

Matthew Benn (MB) and Gerard Hartigan (GH) were members of the Strand Fishermen, who were based in Limerick City. They talk about the fish being sent to market in Billingsgate, London.

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SS: Today is the 18th of May 2017 and I'm Sharon Slater and I am interviewing Matthew Benn and Gerard Hartigan on life on the Shannon and the Shannon fisheries. The first thing I would like to know, I'll ask you Gerard how long have you been and your family been associated with the river?

GH: Oh for a long time my, both side of the family fished originally but my mother's name was Tobin so I fished with Gerry Tobin and Tim Tobin, my grandfather was Johnny Tobin. They all fished that family. My own father fished as well with the Strand men and the Abbey men going way back, so I'm sure, my father was born in 1907. So I'm sure it's around 1850s on and even before that as far as my recollection anyway. They were always involved with the river Shannon both with draft nets, snap nets and later on drift nets. I grew up with it certainly, salmon was a big, salmon fishing was a big in the city that time you'd people out of here Crosbie Row, Curragower Boat Club and Clancy Strand and Barry's Lane if I remember rightly

MB: But the Wallaces

GH: the Wallaces yeah, so em, since I was a boy I was fishing my first experience of the river was going down with my uncles for flat fishing which would be flounder, fluke, dabs and odd plaice and that but in the summer season then it was salmon and my father can recollect some of the Tobin's fished for herrings in the Shannon, going back into the early 1900s. So it was always part of our life until we were stopped then. The license, I inherited my uncle's, my granduncle's license in 1978 and I fished every year from that until it closed in 2006, unfortunately. It was absolutely brilliant through, now I can testify I wouldn't be sitting here at this time of the year and you see salmon jumping out there you know. All gone unfortunately. So I'd still be involved with it if it was there certainly even though I've gone from it how many years now. I still manage my time by the river if I was still able. That's about my contribution to it really.

SS: And Matty how long have your family been involved in, on the river?

MB: Generations but to give you dates em, like I was first. I put it this way to you when we were young growing up, like my father, like there was no money around at the time now just give you a for instance like that way. The fishing was a time when we had manna from heaven, as we call it, because you'd get a pair of shoes then something like that. Back in his father's and my uncle's time and back again before that they all fished, like, but how, giving you dates like. I was born into it and my people before me were born into it but em, as far as dates are concerned lets say it came from down from one to the other down through the generations and

GH: I'd say it was around the same time

MB: Yeah, well you see like, for instance over beyond you had the Tobins, you had the McInerneys, you had the Kings, you had the Wallaces,

GH: You'd the Dorans

MB: You had the Dorans, who are we letting out? The Elliots, Stock Elliots

GH: I don't remember them

MB: No, no they were here, they were here in Crosbie Row they were. On this side then you had Farrells, you had the Benns, you had Skullets,

GH: Skullets

MB: And Reg Fitzmorris', Jonky Fitzmorris' you had. Who else had you.

GH: You had Gabriel Tobin as well

MB: Well the Tobins he would have been included in that, you'd Brendan Tobin

GH: There was three Tobins families fishing.

MB: They were different, yeah they were all. You had, and the families outside of them, they were the likes of the crew men which were Niles, weren't it,

GH: Oh there were numerous people my father was a crewman but there

MB: Yeah your father was

GH: My uncle lived in that house behind the white big house there [Points to Clancy Strand] and all the boats were moored here from the corner of the falls down

MB: All along

GH: Down to where that man is walking there. All our boats were lined across there and they would be launched in the Spring some times and sometimes then in the Summer.

SS: And did they fish as part of a group or individually?

GH: No no, they were all individual fishermen.

MB: Well it was em, it was dog eat dog at that time.

GH: It was very competitive from the city and then you had the Coonagh boats. The city I think there was, was there six or seven boats in Clancy's Strand.

MB: At least, I'm trying to figure it

GH: Yeah

MB: Some of them had two boats sure you had

GH: You had Timmy and, Timmy and Gerry Tobin

MB: You had the Terrills' over there then.

GH: You had yeah

MB: Jimmy Terrills

GH: So you'd have seven or eight boats on the Limerick side and you'd have the same amount over here and that's just from the city, you know.

MB: Yeah

SS: How many licenses were there?

GH: They'd all have a license.

MB: There was actually on the Shannon you had 70 drift licenses and you had 25 draft licenses, which was Shore licenses as we know it as. The majority of them, the majority of them would have been in Limerick at the time.

GH: They would yeah yeah.

MB: You had maybe

GH: You had five boats in Coonagh too, didn't ya.

MB: You'd five boats in Coonagh and then Newtown had maybe ten or twelve boats nearly at one stage.

GH: Between Sandy and Newtown

MB: Yeah

GH: Yeah, and then you had I don't know about is it em, Clarina pier there is it, is there any family there?

MB: In Clarina, in Mungret pier there was the Dorans

GH: No past Mungret now down below down by 'bridge aux' there.

MB: Oh, I know yeah Greene Island

GH: Greene Island

MB: There was, there was yeah

GH: There was one or two families

MB: Two families there, there was, yeah

GH: There was yeah

MB: I can't think of their names now at the moment, actually I should have bring you a list of places where they had [inaudible]

GH: That would have been handy yeah

MB: I'll get you one

GH: That would have been handy

SS: How far up and down river did you fish?

GH: Well. We started, you'd start out there [laughs] if you wanted but we were, there was some court case back in the very early 1900s when they were moved from shore fishing, which would be draft nets down past Barrington's Pier, you know Barrington's Pier just down the river yeah and the Lax Wier company won the court case anyway so they definitely, the net fishermen were put down to Mucknish Point which is down by Coonagh and to the best of my knowledge that's where the drift nets came in because it's horrendous to walk the muds down there, only in certain areas

MB: It is yeah yeah.

GH: But eh, that's when the drift nets started on the Shannon

MB: From Coonagh, from Coonagh down to 'Tiltalawn Point'

GH: From Coonagh down to the Airport that's where we fished

MB: That was our stretch

GH: But you could go from here to Loop Head if you, you know you're licence would cover you for that.

MB: But you see we were governed by tides, we'd say the boats'd leave here at high water we'd say, you'd six hours then but wouldn't be fishing six hours because you'd have to contend with other boats as well and there's times and tide that you'd have to lie up anyway because you wouldn't be

GH: It'd be too fast

MB: It'd be too fast for you to work in.

GH: Yeah.

MB: But like em, you'd fish it down for the six hours whatever that would, lets say the airport fish it back up again to Coonagh, that would be your days, maybe, the average day on the river would be, in them times

GH: It'd be twelve hours

MB: Be twelve, fourteen, sixteen if there was fish sometimes, you know. You'd stay at it.

GH: Long days yeah

MB: Long days

GH: You'd go down with the tide and come back with the tide

MB: That's when, that's before the advent of a lot of motor cars, we'd be working over here the Strand and stuff like and the advent of cars like I fished out of Bunratty Gerry fished out of Bunratty and there's other people moved down like there was very few boats to finish up with that fished actually from here.

GH: It'd save you the long trip down

MB: Save you the trip and weather and everything else

GH: Plus it was straight down to the fishing grounds, you know, and we'd leave our boats below then we'd use them for fishing and then when the fishing day was over we could drive home, you know. But certainly in the height of the fishing it was all - get into your boat here, go down the river, do your fishing and then come home with the tide.

SS: And seeing how it was a long day did eat you eat on board the boat or

GH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'd a fire bucket, most boats had a fire bucket

MB: Fire bucket, yeah.

GH: That was a bucket with holes in it and coke and timber and light that and boil your kettle and pot

MB: But then if there was fish there you wouldn't get time to eat [laughs] just keep going until the fish stopped, you know, it's like

GH: Some people they brought flasks when they came into, so you just had a flask of tea when you had a chance.

MB: Of course there was, there was huts below on the islands as well that you'd sleep over on, you know.

GH: That was just, that was before I started fishing full time now. My father certainly went away on Sunday night and we wouldn't see him again until Wednesday night.

MB: Yeah

GH: Then he would be gone the same again then until Saturday. So that's kind of it, all the boats were like that, weren't they

MB: Yeah I remember my mother actually telling stories. My mother and father there was houses there just just as you come into Merchant's Quay there. There was three big houses there. Do you remember Collins was the cruelty man there, Gerry, used to shoot the dogs.

GH: Yeah

MB: My mother and father when they first got married they were living up on a flat there and I remember her always saying it that "You're father will be gone Wednesday night be back, Sunday night Wednesday, be back, he's go away again and again and they they's be back on Sunday, Saturday or Sunday"

GH: Saturday

MB: And there was three women from the parish [St Mary's] here in the winter they used to collect the flat fish on baskets and they'd have them on their head and they'd go around the parish and around the Irishtown selling them. That was then but as I was telling you before that was the winters fishing, like the Limerick boats never had, they never cut reed as such, you know, it's that was left to the Coonagh boys to, for the reed

GH: Old Jimmy Grimes did now didn't he?

MB: Old Jimmy Grimes did alright yeah.

GH: He cut reed up around d'Island Bank as well

MB: He did yeah

GH: He did yeah, he'd be from the city alright, he was a reed cutter, his son is still doing it, he's a good age

MB: He's a Coonagh man, like, they were Coonagh people that moved to Limerick.

GH: Were they?

MB: They were yeah, Grimes' were from Coonagh.

GH: Right.

MB: Like, remembering and trying to put it together is another thing.

GH: About the, we're not talking about reed cutting now are we? we're talking about the river

MB: No, no we're talking about the people that fished like

GH: Like Matty said summer time was a boom time in our house then because we had extra money. We got a suit of clothes and like Matty said a pair of shoes and there was all that kind of stuff. They all came with the fishing we'd very little otherwise, you know.

MB: There was nothing there, my father was a builders labourer, what's that mean what was the money, there was nothing there in the forties and fifties for him.

GH: A lot of them worked on the Docks as well you know, my uncles worked on the Docks.

MB: But the fishing was always looked forward to, clear bills and

GH: Oh it was

MB: Get clothes and whatever

GH: But the fishing was fantastic at the time

MB: Oh it was absolutely

GH: You had boats coming you there, every boat on the peak season now with fifty, sixty, seventy fish for the day, you know and there was a weir up behind us owned by the ESB and that was, they were getting

MB: Thousands

GH : They were getting 30 per cent of everything that went up the river so they still had thousands of fish there, you know.

MB: It's just the river has been neglected down for the last thirty years

GH: Thirty years

MB: At least

GH: Thirty years

MB: Like the bailiffs actually as they are now, like after dark they won't go up beyond the weir, it's a health and safety issue, that's we were told on the board, it's a health and safety issue and it's criminal element that's up there but yet we can't stick our head out below there, you know. It's

GH: It's gone anyway since we packed it up, we have no idea what the real run is anymore because they don't operate a fish count there on the Shannon. So any time we ask has the stocks improved or anything we just get a negative answer, you know so.

MB: There again like outside of the fishing, all the fishermen like the Tobins and McInerney's and Wallaces, they were all boat builders themselves, and that's all, that's all

GH: That's all part of it, all gone, yeah

MB: It's all gone now like.

GH: I'd say you're the only boat builder

MB: I'd say I'm the only one that still carries on like

SS: And the nets as well, were they made locally or did you buy them in?

GH: We bought the nets in, we mounted them on the ropes then ourselves but there was a time when they made them, you know.

MB: There was an aunt of mine living in Nicholas Street there, Chrissy Benn was her name she used to make the nets for the, snap nets for the Abbey Fishermen and she often made drift nets for below as well but she had polio and I remember my father even saying to me, he said her hands used to be bleeding from sewing nets

GH: Tying the knots in the nets

MB: But that's, that's way back and the way they'd used, the way they'd pay her then would be like only we weren't talking money then we're only talking a couple of pound maybe, you know. The nets'd be made and she, when they'd get fish

GH: She got paid

MB: She got paid that's the way it worked. Like it was, it was the same way like for, for there was a man over there Dorans across the waters there [Points to Clancy Strand] he used to build boats

there and at the time a lot of the crowd in Coonagh, he'd build boats for them but they might say look we'll pay you when, lay something down and pay you then. A man you wouldn't caught for much anyway.

GH: No but you paid a deposit on the boat

MB: Paid a deposit

GH: and after you'd make money you'd paid it back.

SS: How did the boats change over the years, did they change?

GH: They're very similar to what they were,

MB: They haven't really changed

GH: They haven't really changed at all

MB: It's just like little quirky things that like em, like if you build a boat now and say you were fishing you might say well the next one I'll change it just a little bit to make it a little bit em, because it can get very dirty down there like and it can get fairly rough down there like, you could pull the arms off yourself like trying to keep an old boat straight.

GH: But the tough pieces, it was all done by, it was all manual you know. When the out board engines came in it was a great bonus because that, you nearly didn't have to sleep in the huts after that, you could come home with your out board engine, you know, but you're still governed with the tide, you wouldn't be driving back against the tide. So you go with the ebb tide and come back with the flood tide but it opened up, it took a lot of hardship out of the fishing. That's why the times I'm talking about now they rowed.

MB: They rowed

GH: They rowed down on Sunday night and they, there was a weekly boat used to come to

MB: There's Coonagh.. the steamship boat

GH: The weekly boat and they'd get a tow off of that, you know.

MB: Yeah, but the funny thing was they'd leave here, I mean it's, it was eighteen mile of a pull into the fishing grounds from here. I mean and they were men that didn't have fancy oil gear or anything, you know. They were tough men, but

GH: I remember Danny Farrell telling me that my grandfather went away in the Spring, March I think and there was ice on the boat it was frozen, you know, and he had no shoes so he had to keep his legs up at the side of the timber to keep his feet out of the walk. When I think of that myself, jeez, horrendous.

MB: They were, I mean they were tough times but if you , when you'd talk, they would be telling you

about it they be telling you with affection in their voice, you know, it was like they might curse it at times, you know, but I mean, you'll always, you could never go away from it, you can never go way from fishing I don't think. If you're born into it you can't go way from it.

GH: It is a, it's in your blood

MB: I mean you look out there [looks at Shannon] you get envious, you want to get out you know

GH: [laughs] It's a bad feeling when you can't paw on the ground as they call it.

MB: It is yeah

GH: It must be worst for you looking out on it here [laughs]

SS: Now, there's an angler out there now, the anglers weren't affected with the license?

GH: How do you mean now?

SS: When the net license got taken away we still have anglers.

GH: They thought, they thought they'd benefit a lot by it but some how it didn't materialise if anything it got worse. So we're of the opinion that something happened at sea. In our case here a lot of fishing going up to spawn don't ever make it

MB: A lot of poaching

GH: There a lot of people up river now that poaching never went on in our time, it's going on now and it's big time, you know and as Matty said the fisheries, we reported it lots of times to the fisheries but they don't seem to be

MB: They're not interested in the least. They're governed by the people that has power like as I said, you've guest house owners, you have hoteliers and they seem to have the power, which like we had a conservation board here which Gerry's uncle sat on and we'd fishermen like ruling below, they would be kind of setting the law for below but then they brought in hoteliers and guest house owners and they actually ruined the board

GH: Ruined the board yeah

MB: They ruined it because when the conservator board was over on the weir here you had like local people putting local problems forward and suggesting, were taken into account that time but not any more . There like, you're only a figure head now on a board you're just sitting there and your, you might as well be chewing grass or something because it's. The fishery has been ruined by the people who know nothing about it and it's not going to recover the way they are behaving at the moment, it's not because. The angling [sighs] the angling situation is that for year you know there were no licenses issued for the river Shannon for angling but they are still fishing away. There's no stopping them.

GH: The river's closed for fishing type of thing

MB: It's closed

GH: Trying to bring stocks back but they're, anyway they're still fishing anyway, that's another matter.

SS: The fishermen, did they have any nicknames?

MB: Oh yeah

GH: Oh they did yeah

MB: Oh the nicknames

GH: Everyone of them had nickname, every single one of them, yeah yeah.

SS: Were there any reasons, any particular, can you name any of them and are there any reason they got that nickname?

MB: The 'Score' Sullivan how he got his name was, himself and his brother they went off to America in the prohibition times before the prohibition times in 1925 or something like that and he was here actually a member of this club [Curragower boat club] and, we, he got his nickname in America because he was running a bootleg from the Canadian boarder to New York, he told me that story himself yeah, but he's dead a long since, that's how he got his name. There was 'Lambs eye' then across on the other side he was Nihill I don't know his, I never know their first names, I knew they were Nihill's there was two, the 'Red lamb' and what was the other one, there was the 'Red lamb' and the 'lambs eye'

GH: 'Paddy lamb' and 'Lambs eye'

MB: They were two small and they used to be like your man in the old silent movies with the, his eyes were twisted [laughs] I can't think. But they were supposed to be very luck in a boat, to have in a boat.

GH: Anyone with an inflection at that times was lucky to have in a boat

MB: And then you had Gerry's granduncle was 'The Yank' Tobin

GH: He spent ten years in America so when he came back they said "there's the Yank"

MB: And you had another

GH: There was one fella there called 'The Chief'

MB: 'The Chief', 'Dead Egg' then [laughs]

GH: He had another name, he had two nicknames, one was 'The Chief' and one was the 'Dead Egg' [laughs] and another fella was called 'Gianty' Fitzmorris, he was a small, very small man. I remember

sitting in a boat one day and I heard my uncle say "Hey Jack the Giant down". His name was Jack Fitzmorris so I expected a big man to be sitting in the boat, you know, small little man [laughs]

MB: You had 'Bergie' McNerney, 'Bergie'

GH: Iceberg, yeah

MB: 'Bergie'

GH: 'Bergie' McNerney, you had em, 'Blacky' Doran

MB: 'Blacky'

GH: 'Sma' King

MB: 'Sma' yeah [laughs]

GH: yeah

MB: Who else was there, they all had

GH: They all had different names, well

MB: They'd cut one another's throat there now trying to get away first thing. It was six o'clock Monday morning was your starting time. The boys would be coming down the lane because they all lived up the lane by the Curragower bar there.

GH: Yeah, my uncles included now.

MB: They'd be creeping down at half past three in the morning to get out before the other fella would hear them or anything you know. They'd curse one another and swear but if anyone, any of 'em got into trouble below like, which if they got fouled up with a net or anything, you'd always, you wouldn't leave a man stuck. You'd always pull to his assistance or whatever, you know.

GH: Well you wouldn't leave him in trouble, you know but at the same time they weren't the best of neighbours either.

MB: Oh no, no.

GH: There was terrible em, terrible jealousy there really. The thing with Limerick people will talk to the Coonagh men before they'll talk to the Limerick men because they knew too much about them I suppose, you know. I don't really know but

SS: was there much intermarrying then?

GH: Not that I noticed anyway, did you?

MB: Not really no, no.

GH: No, not that I noticed, no no.

MB: My people came from Crosbie Row here, you know and

GH: Mine was in Clancy Strand, my father was born along side the Curragower Bar over there. There's all knocked now, where the carpark is now there was a lot of houses, fishermen, that's where all the fishermen lived and when they did knock them they built them houses up

MB: Up the lane at the back of the Curragower Bar

GH: They were all ours, the fishermen's houses. So everyone that was fishing really got a house there when they knocked the old house, you know. So that's where I spent my childhood over there really and when the whisky distillery was knocked they built the housing scheme O'Dwyer's Villas in Thomondgate. That's where I was born was up there. On the bank you'd be looking out on the river every day you know.

MB: Danny had a nickname didn't he?

GH: Danny Farrell?

MB: Yeah. I'm trying to think of it now, I can't

GH: Oh he had yeah, I can't think of it either..

MB: Like Danny Farrell lived here in Nolan's Cottages, they demolished, were the Town Hall stands now

GH: Paddy had the name 'Luna' do you remember

MB: 'Luna'. Yeah, like Danny, we knew Danny very well but he had two sons, he had one lost there, he had one lost with the harbour there in 1982 or 3 was it

GH: Drowned, yeah. 81

MB: He was drowned and he had another son then died with brain cancer, Paddy he was a wild card altogether but he lost the will to live after that but I still can't think of his name but

GH: I'd say he might have been interviewed as well, was he Paddy

MB: I don't think so, I don't think he was. He was actually chairman here one time as well. The fishing community here in Limerick they. Net fishermen anyway were very very, it was kind of a closed shop wasn't it, they all knew one another in the pub and such like but like if some one seen you going away, got away before them, they'd say "that bastards getting away before me now" [laughs] d'you know.

GH: They were jealous of one another but it was all the crew men involved then as well at that time they fished three man boats, you know. So there'd be people fishing, tipping away, like myself

before I got my uncle's license I didn't have a license until he died so I'd be a crew man in that boat for years and there was other crewmen that never got licenses at all because it was always kind of kept in the fishing family you know.

SS: And the crew men and the fishermen were they paid differently?

MB: They were

GH: It was share bases

MB: It was share bases, well

GH: So the man who owned the licence, there'd be four shares, and that would entail then if there was three man boat there would be four shares so that man that owned the boat and licence got a share for the boat and licence and he got his own share, so he'd get two shares and the other lads would get one each but the share being, the extra share being that, would allow him to buy equipment and refurbish the boat and nets for the following year. He supplied the petrol and the whatever, that was the share and then when the boats went down to two man boats it was two and a half, one and a half, wasn't it?

MB: Yeah,

GH: There was still a share taken for the boat, yeah yeah, and you split the other one then, you split the other man's wages

MB: He got a share and a quarter,

GH: He got another half share there, so

MB: That's when

GH: So whenever you were paid, depending on what you got, there was no set wage, you know or anything like that and if there was people wouldn't have went fishing at all because

MB: You weren't guaranteed anything, like

GH: You worked just as hard for nothing as you did for a bountiful day, you know. But there's sometimes you come in then, hands pulled off you jaded tired you might only have three fish, you know.

SS: And where would you sell the fish? Who would buy the fish off ye?

GH: Well you had a few of them buying fish, you had Rene Cusack

MB: You had Rene Cusack, you had Hayes, you had Sadliers

GH: Sadliers, Casey's

MB: You had the Shannon Fish Store

GH: Shannon Fish Store, yeah

MB: You had them but then like as time went by like as in recent years or years in the last twenty I suppose, people like sourced out private buyers, you know

GH: I sold a lot of fish private you know in the last of the fishing. First of all we weren't getting that many, so we were able to get a better price but the fish monger wouldn't give you the better price really but you'd get a better price private

MB: Private like

GH: So you'd kind of found your own niche market yourself and that's where you sold the fish, obviously if you came in with fifty or sixty fish you you'd have to go to

MB: Yeah, yeah you'd have to a fish buyer then

GH: Fish monger then, like Cusacks or Shannon Fish Stores or Sadliers is it?

MB: Sadliers yeah

GH: Rene Cusacks would have been one of the biggest buyers of our fish.

MB: But even with the men, the 'Squaw' Sullivan I was telling you about there earlier on he actually exported fish from here. He was a fish buyer and he exported to Billingsgate in London and he used to give a fair price at the time because I mean

GH: Who's that Matt

MB: Joe Sullivan, the 'Squaw'

GH: Well, Martin Tobin bought fishes

MB: Martin Tobin bought 'em didn't he

GH: And he use to sent them to Billingsgate market as well. The one thing that puzzled me was at the time, where did they get the ice [laughs]

MB: The ice to hold them over because it was all train service

GH: I honestly don't know where they got the ice because, it wasn't a commodity that time was it?

MB: No, no it'd be sent out from the station

GH: They'd go on the railway, the boxes

MB: Station down to the boat and

GH: They were all on the train and gone, Holyhead and straight over. He made a nice profit for himself doing that business, you know, so he didn't go fishing anymore he bought the fish and some of the people from the Strand and Crosbie Row were selling fish but at lot of them got jealous of hi and they wouldn't sell it so he'd get fish from county Limerick then, you know. But it was a great endeavor at the time but like I said, we could never figure out where the ice came into it, can you?

MB: I can't, there was o such thing as dry ice, I think at that time [laughs]

GH: But the boxes were all slatted, the planks weren't together, there's a gap between them, they

weren't laid together and they were bound by wire

MB: Wire, just a wire binding

GH: And you could see the water just kind of melting out through them, you know, the ice melting. But I'm sure they kind of lasted until they got almost over to London anyway, you know.

SS: Can you tell me about how, how you fished, what the draft net fishing involved?

MB: The draft, the draft net fishing was actually murder if you like because you had mud that depth. You go up to your knees in mud and they way it used to work, one man used to stand on the shore and if you had three of the boat there would be two man, you'd go out in a semi circle like that and you drift down so far, you go down so far with the tide and the boat then would pull in ahead of the man on the shore, get out of the boat and start pull the net then like that and the fish, hopefully there would be fish inside it. That was that, now that was tough going

GH: That was

MB: That was tough going that was.

GH: Very hard, you're very limited to the amount of time

MB: You're limited to where you can fish down there as well then, you see because it isn't all

GH: It isn't all hard mud

MB: It isn't all but em, like you had a very short, I'd say you had

GH: Be two hours

MB: Maybe two and a half hours before low water and maybe

GH: An hour after it

MB: Two hours maybe after it

GH: Two hours

MB: You'd be fishing but like if you had to walk maybe a hundred yards in the mud up to your knees like you'd feel it like

GH: T'was savage

MB: That's why I have a bad back and all over it

GH: Savage stuff

MB: Crazy

GH: They were very hard to fish

MB: They were hard and you see the thing about that then you'd do to sessions. You'd say, the tide now low water is four o'clock today, you'd be there two o'clock in the morning until four and then you'd fish up until six o'clock in the morning again but you'd be back out on the river again at half two again so you were only getting maybe three, four hours sleep broken sleep all the time like.

GH: You' be doing double tide

MB: You're eye'd be, you'd be knackered, but like it was grand and it wasn't, it was grand but like with the car then. When I was fishing draft out of here now, I was going down we'd say to Bunratty and back again and down again three or four hours later which was an hour of a run from here down and it was tough going then and it was tougher trying to get someone to go fishing with you

GH: Oh

MB: Nobody wanted to

GH: Too hard

MB: Nobody wanted to do it like

GH: Matty had that license for years

MB: Ten years I'd that license

GH: You had yeah, tough going

MB: And it was tough like but I had a bother in law of mine and English lad he used to come home 'specially for it. Like he was tough out.

GH: You'd have to love it now to do it

MB: You'd have to

GH: No money would pay you for that kind, it was savage, savage work

MB: Well the thing at the time, when we're in Bunratty you'd come in you went for, we'd link up and have a few pints in Nelly's know and it eased the pain a bit [laughs]

GH: The thing about it was if there were fish going there'd be no point, you'd be gone straight home again and into bed.

MB: Into bed

GH: where as if the day was mediocre or bad you'll say we're killing ourselves for nothing, there was no point then you know.

MB: You were coming in like, in this time of the day or whatever like if the weather was right, you'd go in and have a pint and maybe we often sold fish to Nelly's.

GH: Oh we did, I sold a lot of fish to Nelly's

MB: So it was beneficial both ways as such in that way, but

GH: And it made a big difference to us 'cause we got double the market prices so he'd give us what he was paying Rene Cusack for fish but he was getting them straight and fresh off the river, you know so. He'd have double the market prices up on the wall and we were doing well that time, weren't we?

MB: We were doing very well that time

GH: Plus the fact we had a short run up the river, you know with no long trip down we could go to Bunratty River and our car was there and go home and come back again. It made life an awful lot easier in the later years yeah.

SS: And how would you get the fish back into the boats from being in the nets on the side?

MB: the shore net would be swimming freely because you'd be coming in, like that you'd be drawing them in in front of you and it was doubled the net, then it would be fishing about 18 feet deep whereas a drift net you'd be fishing 9, 10 feet deep and they'd, a drift net would stick in the mesh because the mesh was a five and a eight or a fish and a half inch mesh net it would catch their gills and you just lift the net up and. You wouldn't get them all like, you wouldn't get them all

GH: You'd lose some you would yeah. Well they swim into it you see they feel little thing and they panic and they drive forward. That's where the power is they go forward once they do that then they push themselves up harder into the net so it's up on their back. They usually stuck in it but you do lose some alright. Some of them struggle and get out of it so you know so. The draft net is the only true net once you have that circle formed you have him

MB: And the mesh is smaller

GH: He's in it that way

MB: Yeah

SS: Where would they get stored when you put them onto the boat?

MB: Oh, throw them into the boat and throw a bit of sea weed over them mostly just to

GH: Keep them fresh, if you had a wet bag, you'd throw the wet bag to keep the sun off them you know. They would be on the floor of the boat really until we came in and then we'd put them into the fish box.

MB: Because there are a type of fish that wouldn't last too long out in weather, you know you'd have to keep them some way cool and moist otherwise you'd be in trouble. The fishmonger actually, if you did have a lot of fish like and you spent a lot of hours out. We'll say you spent 16, 18 hours out and you had a handful of fish and you bring them into him, you might have some of the fish in the boat for maybe 10 or 12 hours, maybe more and of the weather was anyway warm he'd check'm and if they were gone any way soft he'd cut you in price. He might take two shillings off the pound or whatever and em you'd have to. As years went by people got more wary they'd boxes and they'd a better way of keeping fish especially when they went scarce. People were very very like you'd be looking after the fish as they came in like, but.

SS: And did you kill them on the boat?

MB: Well we the them on the boat

SS: Yeah

MB: As soon as they came in you gave them a tap [knocks]

GH: Oh yeah, you kill them straight away yeah.

MB: we were merciful there like that [laughs]

GH: And what you able to was called the priest [laughs], so, yeah we saw the best of it and we saw the worst of it.

MB: This is the worst of it as you like, but em, yeah we growing up it was a great childhood growing up, great even.

GH: But they all fished all late in life, what age was your father Matty?

MB: My father stopped fishing with me at 78

GH: 78

MB: And he died at 82 and like he used come up the slip in Bunratty, you know, and he's say, he's crippled up with arthritis, and he's say you'd better find someone else to do it I'm not able to do this any more but the funny thing about it was he'd go home and he'd sit down and have something to eat and he'd say "what time are we going in the morning" [laughs] you know.

GH: The tired would be gone off him

MB: The tired would be gone off like and to the very end the fishing was there you know.

GH: I think 'Bergy' McInerney fished until he was over 80, in his eighties

MB: Well 'Bergy' had a hut there in

GH: In Rag Island

MB: The other behind Staffords

GH: Lynch's isn't it

MB: Yeah, Tom Lynch's

GH: Tom Lynch's place yeah.

MB: He, yeah, 'Bergy' was an old man actually there's a, I should have brought the books, there's a book with a couple of photographs in it

GH: Is there?

MB: There is yeah, with 'Bergy' over on this [points out window]

GH: That's right over there yeah, one of my uncles is in it as well

MB: Himself and

GH: Timmy Tobin and

MB: Who was he? his brother. 'Bergy's' brother what was his name

GH: 'Willex'?

MB: No it was em,

GH: 'Bergy's' brother?

MB: Brother, there was one there, jeekers I can't

GH: Terry?

MB: And the lad that died there with cancer there two year ago, two or three year back, remember.

GH: 'Dull' Peter

MB: 'Dull' Peter he's there, Victor Grimes, 'Bergy'

GH: And the 'Chief'

MB: And the 'Chief' was it that was there.

SS: What was the biggest fish you caught?

GH: Weight wise?

SS: Yep

GH: Mine was 25, mine was but my uncles caught and Matty's people 54, 52 pounds. Quite common, he told me one time that eleven fish inside St Helena inside the island below a place called St Helena and the smallest fish was 30 pounds. Eleven fish and the smallest one was 30.

MB: Well, the fish were there in numbers

GH: Spring salmon, sorry Matt

MB: Nah, go on, but I mean the thing was that like looking out at that river now, it's sad for me to look out there and Gerry to look out there because I mean through no fault of it's own and through the ESB and fisheries they left it run down to the state it's in now. It was the nicest river in Europe.

GH: You can talk of any river you like in the world and that would be in par with any of them. I lived, like I told you, along side the river up in the distillery and you didn't have to pull the curtains 'cause there was no house in front of you. It was like that in front of you, you know and in the summer time we were facing east we'd be looking over at this shore and you could hear the salmon, the salmon would wake you jumping in the water, it's that incredible. You'd wake and all you could hear was fish jumping outside it was shaking with salmon, shaking.

MB: It was absolutely

GH: It was absolutely incredible river you'd see them out there back fining and an odd fish throwing himself, you know. It's all gone.

MB: Like this particular time of the year now even the tide as it is at the time we're talking about the fish'd be throwing themselves all over the place

GH: They would yeah

MB: It was a sight now that I can visualize in my mine but kind of looking at it now like it's killing.

GH: Even people who weren't living by the river when they came out of mass there of a Sunday morning they'd be confronted by the river and there'd be fish throwing themselves everywhere. They'd be living in different places along the city but then when they go to mass and come out on the river they'd see what was in the river, you know.

SS: And not just the salmon there was the eels as well?

GH: Oh yeah there was eels as well yeah, well we didn't fish for eels commercially now, we fished for them pleasure wise

MB: Pleasure wise, that was it

GH: Yeah, yeah, we put out night lines for them and that kind of stuff. They were lovely to eat, you know but

MB: There was a thing called 'Bobbin'

GH: The ESB did em, commercially, sorry Matt.

MB: Sorry now, the ESB as Gerry said done the commercial side of the eels but out of here, the town hall the lads here, my father and other people here, there's a thing called bobbin and you go down the river and you have long bamboo. Bamboo now we'll say fair thick and you'd have a length of cord on it we'll say might be eight feet but you'd have a ball of worms, you'd have 'em, you'd sew'm, you'd sew'm together with a needle. You'd make up a big needle and sew them on and you, when you have the right length of them then you

GH: Fold it over

MB: You fold it, leave it down and just, in about maybe three or four feet of water, you'd just do that, on the bottom and the eels come around and at the time, I'm speaking of you could get a couple of hundred weight of eels at the time no problem but now they're gone even

GH: Oh, they're gone

MB: They're gone

GH: That's incredible, wasn't it, there was no hook involved, you see, when you're tying up the worms you're tying them on the long thread and then when you start folding the thread over and back and over and back when the eels would attack the worms the thread would get trapped in their teeth, you know. So when you lifted the bobbin into the boat the eels just fell off [laughs]

MB: It was no bother

GH: There was no hook involved or anything, no nothing like that, it was incredible

MB: Ah it was

GH: That's all gone too

MB: I had an eel license for two years, now myself and Gerry

GH: Fished it

MB: Fished it and we were getting nothing, the eels were being depleted, the ESB done that, they took, they took numerous

GH: Tons, tons

MB: Numerous tons of eels out of that river in Killaloe

GH: They do, they have weir for fishing for eels up there

MB: Plus the fact then that you'd have the winter months with flood water coming down, they go

through the turbines and you'd be getting halves quarters and everything, they'd be shredded, like the same actually effect effected the salmon because Peter Byrnes may have said this to you now but he worked on the turbines above there and he said he remembers scraping off the walls of the turbines, salmon fry, fish that [inaudable] being destroyed and there's no one, there's no one held responsible I wouldn't question it about the carry on, on that river something cruel and it's even going on to this day. They're above now in the Tail Race and the Long Shore and along the Island Bank side there. They're fishing for salmon, they've nets out there and they're no one going near them. They just won't go near them, they're told not to touch them.

SS: When you were out on the boats were there many accidents that happened?

GH: I only know of two people that fell out but

MB: They were drunk

GH: But they got back in again, they went back in again.

MB: But there was two people lost but it was through their own fault, there was a bunch of them in Bunratty they came in off the river and went in for a drink and they had too much to drink and they fell out of the boat. The two of them were drowned.

GH: No, one of them

MB: Was it two of them was drowned wasn't it.

GH: No, no only one.

MB: Munchin wasn't it

GH: Hickey, Munchin survived

MB: Muchin survived

GH: It was 'Grey' Hickey, Gabriel Hickey

MB: Drowned

GH: Drowned unfortunately yeah

SS: And can ye swim?

MB: I can alright

GH: I can swim yeah, yeah

MB: But the funny thing about it we were always warned as kids, the youngest day, if you're on the boat, you're standing up on what we call the locker, the back seat, the very back of the boat, you

stand up

GH: To let out the net

MB: To let out the net, you're doing that you see and you're always told if you're falling in or if you fall in hand on to the rope of the net we'll be able to retrieve you that way.

GH: Pull you back up

MB: Like that happened to Brendan

GH: Brendan Tobin

MB: Brendan Tobin that happened too, he fell out going down Rag but he get back into the boat again like but never

GH: There was one incident with me, alright I was with, fished with Gerry 'The Yank' Tobin and Jimmy Terrill. Myself and Gerry were on the long oars and Jimmy Terrill was on the net and there was a nice bit of a wave above, not very big you know he bring out the net and he was pulling up his pants after the effort and the boat got a bump of a wave and it hit the side of his feet and out over the side he went but he disappeared, he had no hold of the net or anything you see he was just gone and all I saw was his hat floating in the water you know, but my uncle being very quick minded jumped over me, my hand and got up where Jimmy was and put his hand under the water and caught him by the shoulder, lucky enough. So we pulled him in and got over the shock. I hauled in the net and home, went back up to Limerick.

SS: And the boats that you used did you just use oars or were their sails on them?

MB: Oars

GH: Oars

MB: Well there was always sails in the olden boats before the outcome of the outboard engines

GH: Outboard engines, yeah, you'd use your sail to get down and up

MB: There were always sails, there were always sails on the gandalows

GH: There was yeah

MB: Every one carried because I mean like mostly we get westerly winds as you know from the Shannon so if they were coming out of the Fergus as soon as they'd come out onto the main stream they'd have the sail up and they'd get, blow up to Limerick, like that was one way of getting home another way of getting out of there then was, you had the weekly boats, the steamship boats, they'd always, they'd be local crews on them as such and they'd know that when the boats would pull out of the Clare river they'd pull out in to the channel if they knew the boat was coming and they'd throw them a line and they'd tow them to Limerick. The steamship boats would, you know.

GH: It was a blessing, an absolute blessing.

MB: Ah, yeah, the times

GH: As Gerry Tobin said "third class sailing is better than first class pulling" [laughs]

MB: What was it, if there's not a sail as my father used to say

GH: You see in the old days when the Abbey Fishermen and all were operating, they were fishing the upper Shannon and the Lax weir company owned the weir up in the Mill Road in Corbally, do you know it?

SS: Yeah

GH: That was the old original salmon weir from the time of the Vikings but the Abbey Fishermen fished up behind that, that meant the weir had first choice of all the fish and then fishermen got what was leftover, you know, but when they built the hydroelectric scheme in the Shannon the ESB, they put no fish pass there so when the fish came up they'd nowhere to go. Salmon will always head into the strongest flow of water and when they were generating power up there they were letting off heavy water so the salmon would home in there and then they met this dam and there was no up the dam so they spawned in deep water which was absolutely no good. So that helped to wipe out the salmon, the original salmon species in the water and I was talking to Paddy Hehir(?) here last Saturday

MB: Oh yes

GH: And he told me there was no species of salmon in the Shannon from the original stock, it Mulclair stock

MB: The original salmon

GH: And river Feale salmon

MB: Is that what he was saying?

GH: yeah, they done dna test on thousands of fish, the old gene of the salmon is gone.

MB: The old Shannon river salmon

GH: Is gone

MB: Were colossal fish, they were the big fish

GH: They were the big ones we were telling about, they would come in the spring of the year and they'd go back to sea and feed again and come back again because there was no impediment there was no real off shore salmon fishing at that time, nobody fished at sea for salmon so only in shore men like with snap nets and draft nets there was no drift nets but even when they built the Tail Race the Abbey men asked them to put bars across the bottom of the tailrace to stop the fish going in and

they wouldn't do it because

MB: The fish it was just like going into a bath, they had no, they could go so far and that was it you see

GH: They could go in but had no way out and they wanted to stop them going in so the Abbey Fishermen suggest them a good idea but they didn't do it.

MB: Now it's down through man's

GH: Very very bad ESB management as far as fish is concerned. They'd no one, they didn't want to hear of anyone with fishes interests at heart because it would cost them money. Even today it's not right up there, there's no way down for smolts in the Shannon, even to this day 2017, the smolts can't get back down.

SS: And how did the trawlers affect the water as well

GH: Well now monofilament nets came on the scene, that time sea fishing had to be done at night because the salmon would see the net at sea and he wouldn't go into it, you know but he would at night time. So all salmon fishing pre the sixties, was it Matty, sixty five. The monofilament scene

MB: The monofilament came on the scene in the, we'll say what happened here actually was that in 1981 the Fianne Fail government were going out of office and the minister for fisheries that time was Brendan Daly and there was an awful lot of poaching going on around Loop Head, which they couldn't control, the bailiffs couldn't control it

GH: It was out of, out of , it was unbelievable they were making fortunes out of it, big money

MB: But the night before they came out of office he actually issued sixteen off shore licenses to make the poachers legal, and that's what happened

GH: And then when they got it the Cork men wanted and the Kerry men wanted it so the couldn't just give it to Clare and not give it to, so in other words they legalised the poaching that was going on

MB: Poaching, we can't control it we'll legalise it, that's what I was told

GH: That's exactly what happened

MB: Yeah

GH: Because he was brought to task, that went to court that case by the incoming government some fisheries authority in the country questioned that, that he could do that and a minister like that can apparently do what he likes and he got away it anyway. That's what really tore the backside out of it altogether.

SS: Were women involved in any way?

MB: There was

GH: There was two women I know was fishing

MB: Aiden O'Brien's wife, Anne used to fish with and there was people living on Greene's Island below the Greene's, Mary Greene she used to fish. They were the only two I know.

GH: The only two I know as well.

MB: They were the only two I know to fish. Anne Aiden O'Brien's wife, Jesus the funny thing she used to be all turned out in wet gear and stuff you know and she's have the hair tied up and stuff

GH: A nice lady

MB: People like, you see you wouldn't be fishing constant you'd be, we'll say there was a, tower here that you might be tied up and there might be five or six boats tied

GH: Waiting to take your turn

MB: Take your turn, you have to give a man a certain distance but like at the time when people didn't know that she was a woman they might want to make a slash or something you see [laughs]

GH: Or make a pee, even

MB: Yeah, make a pee and no one knew that she was a woman and [laughs] let on the time so that was a bit of a, there was a bit of few questions and couple of unrepeatable answers thrown out after that like, you know but she was the finest, to this day she is the finest

GH: Oh she is absolutely

MB: But a

GH: Down to earth solid woman

MB: Tough woman, tough woman

GH: And good looking

MB: Good looking woman, yeah

GH: Yeah

MB: Jesus she was a tough woman but she used to fish with her husband all the time.

GH: For years yeah

MB: Mary Greene, Johnny Greene's sister, that would have been one of his sisters who fished with Johnny Greene from Greene's Island and his mother prior to that fished on her own Mary Greene. Well I can remember his mother when I was only that size [gestures] going down the river like but

thy lived on the island. Actually they told me at one time they lived on Greene's Island for 300 years up to the time the last person died, there's no one on it now but they were on it for 300 years like the things that, they wouldn't be doing, speak too much about but they had the history of it and they knew what it was like in the good times and the way. I mean the fishing actually it got out of hand in the last few years even like because you'd, you'd couple of unscrupulous people bringing unscrupulous people down fishing and a lot of that came from the poachers that are up there now got their training from one or two people below here. Which wasn't quite right either because that river if it had been left like after ten years we're off it now they were saying like that after three years that river would return to as what we know as normal but as you can see after ten years it hasn't returned to anything

GH: It's got worse

MB: It's gone depleted completely

GH: It's gone worse yeah

MB: And they keep putting more restriction on people which is crazy altogether. Like the question arose like about poaching, we were asked before like, we were the best protectors of that river down there because we knew, everyone know one another and if you see a strange person, a strange boat you say "Well he hasn't got a license what's he doing in between us" He's be told in no uncertain terms to. Which it never happened like because it, I mean you had the older generation was well respected, you wouldn't speak out of turn in a boat, you know, you wouldn't answer back or anything like that, you'd do as you're told and that was it like you wouldn't say "Are we going home now" like [laughs]. When the boss says we'll go that's it you'll go then not before but em, now I probably think of more antidotes but at this particular time they allude me but like that river as I said we owe a lot to it. We owe an awful lot to it as I said it fed and clothed us like.

GH: Did you interview anyone else as regards fishing?

SS: Oh yeah

MB: Peter last night

GH: They're more or less told you the same stories we'll tell anyway so did they

SS: We've got a nice variety.

GH: oh, yeah yeah

SS: I'll leave that there.