

Fisherrow and The Fishermen's Walk

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I'm a Museum and Heritage Studies postgraduate student from the University of St. Andrews, and as part of my degree, I've been able to work at the Scottish Fisheries Museum as an Archive Photography Assistant, where I've been going through the digitised photography collection and adding tags and captions to make them more accessible in the online database. In doing so, I've been able to learn a lot about Scotland's fishing industry.

With centuries of history, it's no surprise that fishing communities have developed a variety of unique traditions and customs. Many of these are showcased in the displays and collections of the Scottish Fisheries Museum, such as the intricate ganseys knitted by fishwives, their iconic striped petticoats, and words that bring bad luck at sea. However, some unique fishing customs were more localised. The harbour of Fisherrow, now part of Musselburgh, was home to an event that showcased the traditions of the community whilst also becoming a tradition itself – The Fishermen's Walk.

The Walk



Fishermen's Walk, 1947. iBase: 12685

The origins and evolution of the Fishermen's Walk are emblematic of community support. The Walk began in the 1790s, when fishermen would pay into a fund or a box (hence why the event is also referred to as the Box Walk). This fund could be used as insurance for the fisherman's family should anything happen to him, and on the third Friday of September this fund was also opened for people in the community who needed it. Over

time, the collection and distribution of the fund became a celebratory parade where all members of the community participated.



Fishermen and children in ganseys. Fishermen's Walk, 1979. iBase: 2628



Children dressed in traditional fishwife clothing. Fishermen's Walk, 1979. iBase: 7394

As can be seen in the museum's photography collection, participants in the parade would dress in traditional work clothing. Fishwives are pictured wearing striped petticoats and waving white handkerchiefs, singing songs as they walk down the street, such as *Weel May the Boatie Row*. The walk would finish at the grounds of Pinkie House (which later

became Loretto School) where people would enjoy dancing, races, competitions, and live music.



The Dancer's Headmeeting, Pinkie House. Fishermen's Walk, 1940s. iBase: 4176



Fishermen and women dancing on the ground of Pinkie House. Fishermen's Walk, 1950s. iBase: 4199

Over the past 200 years, the style and popularity of the Fishermen's Walk has evolved. Photographs in the Fisheries Museum collection suggest the Walk was held on and off throughout the 20th century. The Fisheries' collection and other community resources are a little conflicting in terms of the decades when the Walk took place, so please get in touch if you have more information on the popularity of this event! Currently, the Fishermen's Walk has been absorbed into Musselburgh's summer festival, which began in 1935. Whilst the event differs from the Walk, some of its traditions are still maintained. For example, an Honest Lad and Lass are appointed as town representatives and awarded a sash at the festival each year. Memory of the Fishermen's Walk is still strong in the Fisherrow community, so much so that there are currently plans to revive the dance in Musselburgh this October.

Community

The Fishermen's Walk, and its records within the Scottish Fisheries Museum's archives, are a testament to the strong character of the Fisherrow community. Many photographs of Fisherrow have a rare level of detail provided by people whose families have worked in the fishing industry there for generations. For example, many of the photographs of Fisherrow were donated by Mrs. Amy Orr, whose mother, aunt, grandmother and great-grandmother, all fishwives, are now recorded within the Museum's collections.



Fishermen's Walk, 1979. Mrs. Orr is in the centre. iBase: 2597



Euphemia Hamilton, Mrs. Orr's grandmother. c.1890. iBase: 13232

One photograph of the Fishermen's Walk, taken in 1967, is accompanied by a poignant caption. Pictured waving a handkerchief and holding the hand of a young girl is Betty Millar, apparently the last fishwife of Fisherrow. Although Millar continued working in the industry, exchanging the heavy traditional creel baskets for a wheeled trolley in the late 1980s, this photograph demonstrates the changing fishing industry and the ending of a unique way of life. It is therefore important that records of traditions like these are preserved within an archive, before this knowledge is lost with passing generations.

To learn more about Scotland's traditional fishing communities, visit the Scottish Fisheries Museum, or search the online photography collection to see what you'll find. If you have any more information about Fisherrow, or recognise anyone in the photographs, please get in touch!



Betty Millar, the last traditional fishwife of Fisherrow. iBase: 16466



Fishermen's Walk, 1967, featuring Betty Millar. iBase: 5056