

Sponges.

BY FRED WESTBURY.



REECE is at the present day the most prolific country in the supply of sponges, those essentially modern and most indispensable assistants to cleanliness. Ægina is the centre of the sponge trade. Next in importance comes Hydra, in the Greek Archipelago, and Symi and Calymnos, in the Turkish Archipelago. But it is characteristic of our race, and pleasing to note, that the sponge trade in that particular corner of the globe is ruled by Englishmen.

Mr. R. Cresswell, the founder of the house of Cresswell Brothers and Schmitz, the principal firm engaged in the sponge industry, was undoubtedly one of those men who have done so much to spread our influence in outlandish parts, and that, let it be said, through sheer pluck and energy.

To start with, a fleet of sponge-fishers had to be organized, and we see in our first illustration a sponge-boat, showing the diver just rising to the surface; on the left of the picture some men are in the act of drawing out the proceeds of the diver's work. It is a small net, well filled with sponges. The two relief divers are seated at the stern. The air-pump is worked by the men near the

mast, while the life-line or signal-rope is held by the man in the bows.

When Mr. R. Cresswell first started in business he knew but little of the elements which, put together, form the Greek as a whole. He thought that it would be in keeping with English principles of commercial methods if the fishing were done systematically.

With that idea he fitted out a large brig, which, by the way, he named the *Cresswell*. The Greek fishermen, however, did not fall in with British methods. They preferred to remain independent and take all risks upon themselves; they did not care to work for a pre-arranged salary or wage. Needless to add, Mr. Cresswell was glad to fall in with their views, and the reason why will be found in what follows.

When these good people were paid regular wages sponges became correspondingly scarce at the bottom of the sea, although the salaries fell due just the same. At their own request, however, Mr. Cresswell organized a new system which worked out to payment by result. Strange to say, sponges were found almost everywhere—they poured in by the thousand. The new rule had evidently affected the sponge-growing power to a

tremendous extent; catches such as were little dreamt of formerly were brought up from those unknown depths where some time before no sponges could be found.

The sponge fishery in Tunis is most active in the months of December, January, and February, as, during the other seasons, the spot where the sponges are found is covered with dense masses of seaweed. The tempests of November and December clear away the



DIVER RISING TO THE SURFACE. HIS CATCH IN THE NET ON THE LEFT IS BEING HAULED IN.

latter, and allow the sponges to be seen. The fishery has, however, two seasons—one commencing in March and finishing in November; the other occupying the rest of the year. In the summer season the production is small, because diving apparatus is then necessary, and can only be employed where there is a rocky or other firm bottom; but the Arabs search along the coasts, feeling for the sponges with their feet beneath the masses of tangled weeds, those which they find being generally of an inferior kind, as they cannot go into any depth of water. The success of the work of sponge-getting depends upon the sea being calm, and there are not more than forty or fifty days during the winter season which are favourable.

In our next illustration we see a number of Greek sponge fishermen packing their catch for the London market. The finding, washing and drying, and packing of sponges in these islands is presided over by Mr. G. H. R. Brown, the agent of Messrs. Cresswell, who is the only Englishman resident at the sponge fisheries. His father founded the Ægina station, and it is significant to state that more sponges are now imported to England from that port than from any other.

A large stock of sponges is kept in London. In Red Lion Square, the head-quarters of Messrs. Cresswell, there are enough sponges to supply the whole of the United Kingdom for considerably over a year. Sponges are re-exported from here to every corner of the earth, thus proving that other countries cannot excel England in this particular branch of trade.

The diver goes down either in diving-dress, or stripped. The latter is carried down by a broad, flat stone of marble of about 25lb. in weight, which he holds at arms'

length in front of him, and which he uses to guide his flight, to protect his head when he first strikes, and to keep him down when he walks on the bottom. Fifteen to twenty fathoms is the average depth; but for depths beyond this up to forty fathoms, which are reached in the Mediterranean, more preparation is necessary. The man, standing in the boat, inflates his chest to the utmost for about ten minutes, and when the blood is thoroughly oxygenated by this means he



GREEK SPONGE FISHERMEN PACKING THEIR CATCH FOR THE LONDON MARKET.

seizes the stone and plunges headlong into the sea.

The tremendous pressure of the water, at a depth of even fifteen fathoms, is such as to cause bleeding at the nose and mouth when divers begin the season, and only the most expert attempt greater depth. Two minutes is the usual duration of the dive, and three and a half the utmost extent of endurance.

The skin of the shoulders is, in habitual divers, burnt off by the action of the sun and salt water, and the hair is of a greenish or greenish-brown tint during the summer, returning to its natural colour only in the winter-time, after diving has ceased to be profitable. Each diver has a net bag hanging down in front, and held in place by a cord extending around the neck. Into this he puts the sponges as he pulls them from the bottom, and when it is full, or before, in case he has remained too long upon the bottom, he jerks the rope and is quickly pulled to the surface.

"Like the coral fishers, who never allow anyone to accompany them or to witness their fishing operations, sponge-divers are very exclusive in the matter of curious visitors. My cousin, Mr. G. H. R. Brown, of Ægina," says Mr. Crosswell, "is, I believe, the only Englishman who has been through an entire season of sponge-diving with the Greeks themselves. The reason for his being accorded the privilege, however, is not far to seek. He has always lived amongst them, and is regarded as a blood-brother. Moreover, they will work for him at a nominal rate, whereas their zeal for an ordinary English employer would be conspicuously absent. It thus happens that we can own and fit out boats successfully which in former times would have caused us great loss.

"We should like to point out," said my informant, "that these men are well aware of the hardships and dangers of the diving trade. They undertake their task entirely of their own free will, or, I should add, of necessity. Their native islands are very bare. Agriculture is in its most primitive state, hence the inhabitants are only too glad to revert to sponge-fishing for a living.

"The summer fishing begins shortly after Easter and ends about October or November, according to the state of the weather. From November to the end of March the winter fishing is in full swing.

"In summer the boats go out hundreds of miles from their native shores, but in winter the fishermen do not venture far out, and only dive in comparatively shallow waters. As a matter of fact, the sponge-fishing fleet is managed on much the same lines as the

trawling system in the North Sea, and Ægina is our Grimsby of the sponge trade.

"Our divers have made some queer finds," continued Mr. Crosswell; "for instance, we have in our possession some remarkable amphoræ which date as far back as 200 B.C. They are the envy of lovers of antiquity, and needless to add are also extremely valuable."

We reproduce one of these wine-jars. It is beautifully shaped, and wonderfully incrustated with tiny shells of every hue — marvellous designs, which only Nature can invent and produce. Crowned with the halo of antiquity, this find forms a subject of interest and wonderment — sufficient to be treated alone and separately by some expert and lover of the fine arts of ancient Greece. It is interesting to note how, regard-

less of the multitude of shells and other inhabitants, these relics of ancient times have been monopolized to a great extent by beautiful sponges, which have chosen their birth-place on the very edge of the graceful curves, modelled no doubt by some great expert many centuries ago. A beautiful

mass of white coral with a sponge attached to it has also been photographed; unfortunately, however, the picture gives but a faint idea of the magnificent handiwork of Nature in her most graceful mood. This particular piece of coral was found by sponge-divers near Turk's Island, Bahamas, West Indies.

This brings us to another quarter of this wide world where sponges are also found in profusion — the great sponging grounds which lie to the east, west, and south of New Providence. Here about 500 vessels are



A TREASURE OF THE DEEP—MANUFACTURED ABOUT 200 B.C.



MILK-WHITE CORAL SHOWING SPONGE IN ORIGINAL POSITION.



A WEEK'S CATCH LANDED ON THE JETTY.

constantly engaged in the trade, 3,000 men find employment, and through it £20,000 to £30,000 sterling is actually circulated and spent in the Colony. Although often far from the shore, and at a depth of 20ft., 40ft., or even 60ft., the sponge may easily be descried through the transparent waters on the clear, sandy bottom, from which they are raked or grappled up.

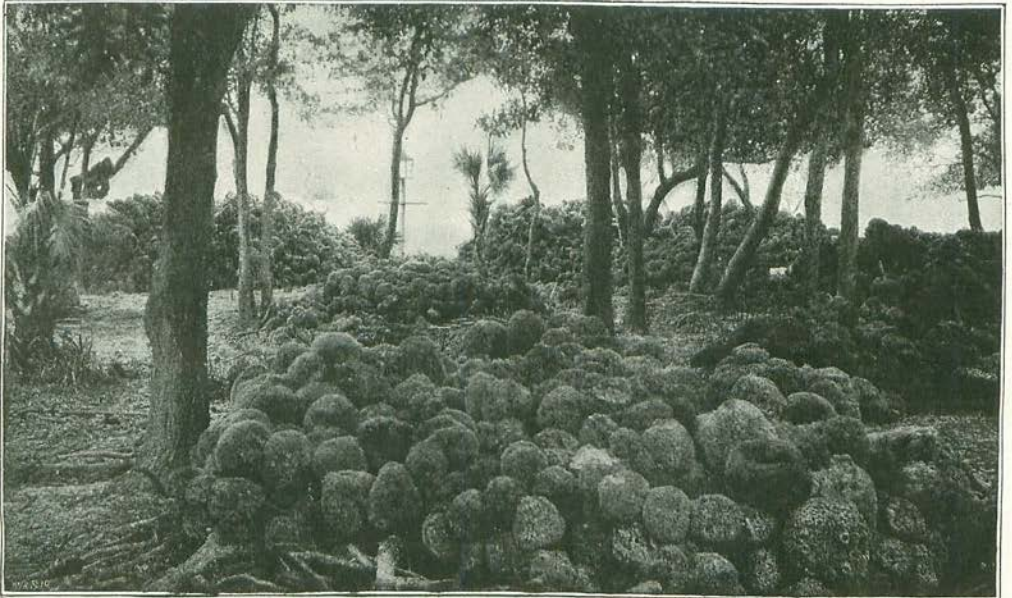
Sunny Florida is another centre of

the sponge trade, and we have here two pictures of great interest. They are different views of divers landing their prize on the quay. They show how sponges are landed and counted by the officials in charge. In both cases they are the result of a week's effort, and the crews are pleased at their work.

In Greek waters divers

are allowed to perform their duties either with or without diving apparatus. In the West Indies, however, the diving apparatus is not allowed. This is on account of the tremendous depth of the waters. The coral reefs are the boundaries of almost immeasurable depths, and consequently the use of the diving apparatus would prove extremely dangerous.

The next picture is a very striking one: it shows piles upon piles of sponges to be



CATCHES OF ALL SIZES AND SHAPES LANDED ON THE FLORIDA COAST,



DRYING SPONGES AFTER SORTING AND TRIMMING—COAST OF FLORIDA.

counted by thousands. It gives a view of Sponge Land at Tarpon Springs, Florida. Catches of all sizes and quantities are brought ashore by the fishermen, ready for sorting. Farther on we see the same sponges laid out to dry, a preliminary process to their being finally shipped for English shores.

The last illustration of all is a peculiar one. The negro sponge fishermen of West Bahama and Florida are taking their Sunday rest. Masses of sponges are piled up in the foreground, whilst farther back a negro of splendid physique is seen preaching a sermon to his fellow-workers.



NEGRO SPONGE FISHERMAN PREACHING TO HIS FELLOW-WORKERS—COAST OF FLORIDA.