

THE FISHERMEN OF LEIGH

FOR most people fishing is a hobby, a relaxation, an excuse to get-away-from-it-all, with the occasional excitement of a bite thrown in.

For others it is a livelihood, a way of earning that is sometimes disappointing, often uncomfortable and always hard work.

And still men give up comfortable land jobs to try their luck at fishing for a living.

But fishermen are usually happy men because they are free. They get used to bad weather and rough seas, they get used to the discomforts of spending days and nights in a boat that can hardly be called cosy, and they get used to sparse catches and subsequent sparse reward.



Naturally there is rivalry. But it is friendly rivalry — it can afford to be. The ocean is big and everyone has equal opportunity for making a catch.

For many years now the fishing industry in the North Island has remained stable, consequently the establishment of a new fisheries is an event. And when that fisheries succeeds in circumstances that can hardly be described as easy, then it is a worthy and indeed creditable effort.

One of the most recently established fisheries is at Leigh, a county town about 14 miles north of Warkworth, populated by about 350 people.

Leigh's livelihood is dependent on its farming, fishing and timber — it is a small place, but it is progressive in all of these.

To the Fisheries Inspector assigned to that area the growing community of fishermen are "a progressive and happy lot of men who obey the rules and get a good price for their fish."

The areas in which they fish—Cape Colville, Great Barrier, Little Barrier, around the Hen and Chicken Islands and Mokohino Island — are territories for experienced fishermen, but if they are lucky they may catch blue cod (generally confined to the Chatham and Stewart Island areas) on the foul ground.

Generally speaking though, the main source of supply is snapper

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with a seasonal supply of crayfish, sharks and hapuka. Tuna fishing has just recently been developed, but at the moment only three of the boats are equipped for this type of rod and reel fishing.

Swordfish is also caught with rod and reel, but this is mainly used for bait. Nets are used only for bait.

There are now some 20 or so full time fishermen in Leigh operating in 18 boats which range in size from 18 to 36ft. Some of the men, like Jim Aitken, have part-time jobs as well, while others in

men operating in local waters are not from Leigh.

Like Ron Skipwith, for instance, who owned a plant shop in Hamilton until the beginning of this year. Now he owns his own boat and says that although fishing is not so profitable, it is not so important as liking the work.

Cyril Morris came to Leigh from Auckland four years ago. He was a flounder fisherman before. Now he's happy to catch anything—happy being the operative word. "There is something free and easy about fishing," he says. "It's a please-yourself-beholden-to-no-body job. It's hard and it's wet, but it has its compensations in the good weather."

To summer visitors who make the bumpy journey to this off-the-beaten-track spot, Leigh is a pleasant little bay offering good fishing both from the wharf or from small craft at sea, but what they

"early in March 1957. This was just the bare smoke-house capable of processing 220 fish in one batch. We had no freezer and any surplus had to be sold or dumped. Our first three batches, due to hot weather and other troubles, were largely lost. These fish were supplied mostly by the Aitken family, who, with myself as smoker and salesman-hawker stood the loss."



Books were opened on April 1, and on April 4 the second building, a 12 x 14 shed containing an 8cwt freezer (shortly afterwards supplemented by an ice box) was opened.

The early success of the project and the growing demand indicated the necessity of a fulltime shore crew, but this was not fully achieved until 1959. The interval was filled by co-operatively contributed labour.

Because of the inconvenience of hawking the smoked fish, a better method of distribution was sought, and this eventually resulted in Leigh supplying clubs and department stores in Auckland. At this time the orders called for something like 1400lb of green fish of smoker size per week.

However, with the fluctuation in catches it was never quite known until very late in the day whether the orders would be met, thus emphasizing the necessity of a bulk outlet or a large freezer.

And so the fishing industry in Leigh grew. The few fishermen spent their days fishing and their evenings assisting Mr Tong smoking, and sometimes Mr Tong had to assist in the fishing too.

Mrs Tong was in charge of all orders, and also assisted in the smoke-house when necessary — "I was a real fish wife," she told us.



Finance at that time came mainly from the fish sales and from the fishermen themselves who had each paid £2 down and were paying their shareholding off by small deductions from their catches.

As the end of the first year as a "loose co-operative" drew near it became obvious that if expansion was to be carried out more capital would have to be sought.

It was estimated that £3000 at least would be needed to build a freezer and receiving station. It

THE STRUGGLE TO ESTABLISH A FISHERMEN'S FISHERIES...

Leigh, although they do not fish, have financial interest in some of the fishing boats.

The installation of radio telephones in some of the vessels has been a great boon to both the fishermen and the Fisheries. For it means that not only are the fishermen able to contact each other at sea, but they are also able to keep in contact with the Fisheries, to inform them when they will be arriving at the wharf and the extent of their catch.

Two of the boats have fish finding radar equipment.

A good catch would be about 500lb, which would include something like 200 snapper. The best catch brought in in one day was a load of half a ton (with two men fishing).

The development of the Fisheries can't really be said to have found employment for local men, since the majority of the fisher-

perhaps don't realise is that it can also be a very treacherous bay because of the shallowness of the water at low tide.

Fishing as a communal commercial proposition was first contemplated by a handful of men who got together at the instigation of Mr Bill Tong to discuss the possibilities in Leigh.

The original aim was to use the superior quality of fish obtainable from day line boats and distribute this quickly and hygienically to the consumer.

The latter, however, proved too difficult to finance. Said Mr Tong, "We were unable to inspire confidence sufficient to raise capital, so we decided to turn to the kippers article and seek distribution through grocery freezers."

At that time there were only two fishermen in Leigh interested in the proposal — Jim Aitken and Mr Jack Brittain (the latter is now fishing in the Bay of Islands).

"Our first building was erected on my property," Mr Tong said,

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was in consequence of this that Leigh Fisheries eventually sought registration as a private company, since, said Mr Tong, "the fishermen found it hard enough providing boats and gear."

Jim Aitken explained the project quite simply when he said, "We were all in this together. We pooled our catches and were each paid for the fish we caught and Mr Tong sold them for us. It was a co-operative effort and we wanted it to be a fishermen's fisheries."



When the new station and freezer was built it was decided to add a smoker unit, and later expansion of demand through chain stores rendered the five-ton storage room inadequate and further expansion was undertaken after three years.

A 20-ton room was added, and in the fourth year this was strained to meet summer intake and failed to balance winter demand.

The opening of the Australian market to shark flesh and classes of snapper seemed to bring a happy solution, enabling fishing power to be built up to a level capable of handling winter demand for smoked.

Though Mr Tong has no longer any vested interest in the Fisheries and devotes the whole of his time now to his 48-acre market garden in which he specializes in tomatoes and pumpkins, he still has great hopes for the further development of fishing in the area.

"The scope for fishing here is limitless. We are situated in the middle of a selection of good fishing grounds," he said.

Jim Aitken is now the only fisherman director of Leigh Fisheries. Mr J. C. E. Wyatt (owner of the local timber mill) is the chairman of directors, and Mr M. Rowe (carpenter), and Mr S. Gerbick (hotel owner), make up the Board.

This winter the Fisheries have been smoking about £2000 worth of fish a month, and distributing it all over the North Island.

The Fisheries are staffed by Mr Ewan Matheson (manager), Mr Owen Astwood and Mr Don Matheson. Supplies of fish are brought in every day — already selected and gutted at sea — and smoked in batches of 580 at a time.

Since the radio-telephone was installed in the fisheries, Mr Matheson now knows just how much is being brought in, and can prepare to receive it. He can also take and give messages perhaps from a fisherman who wants his wife to know what time he'll be home, or from a wife who thinks it's about time her husband was home!

Very little fishing is done at night, although sometimes a boat might stay out for as long as four or five days and nights. Apparently the best times to fish are early morning and dusk.

Leigh's history is not very definite. It seems that the land was divided up in England and allocated to farmers, who settled inland, leaving the coastal area, which lent itself to fishing and shipbuilding, to later settlers.

It was probably because of the latter that the Matheson families were attracted to this area, and in particular to the bay that is now named after them.

As a separate community, Leigh was probably established in the way of a spill-over from Matheson's Bay, which is just a little further down the coast.

The Matheson family, namely the brothers Angus and Duncan, of Scottish origin who were living in Nova Scotia, decided to seek new pastures because there was no work for them there.

They had probably heard of New Zealand from some of the earlier settlers who came from Nova Scotia in 1853 with the Rev. Norman McCloud, and subsequently settled at Waipu.



And so on January 10, 1857, the 107-ton brigantine Spray, built by Duncan Matheson and previously used as a mail packet between Halifax and Bermuda, with Angus as master and Duncan as mate, left Big Bras D'or, Nova Scotia, and arrived at Auckland on June 25, the same year.

She carried 93 passengers to a point off the Cape of Good Hope where Mrs Angus Matheson gave birth to her second child (Alexander). Later in the voyage a daughter (Margaret), was born to Mrs Alex McKenzie.

Eventually, both Matheson families settled in the Bay area. They sold the Spray, which was eventually wrecked in the Islands.



Fishermen of Leigh—Mr E. B. Campbell and Mr Vern Keith.

Duncan continued his old trade, that of shipbuilding, selecting the Bay as the most suitable area, and his sailor brother Angus gave up the sea to help him.

While he was still quite young Duncan was killed on the wharves in Auckland.

The descendants of Angus' family continued to live in the district and farmed surrounding land, while Duncan's offspring apparently carried on the seafaring tradition of the family.

The population was gradually augmented, some of the early English settlers being the Wyatt and Clarke families.

Farming was the main source of income in those early days. There was some fishing carried on, but not a great deal, and certainly not for commercial purposes. Probably the first commercial fisherman in this area was Mr Fred Franich, who still has his own private fishing business in Leigh.



One of the earliest commercial links with Auckland was the fruit trade. The farmers then loaded the fruit on to the boats in the Bay to be transported to Auckland — there being no road link until considerably later.

Leigh is administered by Rodney County Council and has a five-man representation at Council meetings.



Since there is only a primary school in Leigh, children have to travel to Warkworth for secondary education, and after leaving school usually find employment there or even further afield — like Elizabeth, the Tong's 17-year-old daughter, who is a bank clerk and lives and works in Auckland. "because there is nothing much for young people to do in Leigh," she said.

So far as recreation for young people is concerned, there is very little organized — probably because so few young people actually live in Leigh — there is however, a teenage club and regular functions are held at the Community Centre. There are also football and hockey clubs.

For adults there is the Parent-Teacher Association, the local branch of the Women's Institute, indoor and outdoor bowls, etc.

How Leigh got its name is a well-aided argument in the district, but the general belief is that it was named after the Rev. Samuel Leigh, a missionary who travelled extensively in the North Island and often rested at this peaceful little harbour en route.