



the winter of 1883/84
had been very bad and by
May everyone in the village
was starving

1884
BOAT
DISASTER

Fish Tales & Other Stories

- about the heritage of fishing in Embo -

Many thanks to the following organisations for their help with this project:-

Brora Learning Zone
Dornoch Social Club
Homeland Services
NOSAS
Oversteps Eventide Home
Puddle Jumpers
Tain Slating
The Meadows Nursing Home
The Sign Workshop

Plus all the individuals who were involved along the way

The typeface used in this booklet, Bembo Standard, is specifically selected to be easy to read.

However, if you would like a large print version of the booklet please contact the Museum.

Introduction

In December 2016 Historylinks was awarded funding as part of 2017 year of History, Heritage and Archaeology from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Fund gave us the title *Stories, Stones and Bones* and invited us to run a project involving the local community.

Our project idea was to collect stories about the fishing village of Embo and then take these stories out to the community - we called the project *Fish Tales and Other Stories*.

Our objectives were to research stories that had not been heard by the wider community and to provide a response to these tales.

For a long time the museum staff and volunteers had also been wondering how to make best use of the ground surrounding the building. We wanted to make an interesting interactive space that would engage people of all ages and abilities. A story maze fitted both criteria.

Using the stories to build a maze meant that community groups could get involved to give visitors to the museum and local people an outside space to enjoy. Making the maze wheelchair accessible was a major factor during planning. Also, we wanted to create a space using sensory plants so that the space was attractive to everyone.



This booklet contains a collection of some of the stories we discovered during the project and is a record of the project along its journey.



Lynne Mahoney
Curator - Historylinks Museum
April 2018

Collecting the Stories

Various locations in Sutherland - 2017/18

Volunteers from Historylinks took part in an Oral History training workshop. This meant that we had people ready to collect stories.

Some stories were provided by Rona Grigg who gave permission for the wonderful tales from her book '*Embo Genealogy: Uncle Sandy's Story and a Little History*' to be used. Other stories were collected from people who got in touch with the museum, like David Cumming whose great grandfather, a fisherman from Embo, performed a daring rescue off the coast of Golspie in 1912.

Local ladies Christina and Bella Mackay were interviewed about their experiences as Herring Girls during the 1930s. Christina worked as a herring gutter and Bella as a packer during the 1930s. Born in Embo they followed the family tradition of working with the Herring fleets.

As teenagers they worked in Wick, Fraserburgh, Ullapool and Great Yarmouth. Their memories were collected in two sessions of recording and filming. Peter Wild filmed and edited the interviews. Local people gathered at the Social Club in Dornoch in December 2017 to view the film.



Anne Coombs is a local historian who has researched fishing in the area extensively. She was able to tell us about what life was like for the fishing families in Embo. After collecting the stories, we engaged local Storyteller Lorna Jappy to bring them to the Community. Lorna has a special affinity with the stories as her husband is a fisherman from Helmsdale.

Children at the after school club 'Puddle Jumpers' enjoyed a morning of storytelling in July of 2017. After all the tales had been told, the children had the opportunity to dress up as fish wives and fishermen and create their own fishing stories. A few weeks later we ran a workshop so that the children could give an artistic response to the stories that they had heard.

Lorna told the stories at Oversteps Eventide home. The residents at Oversteps, with help from staff and volunteers, used the story of William Cumming to create scenes for the story maze.



Our Curator, Lynne and museum volunteers David and Rebecca, spent two sessions at The Meadows Nursing Home where the residents painted pictures of herring onto slate. Their paintings were used to form a shoal of Silver Darlings swimming along the wall at the back of the maze.

During the Easter Holidays 2018 a group of 12 youngsters enjoyed stories, games and painting. Again Lorna, Lynne and Rebecca helped the children interpret the stories from the Embo fishing heritage. They were able to dress up as fishwives and fishermen. The games helped the children understand how teamwork would have

helped the fishing families go about their daily work.

Our final workshop was a two-day visit to Brora Learning Zone. The Learning Zone welcomes people of all ages and abilities. Over the two days, people heard the stories of white fishing in Embo, the Embo fishing fleet and all about Christina and Bella Mackay.

As well as telling stories, we did some creative writing and thought about what life was like for the fishwives walking about the countryside selling their fish. One of our writing collaborations saw us wondering what it was like to leave a small village like Embo and travel to Great Yarmouth to work like the young herring lassies had done.

Buenafe Murray wrote a wonderful tribute to the girls called 'Herring Queen'.

The whole group participated in painting scenes and slates for the project.

After all the stories had been told and the rocks painted we set about constructing the maze. The rocks had to be varnished several times to make them durable and we purchased a tarpaulin to help protect the artwork during the winter months.

1 - Uncle Sandy's Story

Puddle Jumpers - July 2017 - Lorna Jappy

On 20th March 1746 Jacobite soldiers came across Loch Fleet under the cover of fog. They met the soldiers of the Hanoverian army on the beach at Littleferry and a furious battle took place.

After the battle, a woman and her daughter were walking among the dead. The soldiers' broken bodies lay scattered across the beach. As they wept for the loss of these fine, strong men the woman noticed a movement among the bloodied corpses. Could it be? How was it possible that among such devastation one of the men was still alive? One man among so many had survived the battle.

The woman and her daughter tended to the man, they gently helped him. His wounds were very bad so they moved slowly, supporting the young soldier between them.

For many weeks the woman nursed the young man back to health in her small house by the shore. Eventually the man was restored to health by the care he received.



By this time the man and woman had spent many months together and they had fallen in love. The couple decided to get married but they could not live in the woman's house as it was very exposed to the weather and there was little shelter. The man moved the family down to the shore at the place called Embo.

The Soldier's name was Mackay (*MacAoidh*) and he had been a fisherman. The couple had six sons and they lived in a house that was built of stone and turf and thatch and it had a chimney right in the middle.

The oldest son was called Iain or Niall – the big man – they called him *Moraich*. The second son was called *Ruadhaich* – meaning ‘red hair’. The third son was *Meadhoniach* – ‘the middle son’. Another son was very good at mending clothes and so his name was *Tailor* because he was a Tailor and the name survives to this day. Then there was a fair haired son called *Banaichs*. And the youngest son was *Og* and there are still people with the by-name Og in the village.

So, this is how the village of Embo came to be.

People from other parts of the country came to the village to live. Mackay taught the men how to fish and soon there were 15 fishing boats that went out from Embo and they caught all sorts of white fish.



Photographs from Puddle Jumpers session - July 2017



2 - 1884 Boat Disaster

Meadows Nursing Home - January 2018

In the days before Embo had a pier there were about 100 fishermen living in the village. It was a hard life for both the fishermen and their wives.

The women pushed the heavy fishing boats out into the water until they were waist deep and the boat was in enough water to float. After wading back to shore they carried their men on their backs out to the boat. This was the only way to prevent the men getting cold and wet before they even started a day or night at the fishing.

The women also used to drag the boats ashore when the men returned and it was common to see the sand stained with blood from the women's arms as they hauled the boats ashore.



The Winter of 1883/1884 had been very bad and by May the people of Embo were so hungry and poor that one crew of 5 men was forced to take the fishing boat out despite the weather.

There had been a death in the village and being very superstitious they believed that it was bad luck to take the boats out. They knew they shouldn't go out until the body had been buried. However, the men were desperate and ignored this tradition in order to feed their families.

So, the men set off in treacherous seas and working against the wind and rain they managed to cast their nets. They waited and at last it was time to haul up their lines from the wild sea.

With the fish on board and the storm raging they made their way back to the shore. But they had left it too late for a safe return and as they struggled against the heavy seas a wave engulfed the fishing vessel. The boat capsized and the men were thrown into the freezing water.



In the small Embo cottages families gathered around their hearths with empty bellies. The women took the smaller children and rocked them tenderly as they waited for their husbands to return.

The storm raged on. The wind rattled the windows of the cottages and carried with it the faint cries of the men struggling in the freezing sea. At first the women thought it was just the wind moaning but then they began to hear the names of their children and their own names being called. The women wrapped their scarves and shawls around themselves and battled the storm to get down onto the shore.

They could just see the boat from where they stood and they quickly realised that it had been engulfed by the heavy seas and the men hurled from its decks. The women could do nothing as they heard their men calling from them and their children.

Finally, the sea covered the men and their voices fell silent and the men were lost forever.

3 - The Story of William Cumming

Oversteps Nursing Home - October 2017

William Cumming was a fisherman from Embo. He owned a fishing boat named 'Pearl'. William and his crewmates worked very hard catching all sorts of fish off the East coast from Embo to Wick.

One cold February night in 1912 the crew of five men were out fishing off the coast at Golspie. There was an icy wind and the sea was choppy, the weather made their task all the harder and as they were hauling their nets in William heard a loud and frightened cry from the waves.

His colleague and friend John Ross had fallen into the unforgiving sea. His big heavy boots weighed him down as he struggled to keep his head above water. His thick sweater pulled him beneath the water. John tried to move to keep afloat but the water was freezing, he gasped for air but it was no good and he quickly ran out of breath. His energy was gone and he began to sink into the waves.



A painting on slate completed at Oversteps which is now part of the Labyrinth at Historylinks

Everything happened very quickly and as soon as William heard the cries he dropped the task he was doing, threw off his heavy boots and dived into the black foreboding waves. The water was so cold it took his breath away but his only thought was for his friend. William managed to hold John's head up above the water despite the freezing water (the water temperature would likely have been less than 6 degrees Celsius).

After only 5 minutes a man would start to lose the ability to move and so the risk of drowning was great, but the two men were in the water for 15 minutes until they were pulled back on board the Pearl.

William received an award from the Royal Humane Society in recognition of his rescue of John Ross and the village of Embo was decked out with flags and bunting for the occasion.



A painting workshop at Oversteps

The Marquis and Marchioness of Stafford came to the village to present William with a bronze medal for bravery, a certificate and also a cheque for £10 from the Carnegie Hero Fund which is the equivalent of £1,000 today. A large crowd of people filled the Fishermen's hall where William was presented with his award. Everyone cheered loudly and William thanked the Marquis and Marchioness from the bottom of his heart and wished God's blessing on them. The huge crowd that had gathered cheered again as the Marquis and Marchioness drove away in their car.

4 - White Fishing

Easter Workshop 2018 - Dornoch Social Club

There was no port or pier in Embo until the 1930s so the women used to push the boats out until they were afloat. They then carried their menfolk out to the boat to prevent them from getting wet. The fishermen wore thick woollen clothes and they would be cold and uncomfortable if they got damp. When the men returned, the women hauled the boats back onto the beach.



White fishing was a family affair rather than an industrial process like Herring fishing. Fishermen and their families worked as a team. The men caught the fish and kept the boats in good repair. Women dug the bait, baited the lines and sold the fish.

The fishermen used the long line method of fishing.

There were up to a thousand hooks attached to each line with horse hair. Every hook had to be baited and laid in a wicker basket. The baskets were also made by the women. The lines were coiled and interwoven with grass to prevent them becoming tangled. The men needed to be able to throw out the hooks in one continuous line.

When the men returned from fishing the women processed the fish. This involved gutting, smoking, salting or drying in order to preserve it.

The women were also in charge of the money. If a Fisherman returned home from sea empty handed, he knew he would be in trouble.

Before entering the house, he would throw his hat inside the door to warn her he was coming back with nothing!

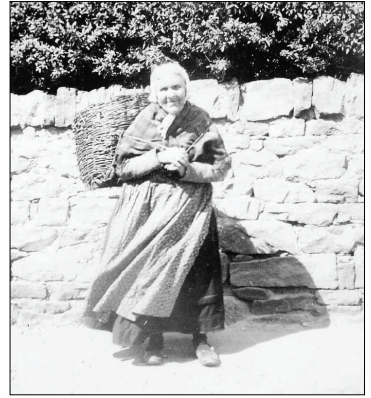


The women then took the fish around the countryside to sell. They carried about half a hundred weight (25 Kilos) on their back in wicker baskets.

Sometimes they bartered the fish for milk, butter or meat which meant that their basket was still heavy on the journey home.

The women were strong and had a reputation as being tough – they had to be!

Going into farms and farmhouses completely unprotected was not without risk. It was important that they should not be seen as vulnerable. They were carrying cash and also many had the added responsibility of children with them.



*Photographs from the
Easter Workshop 2018 in
Dornoch Social Club*



5 - The Embo Fishing Fleet

Brora Learning Centre - February 2018

Archaeological evidence such as shell middens shows that people have been fishing in this area since the Mesolithic period around 8000 years ago.

The layout of Embo village suggests that, like fishing villages along the Moray Coast, it was a planned village. In the 1780s the British Fisheries Society was set up to develop fishing in the North of Scotland. The 1st Duke of Sutherland was a member of the Society and backed the building of new ports in the area. The Estate Owners and Lairds believed that the stocks of herring would never run out.



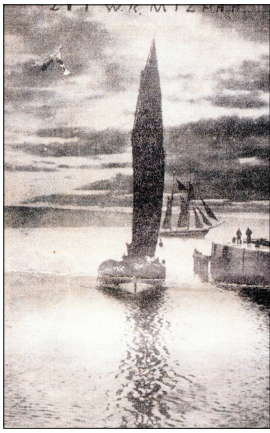
The plan was to build forty ports around the North Coast for the Herring fishing. In fact, only three of these came to fruition - Wick, Ullapool and one on the Isle of Skye. Helmsdale and Brora harbours were built by the Sutherland Estates.

Embo, like most of the coastal places, was already fishing at this time but they were catching white fish, Haddock, Cod and Saithe.

Around the same time, the local Estate owners were improving the farming and setting up fishing villages where people cleared from the land could go. Embo was not a 'clearance village' as it was situated on the Gordon of Embo Estate which did not clear their tenants. However, it is likely that some people cleared from the Sutherland Estates made their home in Embo.

The Embo fishing fleet had a summer harbour at Littleferry and a winter harbour on Loch Fleet below Skelbo Castle.

Fishing boats were often owned by the Estate Landlords. This meant that the fishermen were tied to the Estates by their boats and their cottages.



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was a real boom in the herring fishing industry. The result of this was that more fishermen were able to buy their own vessels and gain independence from the landlords.

In 2015 the North of Scotland Archaeology Society were doing a coastal walk along Loch Fleet. During the walk they came across the hulls of several boats. In all they counted seventeen boats, some were smaller white fishing boats but others were the Zulu class of boat used for the herring fishing. These boats were up to 40 feet long.

It was a mystery why these boats had been abandoned in their winter harbour, but after some investigation they discovered a few reasons for the abandoned boats.

One reason was that people joined crews away from Embo. Another factor was that people earned more money because of the Herring boom and were able to afford bigger, better boats with faster engines. Technology had moved on by the 1920's and so the fleet had outlived its use. However, the most emotive reason may have been that some of the fishermen did not return after the First World War.

The story went that the wives of these men could not stand to see their husband's empty boats, so the boats were towed to the Winter harbour and burned.

A member of the Nautical Archaeology Society came to Embo to examine the remains of the Fleet. He concluded that the boats had not in fact been burned at all. Instead he pointed out evidence of cut marks where parts of the boats had been sawn off.



Therefore, it seems that the timbers were removed rather than burned where they lay. Wood was a valuable resource and was most likely used in the repair of buildings and fences in Embo. Instead of wasting the boats in a huge bonfire it is more likely that parts of them were burned in the hearths of the cottages!

6 - The Herring Girls

Historylinks Museum - Autumn 2107

Christina and Bella Mackay were just teenagers when they set off from their home village of Embo to work with the Herring fleets around Scotland's Coast. Eventually they found themselves at Great Yarmouth on the Norfolk coast in England.



CHRISTINA & BELLA MACKAY (EMBO) YARMOUTH



Christina & Bella Mackay - Dornoch 2017

They had travelled to the Mound from Embo railway station where they changed trains for Fraserburgh. When the girls went to Fraserburgh they shared a wooden hut by the quayside. Some of the huts had small gardens where fresh vegetables could be grown. The accommodation was basic but comfortable with a wood burning stove to keep them warm.

The herring girls worked in groups of three. There were two people to gut the fish and one to pack the fish into barrels. At first the girls were joined by one of the other gutters from Fraserburgh but later on their mother Mary Ann, who had worked as a gutter when the girls were children, joined their team.

Christina was a gutter and Bella a packer. They wore scarves around their heads to protect their hair, mostly they wore overalls, big waterproof aprons and heavy boots. The gutters used 'cloots' which were old bits of sheet cut into long strips to wind around their fingers.



They bound the fingers on both hands from the palm of the hand to the tip of the finger. The ‘cloots’ protected their fingers against the sharp knives and also prevented the fish from slipping out of their hands.

A gutter cut the head off the fish and pulled out the guts. The herring would be thrown into a wooden basket and the guts left in the trough.



When the basket was full it was taken to a packer who layered salt and herring alternately in a barrel. The salt preserved the herring but was very hard on the hands causing any chafes or sores to be very painful.

It was tough work and they couldn’t finish for the day until every herring had been gutted and packed. There was no way of telling how many they would do in a day and they never knew when they went out in morning, what time they would finish in the evening.

Despite the hardship, Christina and Bella enjoyed the experience of being away from home and meeting new people. They were young, they didn’t feel the cold or get tired!

The girls also worked in Ullapool and Wick but their biggest adventure was working in Great Yarmouth. There they had the opportunity to go to the dances, walk along the busy seafront, go to the cinema and ice-rink.

Fishermen are very superstitious and it is considered to be bad luck to have a woman on board a boat. However, Christina and Bella were curious about what went on out at sea. The young fishermen agreed to let the girls go out with them one night. Poor Christina, she was green with sea sickness and had to stay up on deck the whole night.

The moon was full and bright and Bella got to see how the fishermen worked. She watched them hauling in a heavy net of herring. As the men pulled the net in the herring sparkled and shone silver in the moonlight. The fish poured onto the boat and Bella saw exactly why the herring went by the name ‘The Silver Darlings’.



BELLA MACKAY (EMBO) YARMOUTH

The Site



Before

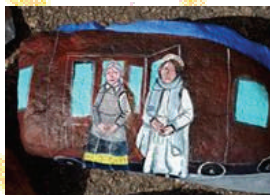


During



After

The maze design and some of the painted stones & slates



*With grateful thanks to our funders and to all our volunteers
for helping to make this project happen.*



LOTTERY FUNDED



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