

Manx Notes 658 (2024)

“THE CLOSE OF THE HERRING FISHING ‘THE BOAT SUPPER,’ OR ‘BALL BAATHA’”

(1899)

Over a hundred years ago, and up to the middle of the present century, the Manx herring fishing finished for the year at about Michaelmas, October 10th, or thereabout, the back or Douglas fishing then terminating, and the boats sailing to their respective ports where they were laid up for the winter, or, “put on the bank,” as the fishermen termed it. There they remained until the west of the Island, or “Big Bay” fishing started for the ensuing year.

The herring fishing in those days seldom or never started until near midsummer, that is, between the 20th of June and the 5th of July. When the fishing boats arrived in port from the back fishing the masts, sails, ropes, nets, and other fishing gear were carefully housed for the winter. The boats had their ballast or stones taken out, and deposited on the hill-side, adjoining the harbour, or in some other convenient place. The inside of the boats was then carefully washed and covered over, if possible, to protect them from the winter and spring rains and snow, and the mast and sails, with the rigging and other ropes, were carefully housed. The men in those days were very particular about the rigging and masts, and these, with care, lasted them a considerable number of years. The nets were taken to the fishermen’s respective houses to have the rents made during the past season repaired, and they were carefully got ready during the winter months for the next fishing term. When the boat was sided or laid up for the winter the crew had an afternoon in the “thie oast,” or public-house, as the old men called it, and had a farewell drink for the season, and those of the crew who intended staying on engaged for the ensuing season.

During the period between the finish of the Douglas season and old Christmas, and up to old New Year’s, the skipper generally had his crew engaged for the ensuing season, and when he had his full crew he invited them to his house to have what was then called a boat supper, or “Ball Baatha.” The night fixed for this event, which was considered by the fishermen the night of the year, generally happened as before stated, between December 25th and January 12th of the ensuing year. The skippers of the boats, or, at least a great number of them, lived in the country, and farmed a small croft, or “craff,” as they called it, during the winter and spring months. They dwelt in thatched cottages, and the boat suppers were held in the skipper’s house. They had no fire grates in their houses in those days, and burnt no coal, ling and turf being the fuel consumed. A small triangular piece of iron, with three or more short legs underneath it, called “the crow,” was set on the hearth, and the pot was placed on this for cooking their food.

Well, to return to the story of the boat supper. The supper was cooked in the skipper’s house, the wife and daughters preparing it; and, in case the skipper was a

bachelor, he then lived with his mother and sister, and they did the cooking and other preparations for the feast. A pork and meat pie was the principal dish. This pie was composed of, perhaps, veal, mutton, beef, and pork, with potatoes, onions, water, *etc.*, and covered over with a crust, then made of barley and oat-meal mixed. Flour was but very rarely used, as little wheat was grown. This pie was cooked in a round, low iron pot called an oven, and this oven was placed on the “crow,” and a turf fire placed under it. The top of the pot was covered with a round piece of iron—the griddle on which they baked their bread was generally used—and a slow fire was placed on this griddle to cook the pie crust. The upper and lower fires combined made a very well-cooked and dainty pie. This pie would be sometimes cooked the day before, and on the evening of the ball be just warmed up and got ready for serving. A good-sized duff, or dumpling, made of flour, if obtainable, or otherwise, barley-meal and suet, with a few currants, was another of the “ball” courses, and perhaps some beef roasted on a grid over the fire, and plenty of whole and mashed potatoes, boiled, and roasted generally, constituted the supper. They sometimes also cooked what they then called a *pringaage*—ox, or sheep’s tripe filled up with oat-meal and fried pieces of fat, and they also filled up some tripes with beef, potatoes, onions, pepper, water, *etc.* These tripes were boiled in a pot on the triangular “crow,” and a very tasteful course at the supper they made. A half-barrel of “jough” (common) was got for the night, and this was placed in the parlour, the supper being served in the kitchen. A bottle of rum was also bought weeks beforehand and kept in the cupboard until the night of the boat supper. The rum and the “jough” were the drinks then used. The rum was very dear. The adjoining countries were then at war, the star of Napoleon 1st being then in the ascendancy, and foreign imports were very difficult to obtain owing to the disturbed state of the continent.

The night of the supper being fixed, the crew gathered to the skipper’s house about seven o’clock in the evening, and the first thing done was handing round the horn with about half-a-pint of rum in it. Each man took a small draught out of the horn for luck for the incoming season, and then those who smoked drew out their pipes and had a smoke. Tobacco was also then very dear, and each man brought his own tobacco with him generally. A few yarns about sailing, and fishing of past years were then spun, the half-barrel being in the meantime tapped, and a quart or two of “jough” handed round to each man, and if any one required more he had only to give the sign or tap the empty mug on the table and the mistress would in a very short time replenish it.

An hour or two was spent in this way, and about nine o’clock all sat down to supper. This lasted about an hour, between eating the pie and the other courses before described, and talking of fishing and sailing experiences between whiles. When the supper was over the pipe was again drawn out, and while indulging in a good smoke, and quaffing a quart or two more of “jough,”—they often tried to lower the half-barrel to within a few quarts of its capacity, and, in some cases, it was quite

emptied of its contents—old yarns were again spun in a more jolly manner, the effects of a hearty supper and a few quarts each of ale helping to make the topics of the evening very entertaining, the old men especially letting out a considerable account n their younger day prowess, feats of strength, and various other episodes that happened during their long seafaring life. The time quickly passed away till nearly midnight, when the horn of rum was once more passed round, and after drinking success to the incoming season, the married portion of the crew, along with their wives (who were also invited to the supper went home. The young men, not married, had often their girls near at hand, and the skipper, if married, also retired for the night, leaving his daughters, if he had any along with the young men and other girls, who had the kitchen then to themselves. If the skipper was not married he stopped up with the others and enjoyed the bit of fun along with his sisters. Sugar being provided beforehand, the pot was put on, and the party had a good old toffy spree. Some of the men, rendered lively with the ale, sometimes on the quiet dropped a small piece of tobacco in the toffy pot, a feat which occasioned a little sharp talk by the girls when the flavour of the toffy was tested. This passed away a most enjoyable night, and the young people retired to their homes often after daybreak.

This short sketch may help the reader if not already acquainted with them to know a little about the old times. The custom of giving an annual boat supper has now died out, and a chance country tea meeting is all they now have on the country during the Christmas times. The good old times are gone, and all the old customs with them, and it is difficult to determine whether those at present in vogue are anything in advance of those which obtained in the times of our fathers.

MANXMAN.

Pseud [signed as “Manxman”]. “Old Manx Customs. The Close of the Herring Fishing. ‘The Boat Supper,’ or ‘Ball Baatha’.” *Isle of Man Times* 18 February 1899: 3c.

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