

**Broad Character: Fishing**

**Character Type: Fishing**

**Irish Sea Regional Perspective**

**Introduction: Defining/Distinguishing Attributes**

The main fishing ports facing the Irish Sea include Fleetwood, Barrow-in-Furness, Ravenglass, Whitehaven, Harrington, Workington, Maryport and Silloth. The region is currently covered by two sea fisheries committees: Cumbria ([www.cumbriasfc.org.uk](http://www.cumbriasfc.org.uk)) and North Western and North Wales ([www.nwnwsfc.org](http://www.nwnwsfc.org)), though these will be replaced the North Western Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority in April 2011. There are currently (March 2011) around 90 commercial (registered and licensed) fishing boats based in Cumbria, most of which are under 10 metres in length, and as well as further boats registered in Fleetwood that work mostly in the Cumbrian sea fisheries area. Primary fishing methods include stern trawling, anchor seine netting, beam trawling, potting and creeling, dredging and gill netting. At certain times of the year a further 50 to 60 vessels, mainly from Northern and Southern Ireland and the south west Scotland work off the Cumbrian coast. Shrimps are harvested from around the north-west England's Irish Sea coast, including off Blackpool and the Mersey, but are most popularly associated with Morecambe Bay (Mitchell 2005, 30).



*The medieval fish traps at Cowp Scar, Morecambe Bay, exposed by shifting settlements and dated from the 14<sup>th</sup> century (courtesy of Cowp Scar Research Group)*

Shellfish are of great importance to the region's fishing industry. The boats from Ireland, Scotland and Fleetwood mostly target nephrops (Dublin Bay prawns/scampi), and Whitehaven and Workington have recently become bases for large scallop dredgers and beam trawlers when these boats work the northern sector of the Irish Sea. Cockle dredgers also work in the area. Much fishing for shellfish, however, is carried out by hand along the shoreline, including hand raking for mussel and cockles, and gathering winkles. Morecambe Bay is one of the prime areas for fishing by hand (Mitchell 2005, 29), and there is commercial fishing for cockles, mussels and shrimp, although the cockle beds have been closed since 2009 because of declining stocks ([www.southlakeland.gov.uk](http://www.southlakeland.gov.uk)). As well as shellfish, the Bay is also exploited for flukes, the local name for flounder. Overall, the Irish Sea supports a diverse mixed fishery, targeting a wide range of fish and shellfish species. These include nephrops, plaice, skate, cod, whiting, brown shrimp, lobster, brown crab, mussel, cockle, winkle and whelk (<http://www.cumbriasfc.org.uk/>).

The Solway and Lune Estuaries are the centres of a local variant of hand netting, known as haaf-netting (<http://www.haafnet.co.uk/>). These are hand-held nets worked by an individual fisherman consisting of a rectangular frame from which a net is suspended. The frame has a middle leg which extends for carrying the frame (beam) and to tip it to trap fish. The haaf net is positioned in front of the fisherman, to face the run of the water. The most common method is to stand in shallow estuary waters during the ebb tide. The fisherman faces the outgoing tide holding the net to catch salmon. Haaf-netters sometimes fish in a line, in small numbers or alone depending on the ground. There are local variants, such as 'Flood Beam' or 'Marsh Haaf', with variations in the design of the net according to the position taken up by the fishermen within the estuary.

Fish trapping was a common fishing method in the region, for the capture of naturally occurring fish stocks. These were permanent or semi-permanent structures, built or placed in rivers (freshwater or estuarine) or tidal areas and designed to catch fish as they move along in river currents or on the ebbing tide. Fish traps include stone, timber, basketry or framed-net structures, sometimes covering extensive areas with their funnel-shaped plans, concentrating trapped fish towards a collection point. Although the remains of fish traps can be hard to see on the ground, a number have been recorded on aerial photographs, many located on or close to rocky skears next to the shore or by river mouths.

### **Historical Processes; Components, Features And Variability**

Little is known about fishing activities around England's Irish Sea coastline before the medieval period. Finds of prehistoric material close to the coast indicates that people would have exploited the rich maritime resources in the regions relatively shallow waters for since earliest times. Fish traps are known to have been used from the medieval period. Documentary records show that the region's monasteries had licensed fisheries in the medieval period (Newman and Hardie 2007, 26), and at least part of a complex of traps uncovered recently by shifting sands at Cowp Scar, has been radiocarbon dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Newman 2006, 116). Also known as fish balks, fish traps have been recorded on sand banks off the north Wirral coast, St Bees, near Ravenglass and in the Duddon Estuary, but most have been recorded in Morecambe Bay. They were built of stone, timber and/or basketwork in the shape of a huge 'V', with the open end landwards, which would be exposed on the ebb tide. Fish would have entered the 'V' on the ebb tide, making their way along the structure until caught between the arms at the narrow end. They would have been forced through a small gap between the arms into a cage or net to be left stranded in pools once the tide went out (Mitchell 2005, 30).



*Ravenglass, Cumbria. A port which was a creek of Carlisle and carried out coastal trade, but now used by small fishing and leisure boats. There are shell fisheries in the Esk estuary adjacent to the village*

Although there were a number of ports, havens and creeks along the coastline from the medieval period, there does not seem to have been any dedicated fishing ports. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, most fishing appears to have been carried out by individual fishermen operating from a wide range of settlements, even from some distance inland, in tiny boats of around only one ton (Fox 1921, 78). Some of the fish caught, particularly herrings and cod, were exported along the coast to Chester and Liverpool (Fox 1921, 79). The big expansion in fishing came after the introduction of the railway in the 1840s, particularly for shrimps. With the introduction of engines, fishermen could make longer trips, allowing them to fish in new areas, and a deep sea fishing fleet developed at Fleetwood. The fishing industry was important to the town, and in 1919 it had become the third largest fishing port in the country (Rothwell 1991, 32) Fleetwood remained a major fishing port for 90 years.

Despite the presence of Fleetwood, most fishing from the Irish Sea coast was inshore fishing, carried out by small boats. Shrimping had long been carried out in the region, but particularly in Morecambe Bay, by means of push nets and nets dragged through shallow waters by horse and cart, and later tractor

(Whincop and White 1986, 49). Shrimp were also harvested from deeper waters by means of small boats known as ‘nobbies’. The number of nobbies increased after the arrival of the railway, and many local people were employed on these prawners, which landed their catches at wooden jetties along Morecambe seafront (Whincop and White 1986, 49; Mitchell 2005, 32). The shrimp were cooked in boiling water on board the boats, and then dunked in the sea, in sacks, to cool and harden them. Once ashore, pickers shelled them (Mitchell 2005, 32-3). On the north shore of Morecambe Bay, at Flookburgh, it was harder to find an immediate market for the shrimp. Here the catch was landed before it was boiled, and it was then preserved by potting the shrimp in jars with hot butter (Mitchell 2005, 33).

Although the cockle beds of Morecambe Bay are currently closed, this was always an important hand-fishing industry. Cockles are lifted out of the sands by means of a short handled, three-pronged rake, called a *craam*. To encourage cockles to the surface, a device known as a ‘jumbo’ was invented. This is a flat board with handles set at right angles. The base is rocked to agitate the sand, which brings the cockles to the surface (Mitchell 2005, 35). In recent years, cockles have been overfished in the Bay, particularly with a rise in demand at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The number of fishermen rose greatly, including the use of gangs of unregulated collectors. This led ultimately to the tragedy of 2004, where 21 Chinese cockle-pickers became trapped by rising tides and drowned. Cockle picking was subsequently licensed, but a reduction in stocks through over fishing has led to the temporary closure of the beds.

Mussels have also been the subject of over fishing in the past, particularly in Morecambe Bay where the problem was resolved by transplanting mussels to fresh beds (Whincop and White 1986, 48). Mussels are harvested from rocky outcrops around the coast, known as skears. Skears further away from the shore were reached by horse and cart, and later tractors, or by small, single-sail boats.

In two areas, the Lune Estuary and the Solway Firth, salmon and sea trout are caught by means of the ancient form of haaf netting. The tradition of using hand-held haaf nets is thought to date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, introduced by Hiberno-Norse settlers. In the Lune, salmon are also netted from small boats, known as wammels (Mitchell 2005, 60-2).

### **Values And Perceptions**

The fishing fleet at Fleetwood is now much reduced, but the town still has an important fishing industry, though much reduced and is now not in the top 20 for fish landings ([http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/office\\_of\\_the\\_chief\\_executive/lancashireprofile/monitors/maritime.asp](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/office_of_the_chief_executive/lancashireprofile/monitors/maritime.asp)). The town's fish-auction hall still handles around 5,000 tonnes of fish each year, although around half the fish arrives overland from Scottish and other ports.

Especially around Morecambe Bay, the shell fishing industry is seen as important to the history and culture of the communities who live around it. Villages around the Bay still have fishermen who use traditional techniques, travelling out onto the sands to collect shrimps and mussels, as well as cockles when the beds are open. Haaf fishing is an equally valued tradition in the Solway Firth and Lune Estuary, and all traditional forms of fishing are valued by locals and visitors alike, with organisations such as the Solway Coast AONB and the Morecambe Bay Partnership providing information and interpretation of the area's cultural traditions. The nature of the sands and tides in the Bay, however, makes direct involvement with fishing in the Bay difficult.

### **Research, Amenity And Education**

There is considerable potential for further research into the history of the region's fishing, in particular shellfish collection and its cultural traditions and associations with communities around Morecambe Bay. The fishtrap complexes recorded around the Irish Sea coastline, such as those at New Brighton, St Bees, Cowp Scar and Wadhead Scar (Halcrow 2009; Johnson 2009) demonstrate the potential for investigating further medieval and post medieval structures. Cowp Scar has shown that these structures were sometimes built on a large scale, and that the movement of tidal trends and channels has the potential to both erode and cover such features at short notice.

### **Condition And Forces For Change**

The offshore fishing industry in this region was much reduced with the decline of fishing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The remaining boats at Fleetwood are still important to the town, but as a fishing port the town is now insignificant on a national scale. Most commercial trawlers working England's Irish Sea region are from outside the region. Commercial fishing based within the region is focused on shellfishing, particularly around Morecambe Bay. Here environmental conditions and past overfishing have had the greatest affect on the industry, resulting in a temporary ban on cockle fishing. Overfishing and the use of large gangs of migrant workers have also led to changes in the regulation of cockle fishing, with the introduction of a permit system (<http://www.nwsfc.gov.uk>).

The condition and drivers for change affecting historical aspects of the character of an area include, for example, pressures from the tourist industry on historic fishing settlements

including developments such as hotels, marinas, caravan parks, and their associated roads and services.

To date the impact of fishing activity on historic assets has not been fully quantified. However, fishing has had large-scale character impacts on coastal settlement patterns as a whole as well as on the formation of coastal fishing villages, affecting the historic character that people value about such places.

### **Rarity And Vulnerability**

Fishing from north-west England's Irish Sea coastline has a long and complex history and contributes to the distinctive character of areas such as Morecambe Bay and the Solway Firth. Restrictions on fishing grounds are impacting on the scale, range and economic sustainability of the present industry, particularly cockle fishing in Morecambe Bay.

The historic character of fishing, fishing settlements, fishing facilities, fish markets, etc. is vulnerable to pressures from the tourist industry, current marine human activities, economic drivers, as well as environmental processes.

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