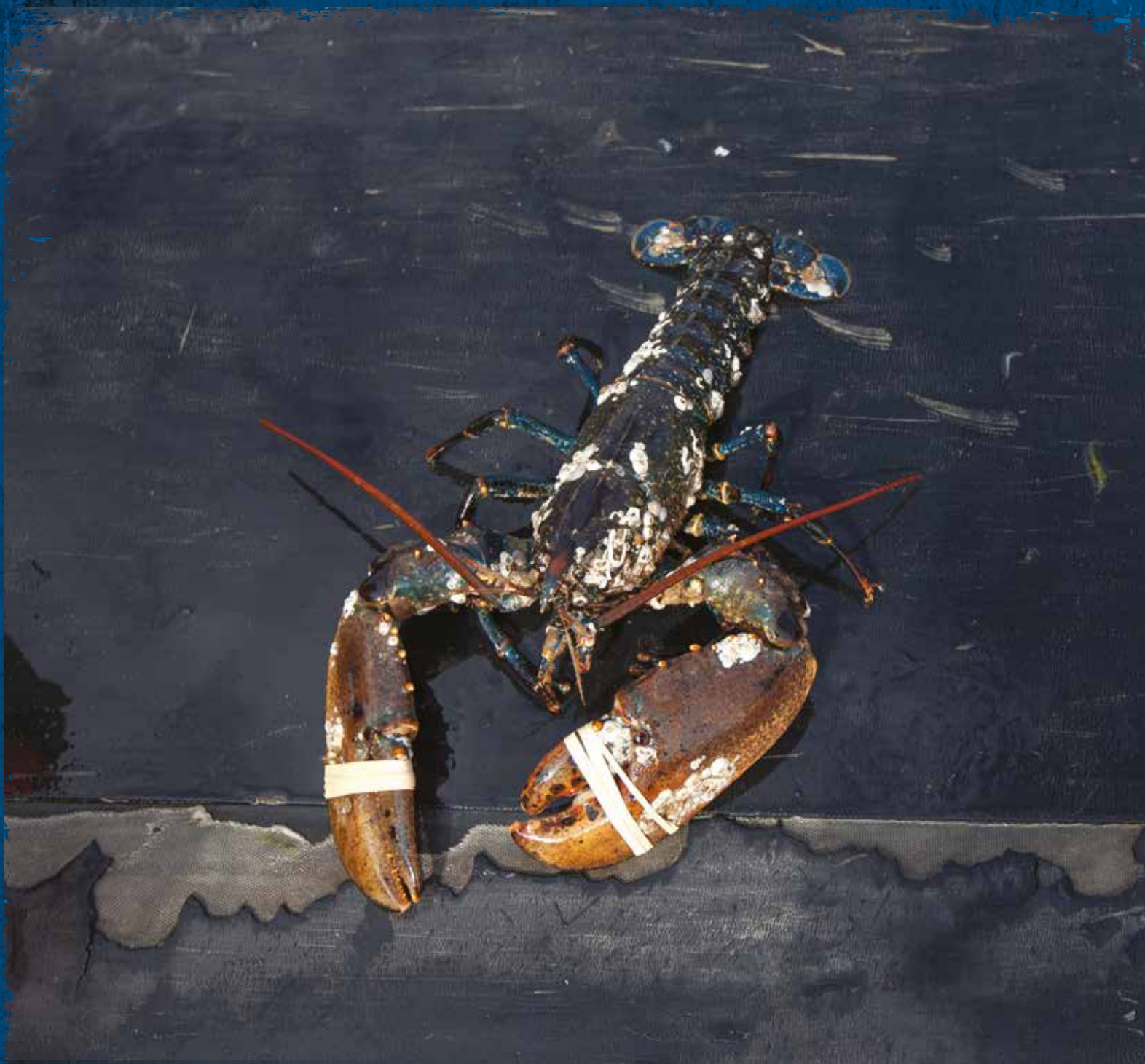
SOLWAY SEAFOOD

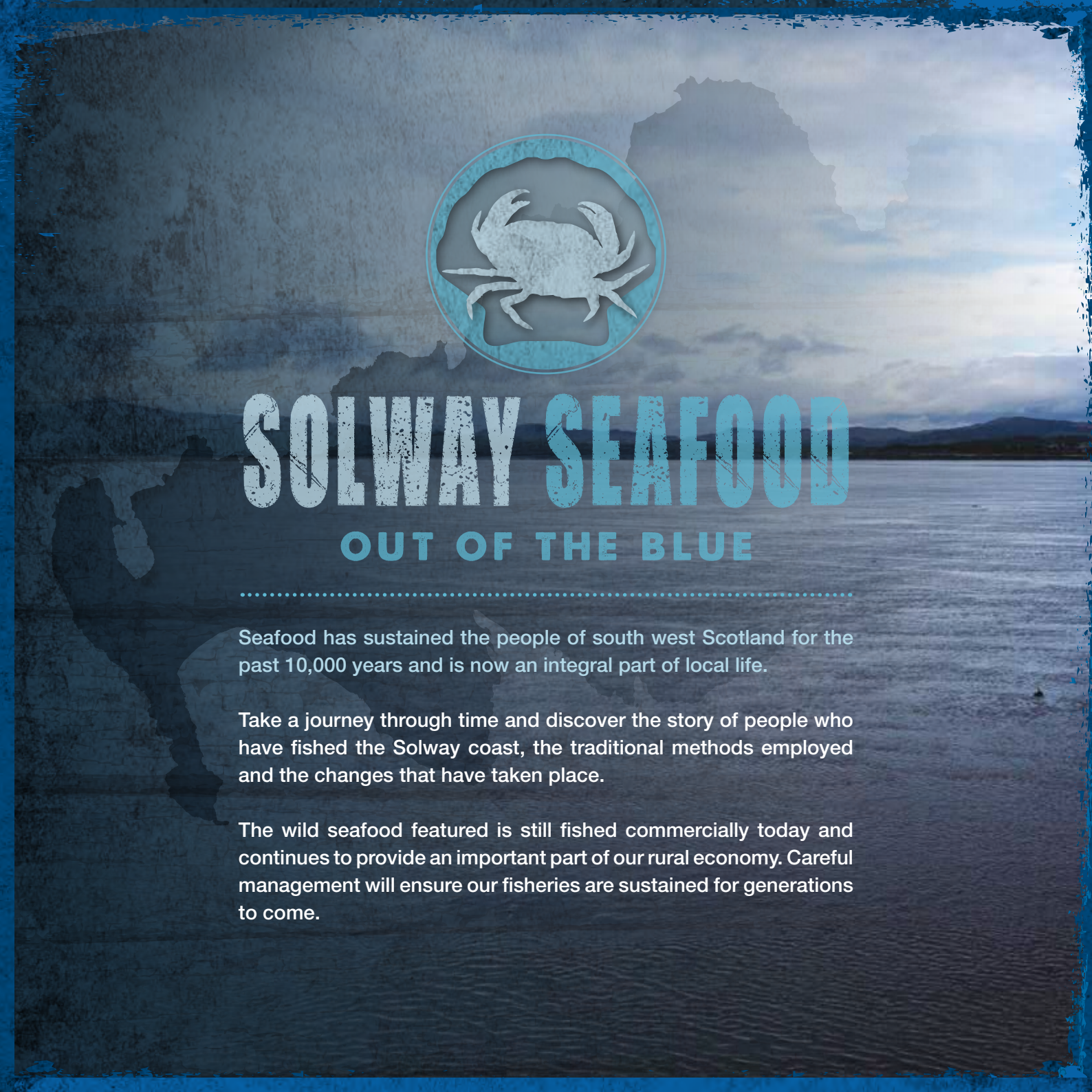
OUT OF THE BLUE

FISHY TALES

The story of fishing on the Solway coast



Lobster
Colin Tennant Photography



SOLWAY SEAFOOD

OUT OF THE BLUE

Seafood has sustained the people of south west Scotland for the past 10,000 years and is now an integral part of local life.

Take a journey through time and discover the story of people who have fished the Solway coast, the traditional methods employed and the changes that have taken place.

The wild seafood featured is still fished commercially today and continues to provide an important part of our rural economy. Careful management will ensure our fisheries are sustained for generations to come.

A TASTY MORSEL

The first people to arrive on the Solway coast 10,000 years ago would have taken advantage of the plentiful supply of shellfish found on rocky shores. Shells discovered in ancient rubbish tips, known as middens, provide the evidence that seafood formed an important part of people's diet.

Limpet broth would have provided a nutritious meal in winter when food from the land was scarce. Rock pools became a larder full of food which family groups, armed with stones to use as hammers, could easily raid. With a swift tap to dislodge unwary limpets exposed at low tide large numbers of shellfish could be collected in no time.

John Pickin

Edible winkles
Colin Tennant Photography

Winkle pickers

Limpets are particularly chewy and so are no longer gathered for food. However, edible winkles, the largest of the winkles on our shore and called wilks by locals, are still collected by hand. Graded into different sizes, jumbo, large and medium, the winkles are washed and then transported to market. Once a popular seaside snack in the UK, now most winkles are sent away to southern Europe.

Limpets
Solway Firth Partnership

TIDAL TRAPS

Early people who found fish stranded in shallow tidal pools discovered they provided an easy meal. As long as 6,000 years ago, fishermen along the Solway coast were fishing with spears fitted with heads of red deer antler carefully fashioned with pointed barbs. In skilled hands these spears would have been more effective than splashing around trying to catch the fish with bare hands.

Pools replenished with fish by two tides a day were so useful for people that they began to create their own artificial pools by rearranging boulders and weaving branches together into fences. Over time these traps became more sophisticated and distinctive stake nets became a common sight on the Solway.

John Pickin

Stake net
Mike Bolam

Salmon Stakes

There has been a dramatic fall in the number of wild Atlantic salmon returning to rivers to spawn and most of the tidal traps have been abandoned as conservation measures became paramount and the nets became less profitable. Today farmed salmon is a viable alternative to fish caught in the Solway especially if it has achieved the high welfare standards set by the RSPCA Assured scheme.

Freshly caught salmon
Solway Firth Partnership

MONASTIC MEALTIME

1,500 years ago fish was in demand as a valued ingredient for meals. It was particularly important in a monastery because it could be served to monks on the many religious days when meat could not be consumed. Any fresh fish caught in the Solway would have been a valued supplement to the preserved salt cod imported from further afield.

Fish-hooks baited with mussels or limpets gathered from the shore were attached at regular intervals to long lines with many shorter lines called “snoods”. The long lines were either used from boats or were pegged out at low tide and the catch of white fish of all shapes and sizes collected at the next low tide.

John Pickin

Angler on rocky shore
MMO

Brass fish hook
The Whithorn Trust
Future Museum

Hook and Line

Long lines with many fish-hooks baited with mussels or limpets were used from boats or pegged out at low tide to catch white fish of all shapes and sizes. Today there is little commercial fishing for white fish in the Solway but recreational angling is very popular with over 50 species being caught from a boat including tope, ray and pollock.

Freshly caught cod
Solway Firth Partnership

BURIED TREASURE

300 years ago shellfish found on intertidal rocks or sands offered a source of food particularly in times of famine. Bivalves like cockles and razor clams are difficult to remove from their homes buried in sand exposed at low tide and so required different approaches by fishermen gathering shellfish.

To be a successful razor clam fisherman demanded skill in using a unique harpoon-like tool with a metal spike. Walking backwards the fisherman would look out for a tell-tale squirt of water from the razor clam, leading to their Scottish name of spoots, and then quickly jab his spike into the burrow and hook out the shellfish.

John Pickin

Hand collecting razor clams
Colin Tennant Photography

Inter-tidal sands
Colin Tennant Photography

Spoots

Razor clams are a rare treat because they are so difficult to extract from their deep burrows. They can be hand collected by pouring salt into their burrow which irritates them so much that they shoot out of their hole. Today research is being conducted into commercial fishing methods that involve a diver using electrical probes to persuade the shellfish to emerge out of their hiding place.

Razor clam
Solway Firth Partnership

2000BC BRONZE AGE 1000BC 0BC 1000AD MIDDLE AGES NOW INDUSTRIAL ERA

WORTH A JOURNEY

150 years ago native oysters were so common place that they were considered food for poor people however the traditional fishing grounds on the English coast were becoming exhausted. Sailing boats with the CK registration letters of Colchester were forced to roam round the British Isles dredging in deep water in search for oysters.

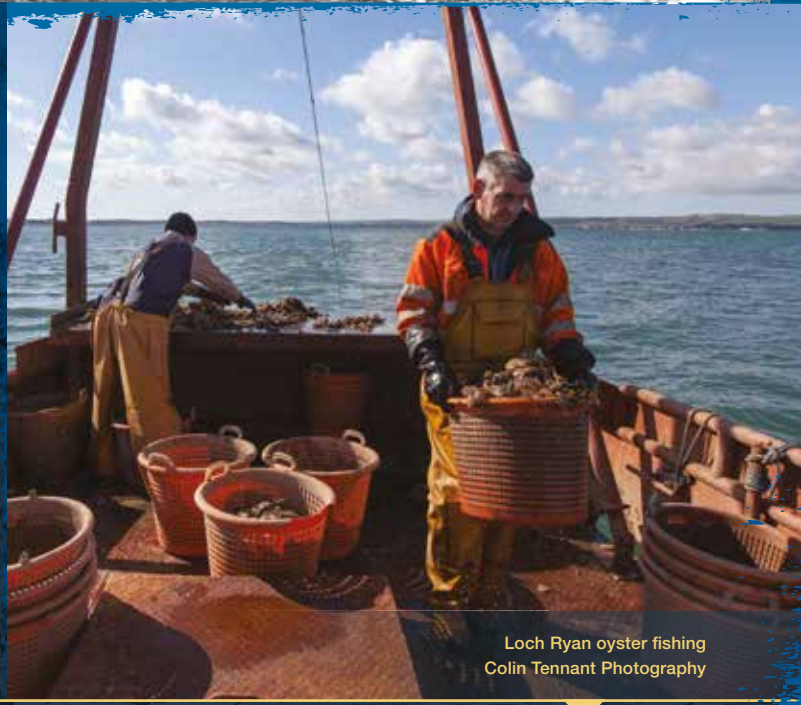
In the early 1880s fishermen from Essex moored their oyster smacks at Isle of Whithorn while dredging for oysters in the Solway. Staying far from home over the long winter season some fishermen married local girls, started families and settled in Scotland.

John Pickin

Oyster smacks, Isle of Whithorn
Dumfries and Galloway Museum Service
Future Museum

Native Haven

Loch Ryan is home to Scotland's largest native oyster bed and is the only one that is commercially fished. These oysters have been managed and harvested by the Wallace family since 1701. Carefully dredged and hand selected, the slow-growing, plump native oysters have taken up to 10 years to mature before being transported throughout the whole of the UK.



Loch Ryan oyster fishing
Colin Tennant Photography

LOBSTER MEASURE

The 1876 crab and lobster fisheries act was the first to introduce a minimum landing size to protect shellfish stocks. Brass gauges were issued to fishermen so they could check their catches and those that were too small would be thrown back into the sea where they could continue to grow and multiply until another day when they make the grade.

Although the measurement has changed over the years, a plastic gauge with minimum landing sizes is still in use today to protect lobsters living in the rocky shores of the Solway.

John Pickin

Modern lobster gauge
Colin Tennant Photography

V-Notch

A local study is being undertaken on the use of v-notching which is a way of harmlessly marking breeding females (hens) before they are returned to the sea. While berried (egg-bearing) lobsters can be landed in Scotland, it is illegal to land v-notched lobsters so this voluntary mark and release programme is protecting breeding females and helping to maintain lobster stocks.

1877 official brass lobster gauge
Scottish Fisheries Museum

V-notching a lobster
Colin Tennant Photography

2000BC BRONZE AGE — 1000BC — 0BC — 1000AD MIDDLE AGES — NOW INDUSTRIAL ERA

A SILVER SHRIMPER

150 years ago fishermen from Lancashire settled on the Solway coast and established a shrimp and salmon fishery. The tiny brown shrimps found in the sands and muds of the Solway Firth were traditionally caught in nets pulled by small sailing boats or, in shallow waters, by horse and cart.

Disagreements between fishermen using different fishing methods were common. In 1897 the fishermen of Annan presented a fine model boat made of silver to Sir R T Reid, QC, MP as a gift for helping to protect their way of life by taking an active role in resolving local and national fishing disputes.

John Pickin

Modern shrimp boats
Alan Cairns

Shrimp trawler
Dumfries and Galloway Museum Service

Solway Shrimps

The Annan fleet of shrimp trawlers was at its peak around the turn of the last century with 50 boats a common sight in the inner Solway.

The sailing boats were gradually replaced by small coal-fired trawlers and then by oil-driven vessels. However the number of shrimp boats has steadily declined and now only a few small trawlers remain.

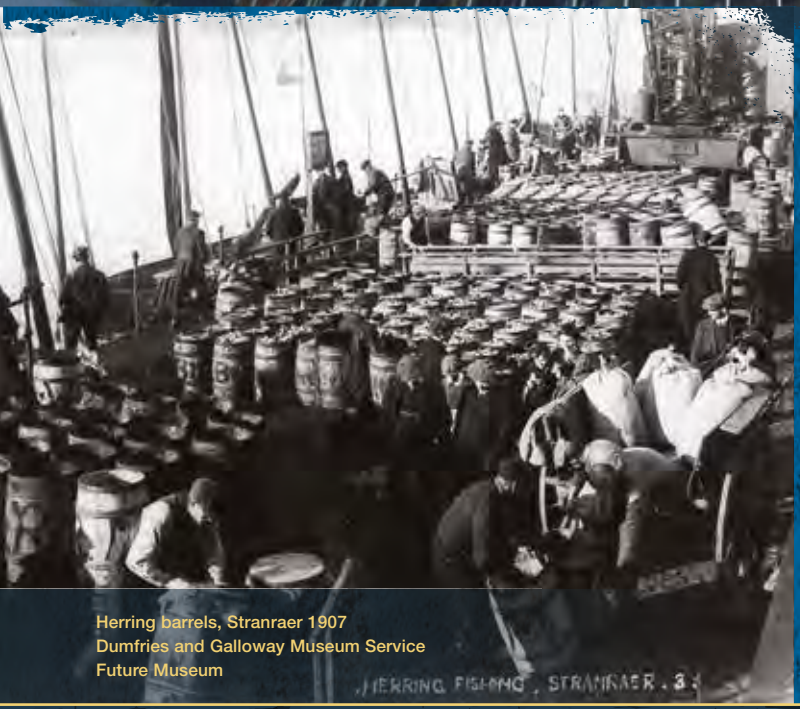
Cooking shrimps on board
Dumfries and Galloway Museum Service

SALTED OR SMOKED

100 years ago the herring fishery was important to south west Scotland. Herring is an oily fish that spoils quickly and needed to be landed and packed in barrels with salt to preserve the fish for export all over the world. Many of the boats, fishermen and associated trades, like the coopers making herring barrels, came from north and east Scotland following the herring shoals round the coast. Herring girls working in crews of three worked long hours to gut and pack the fish as soon as they were landed every morning.

John Pickin

Smoking salmon
Colin Tennant Photography



Herring barrels, Stranraer 1907
Dumfries and Galloway Museum Service
Future Museum

Hot and Cold

Today two methods of smoking are used to cure fish: cold cure where the smoke flows over the fish to give it a delicate smoky flavour and hot cure where heat also cooks the fish as it is smoked. There are several artisan smokehouses along the Solway that use traditional wood smoking skills to cure salmon and scallops as well as meats and cheese.

CRAB FOR THE POT

50 years ago the traditional crab creel was made by the fishermen using timber slats for the base, hazel hoops for the frame and a net cover often dipped in tar to help protect it from the sea water. The local design known as parlour creels had two rooms with the bait held in the inner compartment to make the exit route more difficult. Weighed down with a stone the heavy creels were hauled aboard by hand. With better transport and refrigeration the crabs could be sent to markets far and wide.

John Pickin

Crab post fitted with escape hatches
Colin Tennant Photography

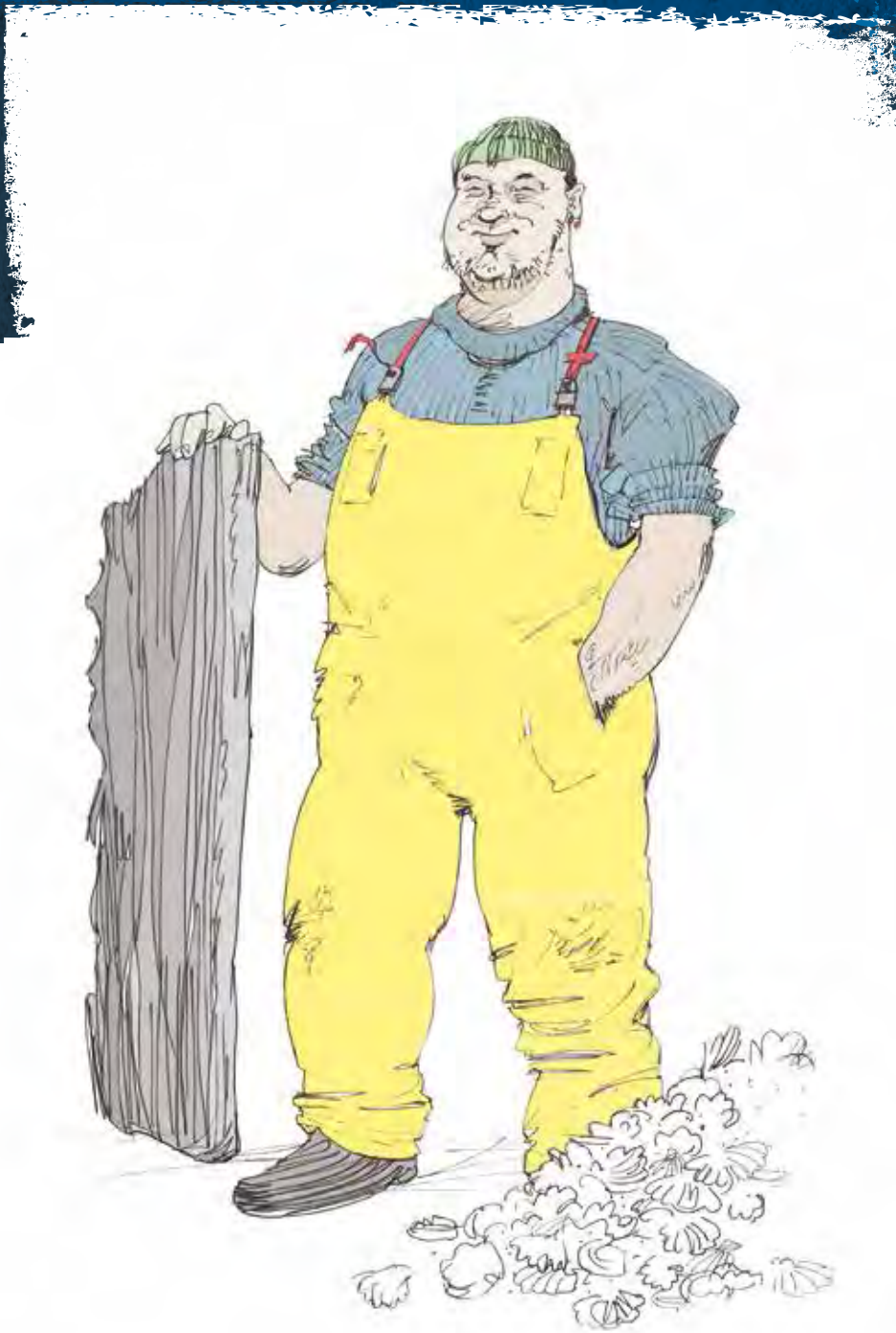
Exit Here

Today crab creels are made from metal with nylon netting and a winch is used to raise the catch, however it is still one of the most selective and therefore sustainable fishing methods used in the Solway. There is a risk that larger crabs will damage smaller crabs so now fishermen are trialling the use of escape hatches which allow the immature crabs to get away to live for another day.

Edible crab
Colin Tennant Photography

MAJESTIC QUEENIES

Today local fishermen are at the forefront of fishing gear development to reduce disturbance to the seabed as it is dredged for queen scallops. One of the successful fishing gear adaptations has been the introduction of rubber flaps from recycled conveyor belts to replace the heavy metal rakes once used benefiting the fishermen and sea life. The rubber flaps flush the queen scallops up from the seabed and into dredge nets but are easier to tow than the rakes which reduces fuel costs as well as minimising damage to the sea bed.



John Pickin

Mending scallop fishing gear
Colin Tennant Photography

Prized Ingredient

The pretty little queen scallops are fished all year round from the Irish Sea and landed to be shucked at the Kirkcudbright ‘Fishy’ processing factory. Once prepared the queenies are sent away to places where they are a prized ingredient for seafood dishes. Most are transported to southern Europe to be eaten in exclusive restaurants, but they also appear on the slab of local fishmongers and menus of nearby hotels.

Freshly landed queenies
Colin Tennant Photography

2000BC BRONZE AGE 1000BC 0BC 1000AD MIDDLE AGES NOW INDUSTRIAL ERA

KING SIZE

Commercial fishing for king and queen scallops has become an important local industry in Dumfries and Galloway and will continue to develop in the future. In recent years the fishing vessels have become more sophisticated and the technology used has advanced to make fishing safer and more sustainable.

Many scallop boats are now fitted with electronic instruments using satellite technologies and 3D seabed detection systems which allow the most productive fishing grounds to be targeted and sensitive seabed habitats avoided.

John Pickin

Wheel house instruments
Colin Tennant Photography

Unloaded

King scallops are fished from the Irish Sea during the winter months and many are landed at Kirkcudbright. The quayside really comes alive on high tides when boats are being prepared to leave or the catch is being unloaded to be taken to the processing factory and then exported to southern Europe. However, the harbour is often empty when up to 20 boats are out fishing the Irish Sea or further afield in the summer months.

Unloading scallops
Colin Tennant Photography

Scallop fishing
Colin Tennant Photography

The story told and illustrated in this publication is based on an exhibition developed as part of Solway Firth Partnership's Out of the Blue project.

The project aims to raise awareness and understanding of local sea fisheries and the part they play in Dumfries and Galloway's coastal communities.

For more information about Dumfries and Galloway's sea fisheries visit:

www.solwayseafood.co.uk

Solway seafood is wild, natural and delicious. Enjoy!

Solway Firth Partnership

Dumfries & Galloway Fisheries Local Action Group

European Fisheries Fund Investing in sustainable fisheries

Dumfries & Galloway Council

The Scottish Government Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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