

# SINGING THE FISHING

Broadcast 16 August 1960, repeated 6 November 1960

Singers	Musicians	Named Speakers
Ewan MacColl	Peggy Seeger banj+mand+ah	Sam Larner <sup>1</sup>
Bert Lloyd	Alf Edwards conc <sup>2</sup> +oc	Lewis Cardno <sup>3</sup>
John Clarence	Fitzroy Colerman guit	Jimmy Burnett <sup>4</sup>
Elizabeth Stewart	Bruce Turner cl+sax	TR Bowles
Jane Stewart	Jim Bray db	Jim West
Ian Campbell	Kay Graham fid	Mr Johnson
Gordon McCulloch <sup>5</sup>		George Stephens
Martin Marshall <sup>5</sup>		Mr Ritchie
John O'Reilly <sup>5</sup>		TR Bowles
David Phillips <sup>5</sup>		Mrs Burnett
Jack Thomas <sup>5</sup>		Mrs Buchan
JRS Wright <sup>5</sup>		Mrs J West
		Mr Murray

<sup>1</sup> sang Up Jumped the Herring

<sup>2</sup> several

<sup>3</sup> sang Sae Like the Little Faded Flower

<sup>4</sup> recited his poem Thou Lovely Shining Silver Fish

<sup>5</sup> members of the Clarion Singer chorus, directed by Katherine Thomson

## Text

1

We present Sam Larner of Winterton:

**Up jumped the herring, the king of the sea,  
Said 'e to the skipper, 'Look under your lee.'  
Singing windy old weather, boys, stormy old weather, boys  
When the wind blows, we'll all go together.**

And Ronnie Balls of Yarmouth, in *Singing the Fishing*, a tribute to the fishing communities of East Anglia, and of the Moray Firth, whose livelihood has been the Herring.

If you fish for the herring, they rule your life. They swim at night: you got to be out there at night, waiting for 'em to swim.

**With our nets and gear we're faring...**

Course it's a wonder, too, you see... to pick these little fish up, the net's vibrant with life, brrrrrrrrrrrrrr, like that.

**On the wild and wasteful ocean...**

The numbers, when you realise, there's only one of millions and millions and millions, when the little people swim up properly, they really do it.

**It's there on the deep  
That we harvest and reap our bread...**

There's no lazy man when herring are about.

**As we hunt the bonny shoals of herring...**

When you're doing well and catching fish, they talk to them all the time: 'Come on, spin up, my darlings, come on', and they, they absolutely cajole them into the nets. And wherever the herring are, the fishermen will go after them. It might be working two hundred mile from Aberdeen on the Norwegian deep water, or off Shields. If the herring are there, you have to go and get them.

2

**Come all you gallant fishermen  
That plough the stormy sea  
The whole year round  
On the fishing grounds  
    Of the Northern Minch and the Norway Deeps,  
    On the banks and knolls of the North Sea holes,  
    Where the herring shoals are found.**

**It's there you'll find the Norfolk boys  
And lads from Peterhead,  
There's Buckie chieles and men from Shields  
    On the Northern Minch and the Norway Deeps,  
    On the banks and knolls of the North Sea Holes,  
    Where the herring shoals are found.**

**From Fraserburgh and Aberdeen,  
From Whitby, Yarmouth Town,  
The fleet's away at the break of day  
    To the Northern Minch and the Norway Deeps  
    To the banks and knolls of the North Sea Holes  
    Where the herring shoals are found.**

Once I went to the fishing you know, it took a sort of hold on me. When we came ashore to try another job, somehow or other, the sea always took you back.

There was about three hundred and seventy-eight of men and boys in this village, fishermen, out of this village. When we left school there was sea or jail or us. I left school when I was twelve year old, felt right a big man, yes I did, and went to sign on for to go to sea in the hoffice. When I got home, my mother said, 'How you got on, boy?' I says, 'I signed on - we're going to sea tomorra.'

**It's up with the dawn  
With your sea boots on  
And down to the Yarmouth quay...**

Cabin boy in a little boat called the Young John, 1892.

**To fish Smith's Knoll...**

Little sailin' boat, about forty ton.

**Where the big seas roll...**

You know there's a dread, there's no point people saying they don't have that dread, cos they do when they first go to sea, you had that feeling, you, you never went light-hearted... when the tug got hold on you and pulled you out the piers. When she began to lift, you began to think about Mother at 'ome then

**Boy!  
Find your sea legs.  
Ho there! Steady!**

**Stow your gear up there in front  
In the smallest bunk, boy.**

Little place, you'd hardly turn yourself round in it.

**Ready?  
Check your stores and stop your gabbing.  
In you go - to the cabin.**

Hello, there old Sam, come on, come and light your fire - put the old kittle on

**There's a crew of ten, all fishermen,  
And you're the boy.  
Boy!  
You're a galley-slave  
In everyone's employ.  
Come 'ere!  
They're a hungry lot,  
Keep an eye on the pot  
And see you keep your stove in order**

...there to look around. Go on, there, one eye on the pan and one eye up the chimney, that's what you get.

**Get washed up and start again, this hunger has no end.**

We used to live on dumplings.

Peel them spuds and scrub the table,  
Come on there, Sam, you're young and able,  
Night and morning, tired and yawning,  
Out of the bunk and make your fire  
With the sleep still in your eyes.

.Norfolk dumplings, Norfolk swimmers, we called them at sea. D'you know how many I used to make when I was at sea - thirty! They'd eat the lot. Fill you up with yer dumplings, so you ever didn't want the meat. Proper Norfolk feed, that was a proper Norfolk feed. Norfolk swimmers, cause they, they come up light when you took the lid off... they had all, like little loaves of bread, ah, lovely

Now we're away with the wind astern,  
So work and watch, boy, watch and learn -  
We're outward bound  
For the Norfolk grounds.

When you're coming in the harbour you feel pleased, heart up, but when you're going out to sea again, out of the harbour ...ye're on the knuckle bones of yer arse... *(laughter)*

There ain't no time for you to stand and stare.  
You've a job to do! You're in the way, boy, there! That's right!  
You've got to put your time in, Sam,  
With the old slop bucket and the frying pan,  
The scrubbing brush and the mop and pail,  
Before you call yourself a man.  
Then you can say that you're a fisherman.

The poor little boy... had to answer everyone's call, you know... Boy, where have you got to? Go this, go there, go on, get me this, that's how a boy answers everybody's call.

Do this, do that, come here, go there,  
You've got to work to earn your share -  
Down you go in the rope room now  
And coil that line.

You're the first one on turn, you're the cook, you've got to coil the rope on the capstans. 'Eaving on up the nets, you see. Because you got about a mile and a half of rope to coil, you know. Down in the rope room, well that was a rum night, too, you're boxed in, coiling there all alone down there, little boy, in that, all that space around you, coil the ropes right across round you like that, oh, you're right dizzy.

You've got to coil it tidy, coil it neat,  
Round and round and round and round your feet,  
Hour after hour,  
That great big rope as thick as your fist,  
It coils and twists, it twists  
And turns as they haul the nets.

They drill yer... you had to coil them so they'll trickle marbles on.

**And the rope drips water down your neck  
As the rope winch feeds it from the deck  
And the big new blisters hurt your hands  
And make 'em burn...**

Them were poor old times

**...and the biting cold has numbed your feet,  
And you feel you'll die if you don't get sleep,  
Hour after hour.**

Very poor

**Till the nets are in,  
And the rope is coiled  
And stowed away.  
And the crew all troop off down below,  
And the cry is heard:  
Boy! Cookie! Dish up!**

4

Years ago, you started very young, and you were put through the ropes rough you know, rough and ready you were put through the ropes.

They were rough old boys, boy, you know, rough, they were rough at you. My uncle, he was the one used to, my uncle Jimmie used to flog me and he used to cry arter he done it, used to cry after he'd flogged me, used to cry.

**Oh it was fine and a pleasant day,  
Out of Yarmouth harbour I was faring,  
As a cabin boy on a sailing lugger,  
For to go and hunt the shoals of herring.**

**Oh the work was hard and the hours were long,  
And the treatment surely took some bearing.  
There was little kindness and the kicks were many,  
As we hunted for the shoals of herring.**

A real old bulldog breed they were, they didn't care for no-one, neither God nor men, they didn't, they didn't, that's the truth, they were wicked old men. Now and agin you'd find a kind old man but some of them, oh they were, cruel. You warn't allowed to speak and they'd take and gi' yer the rope's end when they'd look at you, put the rope on your backside if you were into trouble.

**Oh we fished the Sward and the Broken Bank.  
I was cook and I'd a quarter sharing,  
And I used to sleep standing on me feet,**

**And I'd dream about the shoals of herring.**

And do you know what, sometimes I bin sleepy, and they'd throw a bucket of water on to you and wake you up. 'Wake up, you young beggar'. And they'd chuck a bucket of water on you, make you shake your feathers, that'd wake you up.

**Oh we left the home grounds in the month of June,  
And to canny Shields we soon was bearing,  
With a hundred cran of the silver darlings  
That we'd taken from the shoals of herring.**

When we went to Shields I was looking on deck and seeing the Shields pier, seeing 'em coming, oh that were bonny going into Shields pier. Strange and excited to see different fares of life, you see. I'd never been away from home afore, away from home. We went to South Shields that night, little boys, you had to cross the ferry to go over to South Shields. I was with these other boys and I forget what theatre we went, but I'll tell you what was on: The Wages of Sin. In the last act the hero come in and then he said 'The wages of sin is death' and he shot 'im. He shot 'im in the last act.

In 1896 I thought now I'd had enough of this cooking business and I go on deck-hand in the Snowflake and so, I been cook four years before I got my berth as deckhand.

**Now you're up on deck, you're a fisherman,  
You can swear and show a manly bearing,  
Take your turn on watch with the other fellows  
While you're searching for the shoals of herring**

**Oh sailing over the Dogger Bank, oh wasn't it a treat -  
The wind a-blowing 'bout east north east  
So we had to give our sheet.  
You ought to see us relling, the wind a-blowing free -  
A passage from the Dogger Bank to great Grimsby**

5

I started to go to sea in 1892, in the Young John, the John Frederick, the Gemini, Thalia, Snowdrop, where, what's that name... Snowflake, that's, Snowflake, then Breadwinner.

**Oh I earned me keep and I paid me way...**

I done eight year in sailing boats, and then we were fully qualified then, we could do anything there was to do aboard sailing boats: knots, splice, mend the nets, set a rigging in, serve a rigging.

**And I earned the gear that I was wearing...**

The more you sailed a boat and done things aboard a boat, the more enlightenment you got.

**Sailed a million miles, caught ten million fishes -  
We were sailing after shoals of herring.**

There's something 'ooman about a sailing boat, how they answer - and they talk to them, 'Go on, old girl, you'll do this, he'll do it.' They talk to a ship just as they would talk to a human being. But as regards the work, that was like heaven when we gang to the drifters, the steam drifters, absolutely like heaven.

Ah the steam drifter, the loveliest ship for the job that ever was built.

I went in the Larty, that was the first steam drifter I went in, in October 18 and 99 and that was the first start of the good seasons. 1899.

6

**So it's off with your boiler full of steam  
And your engine spick and span  
To fish the grounds, the North sea round,  
And fish the knolls on the North Sea Holes  
And try your luck at the North Shields Gut  
With a catch of a hundred cran.**

That period from 1900 to 1914 must've been a bonanza, must've been a gold rush.

**No need to wait for wind and tide,  
You're the masters of the sea.  
Come calm or squall,  
Just shoot and haul  
And fill the hold  
With the fish to be sold  
And steam ahead  
For the curing shed  
And the buyers on Yarmouth quay.**

Five pounds he's landed, four... five pounds four and a half five pound six five pound six and a half...

**But first you've got to find your fish  
And spot your herring shoal,  
Because as long as they're still in the sea,  
You'll never get them sold.  
So watch the diving gannet boys  
And notice what he gets,  
And if you see the whalefish blow,  
It's time to shoot your nets,  
With your tooraladdy whackforladdy tooralooralay.**

The gulls and the blowers used to tell us, the blow fish, sperm whales they are, they come and they'll tell you where the fish are. And I seen the big whales where they blow the smoke round them, great old big 'uns, and they'll tell you where the herring are.

**And when you've shot your nets, me lads, you'll wait for time to pass,  
And keep one eye upon the clock and the other on the glass,  
For the sea is wide and deep and the wind may blow a sudden gale  
And take your ship and gear and leave no-one to tell the tale -  
With your tooraladdy whackforladdy tooralooralay.**

The sea is lovely, but you can't push it around. The sea, the sea, they used to talk about the cruel sea - the sea isn't cruel. The sea is a natural element. If the wind blows a certain force and a certain direction there'll be a certain type of sea. If the wind shifts there'll be a cross sea. If you go over a shoal where there's a hell of a tide rip and a gale o' wind, you'll probably swamp your ship and lose her, but that's not the sea's fault, that's your fault.

That's true enough, cause when you're in a gale of wind and those big 'uns come a roaring at you, you can't get out on 'em. You can't get away out on 'em, you've got to face it. You know there's death there if one of them gits you.

The sea is the thing that doesn't change, you see - a fundamental, like the climate, or mountains or things like nature, so you can't change the sea, so you take your lovely machines and ships and gear to sea and you still got to use them subject to what the sea will let you do.

You see it when it's lovely to be out there, you see it when it's flat calm, then you'll see it with just a little air ripple on it and you'll see it when there's mountains of boiling water.

**When the sea grows dark and the glass is low and falling...**

Quick rise after low indicate a stronger blow.

**When your nets are stretched out there two miles or more...**

Biscay. Winds south to south west force four to six, gradually veering north west and increasing to force seven tomorrow afternoon...

7

**When the breeze is freshening to a gale  
And climbing up the Beaufort scale  
And the wind is streaming,  
Your mind's not on the market then,  
The buying then and the selling then  
And the market prices.**

They went in this boat and that come on a gale of wind, that came down the Sat'dy night, and that blew for three or four days a living gale and we were in these little boats.

We had a good breeze when we finished hauling, and when he dished out the six o'clock weather forecast we had then got it very bad, where we were in the North Sea. We'd be somewhere about fifty miles from Lowestoft when that struck us. First of all she,

she broke the side windows in the wheelhouse. I eased the ship in and head up to wind and dived her, time we patched these side windows up, when she took a tremendous sea and I shall never forget that sea as long as I live.

*Auctioneer: five pound eight now... five eight ten at ... five pound ten at five ten now...*

**Beaufort five, Beaufort five**

**... to blow the ships alive.**

**Waves going on, running high, snow white horses passing by,**

**Beaufort six, Beaufort six,**

**Now the wind is playing tricks -**

**Bigger waves, lots of foam, flying spray, our luff is blown.**

*...six pounds, six pounds fourteen, now sixteen, six pounds sixteen, now eighteen, six pounds eighteen...*

**Gale force seven, gale force seven,**

**Now it's blowing like the devil.**

**Broken waves pile up in heaps,**

**Foaming tops are blowing in streaks.**

**Gale force eight, gale force eight,**

**Getting rough to navigate.**

**It's high along the waves are boiled,**

**Into burning strips and coils.**

*...seven four and six, seven pound and... eight now... eight pound ten...*

**Gale force nine, gale force nine,**

**Fighting for the nets and lines,**

**Water black and white and grey,**

**Now the air is full of spray.**

**Gale force ten on the Beaufort scale,**

**Now it blows a living gale.**

**Force eleven, force eleven,**

**Close your eyes and pray to heaven.**

*Auctioneer, unintelligible...*

And there's great seas a-coming - now and again they'd peel you know and break and once they break, look out. So I's stood in the wheelhouse long of the skipper, I was there the whole blessed night, me and the skipper. The chaps down below are crying - they were these young chaps, you know. Well, once she shipped this sea I said, Ted, look out, I say, there's one a-going to get us, they that come roaring along. I bet you our boat stood on our hend like that. I bet she stood up like that!

You just couldn't see the ship, all you could see was the mast sticking out of the water on her. I, I thought the ship was going to founder under us that night. And I think if I'd have lost me nerve, I should have lost me ship. I realised if we kept diving the ship with the weight of fish we had in her, she just wouldn't lift to the swell you see. Everything

was coming down on top of her.

**Sea and sky without division.  
World of water.  
World in turmoil.  
Shock of wave and scream of wind.**

**The small boat is lost and the mizzen boom gone,  
The gear is abandoned, the ropes and the nets,  
The radio's silent, out of action.  
Put her head to the wind.  
Watch it, dodge it  
She near went under.**

*(auctioneer...)*

**You've got to wait for it, now tack around a bit,  
She's riding in the trough, so keep your fingers crossed,  
She's riding high, she's up again and now she's standing on her end.  
That's a sea that she is taking, is a shuddering and shaking,  
Every wave is like a fist and you can feel her dodge and twist.  
Listen to the bloody racket, keep her head up, you can tack it,  
Hold the wind!**

*(storm and auctioneer merge)*

After she took the heavy sea I could see naught but one boiling mass of water like looking up perhaps at forty-five angle degrees, these heavy boiling seas a-coming down, I said to the mate, look here, Alf, I said, if we don't swing the old girl round, I said, we've got to lose her. So I said, we got to take the bull by the horn, I said, and take the risk of running with the wind on a quarter.

**Will she hold out, will she make it?  
Can she keep afloat and take it?  
Will she make it, will she do it?  
Can the skipper bring her through it?  
Can she live in all this waste of water?**

We had a terrible job. We steamed her up for five hours at half speed and we fetched in at 25 fathom. We, we tacked the ship, in we tacked her in norwest again up south and by west again, run her north again and tacked her up diced her up again until we fetched up Lowestoft. And that took us thirty-six hour to get in.

8

**What shall it profit a fisherman  
To gain a catch and lose his span  
In the salt sea water?  
To win a cran at every pull,  
If his heart has stopped and his lungs are full**

## **Of the salt sea water?**

I 'ad two goes at that and that frightened me. Then I went again, you see, now I was frightened, I tell yer. Dreaded when we went to sea the next time, and then that gradually wore off and finally I forget it. Just same miners, I suppose, the miners just the same, down the mine, when they have a disaster. Course, really, you can't live with the dead, can you?

**Come on, leave off this yarning, lads,  
For talk won't pay your debts.  
There's a good green sea for herring  
And it's time to shoot your nets.  
It's time to stand there in the hold and throw 'em o'er the lee,  
And keep your mizzen sail up, boys, so she can head the sea,  
With your tooraladdy whackforladdy tooralooralay.**

Busk ye here-o, come boy, away out of that, shoot-o busk it, busk it

The herring lay on the bottom during the daylight and rise just before the close, just before dark.

Come on... out of that boy.

That is the time when they get up to net depths to put your nets down into.

You'd a two-mile string of nets and you've let them hang in the water, like a spider's web, if you like, waiting for the herring to swim into the meshes, you see. If the herring don't swim in, you don't get any.

And when they heave the pole-end net over and you start to shoot the nets, they always say: 'Heave nets in the name of the Lord', and Jesus said 'Shoot your nets on the right side of the ship', when they got the big multitude in the Galilee, didn't they?

**So take it nice and steady boys,  
And start to earn your pay  
And mind that you don't shoot too soon  
And scare the fish away  
Your sur ropes are in order,  
Your cochlanes, buffs and all  
Here's hoping that this good night's work  
Will fetch a bumper haul,  
With your tooraladdy whackforladdy tooralooralay.**

It was always that... what you're going to get? You see, you, chucking it into the water, you can't see it, you pull 'er out again, here they are, spin up, lovely, bonny herring - here they come.

**It's busk ye, me lads, get you up on the deck**

**And take up your stations for hauling the nets,  
And mind you pull together, boys, all through the night,  
And sweat in your oilskins until it's daylight,  
    After heaving and hauling and shaking the net.**

Altogether my boys...

**It's when we start hauling we're living in hopes,  
The boy in the locker, the lads on the ropes,  
And the fellows in the hold who are pulling the nets  
And shaking the herring out onto the deck,  
    With a heaving and hauling and shaking the net.**

There's nothing more sightly, I don't think, or stately, than a shoal of herring a-coming over the side.

**It's net after net is pulled up from the sea,  
With a haul and a shake and a one, two and three,  
And the herring are a-boiling around your sea boots,  
And slithering and sliding down into the chutes,  
    And we're heaving and hauling and shaking the nets.**

Oh there's nothing can beat it.

Oh they're lovely, herring. You see when the net is coming over, it's like a white sheet of silver. Altogether, there'll be five, perhaps six blokes all in the hold, overall you see, everything kicking, Up, whoosh, they're all out. Out they all come... it's black, you see, altogether boys. Now you get a fresh boat, in come another lot... whoosh.. Them nets are thirty-five yards long and if you see that you see that, there's no team-work to beat it. And the fact that the herring are there, you see... Money. Spin up my little darlings, throw ... lovely.

**It's hour after hour we are hauling away  
All through the long night till the dawn of the day.  
The skipper's in the wheelhouse, he's on the RT,  
And the cook's in the galley, a-brewing the tea,  
    And we're finished with hauling and shaking the net.**

10

There's no feeling like comin' into a harbour with a good catch of fish, there's no feeling like it, especially if you're in a boat, like we used to be, with a good crew. You come up to the quay and you tie up, now there's everyone come, you see. Hundred cran, cor, lovely shot, get your sample out, let's be selling 'em, you see, and you just lean back in the wheelhouse and you look. All I can think of, if you know, if you was one of the old hunters, in the old tribal days, you'd brought home the meat, you see, share it out, do what you like with it, you see, I done my bit.

**The season is over so be on your way  
And head for the home port to sign for your pay.**

**Your missus is waiting to welcome you home:  
It's hard for a wife to be so much alone.**

There's nothing like coming home, you know, lovely.

**So forget all the hauling and shaking the nets.**

There's the old girl a-waiting for you, oh, used to count the days... like getting fresh married, when you'd been away about ten or a dozen weeks. Reunited again, and just as strong as ever. Well, you know, you were hungry... When you'd gone down the North Sea, had plenty of fish down on you, you got hungry when you got home, didn't yer? Yes well....

Lovely!

*...four, five pound four now five pound six five pound six now...*

They must have had a fabulous time, from nineteen hundred, up to the first war, cos they built eighteen hundred drifters, practically - that's nearly a hundred boats a year.

I've seen they walk across Yarmouth harbour, jammed full up, right chockablock with boats, right full up. Herrin' - ain't nowhere to put the herrin' on the quay. That's when the drifters first came, that's when that was good.

You've never seen anything like it in your life. Every year there was more boats, every year they wanted more herring, they used to cure 'em, millions of barrels. And the gals used to come from all the Scotch places where they lived, to do the gutting. There'd be hundreds and hundreds of them, you'd see them walking along Yarmouth quay, in great lines, arm in arm, singing away, and lovely bonny red faces, you know. All the real kind of Scots girls.

That's where you meet all the lads...Yarmouth... Come up just to see you... and then he asked her out for a walk, well that was the first o't, that's the last o't you see...

11

**Come all you fisher lassies,  
It's come awa with me,  
Fae Cairnbulg and Gamrie and fae Inverallochie,  
Frae Buckie and frae Aberdeen  
With all the country roond, we're awa to gut the herring,  
We're awa tae Yarmouth toon**

Ah, twas awfu' fine in Yarmouth, twas awfu' fine.

**Rise up in the morning  
Wi your bundles in your hand.  
Be at the station early  
Or you'll surely hae to stand .  
Tak plenty to eat**

And a kettle for your tea,  
Or you'll maybe die of hunger  
On the wa to Yarmouth Quay

It was just like a holiday, when you ... to Yarmouth, cos you've nae housework to dae, you see, you've nae cooking to dae.

The journey it's a lang yen and  
It taks a day or twa,  
And when you reach your lodging, sure  
It's soon asleep you'll fa',  
But you'll rise at five  
With the sleep still in your e'en,  
You're awak to find the gutting yards  
Along the Yarmouth quay.

It's early in the morning  
And it's late into the nacht,  
Your hands are cut and chappit  
And they look a nasty sight,  
But you greet like a ween  
When you put 'em in the bree,  
And you wish you were a thousand mile  
Awa from Yarmouth Quay.

Oh I've seen the hands, I've the marks o' my hands yet, wi' holes, the rough salt breaks your skin, the pickle gets in, then it festers. I've seen me in Yarmouth afraid to put my fingers in my hands in the pickle, in the brine, in the morning... that sore, just nip in, until you get used to them again, they just... well, the pickle just cures them again.

There's coopers, there are curers  
There and buyers, canny chiels,  
And lassies at the pickle  
And others at the creels,  
And you'll wish the fish  
Had been all left in the sea  
By the time you finish gutting herring  
On the Yarmouth quay

Oh it was a hard life but you was fisher bred and born... it made all the difference, that made. Being fisher, I would do it all over again.

We've gutted fish in Lerwick  
And in Stornaway and Shields.  
Worked all on the Humber  
'mongst the barrels and the creels.  
Whitby, Grimsby, we've traivelled up and doon,  
But the place to see the herring  
Is the quay at Yarmouth Toon.

In them days, you see, that was on the crest of the wave, must've been a Golden Time, but we don't know anything about that, our generation just missed that, you see, we come in for the Low, when the market was gone.

You see I went, first went to sea in 1918, and I went younker in the Crown. I got a hundred pounds from the Shields fishing and a hundred and ninety from the Yarmouth fishing. And after that it was never the same again. The next year was... I can't remember what I earned, but it was very low and course it never did come better. The year that I went wheelman in the Premier, to the Shetlands, hell of a poor summer that were.. caught plenty herring but couldn't sell 'em. '21 I went mate in the Golden spray. Now that was the worst fishing ever was known at Yarmouth. 1921. There was no herring, terrible scarcity of fish as well as poor markets and everything else, you see, that was the year they said they paid the men off with the stamp cards.

12

**Up jumped the herring, the King of the Sea  
And he sang out, 'Old Skipper, now you can't sell me.**

A glut, that's the worry, when you've got them aboard, what you're going to make.

**Up jumped the herring, the King of the Shoal,  
And he cried, 'you'd do better to be on the dole'  
In this windy old weather.**

A Winterton chap, now, they took the house he lived in. He lost every penny.

**Up jumped the herring, all broken and spent.  
And he cried, 'Drifting's finished, so who'll pay the rent?'  
In this windy old weather, stormy old weather.**

From 1924 to 30, they were struggling years, but they weren't the deadly bitter years that came after 1930.

**Up jumped the herring, right under our lee  
And he cried, 'Skipper, dump me right back in the sea'  
In this windy old weather, stormy old weather,  
When the fleet's scrapped, we'll all rot together.**

The lovely shining silver fish  
To me they were a wholesome dish  
To Lucifer a shooting star  
We fishermen hunt you near and far  
In the wild Atlantic or on the Channel swell,  
We do our best to ring your knell  
But even in our greatest moment  
We respect and fear you in quick and torment  
We the hunters, you the hunted  
Our wealth is by your numbers counted  
And should your numbers prove too many,

Wealth, well, there isn't any.

**Men and ships no longer needed  
World of glut and world of hunger  
World of scrapped and rusting gear.**

1929, when the grass was growing on the ship-building yards.

**The markets are lost and the curers gone  
The gear is abandoned, the ropes and the nets  
The buyers are silent, out of action.**

**Fishermen, try again,  
Catch 'em, dump 'em,  
We'll all go under.**

The trend in the fishing was just absolute despair, just ruin.

Mind they were the bad years, they were the bad years.... I used to see boats having to go to sea and dump big catches, just off Claremont pier, dumping fish after eight or nine hours hauling them. Come in and, and the, and the boats are lined all round the market sometimes, two and three deep in them days, and you couldn't sell 'em.

Ah, they were poor old times. Very poor.

No market, you see, after 1930 you really could not get a living if your neighbour's got one. What you had to do, you had to go to sea and catch some fish when nobody else had any, then you got a price. What sort of an economy do you call that? Dog eat dog?

And this sort of thing was far worse along the Moray Firth with the Scotch people. They'd built up their, their homes and, and fortunes on the herring and now the herring trade suddenly collapsed, you see. I should think there was, there was as much if not more poverty along the Moray Firth, Banff, Buckie, Fraserborough, Peterhead, where all the drifters belonged to... well they were dying out, you see absolutely sort of... starved out of existence.

Don't want that time to come back again.

**When you see fisherfolk  
Do you no think shame  
To gang to the butcher  
For a thrupenny bane?  
If you get Sunday put by,  
You're no muckle caring,  
A' the week round  
You get tatties and herring,  
Tatties and herring, tatties and herring -  
Wee Buchan tatties and Peterhead herring.**

Time of the Depression, the herring fishermen, way back in the Thirties.

I remember once leaving home and going to Ireland and Crannan fishing there for a good few weeks, came home, started at Fraserburgh, the home port, continued right up till the end of August, and finished up with five pounds. Refitted and went to Yarmouth, came home and got five pennies. From the month of April until the end of November I got five pounds and five pennies for my labour share at the herring fishing.

**See like the little faded flo'or  
That in summertime did bloom,  
But when the autumn winds were blowing  
All who..? first to tore them doon.  
They remind us we are strangers  
And this world is nae our hame,  
But we seek a better country  
Wi' the Saviour there to reign.**

I sold a drifter to Holland for sixty-five pounds, a fully equipped drifter - her anchors and chain were worth more than that sixty-five pound. That was in 1937. Two years later, the government would have paid me that, a month, for hiring them.

**Up jumped the herring and he looked to the shore,  
And he cried, there's a world and they'll need us once more,  
In this windy old weather, stormy old weather,  
When the wind blows we'll all pull together.**

Of course, since the war there's a big change, just the opposite, where 'fore the war we had a great big fleet of boats and no market, now we got a small fleet and a good market. In fact the people ashore can't get enough herring. Mind you, there's been a lot of technical developments, what with diesel coming in, echometers, and the radar for position finding and direction finding, all that kind of thing, but the echometers are the thing for catching herring. The Scotchmen are mustard on that. With the Scotch people, you see, they spend more and more time on the west coast, they're steaming about all night and as soon as they mark the herring, pretty boys, over they go, you see, which is a new kind of drifting altogether.

Here and out past Tobermoray by the time we'll get going we'll get the forecast... and see whether it's worth going across to the Castle Bay side or go, maybe have to go north.

I think this is a beautiful country, specially the north of Scotland. You see more of the handiwork of God down here than you see in the flat country. It's wonderful, God's creation, wonderful.

13

**Come all ye herring fishermen  
That work the nets the hale year roond,  
With a ten-hour sail to the Northern Minch  
To fish the western herring grounds,  
    With your diesel engine, nylon nets,  
    RT and echo-sounder set,**

**And a crew of ten to toil and sweat  
We're awa to fish for the Herring, O.**

**We're racing through the Sound of Mull  
When ither folks are in their beds.  
Tyree and Coll are left behind -  
We'll shoot war nets off Barra Head.  
    With your diesel engine, nylon nets,  
    RT and echo sounder set,  
    And a crew of ten to toil and sweat,  
    We're awa to fish for the Herring O.**

Nowadays, when you go to sea, looking for herring, you wander, you dinna take a set course. Once ye get out and you get the news of, what's doing... you sort of have your scouts that you call up, get the information from them, just make a beeline.

*Radio voices.*

You know all the voices belonging to the different boats, you strike a direction finding and get the bearings where they are, from them, the people that are among the fish.

**Old nature's a back number noo.  
We dinna wait on gulls and whales -  
Our echo soonder's on the job,  
And seldom is it that it fails.**

We don't depend on the whales so much nowadays. Once we see the whales we get the echo sounder going to locate the shoals.

The echometer's revolutionised fishing, well, it's like if you were playing Blind Man's Buff, it's like lifting up the handkerchief, isn't it, you can see what you're doing.

**With your diesel engine, nylon nets,  
RT and echo sounder set,  
And a crew of ten to toil and sweat  
We're awa to fish for the Herring O.**

When we were young, when we came home from Yarmouth, we'd stay at home usually from the end of November up till like February afore we went back to the fishing , but now...

Now it's developed, since the war, into just one continual rush... backwards and forwards towards the West Coast, pretty much like cattle, and they're on the boats about fifty weeks a year.

**A market willna wait for God  
And neither will it wait for men.  
It's get your fish up on the quay  
And turn and put to sea again.**

**With your diesel engine, nylon nets,  
RT and echo-sounder set,  
And a crew of ten to toil and sweat,  
We're awa to fish for the Herring O.**

Aboard the ship you know the older men talking about the, the fishing in their days. I mean to say, the younger fellows I'm bound to say, is almost six month at sea in th' old days. Now it's a twelve-month job. I mean, they was tied up the whole winter, they never went to sea.

**You're chasing here, you're chasing there  
You're keeping at it necht and day.  
Aye, when you face the herring, man,  
You've got to sweat to earn your pay.**

It's not so bad at twenty-six or mebbe even at thirty or thirty-six, but... at the age of fifty or sixty or even older, they're still going there, and at that age it's ridiculous, the work's too heavy.

**We're gaun to whaur the herring swim,  
And east and west it's just the same  
You're lucky if in twa, three weeks -  
You get ae day to bide at hame.**

It doesn't matter how good the boat is. It's not like home, you know

No, ay. Once you're living ten men in a boat, you subordinate your feelings to those of the crew... whereas at home you get back to your individual self, and your wife and family.

The way we work, there's no home life at all, we go home for a weekend every second weekend. It takes about six hours to go from here to Fraserburgh well it's just a rush round the table and away back again.

14

**A' the week your man's awa  
And all the week you your lane.  
All the time you're waiting for  
The minute that he's comin' hame.  
You ken whit wa' he has to work,  
You ken the hours he has tae keep,  
And yet it maks ye angry when  
You see him just come hame to sleep.**

They're never at home. They're just like lodgers, they're just home a weekend. Home on Saturday and away back on Monday, hear. And it's getting worse, for that, they're never at home. They used to be at Yarmouth and then they were home all winter and start the summer fishing and then Yarmouth again. But noo it's steady on, a the year roond.

Through the months and through the years  
While you're bringing up the bairns,  
Your man's awa tae here and there  
Following the shoals o' herrin's.  
And when he's back there's nets to mend -  
You've mebbe got a score or twa.  
And when they're done he'll rise and say,  
Wife, it's time I was awa.

All whaur life mending nets. All whur life, gutting herring and mending nets.

If I was to live my life again, I would never marry a fisherman. I wouldn't. It's a good job he'd no kennt this in front of ye.

We used to sing a song:

To be a fisherman's wife,  
To gae with the creel,  
The scrubber and the knife  
A full fireside and a ravelled bed  
And awa to the mussels in the morning.

Work and wait and dree your weird,  
Pin your faith in herrin' sales.  
And oftimes lie awak at nacht  
In fear and dread o' winter gales.

And men maun work to earn their breid,  
And men maun sweat tae gain their fee,  
And fishermen will aye gang out  
As long as fish swim in the sea.  
    With our diesel engine, nylon nets,  
    RT and echo-sounder sets,  
    And a crew of ten to toil and sweat,  
    We're aw to fish for the herring O.

Throw up... here they come, throw up throw up...

There is the basic instinct in man that he's a hunter. I mean, once man didna even till the ground, he just hunted, and I suppose fishing lets that out, doesn't it? You satisfy yourself that... you've hunted for your fish and you've caught 'em. I don't believe that man was born to be a tiller of the soil. He's an animal, the same as all the other animals, and like the big fish in the sea, he lived on the smaller ones, and, and that, that's just it.

15

Wi' our nets and gear we're faring  
On the wild and wasteful ocean.  
It's there on the deep that we harvest and reap  
Our breed, as we hunt the bonny shoals o herring

We reap without sowing, don't we, but we do it in a damned stupid way, that we don't get half the benefit we might, you see. If we could learn how to reap this wild harvest properly, that'll take us fifty years to do that, but eventually we probably shall have to cultivate the sea.

**Night and day the sea we're daring.  
Come wind or come winter gale, sweating or cold,  
Growing up or growing old or dying,  
While we're hunting for the shoals of herring.**

I don't know, fishing seems to do something to you. You know that swagger that any sailor gets when he comes ashore, that's a sort of superiority, isn't it. Now that's the thing about going to sea - the things ashore don't seem big enough to worry about. There you are, you got everything your own, there's no pleasure like getting free of the harbour, and all the trammels of the shore... to say now where are we going, we can go where we like, we've got the whole sea.

16

**Our ships are small and the sea is deep  
And many a fisher lad lies asleep  
In the salt sea water.  
But still there's a hungry world to feed,  
So we go where the shoals of herring breed  
In the salt sea water.**

Your livelihood, you see. Proud, you was proud that you was a fisher. You was fisher bred and born. Never ashamed of being a fisher. Oh no.

**Come all you gallant fishermen  
That sail the stormy sea  
The whole year round  
On the fishing grounds of the Northern Minch  
And the Norway Deeps and the banks and knolls  
Of the North Sea Holes  
Where the herring shoals are found.**

Singing the Fishing was the work of Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker, with music direction by Peggy Seeger.