

Brough Transcription Template

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Interviewee Name:	Michael O'Donnell
Fieldworker Name:	Interviewer – Joanne B Kaar Typed by – Joanne B Kaar
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Interview Summary:	(00:28) date of moving to Caithness and Brough, (01:15)work lighthouse keeper – at Dunnet Head lighthouse, (02:25) cycling to work at the lighthouse. (03:05) lighthouse maintenance jobs, (03:44)how parafin tilly the light was lit. (07:40) fishing from Brough harbour in the 70's. (08:12) pecking order of boats parked on the slipway. (08:48) Fishing to earn a living. (09:19) what the anglers they did with their catch. (09:42) favourite and traditional fishing grounds. (10:43) cod, skate and big halibut. (11:36) landing a halibut with rod and line. (12:19) Fog horns at Dunnet Head. (12:57) staying in a caravan between the fog horn and lighthouse. (13:38) making creels to pass the time when working at the lighthouse. (14:09) storm at Brough (14:46) big wave incident. (16:06) repairing the harbour and pier committee raised money for materials. (16:20) Ian Munro from Clett Cottage. (17:00) building the boat park and Brough men in Merchant And Royal Navy (18:12) life at sea in the Navy and the captain of the Liverpool of Liverpool lived in Brough. (18:42) seasick and buying first boat. (20:57) delivering the boat from Scrabster to Brough with Willie Geddes who was blind. (22:16) How blind Willie Geddes repaired tractors.

Transcription

(remember to note time code from recording regularly to make it easy to find key quotes quickly later) (Time is minutes and seconds)

JK: Ok, we're recording. It's the, Thursday the 18th of November 2010 and we're in Brough at Burifa and I'm interviewing Michael O'Donnell, this is my dad. Em, so Mick tell us a bit about em, about yourself and I'm going to start with a few questions here. How long have you lived here?

MO: (00:28)Eh, we moved to eh Caithness in 1970. I was working with eh Rolls Royce and Associates at Vulcan. Eh, we moved out to Brough in 1973 to live in The Croft, that's a traditional croft with about 3 and a half acres of land.

JK: Em, have you got any family in the area apart from me!? *(Laughter)*

MO: Well, eh, we have two children, yourself Joanne and eh my son Cullen. But that's our only eh family in the area.

JK: And mum!!

MO: Oh, and mum yes of course I was assuming that!! *(laughter)*

JK: So how do you make your living?

MO: Well,

JK: Has that changed?

MO: (01:15)Changed, it's changing all the time. I mean yes, I was an engineer for eh with Rolls Royce for 4 years, then I left to be a lighthouse keeper and your mum, liz, she went eh teaching art in local primary schools.

JK: Do you remember what years you were at the lighthouse? And how long were you there for?

MO: Yes, well, I left Rolls Royce to eh be a lighthouse keeper. I went for an interview on eh a Sunday morning at the lighthouse, they thought I was quite good for the job so I went back and handed in my notice at Rolls Royce. And I started there a week later and that would be in about September eh 1974. ...

JK: Who else was working at the lighthouse then?

MO: Oh, there were em there were three families at the lighthouse in the three cottages, they were full-time lighthouse keepers. There was a local assistant em came in from Gills, who's name I've just lost it, I had him there, and myself eh local assistant and I only worked 20 hours a week.

JK: When you were working shifts, eh, how did you get to the lighthouse, in your car?

MO: (02:25)Oh, oh no I used to eh cycle up and down it's only sort of 2 and a half miles from the house so that was ok. I mean it was fine in the day, but at night it was a little bit hairy because my bike had a dynamo on and it's a lot of twisty bendy road. And I had to go fast enough so that my light would shine on the road but eh it was difficult then getting round the bends and missing all the rabbits as I, as I came down.

JK: What about maintenance at the lighthouse, what jobs did you have to do and what about changing the light and things like that?

MO: Em, well

JK: How often?

MO: (03:05)eh, there were different jobs but the eh, lighthouse keepers had different priorities than I thought was reasonable, *(said while smiling!)* em, we used to take tourists up. Tourists would come down to the lighthouse and they would want a tour. And so would take them up the eh, up to the tower. But one thing we had to do was to

ask them not to touch the handrail going up the narrow spiral staircase because we had spent a long time polishing it, and it was brass and they would leave hand marks on it!

But yes we had to eh, clean the lense eh, cut the grass (03:44) and generally while we were on duty ... we would light the light, and the light was a paraffin tilly-type lamp and we would have to pump the lamp every three, every hour and a half. And the turning mechanism was clockwork, there's a weight eh in the tower which kept the light going round and we had to wind that every three quarters of an hour, through the night.

JK: What about em, changing the light, was there any , how often was that done?

MO: eh

JK: Changing the mantle?

MO: Changing the mantle, well em, I don't know because I only ever attempted it once. Eh, I was on duty at night, and the mantle was looking a little black. And I thought, well, that needs changing! Eh, the next day I was on duty I went up again and I was, the light was lit and the mantle was looking even a little blacker. And I did wonder why no-one had changed it! Eh, then about three days later, I was on duty and eh on my watch, I had to light the lamp.

So I thought, I will change this mantle. So I took the mantle off, put the new one on , pumped it up, but eh, unlike a normal tilly lamp which has the advantage of gravity that the mantle hangs down, these ones, the mantle blew upwards. So I pumped, lit it, the mantle blew up into shape, I thought that was great! A few seconds later, it collapsed. And I had to change it. I changed it maybe, five or six times with total failure.

So I called in the eh, the number three lighthouse keeper. And he came up, and we went through the same procedure again, five or six mantles, absolutely no success what-so-ever.

We called in the second lighthouse keeper. He came up and he says "and well why the hell did you change this it was still lit?!" (*Laughter*) And I said I though it just needed it! So, there were three of us in there, changing mantles, went through another five or six.

And eventually we called in the principle lighthouse keeper. And between them, they had almost a hundred years of lighthouse service. And they could not change the mantle. There were four grown men in there pumping away at this little mantle, then all blowing from either side, trying this jelly-like wobbly thing set before it collapsed. And eh, by this time it was getting dark! (*laughter*) And we were a little bit concerned about boats crashing into the eh Headland, but very fortunately, eh, Jimmy, the local assistant from Canisbay, came in. We told him what the problem was, and we couldn't understand what we were doing wrong. He took one mantle out of the box, he put it in place, he pumped it up, it lit, it stayed. And he never did tell us what he did! (*Laughter*) And that has been there ever since I think probably until it went eh automatic in about 89. (*Laughter*)

JK: So how long did you keep your job after that?! (*said with irony!*)

MO: (*Laughter*) Well, em, I was eh, only there for about six months. Because then in the spring I got a boat, I started fishing, eh, fishing trips, sort of started overlapping with the lighthouse duties. And I had to make a decision. So eh, I left the lighthouse and em, well I was doing some fishing, I was doing gardening work, I was doing woodturning. Just anything, well we had the croft, we had the sheep and a cow, so those things kept me busy.

JK: The fishing down at the harbour, was it a busy place? Who else was there?

MO: (07:40) Well yes, it was quite busy then because there were eh, well Peter Henderson he, and Jessie Henderson from the corner at Pentland House, they were fishing full-time lobsters every day. And there was George Shearer, who again, was also full-time lobster fishing. Eh, Johnnie Sinclair came down occasionally and had his boat down. Larry Grant from Dunnet had a boat down there. But they were just occasional, and then when I came along, I was fishing, more or less every day.

(08:12) And we would leave our boats actually on the slip. (Em, the prime position was at the top of the slip. And second one, as you went further and further down. The problem is when you've got three or four boats down you, you, had to keep moving it when the tides got stronger or it got stormy. Eh, gradually, when Peter eh, retired, I moved up a spot, so I was number two. (*laughing*) And well, it stayed like that em, because I wasn't fishing quite so regularly and George was the only man down there for quite a long time.

JK: (08:48) So, did you take other people out fishing or you just fishing for yourself?

MO: Eh, we did both. Yes, I mean I bought the boat as a mean of, of making money. So I advertised and eh, I would take four anglers out. They would, this was eh in the eh 70's mainly. They would come up, stay in a local house which I had arranged for them. And I would take them out every day fishing for about 6 hours a day fishing.

JK: Did they keep their catch or did they sell it?

MO: (09:18) Oh, well, when they were fishing, they, they would keep the catch. And at that time we were catching quite a lot of fish. So, yes, all day was spent fishing and I think they spent most of the evening filleting the fish. Eh, and then I would freeze it for them. And at the end of the week they would have some big bags and insulation and they would put them in their cars and they'd take them home, take them home.

JK: (09:42) Were there favourite or traditional places for fishing in the Firth that others from Brough would know about, would they share information or did you have to find your own spot?

MO: Well, I was always told about a spot, it we went straight out from the end of the slipway heading more or less sort of, well, north east, to north north east. And until you could see the fog horns. And eh, and fish there. Well I tried that quite a few times but we really did never, never catch anything, so we started fishing closer in, we'd go up from Sinigoe right round, falling stones, round the corner by the lighthouse and even further west eh round to Dunnet. And those were quite good, well they were very, very dependant on the tides. And occasionally we'd go towards past Langapor to Ham and as far as Scarfskerry.

JK: Were you going fishing for cod or what where you fishing for?

MO: (10:43) Well, most people wanted to fish for cod. But we got a few people who wanted eh, to fish for something different and we'd fish for halibut. And we were quite successful with that. The thing about halibut is em, when you're fishing for that, you either caught something big or you didn't catch anything at all. And it's wether they could stand sitting in the boat for a whole day and not getting anything. But we did catch, we caught some big skate up about 100 lb, we got three or four big skate. We got some big halibut, em, the first one I ever caught was 127 lb in weight and then the biggest was eh, 161.

JK: They were taller than you.

MO: Yes, the eh big one was taller than me, yes we really couldn't hold it up.

MO: And we got some small

JK: Was that on rod and line?

MO: (11:36) this was all rod and line, yes. All rod and line and big bait lying on the bottom and we'd just wait until they eh, they took. Yes, the first one, we were just eh, just north east of the lighthouse and we were fishing in about 20 fathoms. And with a great struggle the guy reeled the fish up, who, we, after about 20 minutes got it to the surface. We tried to get a gaff in it. We failed and then it took a dive to the bottom and we had to start the whole process again. So it took us about three quarters of an hour to, to land it.

JK: (12:19) You talked about eh, fishing underneath the fog horns. Em, there's only one fog horn there now. Was there more?

MO: Well, em, when I was fishing there were two fog horns, and there had been one earlier than than which had, had fallen into the sea. I think the vibration of the foghorns on that little promentary you know, caused a lot of the eh, the rock to fall apart, because they were very powerful things. Yes, there, there were two there and I think there's only one a the moment. The, the far one has been demolished ,but then, that's not operational because they don't use it any more.

JK: (12:57) I can remember staying up their, when you were working at the lighthouse, in a caravan and you had to switch the foghorn on.

MO: Oh yes

JK: Did we stay up there much in the caravan?

MO: Well, yes, when I was on night duties I used to em, stay in a little bothy eh, next to the lighthouse. But then they got very modern and they and put a small caravan. But they put the caravan between the lighthouse and the foghorn. So nights, em, when it was very foggy eh, I had to put the foghorn on and that would kind of shake the eh, the caravan a little bit.(laughter) So we never really got any sleep.

(13:38) And eh, yes I mean, so there was very little to do and in my caravan I didn't have a television, I didn't even have a radio. So at that time I was doing a little bit of

fishing with creels and I used to make my own creel and I would sit there knitting nets, to cover the creels with in the evening to pass the time.

JK: Do you remember any em, big storms down at Brough – any boats that were wrecked or any folks lost at sea or any ships heading for the lighthouse that shouldn't be?

MO: (14:09) Eh, well, eh, down at Brough, I mean we had a, a big storm, I think it was 1978 in October or something like that. Big storm, and this sort of almost wrecked the eh the pier. A lot of the stones were eh hurled about and eh yes, if had been left, we wouldn't have a pier there now.

JK: Were people's boats, did they leave them down at the harbour all winter or did they bring any up?

MO: Eh, no well, most people brought their boats up for the winter. Unless they were fishing, still fishing later on. (14:46) But the only other eh incident, we'd been out fishing all day with four fishermen from Yorkshire. Em, and it was strong tides at the time and we'd come back to the harbour and there wasn't enough water to get to the slipway so we just fished around in the bay and caught a few dogfish until there was just enough water to get me to the end of the em the slip. And we weren't tied up. We'd taken all the engines out and the fish and carried them up. I was standing just holding the bow and the stern rope of the boat and I looked over my shoulder and there was a big wave coming, actually breaking over the Cletts. And eh, the water rushed up, and the boat lifted and I ran up the slipway holding the ropes and I think I went halfway up the slipway you know before the water receded and put my boat back on the sand and it sat there for I think another three hours before the eh, tide actually came in far enough eh to float it again. I think we were just lucky not to be actually out at sea when that wave came along. It seemed like a freak wave from somewhere.

JK: So was the harbour then needed to be repaired?

MO: (16:06) Yes, the harbour was eh, repaired and eh, the Brough Bay Association we were just called the pier committee at the time, eh, we had to raise money for all the materials.

JK: Who was in that?

MO: (16:20) Well, Ian Munro from Clett Cottage, he was the eh chairman. Em, George Shearer was in, Peter and Jessie Henderson, Sinclair Coghill, eh, Jim Calder, I think they were the main ones. It was Ian who did most of the paperwork raising the money to em pay for the materials that we needed. And then that was re-built by the job creation scheme (*coughing*) and there were local guys, there was two of them, Sinclair Coghill was one and em, William Shearer.

(17:00) And I remember that was, when where they down there, I think, I'm just trying to think, 74 ...80 and no, that wasn't from the storm, we did some more work down at the harbour, we built the boat park. And eh, that I year I was, I was going to America. I was really pleased about this. And so I went down to the shore and chatting with the boys while they were having their coffee. And saying I was going to America and they said "oh that's interesting which part have you, are you going?" I said well, we're going into Atlanta then down to New Orleans, oh, all of them had

been to New Orleans. And they knew the whole history of the Cajun people and they told us this.

JK: Is this the Merchant Navy?

MO: They were all in, they both in they had been in the Merchant Navy and in the Royal Navy some of them, em so they had travelled the world these people and so em, it wasn't unusual for someone else to be going to New Orleans but then they'd been every where else in the world almost in their, in their careers.

JK: (18:12) So life at sea for a lot of folk?

MO: Yes, yes, em, yes there were a lot of people who were recruited for the Navy from up here, in fact in the house em, we live in, "The Croft" eh, the captain of the eh, Liverpool Of Liverpool, the biggest eh, sailing ship ever built, the captain lived there. And there were captains in many of the houses in the village.

JK: (18:42) When you were out fishing eh, your always desperate to go out there fishing watching the sea from the window, but eh, you suffer a bit from seasickness. It doesn't stop you! (*laughter*)

MO: Well, em (*coughing!*) oh right yes! (*laughter*)! Well yes I've always been a bad sort of seasick and traveller, em, and I really hadn't thought of a boat at first, but what started it off, I was actually at the lighthouse, working and eh, Mervyn Sinclair came up and asked me, he said they've got a party of Swiss fishermen staying at the Northern Sands Hotel and they've got half a dozen little boats to take them out fishing, and they were short of a skipper. And would I go along and help out? So I agreed to this and we went out fishing three or four days and I wasn't seasick. So on the the strenght of that, that's when I got my own boat. Which was a 20ft clinker built boat built in eh, Shapinsay Orkney.

And eh, then I fished, well with the family, taking yourself and Cullen out catching our own food, taking my eh, sea-anglers out to make some money. But then after eh, I don't know, five or six years, the seasickness started coming back.

I can remember being out there, the four fishermen fishing away, I was lying in the bilge feeling really very ill. And put my head over the side to realise there was, we were in quite a bit of swell and getting very very close to the rocks, and I think the fishermen just had blind faith in the skipper they weren't concerned about it what-so-ever! And I told them to haul up their lines very very quickly, I only just had enough strength to start the engine. And so we headed back to Brough Harbour. I think I lay on the slipway then for about an hour while the world spun around me until I recovered. So then I stoped doing the eh, commercial fishing taking anglers out and just went out for short trips for our own pleasure.

JK: (20:57) Talking about blind faith, when you had, how did you get your boat to Brough Brough harbour, how was it delivered?

MO: Ah right, yes that was em, the boat was sitting in Scrabster, we'd bought it off Jimmy Mackay who now, who then owned the Viking Queen, and the boat was only about four years old. (*coughing*) So em, Mervyn Sinclair said he would come and eh, sail round with me and he would bring eh, Willie Geddes. Well Willie was em, lived at eh

lived at Greenvale then, but Willie was totally blind. So em, we went down to Scrabster, my boat was sitting four boats out from the eh, from the other boats down there, so we climbed down the ladder, had to clamber over these other three boats with Willie, and got into my boat and eh, we set off. I think Willie had a really great trip. Eh, sailing from Thurso, round by Murkle towards Dunnet and then round Dunnet Head into Brough, and then em, sailed to Brough for the first time and lifted Willie out yes, he had a really, really good trip.

JK: (22:16)Your, Willie, was eh pretty useful eh man to be a, to have around because your tractors were always breaking down and you needed (*coughing*) your tractor to pull your boats out up on the, from the shore.

MO: Ah, oh yes, we had a little eh, grey Fergie, em to pull the boat up and down from the slipway. Yes, and it wasn't that reliable, it did break down and if Willie was round I'd say yes, the problem with the tractor. And he would go out and he would always have the spanners in his pocket. He he would go out to the front, and he's sort of sometimes you know take the lift the hood up take the petrol tank off. Eh, you know check everything, repair it, put it back again. Even one day I mean, he actually took the cylinder head off! And, eh put it back and set it running for me. And he, u, would do all this without any help and I couldn't be any help to him because if I moved something he really wouldn't know where to find it. So I was better leaving him alone and eh, yes he knew what he was doing and eh kept my tractors on the road for many a year.

JK: So when's that last time you were out fishing? Do you still go much?

MO: Oh, last time was about pp, about four, four weeks ago. Em, yes fishing out from Brough eh, with my son-in-law Joe, and John Farrow Doctor from, from Dunnet and we had a very very good catch, caught over fifty cod which was really quite good compared with previous years. And we'd been out may be a fortnight before that with yourself and cu eh, Joe and had a similar catch.

JK: The same, same drift.

MO: The same drift, a very unusual one I don't know, the wind from the south we set off for Langapor expecting to drift eh towards Brough and then round to Sinigoe but the wind took us more or less due north. And eh, yes, we caught a very good catch on that one. And fortunately on the second time we repeated the same drift with the, with the wind, Mmmm.

JK: Well thank you and eh, I'm going to switch off the tape recorder now.

MO: OK

JK continue another time.

MO: Yes thanks

(End of recording 24:34)

