

SS: Today is the 17 of May 2017 and this is Sharon Slater interviewing Peter Byrnes on life on the Shannon Estuary. First thing I would like to ask you Peter is how long have you been living in this area?

PB: Well I was born in Newtown, Clarina in 1929.

SS: And have your family, were your family here a long time before you?

PB: My family, ah both sides of the family were there I suppose eight or nine generations at least. We had a long association with the Shannon and with fishing and reed cutting and all that kind of activity.

SS: And, you were, were you a fisherman yourself? You were a fisherman.

PB: Yeah I was, yes up until two o six (2006) until we were finished up.

SS: What age were you when you started? What age were you when you started fishing?

PB: About 16, there or there, well I'd been in boats before then but that was about the time I started to take an active part in fishing.

SS: And how many people would be out fishing at one time? How many people would be fishing at one time?

PB: How many would you catch? Well [laughs] it had it's ups and downs. I fished one time for six weeks and caught nothing and I often fished days and caught nothing but we often caught a good lot in a short period of time. That's fishing, that's the way things go.

SS: And how did you fish, how did you fish, what did you use?

PB: Well, we started fishing with draft nets, fished from the shore, one man stood on the shore and made a semicircle and came in the other side and then after that we progressed to drift nets. There was drift nets there before, before I started fishing since early famine times. They were brought here from Scotland prior to that it was all draft net fishing and prior to that it was stake net fishing but that was the story now.

SS: Can you tell me about the stake net fishing?

PB: That stake net, well sure a series of wooden poles down there in the mud and area then were the fish sort of thing were trapped and when the tide went out your searched the area where you thought the fish was and if you got 'm you got 'm and if you didn't well [laughs] that was a sad story.

SS: And when you caught the fish, who did you sell them to?

PB: There was fish buyers in Newtown, on different occasions there was three or four different fish buyers there and they send the fish to London to Billingsgate to the fish market and the herrings sort of thing were a different story they were caught and pickled sort of thing for to be distributed during Lent of though they don't any longer [laughs]

SS: So you caught salmon and herring was there any other fish?

PB: There was flat fish as well, there was flounders and sole and plaice that would be between the seasons when the salmon season finished July 19th then after that you went flat fishing if you'd nothing else to do [laughs]

SS: And what, you had the nets, did you buy the nets in or did you make them?

PB: Well, in later years we bought them but originally they made them. They just got the twine and everyone would sort of thing know how to make them would give a hand to make them but then in later years it was all, you just sent for them and it came by post, simple as that, from. First of all they used to come from Lisburn, Northern Ireland and then after that you got them, then Japanese ones came in after that there was different agents for those ones but the ones in Lisburn they have a factory there to make, to make nets Byrnes.

SS: When the nets were made, when ye made the nets how long did it take to make?

PB: Well it could take a long winter [laughs] Well, I mean you have to make it in good time. When there would be nothing to be done in the winter night, there was no television then while you'd be working away making these up and in very few houses there was a radio either or no electricity back in the old days. You realise the age I am [laughs] I was before all this lot.

SS: So when you would go out on the boat to fish, how long would you be out in one go?

PB: Well if the fish were plentiful you could be out 23 hours out of 24 or you might, that might happen all the week, you might get an hours sleep, you mightn't and then if there was no fish you could get plenty of sleep [laughs]

SS: Did you often make camps by the riverside?

PB: No, we were living sufficiently near that we could go home but there was people sort of thing from out lying areas during the summer when the grills would be there, the run of grills, they'd camp by the river and they had a house by the river and a lot of them used to stay in the house, heads and tails everywhere.

SS: And em, when you would catch the fish how would you get it back into the boat?

PB: How would you what?

SS: Get it back into the boat

PB: Into the boat? Well it would be tangled in the net and you bring the net aboard the boat and take the fish out of it and give it the last rights with the priest.

SS: And what was the priest?

PB: The priest was a stick for killing the fish [laughs] that's why it was called the priest it gives the last rights.

SS: And how big was that stick?

PB: 18 inch there or thereabouts either the I suppose, three, three and a half inches diameter.

SS: What was it made of?

PB: There was a handle on it you could pare down and it'd fit in your hand comfortably and the other end was for ministering the last rights.

SS: And with that, did you have boats and nets were they were they blessed, were they blessed before you used them the boats and the nets.

PB: Were they what?

SS: The boats and the nets before you used them did you get them blessed by the priest?

PB: Yes, he would, he'd bless them, seldom I saw the priest sort of thing at the boat bed, ah it used to happen at places but not with us, we'd take a bottle of holy water alright and you'd bless every day before you'd start.

SS: And how many people would be in the boat?

PB: In the olden days three but then when the, we got in the out board engine we got two and there would be three to every boat sort of thing in the olden times because you have to row to where you want to get or either sail but then a lot of people got fed up of it and they got job ashore but prior, the old days there was no work only just fishing.

SS: And the boats?

PB: The boat was wooden, in the old days again it was 24 foot long and then with the engine a smaller boat would do and they nearly all used to, timber merchant used to import good timber from Archangel for making the boat but then all the boats ran dry in Archangel and there was nothing brought back with the result that it was only very poor grey timber so the boats didn't hold as long or they didn't import the long lengths or you had to contend with a smaller boat.

SS: And where did you get the boats?

PB: Well, people made them, people in town used make 'em and we made our own boats. I used to make the boats.

SS: And how did you make the boats? What did they look like?

PB: Pardon

SS: What did they look like when they were done?

PB: It's flat bottomed for the simple reason we had to slide it along the mud, that was the reason it was flat bottomed sort of thing, then you build from there up, with oak or elm knees or ribs now.

SS: Were they sealed?

PB: Well the way it was made, it would seal itself. The bow would be corked alright with the hemp and pitch, sealed with pitch and painted in those days with tar but that's not there any longer.

SS: Would they have to be repainted every year?

PB: Ah they would have to be painted every year, you know, or maybe between the season when the spring fish would start on the 1st of February and carry on until the end of April and then the boat would be lain up and painted if the weather was favourable and ready for the smaller, the grills, the small fish, the small salmon.

SS: And what families used to fish, what were the names of the families?

PB: Oh, there was, there was Garveys, McNamaras, Byrnes', Lynchs, Tobins, Dorans, McInerneys, Greens, Fitzgeralds, Musgrave, that was, in the census of 1911 there was 33 drift net licenses in Newtown that says there was at least a hundred people involved in the fishing of the management of that lot and prior to that there was a lot more licenses. It must been very populated anyway there was a church there, there was a a church there in the 11th century at Newtown and a police barracks, they must have been rowdy enough too [laughs].

SS: And what area, what stretch of water did you fish?

PB: I fished from the stent light in Coonagh down if the weather was favourable I went down to 'Baycastle' possibly maybe down to Foynes. They could go further if they wanted to but during those days it was only sail and like I said they had to row there. They could go all the way down to the mouth of the Shannon if it was favourable but seldom it was.

SS: Were sails common, did a lot of the boats have sails?

PB: All the boats had sails before the engines came in.

SS: And you did reed cutting as well, reed cutting?

PB: Yeah, you reed cut sort of thing, there was an awful lot, amount of thatched houses. There was 39 thatched houses when I was a young fella in our area. Just in Newtown alone and that used to take an awful lot of reed. Everybody would be, well not everybody, but most people would have nothing else to do but to be cutting reed and the reed cutting used to start then because the seasons were different. It w'd start, you'd have cold weather in October and it'd knock the leaves off the reed and make it lighter to cut. You'd be start in October until you might run out of reed then around January or thereabouts. With the result that you'd be going fishing in February. The seasons seemed to fit in that well a lot better than they did later on. Now there are very few thatched houses but there people still cutting reed. Including myself I'd be cutting it this year for a project we're doing, we're rebuilding a little house. It was a hedge school one time and we got the ruin of it from a man ah he's dead now but he said we could rebuild it. We have it just sort of thatch, getting ready for thatched but he died and the land was sold so seven months ago

[Interruption - Arrival of Jim Farrell]

SS: So we were talking about the reeds and the thatch.

PB: Well Jim will tell you about the reeds, he was cutting with us this year, well he was drawing it.

JF: I was, I was drawing, my input. Can I just let you know about our little project that we're involved in. I came out to this parish in 1978 but I only got to know Peter about two and a half years gao, yeah.

PB: That's right.

JF: When we started the project for the sailors haggard, from then on I fell in love with everything that went on around there. Peter gave the site to the lovely monument that we have below. Anyway, I also wanted to find out how the reed was cut and saved so a few months ago I had the opportunity to go down and Peter was there with the late Liam Coughlan and Ted O'Leary and I was watching Peter cutting the reed and I was just looking at the shape of of the, what would you call it.

PB: A sickle

JF: The sickle and the teeth in it and the, and how careful you have to be and how delicate it is to cut it. So I watched that being done and then I watched the lads tying it up and the sheaves and Peter was telling me, I think it was four fistfuls

PB: That's right to a sheaf.

JF: Four fistfuls make one sheaf and then when you're carrying it you carry it five sheaves. You collect five and you carry those then to the water edge, you know for the boat so I found that awe inspiring, it was beautiful to be down there we had lovely weather and I used think that you'd be getting drenched and your feet would be going out into inches and inches of muck. You could walk along very gently, no problem, you know, you just had to be careful, but it was lovely and quiet and peaceful and you just heard the sound of the birds and the odd boat going down the Shannon, em so it was lovely to have the opportunity and when Peter was cutting he'd be cutting maybe about, about eighteen inches from the ground

PB: Yeah, around, yeah

JF: About eighteen inches right and so it was

PB: A taller man would have started a ways from the ground [laughs]

JF: Yeah, so that was a nice experience but at that to bring them over to the boat that to me was the most spectacular thing of all. To bring the sheaves over to the boat and the way the lads were able to place them diagonally across the boat and to keep that balanced and then row about maybe a quarter of a mile Peter?

PB: Around that.

JF: Nearly a quarter of a mile to bring the boat to the slipway

[interruption]

SS: So, you were telling me about the reeds and how they were laid out on top of the boat.

JF: Yeah, so then the reed was placed across the boat and then you had one person below, it could be on a motor or else with the oar and somebody up at the bow to keep the balance of the boat.

[Interruption]

SS: So we laid the reeds out on to the boat.

JF: Yeah, yeah, that's right and then that was fairly heavy then Peter wasn't it.

PB: It was heavy it was.

JF: You might have only about maybe about sometimes nine or ten inches of distance

PB: Free board yeah

JF: Freeboard yeah yeah, and then like, I would find as a painter to watch this coming in to the slipway with the reflections was just magnificent and also to remember that it was done like that for generations and generations and probably centuries and centuries, d'know. So, so it was awe inspiring and then to bring that up then and to stack that then ready for departure.

SS: Peter did you used to thatch as well or just cut the reed?

PB: Pardon?

SS: Did you used thatch too?

JF: Did you thatch as well? She was wondering.

PB: Well I'll tell you about me and the thatching [laughs] when I was a youngster at home, ah I suppose I was around 15 or thereabouts my father was thatching a house belonging to the horse stables for the horse and when I got him down out the ladder anyway he went down and [laughs] I started off when I got the place right I started thatching he came out and he looked "Come down" he says. So the first time I ever done it I was told [laughs] That finished me with the thatching. [laughs]

JF: Yeah, yeah, on to what Peter was saying now when I was helping the lads, I'm a townie, right and they had great fun and they said the townie was coming out helping and the late Liam Coughlan said all the townies they make great donkeys [laughs] all the stuff we were carrying around.

SS: So you used a sickle, a scythe to

PB: No, a scythe won't do it, it will cut it all right but you can't make sheaves of it, it will scatter it everywhere but the sickle is the only thing that'll do it. There is a machine for cutting it but fortunately we haven't one or unfortunately. Some people have them alright but their on sort of thing at reed all the time.

SS: And what would you use to tie them up?

PB: Just ordinary twine

JF: Baling twine

PB: That's it baling twine

[interruption]

JF: Peter am I right in saying this that the different cutters had different colours. Like the cord we were using was blue and another group were below and they were using an orange coloured cord, so when it was stacked that you could distinguish, isn't that right.

PB: Yeah, that's true, yes, yes. There would be no mix up that way.

SS: So then the the reed who did you sell that too or did it just go for local? Who did you sell the reeds to? Or were they just for local houses?

PB: Pardon

JF: She's asking before when you were cutting the reed Peter

PB: Oh yeah well, when we were cutting it commercially

SS: Yeah

PB: A truck used to come every week or two and take a load. Most of that time, my father God rest him and the other people would cut and a truck used to come from Cappawhite every week or maybe twice a week and it would mostly more or less to Tipperary or Waterford and maybe further afield but they were the, they used to come for them but. Different people came to different people, to different reed cutters. They came to different areas. A lot up the midlands they used to use straw for thatch

JF: Yes Yes

PB: Since the combine harvesters have come in then the thatch, the reed is shorter and it's no use or the straw from the corn is shorter it is no use for thatching with the result I suppose that's keeping the reed, the reed man busy now so when it's covering 26 counties when it was only covering maybe one or two before.

JF: Can I just interject here and asked Peter a question about that. When you were cutting the reed Peter, ye cut it about eighteen inches above the ground

PB: That's right yes yes.

JF: Why, why did ye not go down lower as a matter of interest?

PB: Well, if you go down lower, seemingly, the reed will follow you down, the next year of reed won't be as tall. Why I don't know

JF: I see

PB: And then when you have big tides coming in over the march, over the reed beds, it'll bring silt in and the butt of the reed is all black.

[Interruption]

SS: So you were asking about why the reed was cut so short

JF: Yeah, why it wasn't cut shorter, I was just wondering myself, that they cut it about eighteen inches, isn't that right Peter

PB: That's right yes.

JF: And I was asking Peter why they didn't go down further but I think the answer.

PB: Yeah yeah, like I said when the big tide would come in they would bring in silt over the it and that amount of reed would, the bottom of it would be all black and discoloured

JF: Yes

PB: With the result that when you put it up on the roof moss grow on it by cutting it up high you avoid that.

JF: Yes, can I just put in another interjection, something that I observed that Peter was doing as well that I thought was fantastic. Do you remember the trees Peter that were down by the river, there was a tree that was cut, you cut it not clean off but about three quarters with the branch, do you remember that.

PB: Yes

JF: This is an interesting part now.

PB: That was cut for a certain reason that when the tides got high, you cut away in the low tides, you didn't have water to bring the reed ashore and you piled it up on the tree so it would be above the tide and when there'd be tide that rise, you could lower it onto the boat off of the tree you cut.

JF: Yeah, so what was happening was you had your tree and a big branch say, they had about three quarters cut. So the branch came down onto the ground, then they could load the reed onto that branch that was on the ground so that when the tide came in, the branches were under the reed so that when the tide lifted the branch it lifted the reed. So it was dry. Isn't that it Peter.

PB: Yeah was it yes yes.

SS: And were there many accidents out there seeing how you were cutting away.

PB: Accidents?

SS: Yeah

PB: None at all only if a young fella when they start cutting they maybe pull their hand along the reed and the reed would just cut the palm of your hand or your finger but other than that lucky enough there wasn't. There were no accidents with the sickles anyway, lucky.

JF: That's right, that's right.

PB: Luckily enough, nobody got stabbed with them [laughs]

JF: And from my side because I'm an artist I go down and maybe make sketches then as the lads are working away, you know in the boats and the different places, so I found that very interesting for my work also, you know.

SS: The same with the fishing was there any accidents when you were out fishing?

PB: Lucky enough seldom, there was one man drowned one time alright. It was before my time I don't remember it. Oh there was another man drown then coming out of a pub, sort of thing, he fell in and he didn't reach the surface anymore. Other than that there wasn't, lucky enough.

JF: Yeah, yeah, that's right, that's right.

SS: And can you swim Peter?

PB: I can yes. Most, most fishermen couldn't but I could swim sort of thing, well now I'm not a strong swimmer but I could swim since I was around seven or eight or thereabouts.

SS: Would you often go out to the islands in the Estuary?

PB: well you'd always go to an island if you went off early in the morning four or five o'clock, you'd go to an island maybe to make tea or have a sandwich and then you fished away from there again.

JF: And Peter also has the list of all the different fishing implements that were used which is fantastic to have, we might get it to you, whenever we could post it to you or whatever. They were all the names from the priest to the

PB: Well a, we had a conversation [laughs] we had a conversation about the priest.

JF: But did you name all the different implements, you did?

PB: Yes, yes.

JF: Ah great, great. Another thing too when we had the occasion of the unveiling of the sailors haggard two years ago, something was very interesting a lady Mrs Roberts, Anna Roberts

PB: Yes, yes.

JF: Told me that her late husband when he was a little boy remembers his grandmother telling him that she as a little girl can remember the coffin ships going down from Limerick on their way to New York and Quebec and that was only a hundred two hundred yards from where we were.

SS: Peter when you were out fishing or when you were out with the reeds did the other boats coming from the Docks did they interfere with you at all?

JF: Did the other boats coming down from the Docks interfere with your work when you were out on the water?

PB: No not really no because you timed them, sort of thing, you made provision for that, that you would be out of their way when they would be passing and you fished away when they were gone.

JF: And they respected ye when you were on the water?

PB: Yeah, surely

SS: Did ye meet the bailiffs often? Where the bailiffs down here?

PB: The bailiffs? Oh they were [laughs] aren't they everywhere!

JF: Is the Pope a Catholic [laughs]

PB: Oh there was, well I'll tell you now, the last bailiff I had anything to do with, he's dead since the poor fella, he was very fond of playing cards and needless to say he drank a lot but there was a pub inside in town he was to go in there and we wanted to go fishing one Sunday night and we went into the pub, the other man that was fishing with me and myself and we called for two drinks and got them and I said to the man finish that now and quick and we'll go. He was listening of course the bailiff was, "where are you going" he says we're going up to 'Glinog' I says to the pub. He was from there, oh he says "I'll go with ye" he came up and he went up to the pub and then, when he went in of course there was a game of cards going on, on a Sunday night [laughs] he sat down to the table playing cards and I said to the other fella, he's far enough away now we'll go away and went away fishing and left him there

JF: Lovely [laughs]

PB: But I didn't meet him for about six months, you were nice he says, weren't you at home I says to him [laughs]

JF: That's beautiful, that's great.

PB: But there was another man back the road Mick Burke and he had a little net down sort of thing in the Maigue before, well slightly before the season opened and there was two fish in it one morning and he was, on a Sunday morning, and when he looked up the bailiffs were up on the Ferrybridge, the bailiffs were above looking down. He thought of a plan anyway, there was a reek of hay there and went over and pulled a berth of hay and put the two salmon into the berth of hay and walked on up past the bailiffs. "It's grand for ye he said ye have a standing up job and I have to feed forty four cows" [laughs] He walked on out past them.

JF: That's lovely. Ah jee that's great. See he has great stories down the years, my God you have Peter.

PB: But when I started fishing I was with a man by the name of Jack Roche he was a great fisherman but needless to say I was on the net and my job was to put the kettle into the boat and look after all these things and

[Interruption]

PB: But Jack Roache said put the kettle in, store the kettle away and out lunch bags and I went away I for got the kettle of course needless to say and we were down the river, ah hours away, sort of things, and bring up the kettle he says and we'll make the tea. I can't Jack I says, it's above at the boat bed [laughs] what! forgot it, he said nothing I suppose, he might have done it himself when he was young.

SS: What was the biggest fish that you ever got?

PB: 38 pound on a St Patrick's morning I can tell you he was a very welcome guest.

JF: Jeepers, 38

PB: He was a grand fish.

SS: And was that common when you started fishing.

PB: It wasn't no, no. You'd get 15 and 16 many be 17 or 18 pound but it was very common, sort of thing, before my time that there would be 30 and 40 and 50 pound weight there, sort of thing, when the ESB had the, didn't have the Shannon Scheme that the building of the Shannon Scheme destroyed the natural fall of the big fish, when they diverted the flow of the Shannon.

JF: And Peter we often spoke about the quality of the water, what was the cause of the poor quality of the water in later years.

PB: Pollution

JF: From where?

PB: You see, my God isn't farm pollution uncontrolled isn't the effluent flowing anywhere they're spreading out on the fields if it rains, won't it find the lowest point and find the stream.

JF: And then you had of course Moneypoint, Aughnish, Shannon Airport, they were all feeding into it.

PB: Yes, yes there isn't any flat fish as such in the Shannon any longer since 'Alcan'.

JF: Why was that Peter?

PB: Because pollution

JF: From Alcan?

PB: Yes badly polluted

SS: And did you catch many eels down here, were eels down here? Eels

JF: Eels Peter eels, when you were young were you catching eels?

PB: An occasional one you'd catch alright.

JF: But you didn't set out to catch them, you didn't trap them, you had no traps.

PB: No, no, no we didn't, some people did but we didn't.

JF: Ye were salmon fishermen

PB: Salmon and flat fish and herring

JF: And where you get the herring, how far.. is it ok if I just.. how far did the herring come up, like up the river?

PB: We got the herring in the Shannon but.. in a dry year they'd come way up, up sort of thing, almost to our boat bed, up in line with Cratloe.

JF: Up to Newtown?

PB: They would yes, yes. Daniel Farrell..

JF: Yeah my cousin

PB: Used to do a lot of herring fishing.

JF: Yeah yeah.

PB: And there was a few boats used to herring fish below when the, they'd pickle the herring and have them for Lent and maybe distribute them here and there with the donkey and cart.

JF: Yeah, yeah.

PB: A vast population of Newtown, there was one area below at the top of the stone and there was sixty houses in it prior to the famine and then of course needless to say they were all little 'bahauns' but there was a line of houses below near the river and a church, Church of St Margaret and like I said a police barracks. We must have been rowdy people.

JF: They kept you safe.

SS: And were women involved in anyway in the fishing or reed cutting or on the river?

PB: Well there was one woman on the island Mary Green, but there was a woman in Newtown used to fish in later years, not so many years ago either, Aidan O'Brien's wife and she used to fish but then they'd go from door to door selling fish sort of thing when the men would be out flat fishing mostly. Like I said the others, fish merchants in the salmon and that to London to Billingsgate.

JF: And I can remember myself off season, now he wouldn't do it but one or two might try a bit off season salmon and they'd bring it down to me and I'd bring it in to my mother's house in Limerick and my brother who was very much involved in the fisheries was discouraging me from bring it in and I'd say I brought my mother a lovely bit of 'poached' salmon [laughs] There's only one way to take that. There was another book out on the fishing now by the late Jackie Clancy

SS: oh, yeah yeah.

JF: Jackie Clancy do you remember him in Limerick in the Abbey Fishermen Peter.

[/end]