 August 1891, 2.

these changes, such as the decline of truck and the haaf fishery. However, other influences were in play, and Shetland did not merely return to previous circumstances. Ordinary people had seen new possibilities, and attitudes had changed, due also to other factors, particularly security of tenure and more contact with the outside world. This transformation can be seen in the evidence to the Crofters Commission and negotiations between fishermen and curers.

The enthusiasm with which the local press and other commentators greeted the boom shows how it was perceived as a huge increase in economic activity and a vast improvement. Besides higher earnings for fishermen, there were opportunities for other employment, a seasonal influx of people, and increased trade, dispersed throughout the islands. The recession dashed hopes of consistent expansion and brought a partial retreat to other means of livelihood, other fisheries, agriculture, knitwear, and the Merchant Navy.

An assessment of the overall severity of the effects is problematic, as circumstances, individual experience, and opinions varied. The herring fishing never moved past the boom to a steady state operation before the recession. If we consider it not as a blip in the triumphal progress of King Herring, but recognise the boom as a temporary peak of prosperity, we see the precarious nature of the Shetland economy. Operating in a tough geographical environment, its fishing was hampered by underdeveloped technology and transport difficulties from selling in a market beginning to prefer fresh fish to cured; and its agriculture was limited by small holdings and out-of-date methods. It was flexible, but much of that flexibility was provided by external opportunities.

The immediate aftermath, however, was that catches of herring in Shetland waters increased again, bringing a return to high levels of activity, comparative affluence and optimism,

and rising with fluctuations to a peak in 1905. The low catches from 1886 to 1892 faded from popular memory, with nostalgia playing its part.¹²⁷ In contemporary accounts, there was probably an understandable measure of hyperbole, in descriptions both of the boom and of the recession. A more balanced review described this time as part of a 'period of oscillating and intermittent progress towards a modern Shetland' with 'a modestly prosperous economy emerging'.¹²⁸

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127. E.g. Halcrow 1994: 137.

128. Fryer 1995: 93.

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