

ANCIENT FISH-TRAPS OR YAIRS IN SCOTLAND.

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Little attention has been paid in antiquarian literature to the old fish-traps round the coasts of the British Isles. Their frequency in Ireland has been shown recently by Mr A. E. J. Went,¹ who distinguishes between weirs in constantly flowing rivers and tidal weirs. The latter have so little been studied that Mr O. G. S. Crawford's "Lyonesse,"² in which they were interpreted as inundated fields, was not challenged till he himself recognised their similarity to fish-traps along the coasts of South Africa.³ The following pages put on record information about such weirs in the north of Scotland.⁴

The chief occupation of early man was hunting and fishing for the food by which he lived. To capture land animals he made rude enclosures like sheep-cribs, and dug pitfalls, probably aiding the result by driving the game towards the traps, as certain African tribes yet do. The same idea, applied to the capture of fishes, no doubt evolved the first fish-trap or "yair," to give the Scottish name. This is defined in the *New English Dictionary* as "an inclosure extending into a tideway in a river or on the seashore, for catching fish: a fishgarth."

Such traps are used by primitive peoples in many countries. They are in daily use in Africa, the South Sea Islands and the East Indies, and vary very little in size or shape from those which were used around the coast of Britain and Ireland.

Near busy modern towns, traces of the actual yaIRS have disappeared

¹ "Fishing Weirs of the River Erne," *Journ. Roy. Soc., Ant. Ireland*, vol. lxxv. (1945), and "Irish Fishing Weirs," *ibid.*, vol. lxxvi. (1946); and see also his "The Galway Fishery," *Proc. R. Irish Academy*, vol. xlix. (c. 1943-44).

² *Antiquity*, vol. i. (1927).

³ A. J. H. Godwin, "Prehistoric Fishing Methods in South Africa," *Antiquity*, vol. xx. (1946).

⁴ I am indebted to Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh, for this introductory paragraph.

owing to changes and developments on the foreshore, such as land-reclamation schemes, and harbour and wharf construction. Storms also have contributed to the removal of many; and the sites of others are often silted over for a few years, and then reappear when the sand or mud is removed by natural changes.

The best site for a yair was in or near a river-mouth; and the same site being suitable for a town and harbour, it naturally follows that these remains were soon obliterated; the most rapid obliteration taking place in the last hundred and fifty years. In thinly populated districts, remote from busy centres and sheltered from violent coastal erosion, the remains of these traps are yet visible to the experienced eye, and when pointed out are yet distinct in outline. It has been my good fortune to meet old people who remembered having seen fish captured in these Scottish yairs, and others who had the story of their use handed down by their parents concerning the advantage of such contrivances to a small isolated community.

In the first place, it should be borne in mind that as recently as fifty years ago fish were more numerous along our shores, and in our lochs and rivers, than at present, and there was a greater chance of many fish being taken by such primitive means. I can remember the time (somewhere in the 1880's) when children made miniature yairs in the Midlothian Esk and other streams to capture minnows and other small fry. This happened before pollution reached its present stage, and before the volume of the river was diminished by the construction of reservoirs for the Corporation water supply.

In the shires of Ross, Sutherland and Inverness these remains are yet fairly numerous, and in a lesser degree in Orkney, Caithness and Shetland—the shores of the three latter counties possessing more precipitous cliffs. In these counties the yairs are strongly built of rocks and large stones and remain nearly intact, as they were not seriously in the way of foreshore improvements or harbour construction works. A few years ago, when the tide was favourable, I saw a specimen of a double yair quite close to the town of Inverness, and that, too, while travelling by train. A small stream enters the Beaully Firth to the west of Kessock Ferry, and at low water two lines of stones are visible to entrap fish left by the falling tide; the double line having probably been laid to suit neap and spring tides and to ensure continuity of a supply of fish.

At a short distance from the church and manse of Lochbroom, on the west side of the estuary, there remains part of a very strongly-built yair. This being on the extensive glebe of a once rich ecclesiastical site, it was a private affair and the property of the church. When the Rev. Dr Ross was in charge no less than 1000 baskets of herring entered this trap, or were left in it, after all the people in the district were supplied. These fish not being removed, decayed and polluted the whole upper end of Lochbroom, and

local fishermen, blaming this as the cause of fish leaving that part of the loch, broke down much of the outer wall of the trap; but the foundations remain, covered by seaweed. In my opinion, this particular yair was primarily constructed to capture salmon and sea-trout, which were plentiful there in past years. Shoals of herring enter the loch periodically, but for no apparent reason fail to arrive. It is the movement of "plankton" which

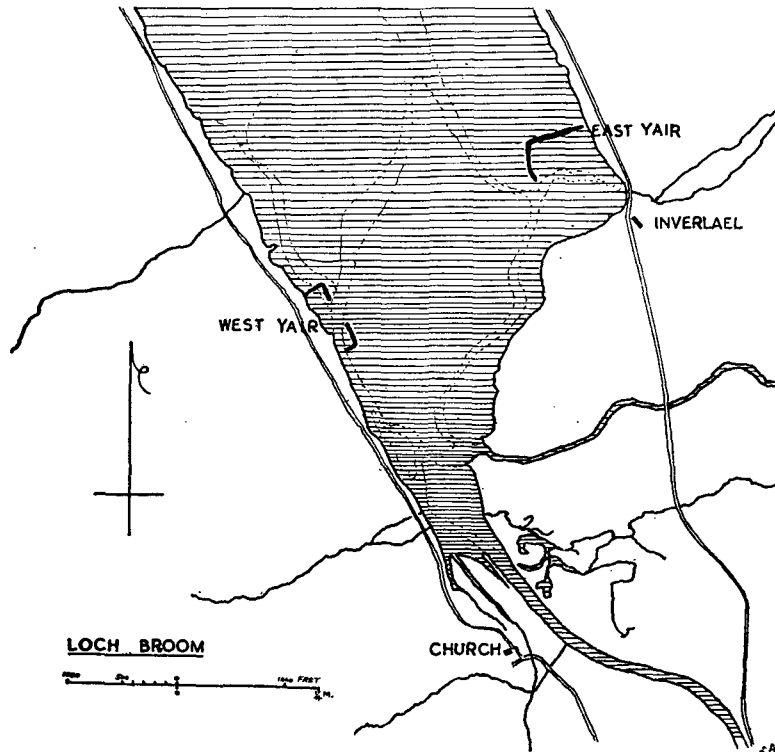


Fig. 1. Site-plan of Fish Yairs on Loch Broom.

(By permission of H.M. Ordnance Survey.)

determines the presence of such fish, and such movement depends on the direction of wind and tide. Even after this yair had been partially destroyed many salmon and sea-trout were taken from it. The current of the River Broom sweeps along by the east wall, and migratory fish enter this stream and find their way into the trap.

On the opposite shore of Lochbroom and northward from Inverlael farmhouse there is a very fine rectangular yair, almost a perfect square. From this fact alone it would seem to have been constructed in comparatively recent times, as the others are of no geometrical pattern whatever, and the

retaining walls are curvilinear. The stonework of this last specimen is composed of smaller boulders than that on the other side of the loch, for the probable reason that these had to be carried a greater distance to the construction.

A predecessor, Mr Murdo Macleay—parish schoolmaster during much of the last century—remembered when this fish-trap was in active service, and told me of the spoils it yielded. This gentleman's father was an eye-witness of the Battle of Culloden, the longevity of father and son being 96 and 94 years respectively. Personally speaking, I have had sea-trout and herrings from it as late as 1910, when great shoals of herring visited the loch.

This yair stands on a flat deposit of sand in shallow water, and generally ebbs out dry twice a day. The walls were easily visible up till 1914. Sometimes the sand drifts over it and renders it less conspicuous. It encloses an area of about half an acre, and must have been constructed when there was plenty of labour on the spot—that is, before the "Inverlael clearances." One can almost gauge the size of the community from the size of these traps.

In other places each family group of relatives possessed smaller traps. This seems to have been the case on the shores of the Kyle of Sutherland, near Invershin, and Culrain. These are visible also on the Dornoch, Cromarty and Beaully Firths. The shape here is variable: oval, roughly circular or irregular, largely depending on the site and geographical situation, and on the skill and whim of the builder, who had to know local conditions and particularly the direction of the run of the fish. Where the coast-line is suitable, with a natural indentation, a very short wall or even a few stones may convert it into a yair.

Storm beaches in the Orkneys, Shetlands and other places enclose "lagoons" or similar bodies of water. With very little manipulation these can readily be converted into serviceable fish-traps. Coral reefs in tropical waters serve the same purpose. The mouth of a small river or stream can also be used for a like purpose by placing one or two lines of stones across the current, and I have noted this trick applied by poachers in comparatively recent times. Salmon, sea-trout, bass, mullet and flounders enter these places. It is on record that 2560 salmon were taken in a single drag of the net in the "cruive" pool near Thurso. The word "cruive" is defined as "a coop or enclosure of wickerwork or spars placed in tideways and openings in weirs as a trap for salmon and other fish."

The yair on the west side of Lochbroom had walls constructed like a "Galloway dyke," *i.e.* having the largest and heaviest stones built in first, and the smaller stones on top of these. At certain places parts of the remaining walls reached a height of about 5 feet. The other yair on the shallow sandy east side of the loch shows a band or track of stones 4 or 5 feet wide, and from 14 to 18 inches in height above the sand on my last visit. The entrance, or an entrance, seemed to have been made at the north-west

corner; there was a gap or break in the wall at this point (seawards). This was a likely spot for the fish to enter the trap, as I observed shoals of sea-trout and salmon playing around this place on several occasions. Old poachers knew the immediate vicinity to be frequented by these fish.

No matter where these yairs or traps are built, they are placed with uncanny skill, betraying years of experience and much knowledge of the ways and habits of fish. In early days the entrance to these traps was closed by a wicker framework of wattle after the fish entered; in later times nets were used. Wickerwork traps were used in rivers at cruives and near waterfalls, as well as in small streams or narrows. Such wicker traps are used for salmon on the Severn Estuary, and farther up the river wicker coracles still survive. Eel-traps, crab- and lobster-pots, formerly made of wicker, are now being made of other materials.

In the South Seas when fish enter the trap the fish are killed by spearing, the chief, or an honoured guest, having the privilege of killing the first specimen. As late as 1912 I saw the trident or leister being used from a small boat in Lochbroom. It was thrown like a harpoon or javelin with a line attached, and on making a strike the line was hauled in with the leister impaling a fish, in this case a large coalfish. This particular leister had a crooked shaft, and I tested it for a cast. The crook in the shaft was deliberately planned to balance the tines or prongs, in such a fashion that they automatically took the proper position for successful casting. The barbed prongs or tines at casting or striking were invariably vertical, and made it almost a certainty that a skilful thrower would strike a fish. This was vitally important in failing light or in darkness, and this same weapon often figured in salmon-poaching or "burning the water" to the accompaniment of a pine torch or a heather-light. Flatfish were speared by a similar contrivance—the "fluking pick." It is still used on certain parts of the coast. About sixty years ago boys used an old kitchen fork on a stick like John Ridd in Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*. Flounders were killed by this means as near the city as Cramond and Musselburgh during my own lifetime.