

Fishing is more than just a job



Archie Johnston at home in Cockenzie. Photo by Niall Duffy

*When Archie Johnston left school at the age of 15 to work on his family's boats as a fisherman, he became the fifth generation to take to the water. Now 78 years young Archie took time out to tell *The Skipper* how the industry provided a way of life for his family and how the future looks for a traditional Scottish way of life.*

Born in the East Lothian fishing village of Cockenzie in 1937, Archie's first experience of fishing was as an eight year old boy on his father Tom Johnston's 40' boat "Thistle". Archie spent a winter ring netting Herring up the Firth of Forth.

"I remember crying for days when I was 12 after Dad sold the boat and I vowed to leave school as soon as I could to join his new boat "Morning Star", LH36. I had to wait till 1952 when I was 15 and have been fishing since!" The 50ft "Morning Star" was built by Forbes yard in Sandhaven as the "Manx Lass" and Archie and his brother Tom learned the ropes under their fathers watchful eye as they fished the North East coast from Arbroath as far South as North Shields. The hard work paid off and the family invested in their first new-build in 1957 when

they ordered the "Morning Star II" LH97 from Macduff. The 10 coil a side seiner enabled them to work deeper water including the Dogger Bank, a 12 hour steam away.

"They were the golden days of fishing" says Archie. "The hours were long and the work was hard but the rewards were there. "After my Father hung up his boots in 1962 myself and my brother Tom fished on with the "Morning Star" for 5 years when we acquired the "Starella" LH329 in 1968 as a partner boat. After a year we cut back to just the "Starella". In 1978 Archie took the plunge and ordered his first boat on his own from the Herd & McKenzie yard in Buckie. The 55' steel built trawler/seiner was christened "Crystal Sea" LH97 in January 1979, a name that would stay with him through several vessels over his fishing years.

"We went seining for the first 6 months and then I paired up with Alastair Moodie from Port Seton who had the "Rose of Sharon" for the next 2 years. As the 1980's began Alastair had an 80' boat built at Sandhaven and I bought a half share of the 60' "Ocean Herald" to pair with the Ritchie brothers from Musselburgh."



The Crystal Sea

"As the years progressed the trawl gear started to get heavier especially when we began to use seine rope as sweeps/bridles and unfortunately the winches we had were not big enough to handle the gear and we eventually went back to working solo seining and prawn trawling"

The next generation was catching up with Archie and in 1985 his son Tom then 22 got his skippers ticket and the family invested in the 60' "Crystal Stream" LH147 which Tom still fishes on the east

and west coast with his son Lewis as a crew member.

Finally in 1997 Archie retired and the "Crystal Sea" was sold to Shetland where she was lost a year later on the Bressay Bank when fishing for sand eels.

"The family thought I had given up the sea but after getting bored with daytime soaps I invested in a double ended Yorkshire coble named "Crystal Sea" naturally, which I took potting for Lobsters. I would still be out at it today if a

dodgy knee had not put me out of action for the last 6 months, but I am on the mend now so it won't be long before the lobsters are running scared again."

Archie served as Chairman of the Cockenzie and Port Seton Fishermen's Association and Anglo Scottish Fish Producers Organisation for 3 years and has long been a champion of fishermen's rights. He has seen big changes in the Scottish fishing industry and feels that the introduction of transferable quotas has sounded the death knell for traditional fishing villages around the coast.

"The fleet has followed the money and with the aggregation of quota in the big ports of Peterhead and Fraserburgh we are losing a way of life in the smaller ports. When I went to sea as a young man I learnt a trade from the bottom up, a trade that provided my family with a good income, that helped me to buy my home and give my children a start in life. When companies start to control the white fish quota the way they do now with pelagics then working on a boat becomes just a job to do for the crew."

"I have two of my grandsons, Andrew fishing the "Bright Ray" LH168 for Prawns on the east coast and Stuart who is a Naval Architect with Macduff Shipyard working in Buckie carrying on the family tradition. They both gained their love of fishing as children out creeling on the "Crystal Sea" and "Boy's Own" which was bought for his grandsons in 2001 because they "wanted a wheelhouse" but where is the opportunity going to be available for the next generation to get a taste of the fishing way of life.

You can go to school now to learn to be a deckhand but that can't teach you passion or tradition!" In more recent times Archie felt a celebration was needed to mark the 200th anniversary of the Box Meeting, an important event in the Cockenzie fishermen's diary. The Box Meeting Parade was born out of a group called the Friendly Society of Cockenzie and Port Seton Fishermen, which was set up in 1813 to support the widows of fishermen and those who were injured at sea.

A treasurer of the group, known as the Box Master, would gather a little money from the workers throughout the year and distribute it to those who needed it most. Once a year, the fisherman would

‘ They were the golden days of fishing ’



John Fulton, RNLI Fishing Safety shows Stuart Mack & his grandfather Archie Johnston how to correctly wear the new PFD

march the box around the village and have a song and dance in the street before waving the fishermen off to sea. This was known as the Box Meeting Parade – the last parade taking place in 1957. Archie was the last Box Master to take on this role. The Society was disbanded in 1973. Several Celebratory Box Meetings were held over the years since 1957 –

to mark the 100th centenary of the harbour opening in 1981 and to mark the millennium in 2000.

Archie successfully organised the special Box Meeting Parade in September 2013 to mark the bicentenary of the society and has been praised by the locals for his effort and determination in bringing the community together and

celebrating their heritage. Thoughts of finally retiring seem far away as Archie comments "the phone still rings with Andrew, my Grandson, looking for an extra hand to mend a torn net so I still get to keep a hand in".

The Skipper would like to wish Archie and his extended family a bright future and good fishing !



The Bright Ray