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The Stockfish Industry in Iceland: Living Industrial Archaeology

THE production of stockfish is as old as recorded history itself. The drying of fish in the open air was evidently practised in ancient Egypt, and was doubtless very widespread in ancient and medieval times.¹

It is easy to confuse the various older ways of preserving fish. *Stockfish* is the term used since medieval times in English to describe air-dried unsalted fish. *Klippfish* is a term of Scandinavian origin used for dried salted fish. These drying processes were (and are) suitable for white fish, eg cod, but not for the fattier fishes such as herring. The latter have, since about 1330, when the Dutchman Beukelszoon developed an improved process, been preserved by pickling in brine.² White fish too have been preserved wet, in a similar way, at least since medieval times, and probably since ancient times.

The industrial production of stockfish now takes place in very few countries, and of these the most important are probably Norway and Iceland. In these countries, it has been established for probably at least a thousand years. In Iceland it must have started soon after the first serious colonisation in AD 874, and stockfish formed the basis of an important trade between Iceland and England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³ Stockfish was obtained by English merchants from Northern Norway in even earlier times, but this trade ceased about the end of the fourteenth century.

The demand for stockfish is diminishing, and the industry is declining. Here we have an ancient industry which seems worth recording while it is still alive. Iceland's stockfish industry has a strong and exciting connection with England, and it is, therefore, on the Icelandic story that we shall concentrate.

The English trade with Iceland

The need for stockfish in England in the period before the Reformation arose partly from the requirement of abstaining from meat at stated times. In addition to this, however, there was always a shortage of meat, and fresh fish was scarce except along the coasts. Thus stockfish, however unattractive it may now seem to us, found a ready market in England.

The trade between England and Iceland began when the English ship-owners found the Norwegian markets difficult, owing to the domination of the Hanseatic merchants. They found in Iceland a good supply of stockfish and a great dearth of the iron and manufactured goods which they could so easily and cheaply supply from England. Thus from the early fifteenth century the trade developed to a very great extent. Mostly it was illegal trade, as Iceland was prohibited by her masters (the Danish crown from 1380, when Norway came effectively under Danish rule) from trading with other countries, and the English crown supported the prohibition. However, this did not prevent the trade from being both intense and profitable. Ships sailed from many English ports, amongst which Bristol was perhaps the most notable. It was a remarkable feat of navigation for such a large trade to be maintained across such wild and foggy seas with only primitive navigational aids.⁴ The trade dwindled after about 1450 owing to the increasing difficulties caused by the activities of the Hanseatic merchants, and it was virtually extinct by the sixteenth century.

The salt-fish activity in Icelandic waters

Within roughly the same period another English activity began in Icelandic waters. English fishermen in their little doggers (about 1412) found the rich fishing grounds off Iceland, and salted down their catch of cod etc in barrels for sale as salt wet fish in England. This had little connection with the Iceland trade in stockfish and did no good for Iceland, but it again indicates the adventurous spirit and navigational capabilities of the English seamen. We discuss it here because it is so easily confused with the stockfish trade.

The discovery of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in 1497, and later other parts of North America, led to much fishing in the western Atlantic, and there was a good deal of fish-drying⁵ as well as pickling in Newfoundland—by the French as well as the English—so much so that it was legally provided for even after the American War of Independence in 1776.⁶ As far as England (or Britain) was concerned, Icelandic *trade* in fish was a thing of the past.

The use of Icelandic waters for fishing by English and later French fishermen and the salting of their catch continued with varying intensity⁷ for centuries, and the only difference at the present day is that the catch is refrigerated instead of salted.⁸ The life of the French fisherman operating in the Iceland fishery in the nineteenth century, and his techniques, are vividly and poignantly portrayed in the famous story *Pêcheurs d'Island* by Pierre Loti.⁹ The Icelanders themselves did not develop a salt-fish business until the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Salt was too difficult and expensive for them to obtain,¹¹ although they did at one time make an effort to manufacture their own by the use of thermal springs as a source of heat for evaporating sea-water.¹²

Stockfish today

In Iceland today, even within the boundaries of the capital city of Reykjavik (population about 100,000), one sees huge areas covered with wooden frames on which split cod are hung in pairs to dry in the open air (see p 216). The method of drying thus differs little from that used in the earliest times.

Nowadays the main customers for Icelandic stockfish are Italy and Nigeria, and the trade is declining. Obviously it cannot compete in general with fish processed by modern methods (especially freezing). Iceland has thoroughly modern fishing and fish-processing industries, and indeed owes its present-day prosperity and high standard of living very largely to these industries. The decline of the stockfish business, although sad from the point of view of history and sentiment, is not, therefore, a very serious matter for Iceland.

The peak annual production of stockfish was 13,000 tons, attained in 1957, and in 1968 the production had declined to 3,546 tons.¹³ The

Norwegian production of stockfish, although perhaps six or seven times larger than that of Iceland, has suffered a similar decline.

References

- 1 See R. J. Forbes in *History of Technology*, ed C. Singer et al, Oxford (1954-8), vol 1, 264. As far back as 2000 BC fish was dried in the sun, or salted, and dried, in Mesopotamia and Egypt.
- 2 This spelling (William Beukelszoon) is given by R. J. Forbes, op cit, vol 3, 22. He was from Biervliet in Flanders. The spelling Beukels is given by G. H. O. Burgess, *Developments in Handling and Processing Fish* (1965), 56, with a more technical discussion of the processes.
- 3 A date as early as around 1350 for the commencement of this trade is given by W. L. Clowes et al in *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present* (1897), vol 1, 316. On the other hand, the later work of E. M. Carus-Wilson in *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (1954), gives the date of 1413 for the start of the trade. (NB Carus-Wilson's essay on the Iceland trade, reprinted in the book above quoted, was originally published in 1933 in *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, ed Eileen Power and M. M. Postan.)
- 4 The lodestone was still the main navigational aid. *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, a poem on the use of sea-power (1436), relates the stockfish trade to the lodestone thus:

Of Yseland to wryte is lytill nede
Save of stokfische; yit for sothe in dede
Out of Bristow and costis many one
Men have practised by nedle and by stone
Thiderwardes wythine a lytel whylle,
Wythine xij. yeres, and wythoute parille,
Gone and comen, as men were wonte of olde
Of Scarborowgh, unto the costes colde.

(See edition by G. Warner, Oxford (1926), and the notes therein. Also given with modified spelling by Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages* (1600), vol 1 in 1907 edn.)

- 5 This was dried salt-fish, not stockfish. See C. L. Cutting in *History of Technology*, ed C. Singer et al, Oxford (1954-8), vol 4, 44-54.
- 6 Provision for drying and curing fish in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, etc was made in a treaty between Britain and the USA in 1783. See J. C. Arnell, 'The Superintendent of Trade and Fisheries for Nova Scotia and the Armed Vessels *Union* and *Hunter*, Part 1, The problems associated with trade and fishing after the American Revolution', *Mariners Mirror*, 56 (1970), 395-409.
- 7 Clowes, op cit, ii, 437 and 495, mentions occasionally the provision of naval protection for the British fishing fleet in Icelandic waters during the seventeenth century.
- 8 The salt was generally obtained from Bourgneuf Bay in the Bay of Biscay. This is mentioned in the *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye* and is explained fully in the note given by Warner in connection with line 113 of the *Libelle*. The salt for the French (Breton) Icelandic fishery in the nineteenth century still came from the Bay of Biscay (golfe de Gascogne) as is clearly stated in the story by Loti:

Mais la *Marie* suivait l'usage de beaucoup d'Islandais, qui est de toucher

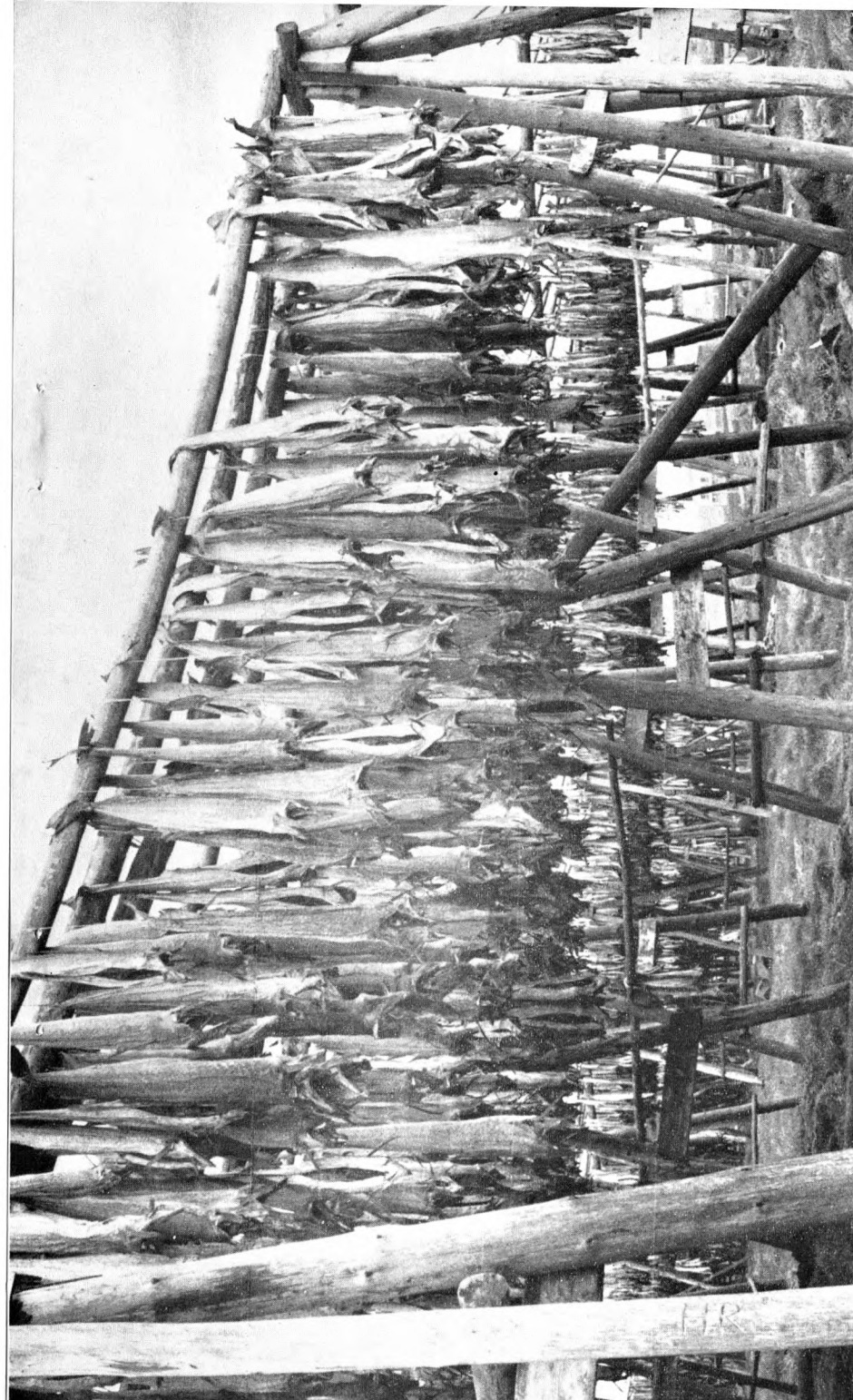
seulement à Paimpol, et puis de descendre dans la golfe de Gascogne où l'on vend bien sa pêche, et dans les îles de sable à marais salants où l'on achète le sel pour la campagne prochaine.

- 9 First published in 1886.
- 10 Cf H. Lindroth, *Iceland—A Land of Contrasts*, New York (1937), 88.
- 11 The abolition of the Danish trade monopoly in 1854 led to an enormous increase in Iceland's imports of salt. In 1806, imports were only 1,450 bushels; in 1855, they were 73,790 bushels. See Knut Gjerset, *History of Iceland* (1922), 364.
- 12 In 1773 a plant was started at Reykjanes in Ísafjardarsýsla, but was abandoned thirteen years later. See *Iceland*, Naval Intelligence Division, Geographical Handbook, BR 504 (1942), 69.
- 13 See Gudmundur H. Gardarsson, 'Stockfish from Iceland', in *Island*, Icelandair publication (1970), 29.

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For plate, provided by the author, see p 216



Page 216 Split cod hung in pairs on wooden frames to dry at Arbaer on the eastern outskirts of Reykjavik, Iceland. The dried fish, which is not salted, is salted stockfish. See Tucker, 'The Stockfish Industry in Iceland', pp 172-6