



## **Ardglass herring: An historic, world-renowned Northern Irish food hero**

Ardglass is a village on the east coast of Ireland in County Down which has evidence of occupation from the Neolithic period. The village was probably always home to a fishing culture being a natural haven for small vessels on a coast where there are very few similar features. The strategic importance of north Irish Sea herring as a support not only for the local populace but for the military of the day may be found in the Statute Rolls of Ireland in the 10th year of Edward IV's reign (1470/71). The protection of the herring fishery in Ardglass was deemed important enough that it was decreed that "fishermen may lawfully draw and throw their nets for herrings at all times according to their will" any person disturbing them would suffer an administrative penalty of ten pounds, half to the King and half to the complainant!

Harris, in his 1744 book, 'The Ancient and Present State of County Down' devotes an entire chapter to the local herring fishery - the socio-economic importance of the fishery and its standing in the Dublin market is emphasised.

The development of the harbour of Ardglass took off in the early-1800's when the local squire William Ogilvie revitalised a rundown village and in doing so developed the harbour. By the mid-1800's, Ardglass harbour was utilised opportunistically by visiting fleets of fishers who followed the herring on its seasonal migrations. Boats from the south of Ireland, Cornwall and Scotland all based themselves in Ardglass, landing their catches at the port which became the recognised base in the north Irish Sea for the herring fishery. The fish was transported inland by cart and this was the origin of Ardglass Herring locally.

The herring season was split in two, with an early fishery starting in late April or May supplying local markets with fresh fish. The majority of herring landed during July, August and September were preserved using a salt-cure process with the remainder being sold fresh at local markets.





As the fishery established transport boats also frequented Ardglass to carry the fish to mainland Great Britain (significantly Liverpool) for sale in those markets as either fresh or lightly cured.

Curing herrings at Ardglass was done by the 'Scotch cure' which meant the gutted herrings were placed nose to tail in a barrel with salt over every layer. They were then left to 'pine'; this meant they shrank because the salt tenderised them by osmosis and made the blood and juices run off through slits in the barrels. Once ready, they were properly coopered in barrels and fresh pickle was added which drove out any air that might remain and could spoil the fish. You can see the many barrels on the quay side in the photo overleaf.

The extension of the railway from Downpatrick to Ardglass in 1859 allowed herring to be transported direct to Belfast by rail. This brought Ardglass Herring directly into that market where previously it had to be carted to Downpatrick and then loaded onto a train for Belfast. Ardglass Herring was now firmly recognised as a branded product in this market.

The fishery changed with the times and steam drifters were working alongside sailboats and then following World War 1 motor drifters entered the fleet. Drift nets were gradually replaced by ring nets in the 1930's and following World War II, trawling became the favoured mode of capture with bottom trawl by day and mid-water trawl at night.

Potted or pickled herrings are the stuff that novels and lyrics were written about. 'Mrs. Eckdorfin O'Neill's Hotel' by William Trevor has lots of references to potted herrings from Ardglass. Sir Van Morrison in his Coney Island hit sings:

*"Stop off at Ardglass for a couple of jars of mussels and some potted herrings in case we get famished before dinner"*



*Leaving Ardglass - a modern vessel heading into the Irish Sea to target herring*

Today the fishery remains the same in respect of species and area fished, but is conducted by two automated specialist trawlers (see image below) and is processed not in the open air on quaysides but in modern mechanised factories with quality and hygiene being paramount. The herring are still landed within hours of capture and the markets both local and overseas remain similar to the ones utilised in previous times.



***For more information on the Northern Irish seafood industry:***

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