

FISHER SUPERSTITIONS OF ABERDEENSHIRE

Scottish fisherfolk have much in common with their seafaring brethren across the world, being employed in one of the most dangerous environments outside military service next to mining. Despite the challenges of climate concerns, shifting fish stocks, and a world now disconnected from the sea and land, fishermen, whose family lines stretch back hundreds of years, will tell you there is nothing like the call of the sea, or 'salt in the blood' as some describe it. Even those who left the industry in the mid-90s due to being forced to scrap their vessels through the pressure of EU fishing quotas, found themselves back at sea a decade later, unable to stay away.

Fishing, by its precarious nature has always involved risk, and it is human nature to mitigate that risk by employing rituals, habits, traditions and even prayer. The very act of going down to the boat in the morning was fraught with difficulty due to the number of taboo creatures and people that must be avoided, such as 'certain women', cats, pigs, ministers, priests, and rabbits. These could all cause bad luck, which could manifest as a poor catch, technical problems, or far worse.

In the North-East particularly, there were a number of elderly females suspected of being witches, who had to either be avoided or placated. Some were simply 'peer craiturs' who didn't have the best hygiene, like one Katesy Mammie of Peterhead, whose evil eye was often believed to be the cause of engine trouble on fishing boats. Liddel's Meg of Torry, near Aberdeen, was another 'witch' that fisher children were told to avoid.

The so-called unlucky creatures were usually land animals that were associated with witches, and thus had to be referred to by their taboo name, e.g. rabbit was mappie, hare was lippy lugs, pigs were curly-tails, cats were wee beasties. It was said pigs could smell the wind and affect its direction, thus could not be allowed anywhere near a fishing boat. One smart crew member upset his skipper so much with even a drawing of a porker stuck up in the wheelhouse, that he refused to go to sea.

Men of the church were also a danger, as the 'new' religion of Christianity was thought to be an offence to the Pagan gods of the sea. So 'the mannie wi the roon collar' or 'the man wi the black coat' was to be avoided at all costs. The church was 'the bell hoose', when described as a landmark.

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Rituals to overturn a bad luck symbol included touching 'cold iron'; there is the tale of a minister making a sermon of the Gadarene swine, and his nervous fisher parishioners frantically looked for nails in the pews to rub for fear it would affect their catch as they left 'at the back o Sunday' (working on a Sunday was forbidden, hence the often mad scramble to leave for the fishing grounds at midnight into Monday, which still occurred in Peterhead and Fraserburgh until the end of the 1980s).



Portknockie Harbour

A sure-fire tradition to protect the crew from supernatural trouble was the 'saining' or purifying of the boat by smoke or fire. Fishermen in the 20th century even admitted to carrying out this ancient ritual with its roots in Celtic times. Andrew Strachan, late of Peterhead, remembered getting a bucket full of old rags dipped in diesel which were then set on fire and carried around the boat, smoking out every corner. Though he did not believe that it made a difference, his superstitious uncle was convinced that the smoke would drive out evil spirits sent by witches.

There were many other taboos, such as opening packets or tins upside down, or leaving the hatches open aboard. Gavin Thain, a contemporary fisherman from Peterhead, recalls how his father would throw any tin opened this way out of the window, such was his concern for bad luck. Woe betide someone asked a fisherman the size of his catch! The answer would usually come back

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'Oh, nae bad,' as fishers were secretive and competitive, hiding their favourite patches for herring and white fish from their neighbours.

Peterhead fisherman poet, Peter Buchan, who shares his name with a local 19th century folklorist, wrote many verses and short stories detailing the peculiar character of the Aberdeenshire fisherman, which can still be accessed today in local libraries. The coastal strip has a vast number of fishing-related museums and heritage centres from Banff right down to St Cyrus, including, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Aberdeen's Maritime Museum, Stonehaven, Gourdon and Johnshaven which are open in the spring and summer months.



Fishermen at Peterhead

The harbours at Fraserburgh and Peterhead are an impressive sight containing both white fish and pelagic boats, the latter being huge trawlers capable of catching and processing their product before they even reach home. Local fish and chip shops all along the East Coast down as far as Fife advertise the boats which supply their wares, often winning prizes for their fish suppers. Visitors are advised to queue early for this takeaway repast, as they are very popular in summer.

The BBC made stars of our local fishers with television programmes such as *Trawlermen* and *Fish Town*, which are available on DVD, demonstrating the age-old fight with the fickle sea to draw her harvest for the benefit of fish lovers everywhere.