

Brough Transcription Template

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Interviewee Name:	Morris Pottinger
Fieldworker Name:	Sharon G. Pottinger
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Interview Summary:	Shipping routes, harbours, tidal currents and livestock trade across the Pentland Firth. Timings in red. Unclear speech shown as (???)

Transcription

(remember to note time code from recording regularly to make it easy to find key quotes quickly later)

SP: OK, this is Sharon Pottinger interviewing Morris Pottinger, February 21st, as part of the Brough Bay Project, and the interview is in our sitting-room at Ivy Cottage. So, Morris, one of the things that led me to want to interview you was when you mentioned that livestock might be landed at Brough Bay. I had always associated Brough Bay of course with people coming and going and enjoying the beach, and with fishing, but it had never occurred to me that they also landed livestock there. So, can you tell me a little bit about, you know, either your family experiences or what you figured out historically about livestock and Brough Bay?

MP: Well, we're turning the clock back a little further, perhaps, than fishing for pleasure, etc., because my first notice of livestock was in the Canisbay Sessional Records where in the 1650s somebody was before the Session for coming over the Pentland Firth on the Sabbath in the Earl of Caithness's staig boat. This was forbidden on Sundays, but the staig boat took young cattle – sorry, it took young – possibly young cattle as well, but it took young horses from Caithness to Orkney, where they grew them for a few years and trained them, and then they took them back to Caithness as working horses.

The places that they landed – you know, obviously, from Orkney they would have made use of Scapa Flow; those on the Scapa Flow side of Orkney would obviously come there, but there was record of my great-great-grandfather buying cattle in the North Isles of Orkney. He was James Tait of Inkstack, eventually, and he bought the cattle in the North Isles, they landed them at Carness, which is just north of Kirkwall; they had two weeks to gather the cattle there, and then they loaded twelve cattle to a boat in eighteen boats, and they set off to cross to Caithness. This would have taken them round the east of Orkney, round Deerness, and then they would have come in probably at St Mary's in Holm, into Scapa Flow, which was sheltered water.

It would have been stupid to have gone any other way and, in these days, before the Churchill Barriers, Scapa Flow was a reasonably peaceful piece of water. And this particular group, they got as far as Longhope and the weather broke, to stop (2:52)

them from crossing the Pentland Firth, so they – eighteen boats went into Longhope and lay there for a week. After a week, they loaded them again and once more set off to cross the Pentland. The weather broke once more, and nine of the boats were hardy enough to keep on going, and made the crossing, and nine boats turned back into Longhope, where they lay for one more week and then finally made the crossing.

Now, I thought they might have come down the east side of Caithness, but after having a look at the maps and a look at the different places, I began to realise that they had to find – you could almost call them harbours of refuge – these were sailing-boats – they'd be quite big, wooden sailing-boats to carry twelve cattle; they would have had oars to help them get into the beach or off the beach; they would not have rowed across.

And the weather being what it is, and how quickly it can break, bearing in mind that these boats would not be particularly fast; they'd be quite heavy, with twelve cattle each, they'd be quite broad and beamy, and relatively slow, unlike the sharp cutter that they used which went out of Scarfskerry, which was the mail boat. That came out of a very narrow geo which is there today, and a sharp, quick boat like that, they could get in and out of that particularly narrow harbour at Scarfskerry.

These bigger boats would have had to find beaches onto which they could run – there were no piers or no jetties in those days. I think the earliest one that I know of along the coast was the one at Brough, which was built to my knowledge in 1831 by Stevenson as a landing-port or jetty for materials for the lighthouse which he was building at that time on Dunnet Head. That actually pre-dated the one at Scrabster, which, in a map of 1841, there was still no pier at Scrabster; there was a tiny little ... very small boat-slip that they could have used for boats, but the pier at Scrabster was built after 1841, so Brough preceded Scrabster. Probably it was one of the earlier ones built along the coast, because Stevenson would have been competent to build a small pier, and it was useful for the work he was doing.

Now, going back to my great-great-grandfather, who was in the farm of Inkstack from 1843 until his death in 1854, and whose family is still there, to take a valuable cargo of livestock across the Pentland Firth – in this case, cattle – he would have needed a variety of fairly safe harbours according to the wind, according to the tide, according to what happened – I've illustrated how they had to turn back with the eighteen boats, and then nine got through and nine turned back and then the nine came through, which sort of illustrates the uncertainty of the weather conditions that you could experience.

So, taking a look at that more recently, with the tide charts of the Pentland Firth before me – there's thirteen, every hour from six hours before to six hours after high water at Dover; and looking at these charts and looking at the flows of the tides in different directions, and then started looking for harbours which would have been safe places to run a boat with valuable cargo. So, if we take Dunnet Head as a promontory, if the tide was going to the east and the weather was good, they could have come round Dunnet Head, sailed into Dunnet Bay and probably landed somewhere about Dwarwick, or in that corner next to Dunnet. However, wind can freshen up very, very quickly and it might be they were coming over and the westerly began, and they couldn't sail too well with these boats against the wind, so the alternative then would be to the east of Dunnet Head.

(7:28)

So, if you take a look, the first one you come across is Brough, and it's, I think, relatively sheltered; it's got these two clett rocks; you can have a gale blowing to the west and yet inside Brough and Brough Bay the water can be quite reasonable.

When they came ashore, they had no piers or jetties in those days; no landings as today we know them, and the boats drove up onto the beach. To get the cattle off, they laid the boat over on its side – I was told they tied a rope to the top of the mast and they pulled it, and it helped to lay the boat across – and then the cattle would literally walk out of the boat onto the beach.

Having done that, the next problem – I wouldn't call it a problem; it was just part of the lives that they led – but they would have to get the boats hauled to safety, and to do that – I think it's a very good illustration of that; there's a wonderful photograph of boats hauled up onto the beach out of the danger of the water and high tides on Stroma. And all the boats would have to be pulled up across the beach and up onto a point high enough that even a surge of wave and a storm couldn't reach them.

So, that meant that most of these places that you could look at – Brough, Ham, (???), Gill's, Huna – all of those places, the boats would have been hauled out of the water, up the beach and onto dry land. There was a lot of boats in those days; a lot of people were doing fishing, (???) apart from my forebears taking cattle across, there would have been vastly more boats doing occasional fishing and requiring to be stored. I think, somewhere down about ... certainly down the east coast, south of Wick, it might be at Whaligoe, there were two rings, or several rings, put into the cliff, which they could then attach ropes from the rings to the bow and the stern of their fishing boats, and they would literally lift them up out of the water and store them against the cliff; and there was no beach inside Whaligoe where you could haul your boats out of the water, so this is how they dealt with it.

In the places I've looked at, in each and every one of them, there is an area up above the high-water mark where boats could have been stored in safety.

SP: OK, so ... (10:30)

RECORDING 1 ENDS

RECORDING 2 BEGINS

SP: OK, I have a question that I'd like to kind of follow up with you. You described Brough Bay and Ham and some of those others as 'harbours of refuge'. Can you tell me a little bit more about what that meant to these people trying to cross on the Pentland Firth?

MP: Well, when I used the word 'refuge' the ... practically all the coastline around Caithness is actually rocky. It's subject to tides which can rise as high as fifteen feet from top to – from the top of the tide to the bottom. It's very, very dangerous to come in on, so you needed some place where you knew the water, and you knew that if you got into a certain place then you'd be out of the danger of an impending (0:50)

storm or very high tides, or very strong tides. If the east-going flood tide, for example, is going through the Inner Sound between Stroma and the mainland heading for Duncansby, if you came close inshore at Gill's Bay you actually had a westbound eddy which the fishing-boats used to use, so while the flood tide was against them they could nevertheless use the eddy in Gill's Bay to continue their journey, at least as far as St John's Point.

The same applied in ... off Brough, that the flood tide would be going round Dunnet Head, heading to the east, and yet inside that you would have an eddy which would take you in towards Brough, in towards the shore, and in towards safety. There's been far too many recorded tragedies all along the coast of this part of the world, of fishing-boats being caught by sudden storm and, I think, three major tragedies off Melvich ... *(coughs)* – pardon me, tragedies off Wick, and the requirement for safety ... (2:15)

RECORDING 2 ENDS

RECORDING 3 BEGINS

MP: ... requirement for safety was paramount. The land was owned, until fairly recently, about, possibly, the 1920s, that some of the Traill Estate was sold and there were bits of it that weren't sold until much later, into, I think, the 1940s where Rattar was concerned, or even perhaps a little later than that, but the main landowners from Castletown right round to Mey or Scarfskerry perhaps was owned by Traill, and from Scarfskerry to ... in the Huna direction would be the Mey Estate, the Earl of Caithness at one time.

So, there was only – on that stretch of water which I'm interested in, there were only two landowners until recent times. All the people involved with the boats, with the fishing, with taking cattle from Orkney over to Caithness, for taking staigs, which were young horses, from Strathhalladale over to Orkney and taking back the trained horses later on, all of this would be done by tenants of the Estate; there would be no such thing as paying rents or rates; it was just part of everyday life. (1:27)

RECORDING 3 ENDS

RECORDING 4 BEGINS

MP: You were going to ask about the eddy.

SP: OK, now, as a landlubber, one of the things that I'd like you to clarify for me is what exactly do you mean by 'eddy', and following on with these 'harbours of refuge'. So, can you explain what that has to do with Brough? (0:18)

MP: Well, there was some major eddies and some not so strong, but the eddies would be against the tide, whichever way the tide was going. The eddy would be a flow of water in the opposite direction, dictated by the lay of the land, particularly, for example, the flood tide going east through the Pentland Firth, but if you come close in to the shore or the cliffs of Hoy, from Cantick Head up to Tor Ness, there's a west-going eddy which goes close in to the cliffs, even though the flood tide is running in the opposite direction further out.

So, my forebears would have taken cattle – knowing the tides, of course – they would have taken cattle round Cantick, they'd have ridden this eddy going west, close inshore, until the flood tide eased off, and then they would have turned their bows and their boats and headed across towards Dunnet Head.

Dunnet Head was a good aiming point. Apart from being extremely visible, it was a good point to aim for because if you went a little further east of that on the ebb tide, you had the – what is called today the Merry Men of Mey, stretching from St John's Point right across to Tor Ness, but not all at the same time. It began off St John's Point, and then as the ebb tide continued and the hours slipped by, this Merry Men Mey reached further and further across the Pentland Firth, and at its furthest across it actually diminished off St John's Point, so you could get a boat or a ship through fairly close to St John's Point while the Merry Men were doing their dances further out.

Nevertheless, they were to be avoided; these boats of my great-great-grandfather etc., they had no power; they really had to sail them, they had to allow for all these things, and if you could head from Hoy, Longhope, along the coast of Hoy, get a bit further west and then turn across to Dunnet Head, this would certainly avoid the Merry Men of Mey, which was not a good place – it could be quite dangerous in certain conditions.

So, I would aim for Dunnet Head, which brings me back again to where the tide is, where the wind is. And when they reached Dunnet Head, they could then decide to slip round the west of it, and into Dunnet Bay, and in below Dwarwick and to the beach just below Dunnet, or they could decide to come to the east of Dunnet Head, and this eddy is quite strong. The flood tide comes round Dunnet Head from the west, and then it curves in towards Brough, quite strong eddy, and then it's slightly less eddy as you go further out towards Ham. It still has this effect between Brough and Ham, but certainly for taking hundreds of livestock from the Orkneys in days long gone by and walking them from Caithness as far south as Carlisle, which is what my great-great-grandfather did, Dunnet Head would very much seem to be the target point.

And when they got across, which could be – I don't know how long it would have taken them, but it would take a certain time for these boats, according to the wind. When they got near to Dunnet, they could then determine do we run west of Dunnet into Dunnet Bay, or do we go into the lee of Dunnet Head and head for Brough and land our cattle there. (4:09)

RECORDING 4 ENDS