

INTRODUCTION

Fishing has taken place off the coast of Scotland since man first arrived nine thousand years ago. Initially people fished from the shore with hooks and lines but soon used boats to fish for bigger and better fish.

The East Sutherland coast is generally flat with a few large estuaries notably the Dornoch Firth. Unfortunately these do not provide good mooring or harbours for boats so they had to be drawn up onto the beach at the end of the day. Without a harbour large scale fishing was difficult in the past.

However in the 1800s landowners wanted to improve the economy of the Highlands and began building fishing villages all along the coast of Scotland in order to exploit the riches of the surrounding seas. This happened in Sutherland at Helmsdale, Brora and Embo and it wasn't until the middle of the 1800s that many of the piers were built.



S C A P E

Scottish Coastal Archaeology and the Problem of Erosion



DIGGING FOR LUGWORMS FOR BAIT

White fish, cod ling, saithe and haddock were already being caught by individual fishermen using a long line with hundreds of hooks baited by their womenfolk.

DIGGING FOR LUGWORMS



© Historylinks

BAITING THE HOOKS



THE FISHWIFE

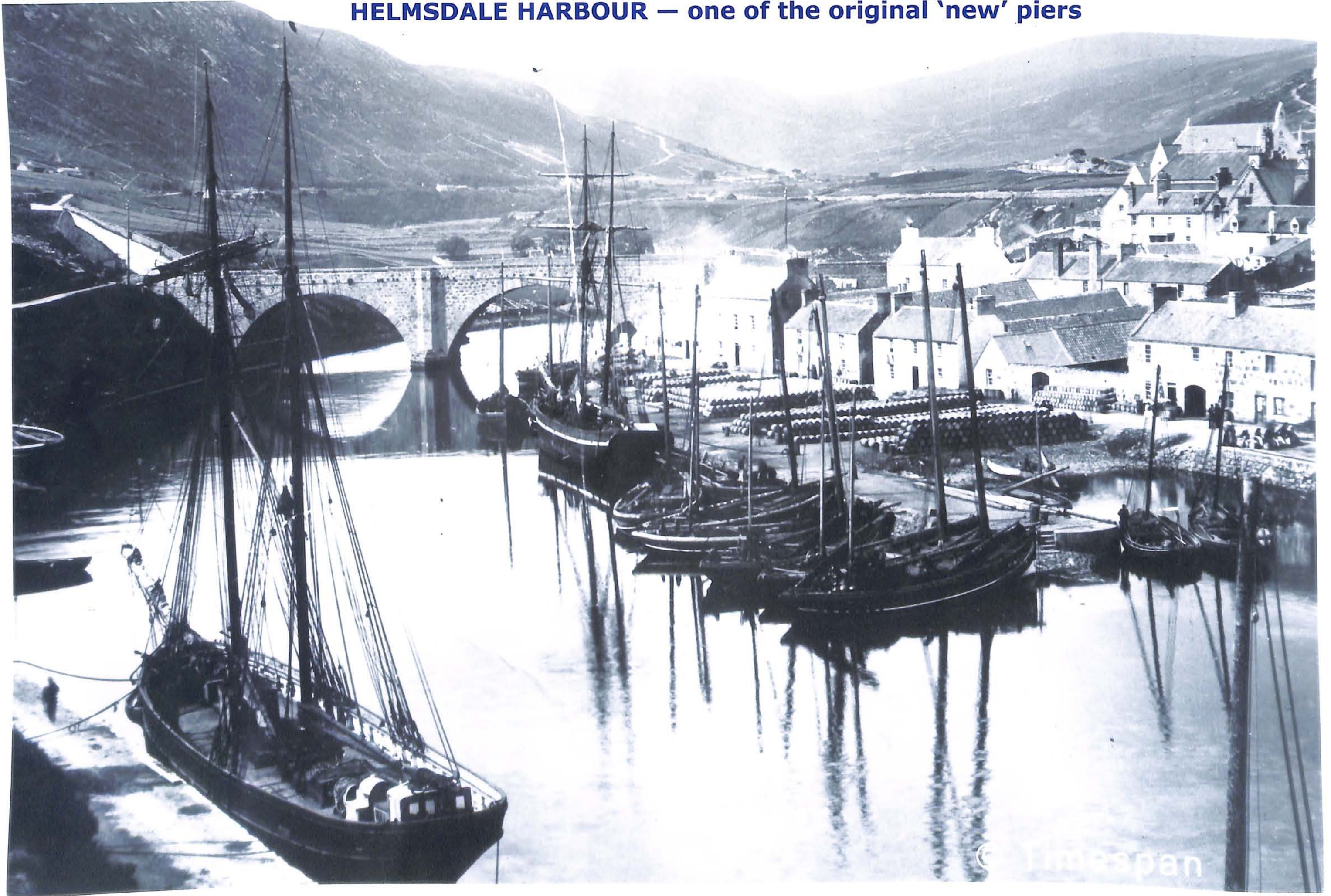


Once baited the lines were carefully laid in a basket. This went into the small boat beside the fisherman who was often carried by his wife out to the boat.

This was done to keep him as dry as possible before a day's work out at sea in an open boat.

Once landed the fish were processed by the women and taken around the country for sale or sometimes exchanged for butter and cheese.

HELMSDALE HARBOUR — one of the original 'new' piers



© Timespan

GUTTING THE FISH



© The Wick Society



HERRING GUTTERS, WICK.

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Herring, an oily fish, needs to be preserved very quickly after being caught. In the 1800s salting was the only way to process the huge amounts coming ashore. Women were employed to gut and pack the herring in barrels.

A good crew of 3 women could gut and pack 60 fish a minute. The herring shoals moved south from Shetland (Baltsound and Lerwick) to East Anglia (Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft) from May to November and the fishermen, boats and women followed the 'silver darlings' through the year.

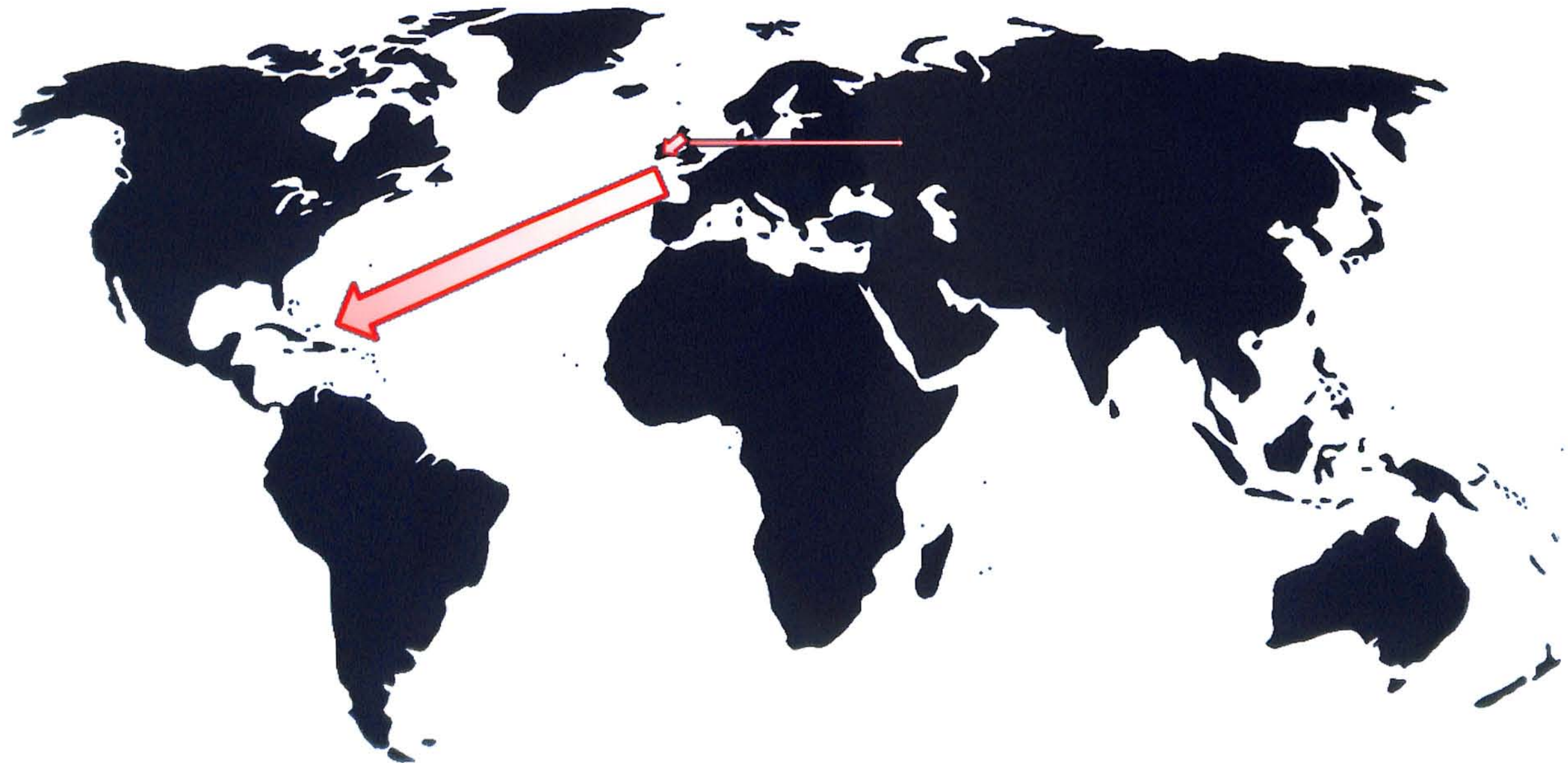


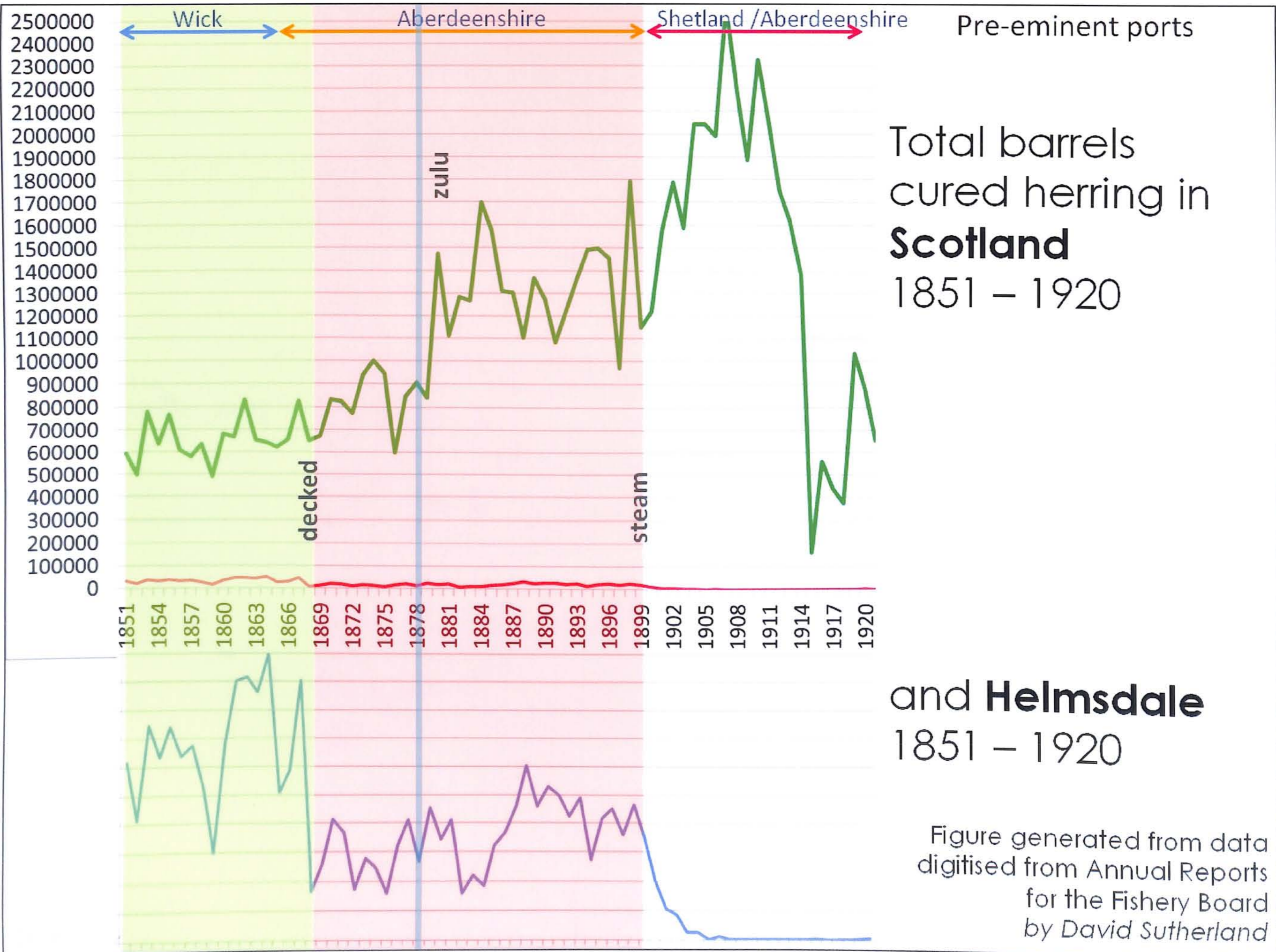
PULTENEY HARBOUR.

HERRING FISHING

Alongside this small scale family based fishing, during the 1800s, a more industrial type of fishing for herring was developing. The British Fisheries Society had been founded to exploit this resource and planned to build 40 fishing ports between Arran and Dornoch. However only 3 were built and 2 were successful, Ullapool and Wick/Pulteytown.

Herring swim in very large shoals and between 1800 and 1950 the catches were huge. Before the abolition of slavery in 1833 much of the salt herring was sold to the Caribbean as food for the slaves. By 1850 the main markets were Russia and Germany until the First World War. Between 1918 and 1950 the fish stocks reduced noticeably and by 1950 salt herring had become 'unfashionable'.





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1851 1854 1857 1860 1863 1866 1869 1872 1875 1878 1881 1884 1887 1890 1893 1896 1899 1902 1905 1908 1911 1914 1917 1920

Total barrels cured herring in **Scotland** 1851 – 1920

and **Helmsdale** 1851 – 1920

Figure generated from data digitised from Annual Reports for the Fishery Board by David Sutherland

EMBO

Our own local port, Embo, developed from small beginnings as a white fishing village but it seems likely that it was intended as a herring port.

ROY MILITARY SURVEY OF SCOTLAND HIGHLANDS, 1747-52



OLD STATISTICAL ACCOUNT, DORNOCH 1791-99, REVEREND JOHN BETHUNE

“There is only one boats crew of fishermen, who are neither skilful nor adventurous: they are, therefore wretchedly poor, and of little or no advantage to the place; while others from Murray and Banffshire, catch fish on this coast and, make money by carrying away cod, haddocks, skate, flounders etc.”

When Roy surveyed the Highlands in 1747-52 Embo was made up of scattered small farms with three or four houses at the 'shore of Embo' and this is confirmed by the Old Statistical Account description. By the time of Burnett and Scott's map in 1832 there was an established 'Fishertown', confirmed this time in the New Statistical Account of 1844.

**MAP OF THE COUNTY OF SUTHERLAND
1831-32, GREGORY BURNETT & WILLIAM SCOTT**



© National Library of Scotland

**SECOND (NEW) STATISTICAL ACCOUNTS
1844, REVEREND ANGUS KENNEDY**

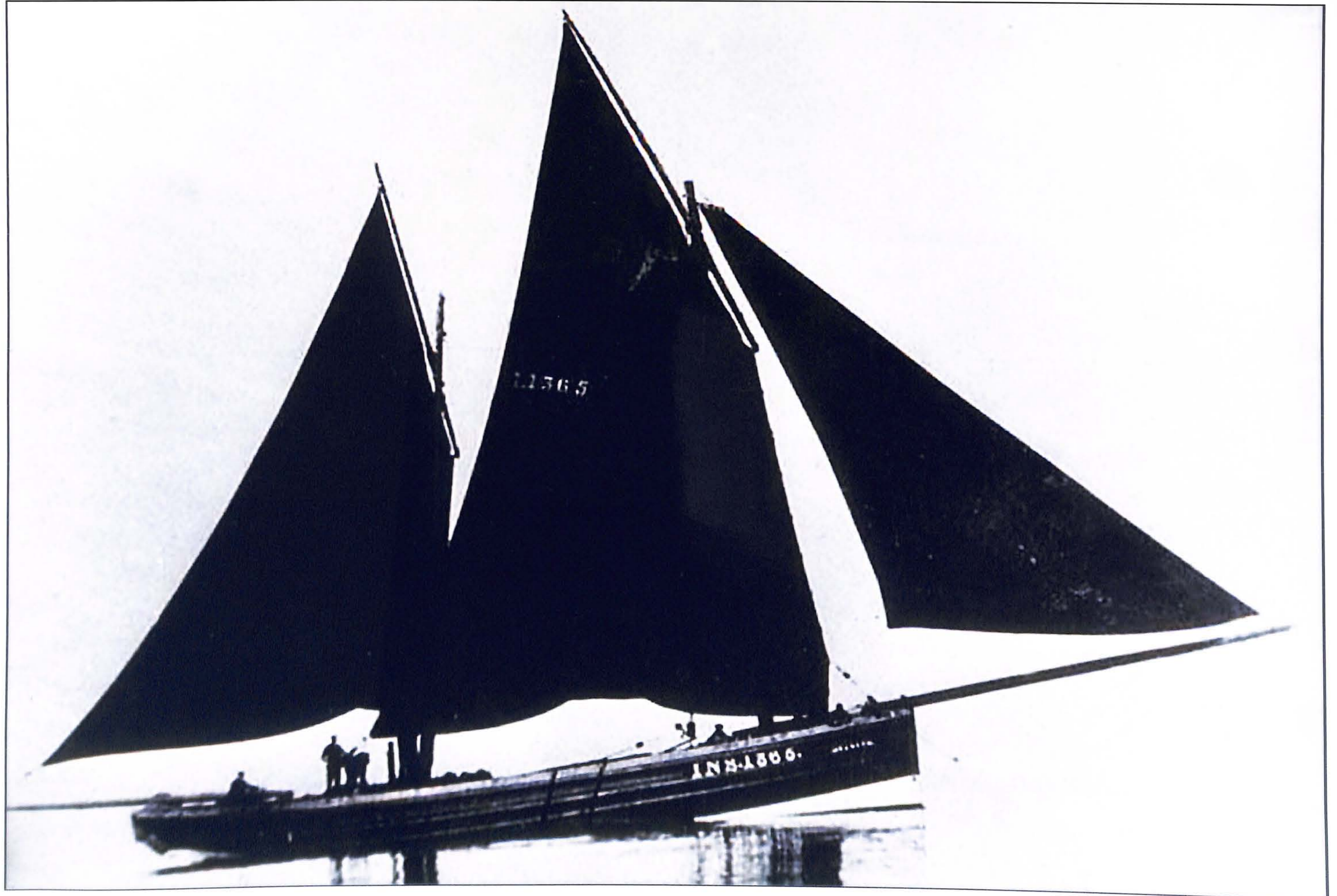
“There is no regular fishery in the parish. There is indeed a colony of fishermen at Embo; but they only fish for haddocks, small cods, flounders etc. which they sell in the fresh state. The women carry the fish in creels on their backs to this town, and throughout the Parish, and sell it as best they can. Of late years, they have engaged in the herring fishing by hiring themselves to fish curers for the season, - the fish deliverable in the fresh state at so much per crane, and the nets provided by the fishermen. The curers allow a certain quantity of whisky to each boat crew. To the credit of the fishermen at Embo, it should be observed, that, with few exceptions, they are sober and industrious, and some very pious.”

There were 'curing yards' to the south of the village and by the late 1800s the fishermen were successful enough to buy Zulus, a kind of boat, suitable for going to the herring grounds to catch this valuable fish.

The women also went as 'gutters', sometimes travelling with their husbands and fathers on the boats but also by train on the Dornoch light railway which joined into the main rail system to Wick and down to Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft.

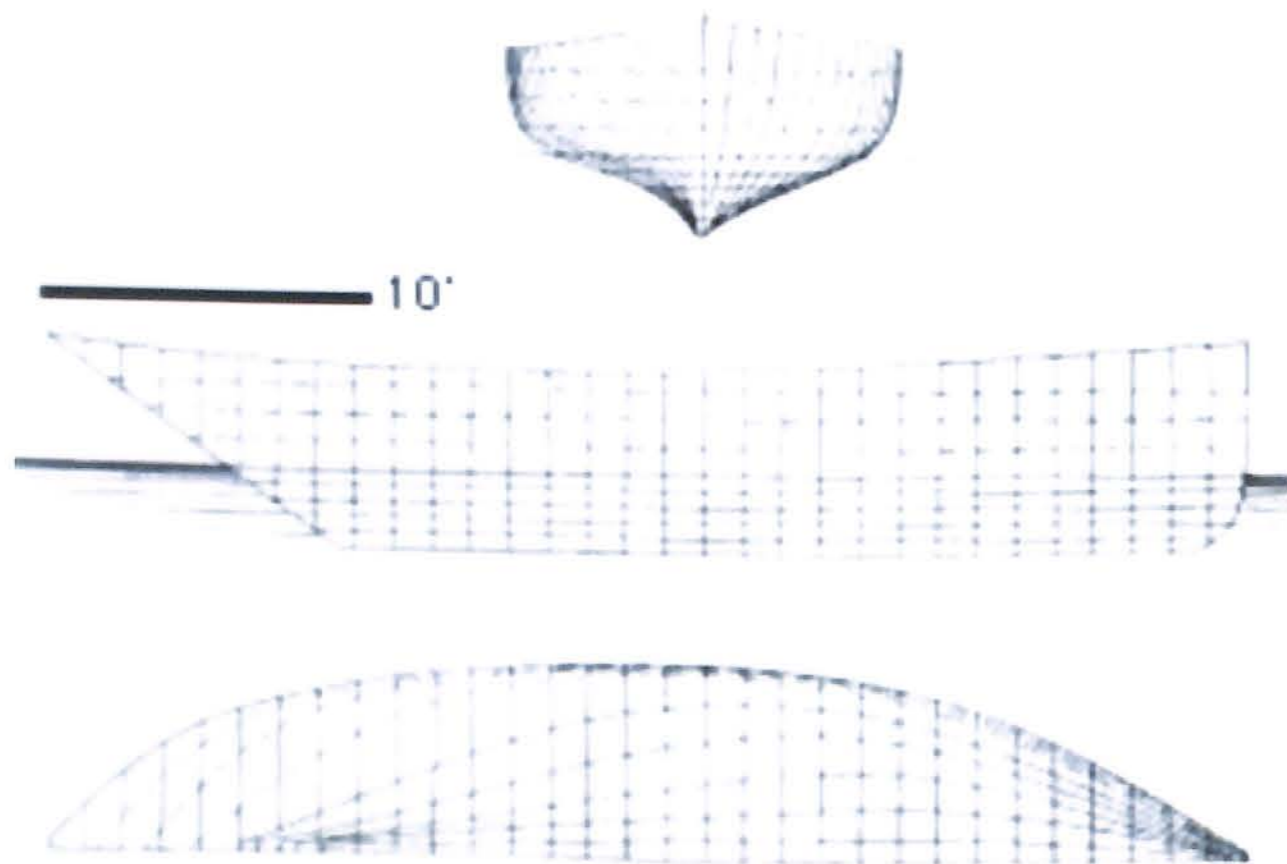
FISHWORKER'S RETURN RAIL TICKET TO LOWESTOFT





ZULUS

This kind of boat was the last of a series of wooden sail powered boats used in the herring industry. First built in Lossimouth in 1879 this boat is very distinctive in style and seems to be a combination of the 2 previous types of boats, the Skaffie and Fifie. The Zulu was named after the Zulu wars taking place at the time of the first boats being built and like the Zulus of South Africa it was fast and manoeuvrable. The last Zulu was working until the 1960s. From the 1900s steam drifters were introduced which were larger and even faster than the Zulus, which became superseded.



THE STORY OF EMBO'S LAST ZULU HERRING DRIFTERS



S C A P E

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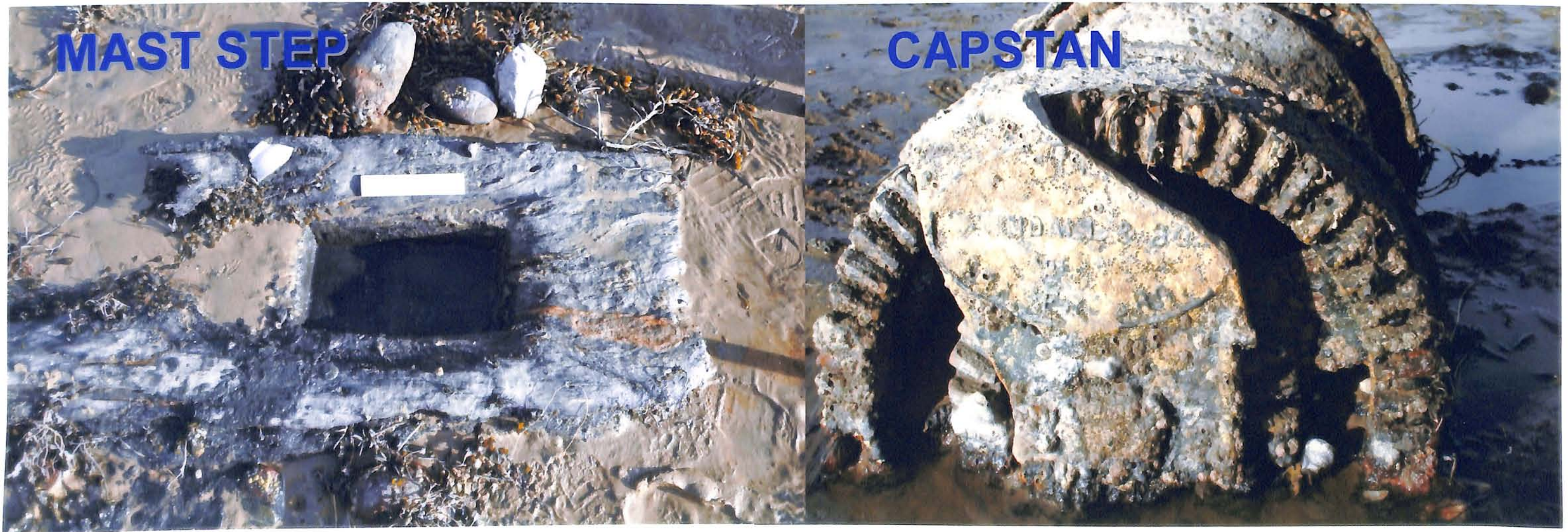


The boats show no signs of burning, although there are some cut ends to some of the main timbers. Almost all of the fittings of the boats have disappeared apart from a capstan and a few notable features such as the 'mast step' and the hook that secures the rigging of the sail.



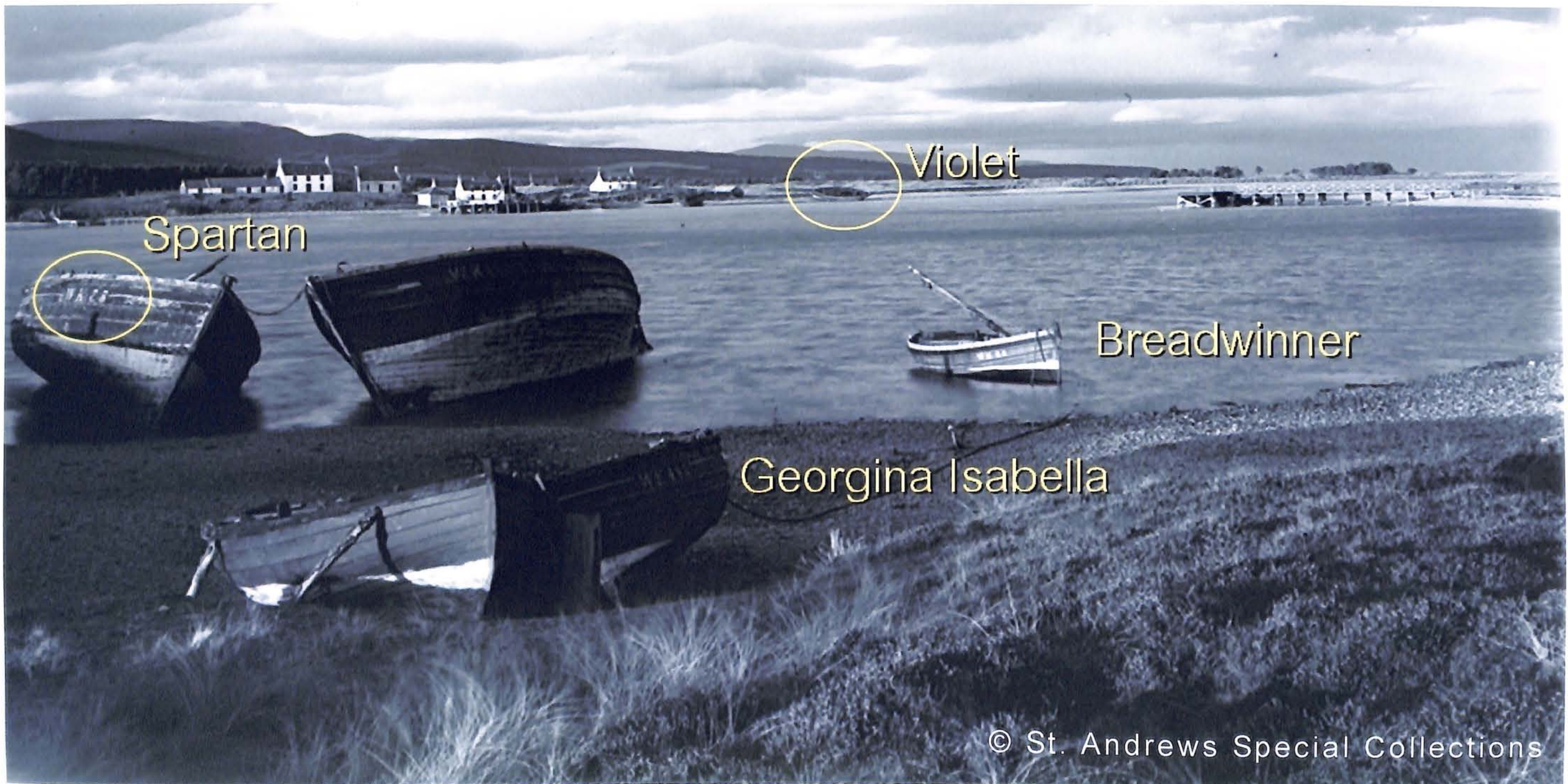
THE STORY OF EMBO

In 2013 a local archaeological group The North of Scotland Archaeological Society (NOSAS) joined Scotland's Coastal Heritage at Risk Project (SCHARP) to record the remains of the Embo fishing fleet in Skelbo bay. The skeletal remains of 17 wooden boats lie scattered on the edge of the sea. A myth, documented in the Northern Times, suggested that these boats had been taken there to be burned at the end of the First World War when the fishermen had not returned. This version of events was investigated by NOSAS over the last 2 years and they found a different but fascinating story.



A photo from St Andrews archives show two of the boats moored on the south side of Loch Fleet near to Skelbo bay with Littleferry pier in the background. The boats, a 1st Class drifter, Sparten and 3rd Class line boat Georgina Isabella are recorded in the Boat Register. Other boats are near the old pier (now gone) on the Embo side of Littleferry.

EMBO BOATS AT SKELBO BAY

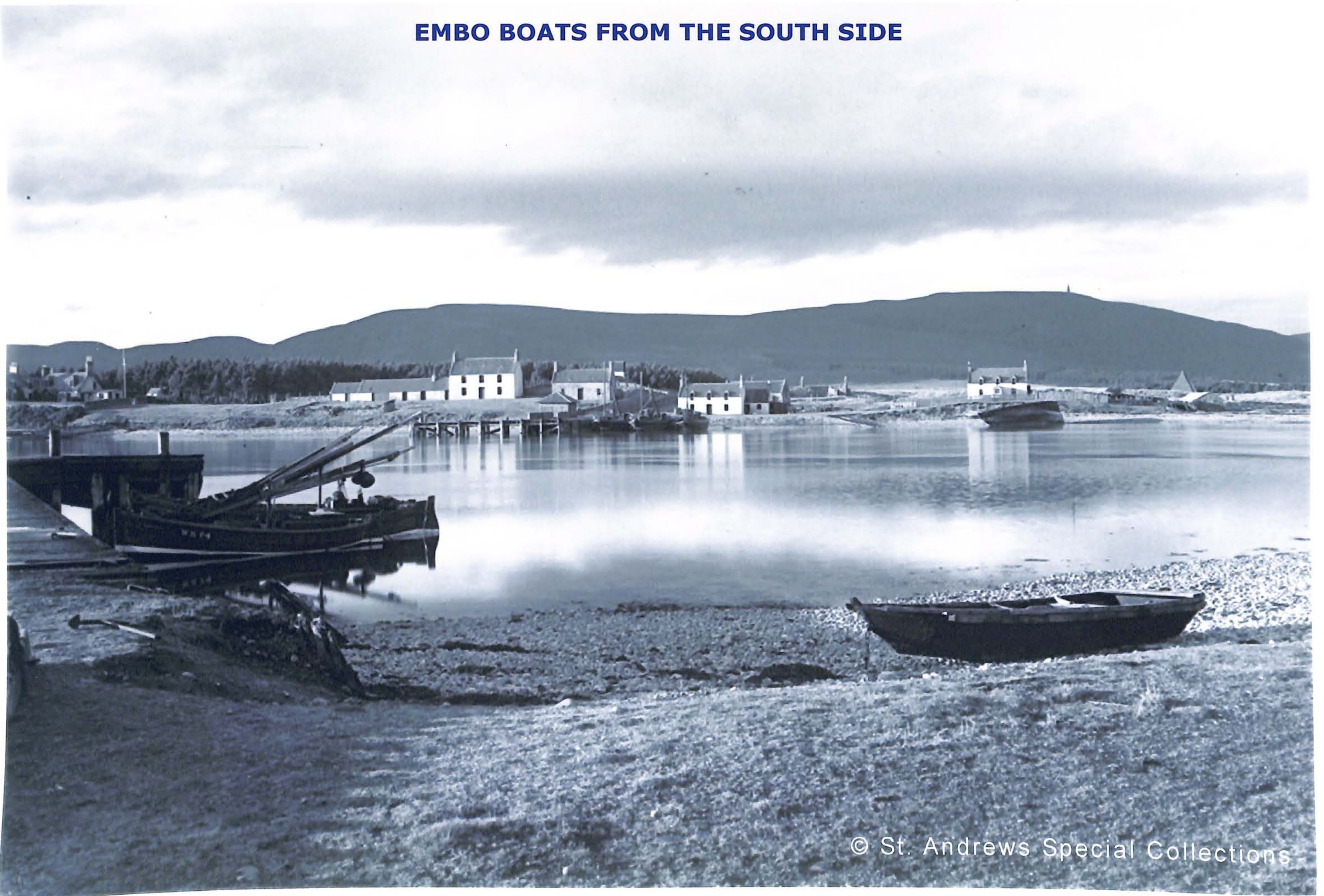


The conclusion reached by the investigators was that in fact the boats were taken round to their 'Winter port' at Skelbo and if their skippers were offered better work in Wick on a big steam trawler they took it and sadly the boats rotted away but were sometimes scavenged for wood to burn on the home fires.

EMBO BOATS AT SKELBO BAY



EMBO BOATS FROM THE SOUTH SIDE



The Sparten was registered to Hugh Ross in 1888 and the Georgina Isabella was registered to David Fraser in 1915 and according to the record it was broken up in June 1941 as were many of the Embo boats through the years after World War 1.

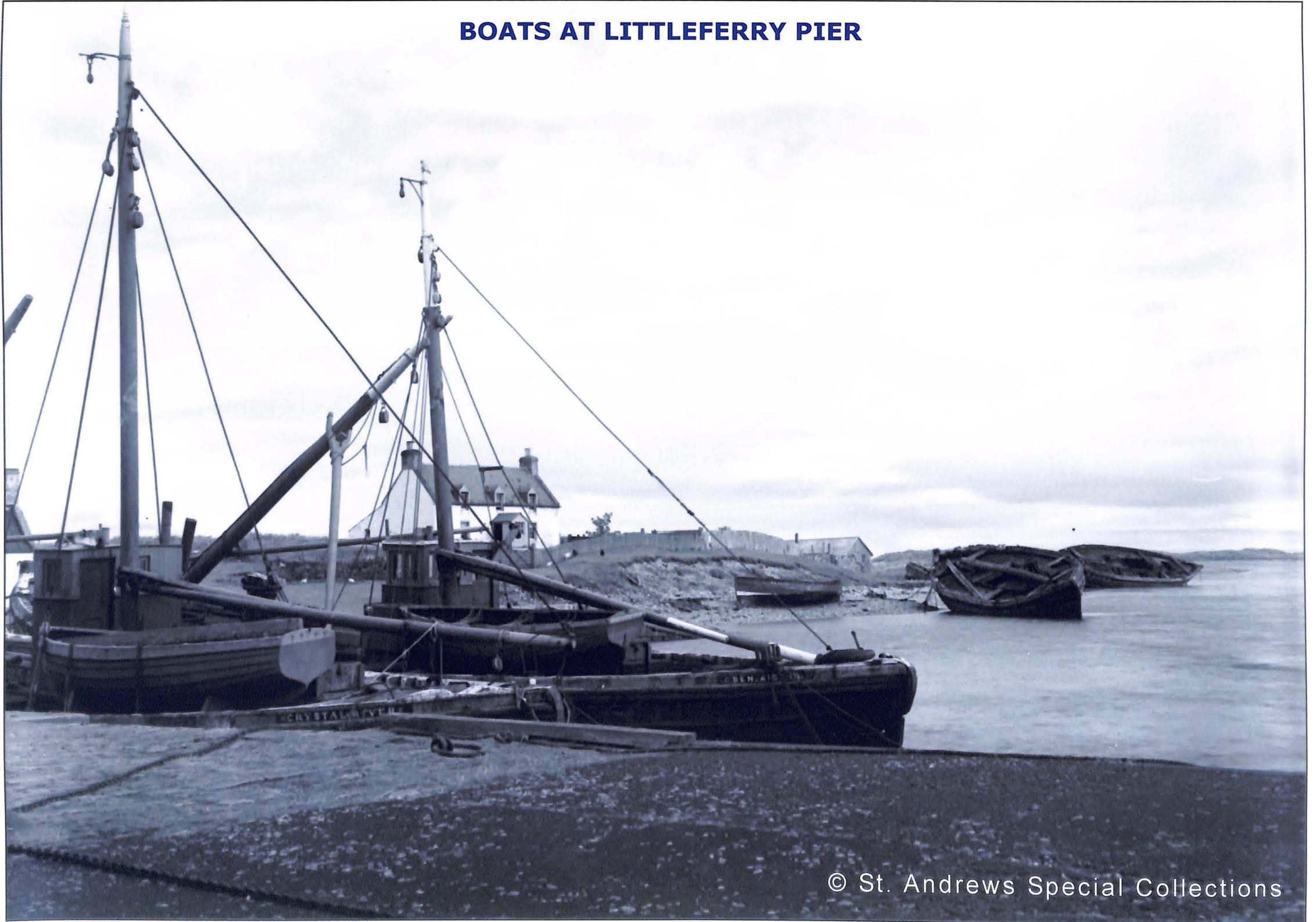
BOAT REGISTER

Harbour	Register ID	Date	Reg	Name of boat	Skipper	Owner	Subsequent Owner(s)	Rig & propulsion	Mode of	Class	Tonnage	Keel (feet)	Men	Boys	Notes	Recorder
	CE113/11/1	1869-1886													No Embo or Golspie entries	Jonie
	CE113/11/2	1869-1891													No Embo or Golspie entries	Ellie
Embo	CE 113/11/3		90930	Active		Kenneth Ross					1 21.7	55			Built 1883 Registration cancelled, vessel no longer used for cargo.	Richard
Embo	CE 113/11/4	10/1886	WK 4	Water Lilly		Wm Mackay "Kenneth"		Decked lug sail			2 5	19			Cancelled 1895	Anne
Embo	CE 113/11/4	11/02/1888	WK 18	Lilly		Donald Cumming		Decked lug sail			1 15	34				Anne
Embo	CE 113/11/4	24/09/1886	WK 28	Spartan		Hugh Ross		Decked lug sail			1 18	42				Anne
	CE 113/11/5														No entries for Embo or Golspie	
	CE 113/11/6														Inverness for conservation	
	CE 113/11/7														Inverness for conservation	
Embo	CE 113/11/8	02/01/1897	WK 619	Jasper		Kenneth McKay		Open boat, lug sail	Line		2 3	22	5	0	New boat Builder: High MacKay, carpenter, Inver, Rosshire	JH
Golspie	CE 113/11/8	26/01/1898	WK 676	Eureka		Donald McDonald Donald MacDonald Jr		Decked boat, lug sail, jib	Nets		1 23	46	6	0	Formerly INS 1273 Change of Ownership 28/02/1900 Boat unseaworthy 02/04/1908	JH
Embo	CE 113/11/8	17/07/1898	WK 678	Commodore		Kenneth McKay		Zulu decked boat, lug, sails	Nets		1 18	47	5	0	Formerly INS 3297 Change of ownership 30/11/01 Broken up 22/12/1908	JH
Embo	CE 113/11/8	02/03/1898	WK 679	Gleaner		William MacKay		Decked, lug	Nets &		1 20	46	5	0	Formerly INS 1923	JH



HOOK

BOATS AT LITTLEFERRY PIER



Visits to the Wick archives to see the Boat Registration records show the Embo fishermen were owners of up to 50 boats, including Zulus, over the period between 1888 and 1921 and there was not a sudden end to the boats in 1918.

BOAT REGISTRATION FOR ELIZABETH AND ISABELLA

*Elizabeth and Isabella WK73: Sailing boat, fitted with nets; lug rigged; 52 foot keel
 Registered in Embo to Hugh Ross and others in 1906, Built in Lossiemouth in 1892
 Ceased to be used for fishing, 26th July 1920*

A		Port <u>Wick</u>		Letters <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		(If other than Letters of Port.)		Name and Address of Builder							
Name of Boat <u>Elizabeth and Isabella</u>		Description of Boat		If Registered under Merchant Shipping Act		Length of Keel		Breadth		Depth		Tonnage		Number of Crew	
Registered Number		Port or Place to which Boat belongs		How propelled, Rig and Sail used		Mode of Fishing		Official Number		Port Number and Year		Feet		Tons	
73	Embo	Sailing lug-rigged		nets		-		-		-		18 0		5 7	
When and where built		not known		1892		Lossiemouth		-		-		-		-	
Name, Residence, and Description of the Owner and Number of Shares held by each Owner		Hugh Ross and others of Embo in the county of Sutherland fishermen.		-		-		-		-		-		-	
B		BILLS OF SALE, MORTGAGES, AND TRANSMISSIONS		-		-		-		-		-		-	
Col. 1	Col. 2	Col. 3	Col. 4	Col. 5	Col. 6	Col. 7	Col. 8	Col. 9	Col. 10	Col. 11	Col. 12	Col. 13	Col. 14	Col. 15	Col. 16

Handwritten notes in red ink:
 - "Cancelled" written diagonally across the registration details.
 - "Registered" written vertically in the center.
 - "26" written in the bottom right corner.
 - "26th July 1920" written near the bottom right.
 - "W. J. Ross" written as the Registrar's name.
 - "20th February 1906" written as the date of registration.