

## Making Fishing Equipment

The life of the fisherman was characterised by diligence, perseverance and determined busyness. The focus of the year's work was to have everything ready for the most important season – the spring fishing. The fisherman would sit by his campfire from early in the morning until late into the night, making new or repairing old fishing equipment. The task of the women was to comb, spin and wash the flax and hemp yarn while the men and older children were making the fishing gear. One Baltic herring net had 934,800 (12-ell net) or 1,090,600 (14-ell net) loops, and for each



A NET SIGN. PHOTO: TUIJA WAREN  
LICENCE: KVARKEN'S BOAT MUSEUM- MALAX MUSEIFÖRENING R.F. A

loop you had to make two knots. It took the whole winter to make a fishing net that was 10 metres deep and 30 metres long.

A skilled net maker could make one perch net per day. Compared to the materials used in modern fishing equipment, flax was susceptible to rotting, which is why fishing with tackle made of flax was not particularly efficient. For hundreds of years, the fishermen's daily lives were governed by tasks passing unchanged from one generation to the next. They did not have to resort to buying their fishing gear – all of the materials were obtained from the nature and vegetation.

The year 1875 marked a turning point in equipment making: flax was replaced by three-ply cotton yarn. The next turning point was 1890, and the introduction of mechanically made Baltic herring nets (first by Finnish manufacturers, later by German ones.) Almost all of the fishing equipment in use at the turn of the 20th century had been used since the 16th century. Some equipment, mainly the Baltic herring nets and (large) fykes, developed into larger ones. New materials gained ground: flax or hemp yarn was replaced by cotton yarn in net making, birch bark was replaced by cork in floats, and stones were replaced by lead weights. Older materials continued to be used along with the new.

At the end of the 19th century the equipment used by the professional fishermen was probably more advanced than that used by the peasant fishermen. The wide range of equipment owned by the peasants reveals the diversity of the fishing methods.

Despite the abundance of gear, fishing was not practised that much in years when crops were good or satisfactory. If the crops were poor or failed altogether, the peasants ensured their subsistence by fishing. This is described in many documents, such as those from the famine years of the late 17th century.

Fish barrels and containers were made for salting the fish, and 30 and 15-litre containers for trading purposes. Other equipment included masts, sprit poles, sails, oarlocks, gaffs, oars and bailers, as well as fyke supplies, wooden floats and cords of various sizes. In the old days, the cords were made of horse hair and the ropes were made from home-grown hemp. Even in the 20th century, the fishermen still made their measuring utensils – 30 and 15-litre containers – by hand, and wove their own baskets and bailers. The Baltic herring nets were made of cotton or flax yarn. The fishing families made their nets themselves; the children had the task of knotting a certain number of loops each day. Before the nets could be set, they had to be impregnated with a solution made from water, ash, soda, dry spruce cones, spruce, willow or birch bark and spruce resin or tar; the mixture was boiled for several hours until the liquid turned dark brown. The use of nylon nets started in the 1960s.

The concentration of fishing net factories in the Vaasa region stems from the automatic net-making device developed by Anders Ohls in 1906.



## Fish Preservation

Before salt was introduced in the 14th century, the most important way of preserving Baltic herring was drying, which is why the fish could not become major merchandise. Thanks to the Hansa trade, the availability of salt improved in the mid-14th century, and salted Baltic herring became a sought-after product. At times, you could trade your barrel of salted Baltic herring for two barrels of grain.

Most of the Baltic herring was salted, but some of it was dried to so-called *krampesill* and sold in bundles of 1,000. However, the Baltic herring is difficult to dry as it is so fatty. Also, as the fish was dried outdoors, it had to be watched until it was completely dry or it would have been eaten by seagulls. Another problem related to drying was the flies. It was probably the less fatty Baltic herring caught in the spring and early summer that was dried when it was possible to do it outdoors for long enough. Tax records often mention the length of the mountain fish, which suggests that it refers to dried fish. Dried pike was especially important, partly as a tax item, partly as an export item, and it was also used in the fishermen's own households. Fish exports were dominated by salted Baltic herring and dried fish, of which pike was the most significant, but other fish, such as bream, whitefish and burbot, were also dried. Tax records also mention perch, roach, *ide*, smelt and flounder as dried fish. Usually, it was fish with less fat that were dried. The dried Finnish pike had a special status in Stockholm and other cities as it was used for paying taxes to the Crown. Finnish pike was a well-known item throughout the Baltic Sea region. If you compare drying and salting, drying has many advantages



A FISH BARREL. PHOTO: TUIJA WAREN  
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from the perspective of the islanders: the fish becomes lighter and you need neither salt nor fish barrels or measuring utensils. For the consumer, however, dried fish means more work as the fish has to be soaked before use.

Salting was quite problematic – salt was difficult to get, it was expensive, and its quality varied. In wintertime, storage was less of a problem: after finishing with the seine, you just spread the catch on the ice and it froze. In his book on the Northern peoples, Olaus Magnus describes how large amounts of frozen fish – as hard as a stone or log – were delivered to Stockholm and other cities.

The attitudes to dried fish changed in the 17th century when it began to be considered poor man's food. Dried fish lost the battle with salted fish, which was one of

the staple foods for city residents in the winter. That is why it became an even more important product when peasants were allowed to operate merchant ships. It was said that *ide* tasted better when it was salted, and it also turned a reddish colour, resembling salmon. An ordinary family needed six 30-litre containers of salted fish to make it through the winter. In favourable conditions you could get large catches of pike, perch and whitefish.

The fish were salted and then traded for grain in the neighbouring Finnish parishes, such as Laihela. The preferred grain was rye. When setting off for the bartering trip, the horse-drawn cart usually had two containers, one loaded with pike and the other with perch.

