

Interview 24 with

Mr. Dan Slater,

26 High St,

Portknockie.

July 1988

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Interview with Mr. Dan Slater, 26 High Street, Portknockie
on 4-7-88

A. There wiz that many boats in Portknockie that time, that they cuilna get cooks. That wiz boys 13 years of age hid tae go tae Buckie and ask there if they wid get away, that wiz the fortnight before as the herring fishing wiz starting up in Peterhead. There wiz about 70 vessels belonged here, Portknockie itself. An' they were cooking for seven men, they were only 13 years of age. The boat that I wiz on wiz called the "Topaz", I believe it wiz BF 1822, it wiz all Banff, there wiz no Buckie that time, jist Banff. An' we jist got about £1 a week. The cook, the engineer, if there wiz a drifter, that wiz about all that they got. Until they settled up, like, when the boat come home. Oh God, it wiz poor times that time. There wiz no pensions or nothing, nothing at all. My mither wiz in a bakery seven years before she married, that wid hae been 18 no *1775 I believe, when she got married. The boss that wiz there he used tae say tae her, now if that two children comes in and jist stands up, give them a loaf. He used tae gie them a loaf. A young brother and sister he discovered hid no money, a lot o' people hid nothing. Aye. I can't remember the name, whether it wiz Askwith that wiz Prime Minister, he wiz the first tae hand out. I think it wiz five shillings for a beginner o' a pension weekly, then it went up tae ten like. Ireland belonged tae this country, the whole of Ireland ruled by this country, this time, and I remember my ma saying when the Prime Minister, he went over tae Dublin, saying, that the wimen and men were going ahead of him, picking the small stones off the street, in case he wid put his foot on them, they thought that much of him for giving them the small pension. That wiz the beginning, it wiz five and then it went up tae ten shillings. People don't know what poor meant at that time, must hiv been thousands died because they hid nothing to eat. They couldn't afford beef. I wiz jist telling this chaps there wiz a library in Portknockie which was a butchers, John Bruce, that they called them and I sailed wi' his brother and he wiz looking at a lot o' books then, and a lot o' books, this belonged to the people, and he says what's that Johnny, that its written in that books, wi' money an' that, he says I'll tell ye fit it is, he says if you go and collect the money that I'm due, that's in that books, I'll give you £200 to yerself. I always remember that. Ye see, they cuilna pay fit they were getting. There wiz about 70-75 sailing boats here that time, the drifters wiz jist coming intae the go. Now the drifters, the sail boats hiv gone and all the drifters hiv disappeared there's only one drifter left, she wiz a new one, belonged tae Great Yarmouth, she wiz in one o' the London basins, I forget her name, I used tae remember her name, bit she wiz spanking new, the people cuiln go and visit her ye wid say. There wiz seven drifters built here like. The "Sunshine", they've a' passed on, the skipper jist deet a few months ago. Well, he wiz skipper and I wiz wi' him, and the first war, we wiz doon at Ireland, minesweeping, that's whaur

the convoys came from America, and there wiz a lot o' boats, German submarines there, at the beginning o' the first war. I forget the drifters names, she wiz built in Aberdeen, jist off tae the sea fin the government comandeered her and she wiz minesweeping wi' us down at Southern Ireland and she wiz only about a few hundred yards away frae us, and she blew up. There wiz seventeen men o' a crew and she blew up, richt tae the sky, and looking out I remember three men on the casing doing something and she blew up, and the bow cart kept going jijst for a few feet, then it turned back. That wiz the seventeen men. There's aie that, things that will stick in your memory and that's one o' them. Aye, it wiz a terrible thing fin ye think about it.

*Lady Smith
Spring*

Q. Was it a wooden or steel boat?

A. The first ane? Aye, she wiz a sail boat, that wiz in 1912 I think it wiz. That wiz my first year. There wiz a big collision, I remember, in America, wi' two ships. There wiz one o' them a big steamer wi' a lot o' wealthy people on board and they ran intae a big lump o' ice or something and the whole lot died as ye wid say, it wiz about 1912 or somewe there. The drifters were jist coming on the go that time. I remember the first two that wiz here, ye cuild see them outside the harbour, that harbour wiz a better harbour than it is now, because they lengthened the pier and that was the wrong thing to do, it sucked all the sand out, and the sand will never come back there unless they demolish what they did. They thought that it would make it handier, safer for the boats that wiz gaun tae use it, bit the first gale o' ween, there wiz two drifters, the first real gale that came on, there were two drifters broke their moorings and they were lying under rocks oe'er at this ither side, I forget their name, bit I remember seeing the two o' them. They didna get much damage cos they were steel, bit there wiz a lot o' boats in Portknockie that time. Aye, mostly sail boats like.

Q. Was your first job a cook?

A. Aye. They hid a job getting cooks so ye gied tae Buckie and got away, and they got away for a fortnight, they hid tae mak up for it when they got back. August and September they wid come back, they made up for it then, ye hid tae stay on at school. There wiz a lot o' boats 70 or 75.

Q. What did you actually do on board.?

A. What did I do? Well, there wiz none o' them poisoned. Ye hid tarry ropes that time, you wouldn't know what they were for. Done here you'll see the black marks yet. All the fleet of boats hid tae their ropes they called them, they hid tae tar them. There wiz big half barrels cut and they were a lot o' tar in o' them as ye wid say, and they hid tae heat it, heat the tar, and there was one man at one side pulling in, they hid

on heavy gloves, and one was putting it down intae the warmth and taking the tar off, another one kyled, put it round about as you would say. Then, it lay down there for quite a while, till they required them, fin the tidy up boy hid tae go down and they hid tae put them all round about in a small, narrow, place, the breadth of the boat, to keep, they hid about 14 o' them, leaders that we called them. Bit oh, they've gone ahead o' that noo.

Q. What about forecasts when you were on the boats?

A. Weather forecasts? Oh aye. We hid the auld ^{gas} like the ane that I hiv there. Fin I wiz young, I always remember. That's the barometer doon there, what they called the barometer, used tae be a door that all the fisherman in that part, the door opened and there wiz a big weatherglass here, they gied tae look at it, tae see if it wiz up or down. If it wiz up onna there, the Bowfiddle, they called it, there wiz a large mast wi' a flag up at the top, that blew the way the wind was blowing. When we wiz young it wiz always there.

Q. Did you get caught in any storms?

A. Oh aye. Ye jist hid tae, fin the sailboats, ye jist hid tae hoist a wee bit o' sail, and the wind went in tae it, and if ye hid the whole sail up, this man here, I'm trying tae mind the boat that he hid, the sailboat, he wiz at the Orkneys, the "Evangeline" that wiz her name, and it wiz awa an ^{elivin} gale, at the Orkneys, and when the people wakened next day, they cuildna get out for the gale ye see, bit when it fared away, when they came out, there wiz solid bodies and the boat smashed up in pieces, and all the seven or eight men were all lying. That wiz in Orkney, it's a lang time ago. And there wiz two steam drifters here at that time. The "Bluebell" was called one, the grandchild lives in the same house, at the present time at the back there, and he went from here tae the Orkney and took all the bodies back, and they are all up at the cemetery. And people opened their door, and the boat was in pieces, body hear, body there, they cuildna come out because o' the storm. That wiz jist the way of life. It comes frae different parts ye see, round about the country.

Q. What were living conditions like?

A. Well, some o' them jist lay down anywhere. I min' there wiz a man at the top there, he says, many a time, this wiz a lang time ago, this wiz a old man, many a time he jist hid tae lie down between the timbers, ye know, the timbers o' the boats, he says ye hihd an affy job getting yer hair fin ye walkened up, ye hid an affy job getting yer hair pulled oot o' the tar. Bit it wiz a hard time that time. They jist slept atween the boards ye know. They cuild dae nithing else, that wiz the way o' life that time. Fishermen went through something terrible that time.

Q. When you went on any of the long trips, what did you do on your time off?

A. Oh well, ye wiz mending yer nets, the herring nets. Up there, there wiz always houses there, they hid outside steps, right up when they came home frae the fishing, the first thing that ye did, got the horse and cart to carry the nets up intae the field, eesed tae get permission frae the farmers, ye got different people that belonged tae the crew, and they pulled the nets out at the parks, ye hid tae dry them before ye took them up this steps, people hid tae pay girls tae help them mend the nets, the small nets, they hid tae pay wimen tae come in. Then that wiz done away with. They hid a poor time.

Q. Did ye iver fish on a Sunday?

A. Oh, no, oh no.

When he bought this house, he bought the ground, the ground then cost £8. All the houses here have much the same ground. This house here, two years ago, she wiz up here asking somebody, and I happened to say to her What's Jimmy doing now? She says, He' jist back frae Cullen House, buying ground, and they paid £1150 for that is jist the same as mine, my father happened tae pay, he's one of the few, there's dozens I heard a chap saying, in Portknockie, well, the chap, his son lives next door, and he says, there's dozens o' hooses, the Seafield Estate will take them over, bit this chap says I'm nae gaun tae pay, bit there's dizens in Portknockie that's nae theirs. He says, bit they'll hae tae pay, they can put them oot. My father wiz lucky to do that.

I can remember fine the poor times. There wiz someone in Buckie that time, I think Gordon wiz his name, and they went tae him tae ask money, people in Buckie, I think wiz well off, I don't know who they were, but they often gave two shilling a week to different people, to old people. Then after that, I think it wiz Askwith, the prime minister, I'm not sure, everybody above a certain age, would get so much money, I wiz over in Ireland, as I told ye, he went over there for a visit and the people were walking ahead of him, in case he would put his foot on a small stone. It wiz nothing, nothing. It wiz poor times. The fult up the basket and put a different coal and everybody could take their pick, put it aboard the cart, took it up to the house, made sure they hid some heat for the winter. The drifters often did that, put the coal ontae their decks and down below beside the herring bit, just to make sure that their wife and family would get something to keep them warm for the winter.

Q. How much did you have to pay for your coal?

A. Oh, it wiz cheap then. That's the reason why, it come up here in a small tub like kind o' boats, it wiz dearer ye see, bit if you took it up frae Hartlepool, I remember being in

three different places. There's a big difference now besides then.

Q. Can you remember how much you paid for food?

A. Well, when ye wiz going away to the fishing, ye jist went and told the man, say there were two large shops here, we'll be going away, will you have everything ready? They hid five new herring baskets, and they put the ---, I'll always remember, a large bottle of castor oil, it wiz put on bit niver used, that's the way that they made their money, the grocers, bit they pit in different things, ye wid say, a lot o' butter, there wiz two wimen, in our house they lived in, sisters, old maids, and they used tae go up the country selling fish, and where they sold fish they got butter, it wisna money, butter. They took the butter down here and it wiz all cut up intae small sizes and the fishermen paid and took it away to Yarmouth and so on.

Q. How did you keep your beef fresh on the boat?

A. Well there wisna sae much beef at that time, it wiz more fish. A lot of them used to boil cod, catch cod. A lot depended on boiled cod instead of, a lot couldna afford.

Q. How did out keep it fresh?

A. It wiz put intae the coolest place that was. You could do nothin wi it as you would say. Ye jist hid tae depend on, but a lot o things was salted. An ye hid to wash it tae keep it the salt kept it.

Q. Was there a lot of boats built in Portknockie?

A. Well there wis some sail boats down at the ither end but they built seven drifters here, round the harbour there. My father an anither chap, Pirie was the skipper, but my father was on this boat this first drifter that wiz built round here. The Parvain she was called. Well she was not a year old when she was run down by a Lowestoft drifter going intae Shetland some way and when she was run down there was a boat come to the rescue. The crew got off alright.

Q. Did she sink?

A.. Aye. The Parvain, I remember my mither saying, if yer father loses this court, there wiz a court in Aberdeen, over who is to blame for the Parvain being sunk, it a new boat, I remember my mother saying, we'll be a ruined if yer father loses this in Aberdeen, bit by good luck, they won it. He always believed it was where a man was standing, he shouldn't have senn this boat coming down on them, and they got the verdict, and they were all delighted. I remember my mither saying that suppose that wiz yesterday.

Q. Did you dae a lot o' yer ane maintenance on the baot, ken, scrapping the bottom o' the boat and a'thing?

A. Oh, aye, that wiz a' deen, Portknockie hid a fine hairbour for that, and the skipper wid say, we're gaun doon the morn tae wash the boat, and the boat wiz, one tide, she wiz turned oe'er on her side and then fin the tide gied back, it might have been dark, bit it didna maitter, ye hid to go down fin she wiz one side, the men wid hae scrubbed everywhere wi' their hard brushes, then when that wiz done, they hid large tanks that they used tae bark the nets aboard the boat, they took them to one side, filled them a' water, so she wid ly the ither wye, then in the morning, they gied doon, took the brush again and cleaned. That's the way they painted her copperide, after she wiz dry like. Aye, they hid a lot o' work to do that time, jist tae keep things going. That's the difference o' then and now, doing things. That chap there him an' his wife could hardly believe't. £1,150 which he paid for the ground there, bit there are dozens o' houses in Portknockie bit the block only belongs to the Seafield's Estates. My father paid £8, I only got a, there wis a woman got a house over there jist a few years ago there wis a great speak aboot it, bit eh, this is the only one, aye my mother got a call from the Cullen House sayin' to put us away, that shows that your, it belonged tae you. Thit ye hid paid for't, well its lyin' bane there somewhere I don't know.

Q. See when you were oot the school, fin ye were a young lad fit did ye dae it nichts?

A. It nicht? Ah well, we used tae run about tae see if there wis a shop open. There wis no lights that time, it was darkness an' ye went tae that shop that was later open an' we jist used tae, if there were a few o' ye, I see S T or something aye there wis no gas. The first gas we got wis fae Cullen, an oh it wis very poor. I remember walkin' down comin' in tae the links there an' I came up that road, I remember the people when I walked over there they were takin' up those old pipes jist aboot that size that had to do with the whole of Portknockie an' there were some gettin' nothing. Jist that wis all, they'd been lyin' there for years. The way goin' down the road, the links till all this come about, as you would say.

Q. Wis your street lights a' gas then aye?

A. Aye, they were a' gas fin they begun. Bit oh, you cwed hardly see bit oh aye they were a' gas. They come fae Cullen, jist a wee pipe bit I mine seein' the pipe, it wis jist a wee hole left it wis that old you could niver get no good o't as you would say.

Q. Did somebody come roon at nicht an' light them a' like?

A. Aye, aye there wis a man come roon an' put up the light as you would say. Aye, ye cwedna' waste o'er muckle!

Q. Fit time o' nicht did they go oot like?

A. Aye, aye that time the water wis much aboot the same, we hid first-class water here it wis a spring up at the top here a bet. Portknockie had its own water but then the population growin' it comes in by the cemetery o'er there, all the way from the Spey but fae Buckie it comes all the way.....

Q. How did ye get your water lang ago afore a' this taps an' athin'? Fit did ye dae?

A. Well Portknockie hid ay a spring up there, its still there, bit it goes in tae the people, the population gettin' more it cwedna' cope bit I remember there wis a Buckie doctor, I forget his name bit I've seen his name it the Buckie hospital fin ye go in the door, his name's up there, well, he always come to two or three people an' he always took a bottle or two o' a' with him an' filled them wae the Portknockie water, because it wis a spring, down from, out from, I don't know where. Bit he reckoned it wis pure water, as you would say.

Q. Did ye hae tae carry your water to the hoose like lang ago?

A. Well, aye thats lang ago bit thats a lang time ago fin there wis a wall over there, there wis three in this street an' there wis up the top, one in the middle an' one away over there, ye hid tae go wa' up an' full yer rouser o' water! Oh by go, I mine that fine too. Different pairts o' the toon there wis ay a wall if ye wanted a drink, it wis a mannies facie here like. Fin ye screwed an' put it on it squirted oot aye. By go those were the days!

Q. Fit did ye dae aboot baths an' that, wis it jist a tub ye used for baths?

A. Aye there wisna muckle baths that time, ye geed in tae the shed an' locket the door an' got a bath, that wis a' the wey ye got a bath, aye. Oh baths wis unknown that time. Aye ye mine the auld man he was aboot first in Portknockie, well he come up every, well his wife wis my father's sister, aye he was a common kin' fin he come up here once a week he used tae say 'They're ay speakin' aboot baths, baths, that's a' I hear them speak aboot, we've hane a bath for twenty year an' I've niver been inside o't'. Aye Jocky Doodie they cawd him, auld Jocky, aye his wife wis my father's sister. Aye, those were the days! Aye, you mine him sayin' that aye! By go aye!

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