

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 20 September 2006

It was a beautiful Sabbath morning in the autumn of 1577...

This is the opening line of a poem marking a great disaster to hit the Dunbar area. Despite the pleas of Reverend Andrew Simpson not to set sail on the Sabbath, the local herring fleet along with many boats from the south and the north, and also from the coast of Holland put to sea from Dunbar. By evening the wrecks of nearly two hundred boats were drifting among the rocks. Two hundred and eighty widows wept for lost husbands. The session minutes state. - *"It being a most calm day as ever was seen at that season— at midnight, when they went forth to draw their nets, the wind arose so fearfully that it drowned eight score and ten boats, so that there was reckoned in the coast side fourteen score of widows "* (Session Minutes).

At that time only the ports of Dunbar and Stonehaven would put to sea on the Sabbath. Some maintain that they ultimately ceased to be important herring ports just for that reason. Such a tragedy must have strengthened the faith of fishermen that it was indeed bad luck to be at sea on Sunday. Right up until very recent times, fishing harbours would be deserted at a quarter to midnight and a hive of activity half an hour later as the boats got ready to start the week's fishing.

Fishing is a risky business and there were many customs and superstitions to help ward away ill-fortune. Certain words were taboo – especially salmon, pig and rabbit. There's speculation that this stems from pre-Christian times, when these creatures were powerful symbols of the gods. It's not unusual for lucky symbols in one belief system to become the opposite in its replacement. Alternative words were used if these creatures had to be mentioned – salmon became the red fish, pigs were grunters or durkies, and rabbits mappies. The antidote to inadvertently using any 'bad' words was to touch cold iron. The story of a fisherman's son learning to read demonstrates just how deeply ingrained the superstitions became. While sounding out words for the teacher he persistently said P-I-G 'durkie', because his father would kill him if he said 'pig'!

It wasn't just animals that were unlucky – women and ministers were also to be avoided before putting out to sea. Ministers were regarded as Jonahs, while the fear of women seems to stem from tales of mermaids luring sailors to their deaths. Certain actions were taboo: whistling into the wind, turning a boat around that was heading out to sea or correcting a 'ganzie' that had been put on inside out by mistake to name but a few. Many fishermen wore a single gold ear ring; some said that was a good luck charm while others that it acted as a kind of insurance policy — "it wid provide enough siller tae bury ye, shood ye dee in a strange port!"

While such beliefs may not hold the same sway as they once did, there is still a great tradition of good luck underpinning skill among seafarers.

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