

Interviewee(s): Tommy (T)	Interviewer(s): Unknown Female (Unknown)
Date of Interview: ?	Ref: EL2-38-1-1-T
REGION	East Lothian
TOWN	Port Seton

0h 00m 00s

T: I left the school at fourteen.

Unknown: Yes.

T: I started the fishing, and it was the days of the sailboats. And after that, there was very little doing at the fishing and I left the fishing and went to the pit during the wintertime. Went back to the sea in the summertime and after that, I went back to the sea in the wintertime, for, eh... for all the winter. And after that, I left in 1916, the pit, and I was never at the pit after that again.

Unknown: Did many fishermen do that? Go into the pit in the winter?

T: Yes, quite a lot o the fishermen here went to the pits in the winter. Ye might find a lot o them, at two o the bigger- majority of them went tae the pits when I left the school.

Unknown: Yeah.

T: Because there was so little doing at the fishing, ye see. And after that, I went tae the fishing, when I was sixteen. Worked practically all ma whole life after that, at the fishing, till I retired... when I was ninety-six- eh, sixty-six years old.

Unknown: And do you regret any of that? Or were you glad you were a fisherman all your life?

T: No, no. I like the sea and if I had my life to begin again – which I'll not have – I would like so much to go to it, more than anything.

Unknown: You would? Yes.

T: Because it's in oor bones, ye know.

Unknown: Yes.

T: Like in our bones, wi all the people, ye know, that's been... and our forebears, away back for hundreds of years. It's been all fishermen in the male line. And I suggest it should be in your bones. Whenever, I rise oot the house to get breakfast in the morning, we always drunk the tea and had a look at the sea.

Unknown: So, you can't get rid of it?

T: No, cannae get rid of it, nah.

Unknown: Nah.

T: And I like tae look at the sea and go down. And I always thank the Lord for having the vision for the sea... the sea. And the rocks that stand doon there stood there for millions of years. And the sea was produced. And everything that we got out of it... it's been such a good life – and it was a hard life, ye know. Don't think it was easy.

0h 02m 05s

Unknown: No.

T: I've seen this when they would open boats, at the first, wi no wheelhouses or nothing, and ye had tae... the sea used tae come over the top o us every day. Seen us right through to the very skin, but a never had an ill effect of it. But I- we enjoyed it. We used to say it was terrible when it was out tae sea, cause I used tae say tae some o the young lads that went wi me... after the people was coming out the [?] that's the ones that should be there [?] but whenever we got tae it again, we were right up on the sea the next day again. It's always in our lives, ye know.

Unknown: And the fishing's in a sad way now, isn't it?

T: Beg your pardon?

Unknown: The fishing is in a bad way now? It's...

T: Aye, it's not very good at the present time.

Unknown: No.

T: They're getting so little prices for their fish. After catching them sometimes, they come in and they can't get them sold.

Unknown: If a young man wanted to go to sea, would you advise him to go now?

T: Yes, if he has a desire to go to sea, certainly.

Unknown: Yes, yes.

T: Oh yes. If he has a desire to go to sea.

Unknown: Can I just show you some pictures here? And can you tell us...?

T: Well, long ago, we used tae go always tae herring fishing, for about six months o the year. We used tae go away on the first of May and June and we used tae start o the herring fishing away up in the north o Scotland, at Peterhead and Aberdeen and Fraserburgh, as far as Wick and as far as Shetland, they went for tae go... tae go after the herring fishing. And they followed the herring down all the time. We used tae go away till about the middle of July... aye, about the middle of July, come home for a weekend, go away again, to the herring fishing down by Berwick-on-Tweed and then we used tae come hame about the end of August. And then we went... we went away down tae Great Yarmouth. And there were a huge suite of boats from all over Britain at the fishing at Yarmouth. About a thousand boats. And the harbour was two mile long, and it used tae be packed full, from the bottom to the top.

0h 04m 12s

Unknown: And it's different now?

T: Beg your pardon?

Unknown: It's different now?

T: It's different now.

Unknown: Yes.

T: Cause the herring got so scarce.

Unknown: Yes.

T: They werenae allowed tae catch herring in the North Sea.

Unknown: Aye.

T: For nearly two years. But they're speaking about opening it a wee while the now.

Unknown: When the herring is landed, what happens to it then?

T: Oh-

Unknown: Or what happened to it in the old days? We've got a picture of women-

T: Aye, that's right. That's right.

Unknown: -and we think they're cleaning them.

T: When they came in... when they came in, you see, we landed them in our baskets onto the quayside.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And the buyer bought them and he took them away tae his yard. And some o them had kippering yards and some o them had what they called 'curing' yards, for salting and for tae send them away tae the continent. And that's all the herring was [?] that way: either kippering or curing – made intae salt herring.

Unknown: And the women did all that?

T: And the women did all that.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And the women was... when I was at Great Yarmouth, all the Scots lassies used tae follow all the fishing boats down there and they finished there for the winter, at the end o November. That was about the finish o the autumn fishing. And then it started, the winter herring fishing, started in the Firth of Forth in the month o January and that went on until about the end of March. That was three month then. But it failed out too, there's no herring fishing at aw there now.

Unknown: Ah. Could I ask you about something quite different now? Could I ask you about the box meeting?

T: Oh, the box meeting?

Unknown: Yes.

T: Oh well, that's... that's a society what was formed wi the fishermen. I think, if I mind right, it was 1819, the first one with the fishermen, just to help one another, as possible, ye see.

Unknown: Mmhm.

0h 06m 00s

T: And they paid a small donation into it every year and, eh... after anything, any ill... any o the... any o the men ill or anything, ye got a small donation to help them because there was so little daeing at all those times, ye know. And that lested... lested all the time. And they had a big... a big demonstration every year... and on the third day, the third Friday of September. And they used to have two bands coming through the town, and they marched through the street with the girls all walking at the back. All the young women, like, and the young men. And they used to, eh... dance.

They used tae come in the west end of the town and they used to dance along and finish up at the school. Right along. To the old school away along the road, there. And that went on practically till the war was finished and after that, it broke up. But we have still the flags and all that for souvenirs and that, ye know.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And all the documents and everything; that's all been kept.

Unknown: It was all brought up last year, wasn't it?

T: Aye-

Unknown: For the centenary.

T: Aye. They brought it oot, aye. I think it's for the centenary, that's right.

Unknown: Yes, yes. Can you tell me a wee bit about the sort of houses that the fisherman-

T: Beg your pardon?

Unknown: Can you tell me a wee bit about the houses that the fishermen lived in when you were young?

T: We always lived in- I'm gaun tae tell ye. Mostly, when a was a boy, most all the houses along the Main Street was all jist single ends and room and kitchen. And they mostly all had big families, from six tae twelve a family and they all lived in those small houses.

Unknown: Mm, mm.

T: A few of the richer fishermen got quite a number of houses built, like in Wemyss Place and Elcho Place and Lorimer Place, and that.

0h 08m 01s

They got those houses built. And they paid about... Wemyss Place's houses... the big houses there in Wemyss Place, they were £208 when they were built. That was the price of those houses when they were built. And they're about a hundred years old the now.

Unknown: Yes, yes.

T: That's about the age o them. And Lorimer Place will be about 116 or -15 years old. And there was no sanitation-

Unknown: No.

T: -in the houses at that time, ye know. When Lorimer Place houses were built, there were no water in them-

Unknown: Mmhm.

T: -and they had no toilets or onything. They had a pipe at the door and that had to do.

Unknown: Mm. It was hard for the women, wasn't it?

T: Oh, it's... the women had it the hardest-

Unknown: Yes.

T: -aw their life. Because they were always baiting lines and that, ye know. I've seen me goin away tae sea at five o'clock in the morning and ma mother rising with us then and us being away out tae sea and after that, after she got the lines baited, she had start and mend nets, and I've seen her goin away tae oor bed at about eleven o'clock at night again and still ma mother wasnae in her bed then. Working the whole day. They were just... they were just practically slaves. The women, long ago. The fishermen's wives.

Unknown: Yes.

T: But still, ye see, they liked it. Because they endured it, as I say. Now, I was in a big family, I was telling ye, ye know.

Unknown: And because all the fishermen lived together, was there a good feeling of... of community?

T: Aye, that's right.

Unknown: Yes.

T: We all used to live together.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And the fishermen from this place sailed round the whole of Britain...

Unknown: Mm.

T: From Port Seton, in the days of the sail.

Unknown: Mm.

T: Then, I left here and I went away tae Ireland and I went right down the coast of Ireland, right down to Kinsale, Queenstown, Cork... all those places away at the most southernmost part of Ireland.

Unknown: Mm.

T: And I went away round the west coast of Ireland as far as Sligo. That's where that man was murdered a while ago, ye remember?

0h 10m 04s

Unknown: Yes.

T: And I used tae fish there.

Unknown: Mm.

T: And I used tae go tae Stornoway.

Unknown: Mm.

T: And that was wi your sailing boats, ye know.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And I used tae leave Stornoway and go right up tae Shetland and follow the fish right down the east coast of Scotland to Great Yarmouth. And that was in the days of the sail – no motors or anything.

Unknown: No.

T: And they were... they were... always... the fishermen from Port Seton and it was always Cockenzie then, ye know. They was always very much esteemed.

Unknown: Were they?

T: They were an awfu grand respectable set o men.

Unknown: Yes.

T: The men that came from Port Seton. Now, a lot of God-fearing men among them, at that time.

Unknown: Could you tell me a little bit about the church and the... and the missions?

T: The church?

Unknown: Yes. And there were missions to the fishermen, weren't there?

UW: And the Fishermen's Bethel.

T: Do you mean in Port Seton?

Unknown: Yes.

T: Aye. Aye, they had a fishermen's mission in Port Seton.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And there were two churches: the established church and the Free Church.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And the mission was called the Fisherman's Bethel, cause it was a fisherman [?], ye see.

Unknown: Yes.

T: And they used to have those services in the bethel after the church service at night and that, ye know. I think... I think it was... the bethel was built in eighteen, eh... that's the date: 1889. That's when it was built. But the mission hall was built about thirty years before that.

Unknown: Mm.

T: And then, when they got the bethel built, they shifted to the Bethel, ye see?

Unknown: Mm.

T: And there were some wonderful, Godly men-

Unknown: Yes.

T: -in the Fisherman's Bethel. In fact there were one, they called him John Thompson, he... he was at the sea and he got a call... heard the Lord calling him to go to a place called Kilsyth and he didnae know where Kilsyth was.

And, eh... he heard this voice calling him, three times, and they were on watch – they had tae watch us in the boat, ye see. And when he rose, he says tae some o the crew ‘have ye heard that voice that’s calling the night’ and no, nane o them heard aether. And he went up tae the skipper o the boat and called the boat tae unity. And he went up tae the skipper o the boat and he says tae... he says tae the skipper o the boat ‘did you hear a voice calling?’, ‘it was a rough nicht’, and he says ‘how are you going to hear any voice on a nicht like this?’. Well, he says, ‘I’ve heard a voice calling me tae go to Kilsyth tae preach the gospel’. And he came home, and tellt the people here and they thought he was goin crazy in the head, ye know? But he left here and took the train... cause there were nae trams or nothing, then. He had took the train tae Kilsyth and when he came tae Kilsyth, the station was a wee bit of a way from the village. And he was walking down, and he met a young lad with a milk van, selling milk. And he says tae the laddie, he says ‘could ye tell me where the minister lives here?’ and he said ‘yes’, he says, ‘he says I’ll take ye tae ma granny’. And he says ‘ma granny and the minister has been praying for the Lord tae send a maun here for six weeks’ – and that was the maun that was sent. John Thompson was his name. And he preached and there were a big revival broke oot at Kilsyth at that time. And after that, he came home and, eh... and he was a ship chandler, ye know, and eh... he started being a ship chandler again. And he went away tae preach the gospel, and he was as far as America, preaching the gospel, that man.

Unknown: Ahh.

T: And he came home and he wanted a bigger place – the mission hall had been too small. And it was through his efforts, that the Fisherman’s Bethel was built. And it’s a beautiful hall, lovely, and it only cost about five hundred pound to build, at that time.

Oh 14m 10s

Unknown: And it’s still used a lot, is it?

T: Well, there’re no very many people goes tae it now. Just a few o us again, ye know.

Unknown: Yes.

T: Cause the place is slack now, ye see, no many people goes tae the churches and that, now.

Unknown: No.

T: There’s quite a reasonable number goes tae the Church of Scotland here and the established church here. They’ve got a new minister and there seems tae be quite a number goin there now.

Unknown: Could I ask you now about... I don’t suppose you had much free time, but when you had some free time what you used to do?

T: Pardon me?

Unknown: What you used to do in your free time? When...

UW: [*loudly*] In your free time.

Unknown: If you had any [*laughter*].

T: Oh, free time. We hadnae much free time, lassie.

Unknown: No.

T: No, no much free time because when ye come in at nicht... ye was glad tae get tae bed-

Unknown: Yes.

T: -ye wis aw tired.

Unknown: Yes.

T: Hadnae much free time. The only time ye got tae yersel was the Saturday nights and the Sundays.

Unknown: Yes.

T: That was about the only time ye got tae yersel. No, through the week ye never... ye'd never-

Unknown: And what would you like to do on the Sundays? You would go to church?

T: Oh yes, I would always go to the meetings-

Unknown: Yes.

T: -at the churches.

Unknown: And did you walk much? We heard that a lot of people liked to take a walk on a Sunday?

T: Well, yes. A lot of people used to take a walk a place down near here, called the Fishers Road. They still call it that yet and fisher people always used tae walk up and down there on the Sundays and that, ye know. But I used to dae a lot o walking myself, when a was a young maun. I remember yin year I was never on a bus. The bus that was running at that time- the cars, I should say... and I was never on a bus for a whole year. Or a car. A walked every place a went. For a whole year.

Unknown: No wonder you're healthy now.

T: Mm?

Unknown: No wonder you're healthy now!

T: Never... never... never went on a bus. We used tae go as far as Musselburgh, tae the pictures and that, and Prestonpans every Saturday night.