

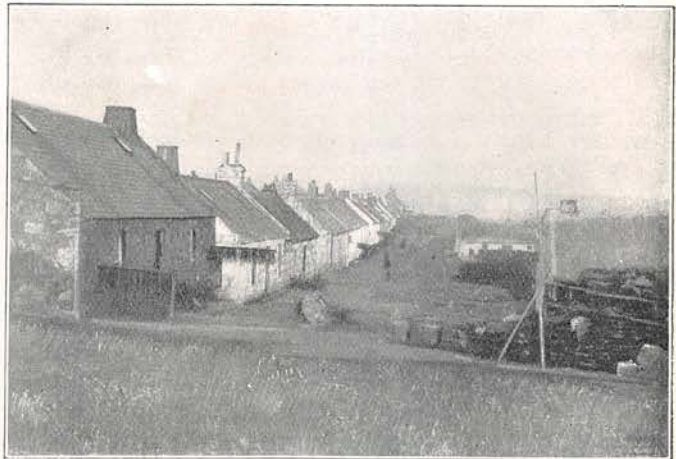
THE "FINNAN HADDIE."

WHAT IT IS, AND WHERE IT COMES FROM.

"A FINNAN Haddie"—Do you know what that is? Surely the nicest fish that is landed on our shores. Finnan Haddock may not have been so celebrated in song as the "Caller Herrin'," but surely they are as renowned as those for their toothsome delicacy! And *delicacy*, I say advisedly, is their true note. Their odour may be powerful and, in some degree, unpleasing—well, so is that of the *durian*, most delicious of fruits: so is that of the *petit Camembert*, most exquisite of cheeses: and the taste of a genuine Finnan yellow-fish will leave no after-soil on the palate; while, as for its odour, *that* will fade away before, or, let us rather say, blend harmoniously into the perfume of a cup of Mocha.

But there are haddocks and haddocks, and though the cognomen of "Finnan" be applied generically to many such, yet few there are that have a specific right to it. Once I foregathered with a benighted Southron, who proceeded to expound the name according to his lights, as thus: "Finnan? Ah, yes!—means *fishy*, I suppose. From *finns*, you know." Quite as intelligent a derivation, by the way, as many that pass muster for philology. "Finnan," however, is nothing more or less than the local pronunciation of

Findon, the name of a little sea-coast village between Stonehaven and Aberdeen, where the method of preserving the fish now practised, or imitated, all round our coasts was first invented. The manner of its invention, or discovery, if tradition be true, was of the same kind, if not so startling, as that of roast pig. Generation



PORTLETHEN, WITH THE FAMOUS VILLAGE OF FINDON
IN THE DISTANCE.

after generation of fisherfolk had gone on curing the haddocks as their forefathers had done, salting and packing them away with every care to preserve, so far as possible, their semi-transparent whiteness; but at last it fell upon a day that one of the sheds caught fire, involving in its destruction a stack of peat that was piled against it; and, lo! the fish that were brought away out of the smoke and débris were found to have acquired an unexpected colour and quite a new flavour. Some of the older and more conservative

fishers were for throwing them away, or, at least, reserving them strictly for home consumption; but the younger and more progressive insisted on offering them for sale in Aberdeen, where they met with amazing and instructive appreciation and a demand for more. But though this legend was told me with great authority, I am unashamed to say I have no faith in its truth. The practice of preserving food by smoking it is far too universal for any popular, unscientific development of it to be of anything like modern origin; and my own belief is that the peaty flavour is as primitively inherent in Finnan haddies as it is in Mountain Dew.

It is not peat alone, however, that produces the true, delicate Finnan flavour. Sawdust is burnt with it, and not every kind of sawdust will do. That from birch would blacken the fish; pine sawdust would give them a taste of tar; and so the utmost care must be taken to use only that which comes from the working of softer and whiter wood, such as beech and sycamore. In the north and west of Scotland fires of such woods as birch and pine are used, often without any peat at all, and the product is, consequently, inferior in flavour. At Findon the sawdust was first used to quicken the peat fire and make its smoke more dense, and then it was found to improve the fish.

Another reason for the superiority of the Findon fish to the commoner sorts so generally sold under their name — a superiority shared in this respect by almost all haddocks from the small coast fisheries—lies in their being taken on lines, not in trawl-nets. Netted fish come from the water in a smothered mass, limp and flabby; whereas the hooked fish are alive till taken into the boat, receive more careful handling, and are still crisp and firm when put to smoke. Hence the haddocks turned out in large quantities from the factories in Aberdeen and other towns, which are supplied by trawlers, although most carefully and skilfully prepared, are at best but a good imitation of the original yellow-fish.

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a Finnan haddie nowadays; for in the

village of Findon not one deep-sea fisherman remains, and it is some years since the last of them betook themselves to Aberdeen and Stonehaven. The yellow-fish industry is now centred in the neighbouring villages of Portlethen and Dunnies, Findon being inhabited by agricultural labourers, with a few "longshore" salmon-fishers. The salmon fishery is a very good one, and brings a rent of £300 or £400 a year to the Crown. Some of the salmon-boats are kept in the old harbour of Findon, and some in a cove nearer to Portlethen, called "the Muckle Strand"; and in this cove the large boats, or yawls, in which the Portlethen men go to the herring fishery, are hauled up high and dry for the autumn and winter months. These herring-boats are of thirty or forty tons register; and one of them, with all its permanent outfit, will cost between three and four hundred pounds, of which two hundred goes to the carpenter, and the remainder for rigging and fishing-gear. There are now six of these boats belonging to Portlethen, together with fourteen "winter boats" used in the haddock fishery. Nine of these latter register from ten to fifteen tons: the rest are much smaller.

Findon itself lies high on a hill, nearly a mile away from the seashore; and so it was always a matter of considerable labour to convey the fish from the boats to the houses. Portlethen is built just on the edge of the low cliffs that here form the coast-line, and that, a few miles further south, rise much higher and present a magnificently rugged and precipitous face to the sea; and this situation, together with the convenience of a railway-station, probably accounts for the distinctive trade of the former village having become transferred to the latter.

The "winter harbour" of Portlethen is just below the village. It is a narrow creek in the rocks, deep enough for the boats to enter at all states of the tide, and has the reputation of being the safest and easiest of access from the sea on this part of the coast. A good path, ending on a gravelly bank with a steep flight of steps, leads from the village to the strand

and as soon as the fishing-boats come in, the women and girls hasten down this to meet them. First of all they receive the lines, which the men have brought back coiled in flat, shallow baskets, which they call "skulls"; and these they carry off at once to the houses, quickly returning for heavier burdens. Meanwhile the men bring the fish to land in wooden boxes, and sort them into heaps upon the shingly beach, the take of each boat being shared equally by its crew, who (except the boys) are its joint owners. Haddocks form the principal part of each heap; but there are also generally a fair number of cod, codling, whiting, and flounders, and occasionally fish of other sorts. When the women come down again, each brings her "creel"—the large basket so familiar to our eyes in pictures of the Scotch fishwives—and bears away her share of the fish on her back. The whole business is conducted with great rapidity, and in ten or fifteen minutes after the arrival of a boat its crew and cargo will be comfortably housed in Portlethen. Then the haddocks are prepared for curing, and in front of almost every cottage you may see a whole family assembled round a heap of fish, cleaning them and splitting them open. This done, they hang them in rows upon the movable laths of a



WOMEN CARRYING THE FISH UP THE CLIFFS
AT PORTLETHEN.

rack in the "smoke-house," and when this is fully charged, kindle the fire beneath them.

A smoke-house forms an appurtenance of every cottage. It is a hut about eight or ten feet square—sometimes longer—

by about six to eight feet high, with a large chimney in the roof at one end, the whole built of wood. The fire is made on the floor underneath the chimney, and the rack for the fish rises from about three feet above the hearth. One of the women sits by it, watching the process carefully, regulating the supply of peat and sawdust (the latter being shaken on every now and



WATCHING FOR THE BOATS FROM THE TOP OF THE CLIFFS
AT PORTLETHEN.

then by handfuls), and moving the laths of the rack about, so that every fish may receive an even share of heat and smoke. In about three hours small haddocks (those less than eight inches long are counted *small*), and in four hours large ones, have become thoroughly impregnated with the smoke; and, with hardly an appreciable shrinkage or shrivelling, have taken that rich golden-brown colour that is one of the signs of a true Finnan fish.

The lines, meanwhile, have been taken

seem all built upon much the same model, and stand in row behind row, all facing seawards. There are about seventy houses, only forty or so, however, being inhabited. Inside, they are kept exquisitely clean, as is everything connected with the preparation of the haddies; but outside, one's nostrils are only too often assailed by "ancient and fish-like smells," the seagulls being the only scavengers, so far as the remains of their natural diet are concerned. Each house has one large room



Photo by B. MacGregor.

PREPARING THE HADDOCKS.

from the baskets and carefully festooned on stout bars, stuck horizontally in any convenient place—generally a hole in the cottage wall—to be overhauled for repairs. Baiting is the next operation. The line is placed in a tub, and a woman or girl sits on a low seat, with this on one side and one of the shallow baskets on the other. Before her is a vessel containing the baits—mussels and small crabs—and on this rests a board, on which she works, passing the line rapidly from the tub into its basket. All is ready then for the next night's fishing.

The homes of the Portlethen fisherfolk

(*Scottice*, "butt") for everyday use, into which the outer door opens, and at one end of it is a smaller one ("ben") for use on state occasions. At the other end is the fireplace, a hearth with a hooded mantel and a wide chimney, specially designed for burning peat; and along one side of the room is the dresser, on which are arrayed the accumulations of years and generations in the way of crockery. Plates, dishes, cups, mugs, and especially jugs, of the most gorgeous hues and startling patterns, seem to line the wall from floor to ceiling. On one dresser

I counted no less than four-and-twenty jugs; and close by them was an odd-looking set of octagonal plates, each printed with the same text of Scripture—a particularly gruesome and funereal one. It was in this house that the good wife proudly exhibited to me her "golden wedding teapot," a Britannia metal one, the gift of her numerous descendants, from which she treated me to

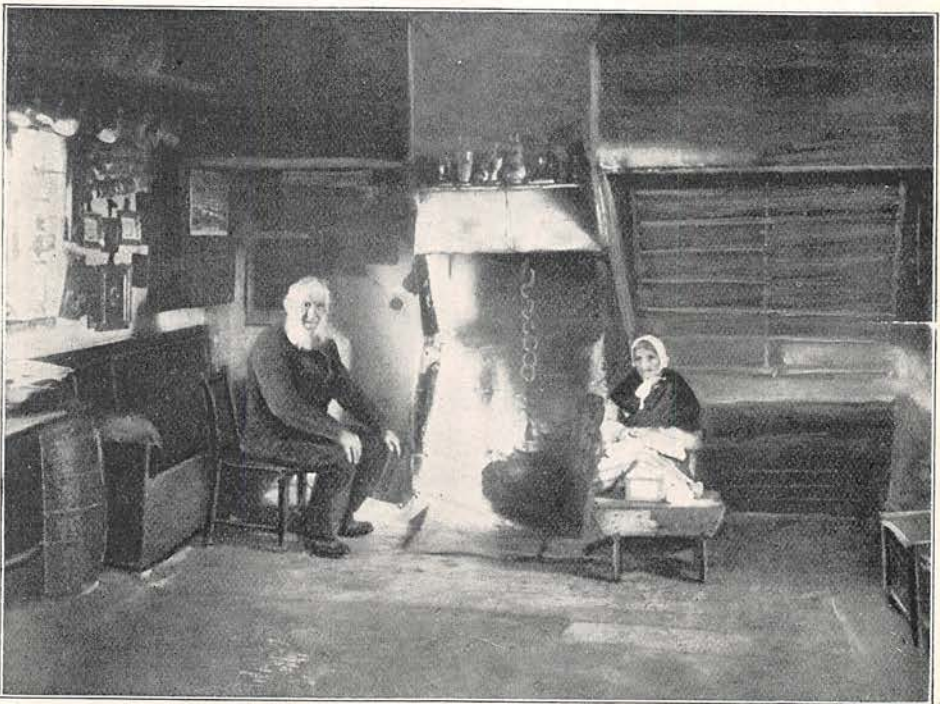
an excellent cup of tea. Her husband, evidently the "G.O.M." of Portlethen, is a hale and hearty octogenarian, six feet four in height, and still takes an occasional turn in the boats.



HOUSE WHERE THE FISH ARE SMOKED.

numbered—a matter of great practical convenience where almost all the occupiers bear the same surname, and often the same Christian name also.

BARRINGTON MACGREGOR.



INTERIOR OF A FISHERMAN'S COTTAGE AT PORTLETHEN.