

Scarborough Sea Wall Heritage Project - Interview

Rachel Jenkinson - The Role of Women in Scarborough's Fishing Communities.

Interview and Transcription Undertaken by Huw Roberts – July 2023

Today, I'm talking to Rachel Jenkinson, (nee Mainprize) born to one of Scarborough's famous fishing families. She has written a book about her experiences. Her brother Bob commissioned the Maggie M MBE, the largest trawler to operate out of Scarborough, and I want to start by asking Rachel about the trip to Campbeltown, in Scotland where she was built, in order to launch and christen her.

All of the family went. It was a very emotional trip at the time. My mother had been due to launch her but she had recently died. She was after all, called after my mother, the Maggie M MBE. It was unfortunate that she had died before the boat launch. So it was a very emotional trip but in the old Scottish welcoming way we all had to make sure that we all had a brilliant time. Naming ceremony over, boat in the water, we all went back to our hotel to prepare for the dinner dance that night where speeches and thanks were made and we had a dance. Everybody dressed in fancy dress, which was wonderful and the Scottish people ensured that, even though it was an emotional time, we all had a very good time.

And I'm sure that your mother was there in spirit, wasn't she?

I'm sure she was.

Now fishing life is hazardous. It's dangerous and I'm interested to know whether there is a reluctance on the part of fishing families to allow their children to go into that career and if there is, do they manage to stay away from it?

Well, I was born into a fishing family. When my mother found out I was a girl and not a boy she would have sent me back if she could. Boys were very important. They were the next generation of fishermen and they were encouraged in every way in the family to go to sea. You didn't play with ducks in the bath, it was always boats. My elder brother used to come home from school and before he could go out to play with his mates he had to make crab pots. My job was cleaning and my younger brother was too young at the time to be doing anything. Fortunately we had a son which was encouraged from a very early age to go to sea and yes, he did. He went fishing with his dad and we have a photograph of him catching a cod and the cod was actually bigger than him. And we got a boat called (indistinct). She was built in Nottingham, steam she was and one of the crew was hurt on her and had to go to hospital. One or two other things happened and some of the old ship's men said she had a witch aboard. You can't afford to have that on a ship. And Colin came home and said we're taking you off that ship? The crew and all the men could see me taking my own son off the ship so the witch would leave it alone. Touch wood.

What a wonderful story. I'd like to talk a little bit about ganseys. Tell me how many of these you've knitted in your time and tell me a bit about their design.

The first time I ever saw a shipman's jersey being knitted was my aunt knitting with five steel needles. The jersey is knitted in one piece totally with the seams running up each side. Filey patterns are absolutely gorgeous. Whitby patterns, very ornate, lovely. Scarborough patterns more plain, plain up to the chest, then two and two change. The idea of ganseys is that it is knitted in a certain sort of wool. A ground wool but an oily one. It was to keep the wind and cold out. It actually worked. It did. Also, in them days a lot of folks, and for a lot of men,

jerseys became an identification of a person especially if they've been in the water a long time. Every woman that knitted them knew her own knitting and they could identify them.

That's a wonderful description. I'd like to move on to the issue of adoptions within the community. There were times when children became orphaned as a consequence of those risks becoming a reality. How would that be dealt with in the community?

Well, I can think of one particular tragedy where the father had been lost at sea. He was the father of two nippers, gorgeous bonnie girls. This community all joined together without exception to look after his wife and children. They all did individual things, hundreds of them until the wife gradually was able to sort herself out. It would be the same for any tragedy and there's been an awful lot in Scarborough. It doesn't matter how much one man is arguing with another, any tragedy comes along and that's all forgotten, they all come together. It's a shame that they can't do that all of the time instead of waiting for something awful to happen.

One of those people that I spoke to some time ago and, sadly, she's no longer with us was Cassie Pelucci. I recall her telling me that she had arrived with her brothers at Scarborough Harbour. They'd run away from home and the fishing community here in Scarborough took them all under their wing and they became part of the community. I believe that have some stories relating to Cassie.

Well, she can't clip me round the ear 'ole nopw can she? She was a character and her brother was a very successful deep sea fisherman out of Grimsby. Very much respected. Cd Cassie was always part of the community. One day Princess St, where she used to live had to be evacuated because they had this house where they found explosives and the bomb squad and everybody saying that Princess St. was going to be blown up. Cassie was going berserk. But Cassie was always game for a laugh. One Shrove Tuesday (Skipping Day) before the middle bit was built on at the sea front we used to have a big, thick mooring rope. It was spread right across the road. If you vaulted it, it could knock you off your feet. We were the first ones of the fisherfolk who were in the pub. Cassie was always a blonde. She wasn't a dizzy blonde, but she was always a blonde. She went into that rope and kept saying go faster, so we tried to swing it faster. Well, she clipped the rope which went round her head it seemed to come off and went onto the road. We thought we'd decapitated her but Cassie was still stood. What had gone onto the road was a wig and she and it had gone right across the road. She walked across, picked it up. and plonked it back on her head, went back in the rope and said 'Again!'.

What a wonderful story to end on. Rachel, it's been an absolute delight to talk to you today. Thank you very much for some wonderful memories.

Interviewed and transcribed by Huw Roberts.
July 2023.