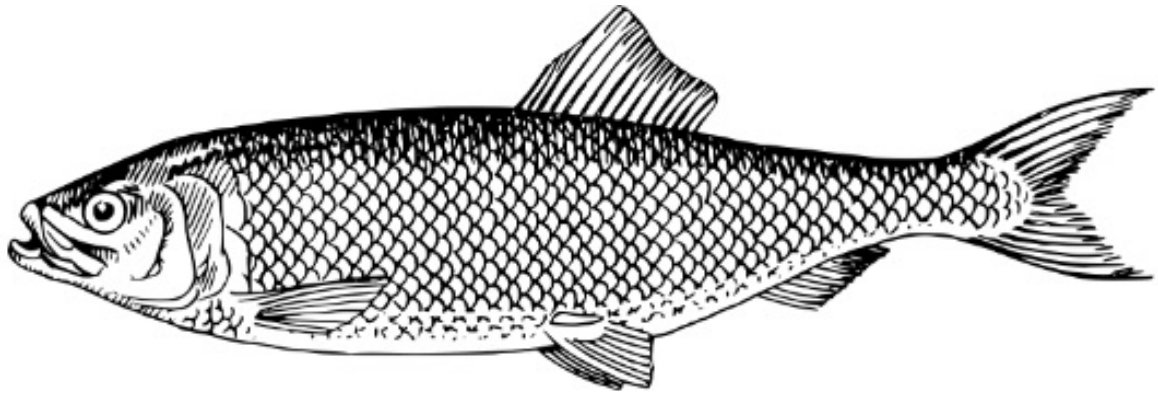


HERRING TALES

Good Stories for Home Schools



with activities

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No 5: Fisher Lasses

FISHER LASSES



The Fisher Lass, a painting by John McGhie

Fisher lasses, fisher girls, fisher women: they were strong and clever.

Where there was no harbour, boats were launched from beaches. Women had to carry men on their backs to the boats. They didn't want the men to get wet feet. Out at sea with cold, wet socks and boots a fisherman could get a chill. If he became really ill he couldn't fish. No fish meant no money.

Fisher lasses carried big baskets for miles and miles to sell the fish. They had to be good with money. They had to get the best price. But fresh herrings don't stay fresh. They had to sell before the fish started to smell! When trains were invented, you could transport fresh fish quickly.

Another way to stop herrings going smelly was to salt them and put them in barrels. Salted herrings lasted for months. You could put the barrels on another boat and sell them abroad. There was lots of work for fisher lasses salting herrings. They'd travel on the trains to where the herring was being landed.



Here are some fisher lasses at North Shields



Here are some fisher lasses gutting herrings at Great Yarmouth

With their sharp knives, they worked very fast. They gutted a herring every second: slit its belly, cleaned out its insides, threw it in a tub. They worked in teams of three - two gutting, one packing. Look at the photograph. They have tied pieces of cloth around their fingers. Why do you think they did that?

Cut fingers hurt, but they were scattering salt all day long. Salt in a cut is really, really painful. And they had to keep working. The bits of cloth were called *cloots* or *clooties*.

When lots of herrings had been caught, fisher lasses might work until after midnight. They didn't always want to get up the next morning. A man would go round the streets calling, 'Get up and tie your fingers!'



Wherever herrings were caught, herring girls gutted and salted. This is Iceland. Herring girls in Icelandic is *sildarstülka*. In 1920, the *sildarstülka* formed their own union to fight for better wages.

They worked long days and didn't get paid much. But they knew their strength. If they stopped work and went on strike, pretty soon all the herrings would start to smell. They couldn't be salted and they couldn't be sold. Christina Jackman was a herring lass when she was young. She tells the story:

We only got four pence an hour at first... We went on strike for six pence... Our boss called us the Bolsheviks and all the names he could lay his hands on... They called us all sorts, but we got it just the same. They had to pay us tuppence because we stuck together. It was early in the 1920s.



Activities

You take 1 second to gut a herring. There are 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour and you work for 10 hours. How many herrings do you gut?

(One woman remembers her team of 3 filling 288 barrels over 4 days. A barrels held 900 to 1,200 herrings. That's roughly 40,000 a day for each gutter and 80,000 for the barrel packer!)

Make some *clooties* for your fingers. They used to cut up old cloth flour bags. If you haven't any cloth, cut up a plastic bag. You need pieces to wrap round each finger, then strips to use like string.

The long troughs where they worked were called *farlins*. Draw a picture of some herring lasses working at the farlins. If you look at Herring Tales No 3, you'll find a nice picture of some herring lasses filling the barrels - you could include that too.

John McGhie's painting of *The Herring Lass* is from the collection of the excellent Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther. The photograph of fisher lasses gutting in Great Yarmouth is from Retronaut. The photograph of the Icelandic sildarstülka is from the collection of the excellent Herring Era Museum at Siglufjörður in Iceland.