

A LACONIC LUMP OF WATER

AS PREPARATIONS get under way to recover the wreck of the Solway Harvester this coming week, Iain Fraser Grigor says that fishing remains the toughest industry of all, with working conditions which are in some respects 150 years out of date.

A TELEVISION EXECUTIVE - whatever that is exactly - telephoned me recently. He wondered why fishermen did not go about their everyday work dressed in lifejackets. I pointed out that there is, most of the time, absolutely no need to wear lifejackets. I said that crewmen would certainly be the first men in the universe to know when lifejackets were needed. And I added that to wear them when they were entirely un-needed might be construed as rather ominous conduct in an industry to which superstition is not entirely a stranger.

The executive then proposed that the skipper of a vessel could set an example to his sturdy hands. He could from time to time pop down to the trawl deck while dressed in this rugged, survivalist fashion. I suggested to the executive that the next time he loafed around his studio floor making a nuisance of himself he should try wearing a life-jacket from his own costume department. And get the girls, or boys, to blow it up for him first of all. That put a swift end to the debate.

It is of course the case that fishing - by onshore standards - is highly dangerous. Already this year there has been a spate of fatal and near-fatal accidents as eloquent testimony to that old truism.

The Solway Harvester was lost in early January. Her crew of seven died when the scalloper went down in a winter gale in the Irish Sea. At the time, it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that she had been overwhelmed by a rogue wave, or 'lump of water' as these things are known with that laconic genius so characteristic of the industry. An attempt to lift the wreck, which is lying in 120 feet of water ten miles off the Isle of Man, is now scheduled for next week, during the neap-tide window of June 20 to 25.

Also in January, but towards the end of the month, the Audacious II was west of Rockall in near-hurricane Force 11 conditions. A huge lump of water smashed in her wheelhouse windows, leaving the vessel dangerously exposed in 'absolutely atrocious' weather conditions. By great good fortune, none of the seven men aboard was injured.

At the same time the Peterhead trawler Ocean Bounty had her windows 'washed in' (as that cool saying has it) by a 45-foot wave out in the North Sea, leaving glass from the armoured panes embedded in wheelhouse furniture!

Meanwhile, 30 miles off the Orkneys, the Be Ready was involved in an extraordinary rescue from conditions of extreme danger. With her wheelhouse on fire and liferafts destroyed, her partly-dressed crew took refuge right forward on the whaleback. There, in a very severe winter gale, they were alternately roasted by the heat of the flames, choked with fumes and smoke, and soaked with waves and snow. All the time they were in imminent danger of being washed overboard. In a display of brilliant seamanship, the Mizpah came close alongside in the 35-foot seas and passed a liferaft over to the stricken

crew. The men then jumped (!) into the liferaft, and were lifted out of it by helicopter.

More recently five men from the *Angela* were airlifted from their sinking boat 70 miles off Aberdeen. The vessel started to take in water at one in the morning in moderate sea conditions, and sank just 15 minutes afterwards. One of her crewmen then spent twenty minutes in the water before being picked up by a rescue craft from an oil-industry standby vessel.

And just last month, a crewman was dragged into the mighty winch of the *Solstice*, trawling off Rockall. He was, according to press reports, decapitated.

These are, of course, the sort of accidents that legislation can do little or nothing about. Legislation could have made no difference to the terrible loss of the *Solway Harvester*. Laws, after all, cannot be expected to predict a lump of water big enough to sink a strong, steel boat. Laws cannot alter the effect of a rogue wave powerful enough to smash in armoured windows, as in the case of the *Audacious* or the *Ocean Bounty*. Laws cannot outlaw the old nightmare of fire at sea, as in the case of the *Be Ready*. Nor can they instruct vessels such as the *Angela* to avoid catastrophic leaks and under no circumstances ever to sink.

Laws, after all, just like lawyers, have their limitations. And these are hazards of the sea as old as time - and are likely to remain so for as long as boats, and men, put out to sea.

Of course, fishing isn't always dangerous. Sometimes, it is just seriously boring. Sometimes, it is very pleasant. On occasions, it can even be enchanting.

Trawling last summer on the west side of Skye, for instance, we watched at dawn the fleet leaders in the Tall Ships Race ghost out in an awesome silence from the first light of the morning. And round about the same time - as the seabirds raced landwards at noon and the day strangely darkened - we took it in turns to watch in a perfectly clear sky, through a welding-mask glass, the eclipse of the sun. These are not, I think, everyday events in the office-world of New Britain.

I first went trawling for prawns in 1973. Later, I pair trawled for herring, and purse-seined for mackerel. In the last two or three years, I have spent a few weeks clam-dredging, and again at the prawn trawl. In all, it might add up to three years or so of seetime. This is not very much, of course: but it is an infinity of experience compared to those who have never set foot on a boat and who might glibly propose implausible solutions to working conditions in the industry.

Over the course of these years, I can think of no more than a handful of occasions when there might have been a threat of danger to life or limb.

One December I joined a boat late on a Friday evening. We spent a few merry hours mending a net in a midnight snowstorm while a village dance enjoyed itself in the very near distance. Then manfully, and with tremendous enthusiasm, we put out to sea. Saturday midnight found us somewhere south-west of Barra with a lot of wind and sea, and a deckful of fish to gut. (This is about the time you start to think wistfully of tank-tops and discos). Eventually we ran away for shelter, and twice the boat took a very strange 'loup': the sort of loup that wakes you up, deep in your off-watch bunk, very quickly indeed.

We got into shelter at the back of Mingulay about dawn, and the remainder of the day was dedicated to such rest and recreation as is to be found in Castlebay on a winter's Sunday afternoon. But I still think of those loups, and wonder.

On another boat at the Cornish mackerel, off Land's End in something of a gale of wind and snow, the scuppers jammed, and the decks were under solid water, with little to be seen forward but a mast surrounded by foam. Two men waded out onto the deck and with a sledge-hammer (meantime taking some care not be washed over the side) smashed the scuppers open. This may not have been as dangerous as it sounds, though the boat was certainly rolling with an eerie sort of motion. But again, it is scarcely an everyday office scene in New Britain either.

And at the pair-trawl for herring once, we were lifting a bag of fish aboard when the shackle at the gilson-head parted. A steel hanging block which had until then been supporting that three-quarter tonne weigh came down like a stone onto the winch-man's head. Much delirium, and some blood, was the result, with the winchman airlifted to hospital later that day.

But give or take the odd smack on the head with a purse-ring, or other minor sorts of accidents, that's about it. Full-time fishermen, of course, who have been at sea for years, have endless tales to tell of just how quickly the job can turn very dangerous indeed. And if anything, these tales may under-estimate the nature of things. Given the freelance self-employed culture of share-fishing, minor accidents - perhaps even some rather serious ones by onshore standards - might not always be registered, or reflected in official figures.

And all this is despite a mass of regulations relating to obligatory safety and survival procedures and equipment. These surely proved their value in most of the recent incidents, in the form of distress radio procedures, liferafts (and lifejackets), flares, full-flotation survival suits, position-indicator beacons, and emergency-training for crews.

Regulations such as these are needed too. At sea, after all, men work on a moving platform with heavy gear and machinery - winches, steel wires and ropes under great tension, beams, dredges, nets, net drums, trawl doors, chains, hanging blocks, power blocks, cranes, mobile pumps, knives, heavy hatches, and all the rest of it. This sort of work is bound by its very nature to be dangerous. And the heavier the weather, the greater the movement of the platform, of course. Any artificial restriction on the weather in which boats can stay at sea would, however, ruin the viability of the fleet. And skippers, after all, are acutely aware of the dangers of bad weather. Their lives, and the lives of their crewmen, depend on it.

The work is made even more dangerous by the hours which the fisherman can find himself working as a matter of course. At the clam fishery, eighteen hours on deck and six in the bunk is considered a civilised sort of day. It is too, compared to the boats which work non-stop for three or four days at a time: week in, week out. And at other forms of fishing, the men can also be on deck for two days or more at a time, with no sleep at all. Arguably, it is even worse for the skipper in the wheelhouse.

Over 150 years since the famous Ten Hour Act of 1847, working hours such as these - and they are by no means untypical -

may be thought of as little short of scandalous. But the men have to go, and have to keep going, because there are mouths to be fed ashore, and there are boats and licences to be paid for. And while much of fishing is now a very marginal economic activity, it can expect no help in the way of government subsidy (unlike, for instance, marginal agriculture). Later this month, in fact, the Council of Ministers will hear proposals which will include a ten per cent tonnage reduction in the UK fishing fleet. Worse, the last thing it needs is legislation to limit the likes of working hours - which would without question destroy the viability of much of the fleet.

And it's a small industry, really. Those boats and the communities they support all the way round the Scottish coast aren't really that important in an electoral sense. And therefore men will keep going to sea, in conditions that are in some respects at least 150 years out of date. None of it really matters to a government that wouldn't know a haddock from a hake unless, perhaps, it spoke Italian with a Tuscan accent.

In other words, the real price of fish is, and will continue to be, the risk of men's limbs and men's very existence. It all seems a far cry, does it not, from a debate on what you need, or what you do not need, to get into some college at one of the better universities in the soft south of England.

Little wonder that the cry of the old fishwives hawking their wares in the alleys and wynds of the coastal towns was this: 'It's no' fish you're buying, it's men's lives'.

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