

GUIDE to FISH & FISHING on the NORTH YORK MOORS COAST

HISTORY

Fishing has always played an important part in North Yorkshire's maritime heritage. The industry still plays a significant role in everyday life along the coastline today.

In the 15th century, the coves and inlets provided a natural haven for mariners to escape the ravages of the sea. Then over time villages began to spring up such as Staithes, Robin Hood's Bay and Runswick Bay.

At first, whaling was the most lucrative occupation from the larger ports in Whitby, but by the 1800s fishing became more important. Key catches were cod, ling and herring.

In the late 1800s Staithes had grown to become one of the largest fishing ports on the North East coast of England, with around 300 men engaged in the industry. They fished from locally-made wooden cobsles or larger five-man boats.

The design of the cobsles was based on the Viking Long Boat. With flat bottoms, the cobsles could be launched from sandy beaches as there were no harbours at this time. The high stern and bow enabled the boats to withstand the waves and swells while lower sides made it easier to haul in the fishing nets.

You could often tell where a cobsle came from by its colour. For instance, Staithes cobsles were painted red, blue and white.

Later came the yawls: bigger boats with larger sails that could venture out further for deep sea fishing and could stay out for days on-end.

Virtually the whole of the community would be engaged in fishing. Women played an active role, collecting and preparing bait, tanning and repairing nets, and knitting the fishermen's ganseys and socks.

They also helped carry the fresh catch up from the beach. To do this they wore a bonnet that had a reinforced crown enabling them to carry fully-laden

baskets and lines on their heads. One of the last remaining places to see the bonnets was in Staithes, and until recently, the bonnets were still worn on special occasions.

As well as boat building, sails would also be made and preserved with cutch in villages. Cutch is a dye, which turned the sails brown or red. The pigment or cutch was mixed with oil to coat the sails and protect them from the seawater. Three cauldrons were used in Staithes to boil the sails during the tanning process. Each of the cottages would also have a barking shed or cellar for tanning fishing lines and nets.

Towards the end of the 1800s, the coming of the railway line along the coast changed the face of the industry, making the villages less remote and enabling fresh fish to be transported across the rest of the country.

The advent of steam power initially enabled the villages to flourish. Apparently in Staithes, enough cod, mackerel and haddock were landed for the North Eastern railway to run 3-4 fish trains a week.

Herring fishing was a huge business with large fishing fleets leaving the shores as shoals of the 'silver darlings' migrated southwards.

However the introduction of steam-powered trawlers that needed to dock in larger harbours began to sound the death knell for the traditional fishing villages.

This was exacerbated by the much-depleted stocks that the village fishermen faced as a result of the bigger fishing capacity of the trawlers, and competition from boats coming from as far away as Scotland.

As fishing became harder, many began working in the local ironstone mines and tourism began to develop as visitors came to the villages on the trains. By 1951 only one fishing coble remained in Staithes and with continued over-fishing in the North Sea, the Common Fisheries Policy was established and subsequently introduced fishing quotas in the 1980s.

FISHING TODAY

Today the waters off the Yorkshire coast are marine-rich habitats supporting a wide range of fish and wildlife including whales, dolphins, porpoises and seals.

Fishing is undergoing a renaissance with shellfish also becoming an important part of the catch.

The North Sea is a relatively shallow sea and today, as a result of conservation measures, offers good fishing with a diverse range of species.

The trawlers focus on catching white fish further offshore in deeper waters. Closer inshore, fishermen use nets to catch fish such as cod, whiting, sea bass and flatfish.

The same fish can also be caught using longlines (lines with baited hooks) which can be more effective in strong tides, although these methods are rarely used nowadays as lobster potting is more lucrative and seal predation on nets and lines make it impossible to work them.

Pots are used for catching lobster and brown crabs.

Much of the fishing is dictated by the weather, tides and the time. Fish move according to the tide and the time of day will dictate how far out they are.

Herring

Main season: August-October

Dogger Herring (the local name given to the herring population in the Dogger Bank area of the North Sea) can form large shoals off the North Yorkshire coast as they spawn around five miles from the coastline. Larvae hatched in autumn spend their first winter drifting towards nursery areas in the eastern side of the North Sea, passing the North Yorkshire coast en-route.

A 10-year ban was put on herring fishing back in the 1970s and all but ended local catches, particularly as popularity for the fish had waned.

However huge shoals continue to be seen off the North Yorkshire coast and they are an important source of food for whales. As the shoals move down the coastline, whales can be seen tracking the herring.

Mackerel

Mackerel are spotted off the coast from April until November. Like herring, they spawn off the coast and then move south providing a food source for whales.

Brown crab and lobster

Crabs and lobsters are trapped in net covered 'pots' that are baited with scraps of fish and placed on the seabed near to the rocks, which provide protection for the shellfish.

The main shellfish season is between March and September but some fishing takes place during the winter when the weather is settled and prices are higher.

The best time for lobsters is June, July and August and numbers have been growing in recent years due to conservation measures and possibly the decline of cod stocks.

Like fishing, tide and time will decide where it's best to place the lobster pots to provide the best catch.

Cod, whiting and flatfish

Whiting are caught all year round, while flatfish tend to appear in greater numbers in the spring and summer. Cod are targeted more in the winter when the fish are closer inshore.

Other wildlife

The thriving fish population along the North Yorkshire coastline also supports an abundance of wildlife.

Whales and dolphins

From August whales are regularly spotted as they feast on the herring and mackerel shoals migrating down the coast.

In one single day in 2014, Whitby Whale Watching recorded seeing not just minke whales, but also a fin, Sei and humpback whale. Porpoises can be spotted throughout the year, and bottle-nosed and white-beaked dolphins are being seen in increasing numbers.

Seals

Both common and grey seal colonies are thriving beneath the cliffs at Ravenscar. There's a very good chance of seeing common seal pups in June and July, while grey seals come ashore to pup in November.

Birdlife

An amazing variety of birds can be spotted along the coastline including common terns, known as sea swallows, which arrive from April through to September. Other birds to look out for include:

Long-tailed Skua, Arctic Skua, Manx and Sooty Shearwater, Guillemot, Razorbills, Herons, Fulmar, Gannet, Red-throated Diver, Common Scoter and the Caspian Gull.

