

Gourdon Gleanings



In the summer of 1916, the Gourdon fishing boat "Bella" sailed with the rest of the Gourdon fleet for the fishing grounds. The "Bella" sailed east until she was about six miles off the coast at Catterline where the long lines were shot. This being war time certain restrictions were in force and fishing skippers were advised to avoid certain areas. This was mostly for their own safety and also for the protection of the fishing gear. Moored mines were sown in fields all around the east coast and it was almost impossible for the fishermen to retrieve their lines if they got entangled in the thick wires and heavy mooring weights. The fish seemed to gather around these minefields, and with a scarcity of food ensuring excellent prices, fishing skippers often took chances to bring in a good catch. So it was with skipper James Ritchie and the crew of the "Bella". All the other Gourdon boats had managed to haul their lines, but the Bella's crew were in difficulties. The gear had broken several times, and it was getting late in the day, so auld "Brimy" was just deciding to cut his

losses and head back to harbour when out of the mist came the unmistakable shape of a German submarine. The Gourdon crew looked on aghast, but there was nothing they could do except await the outcome and obey the U-boat commander's orders. The Oherleutnant drew expertly alongside and told the fishermen he was sorry, but as he had been seen, and would be reported, he must take them prisoner, so it was a disconsolate crew that were taken on board. Other prisoners, English fishermen and Granton trawlermen, were already on hoard and on talking to them they reported that they were all well treated. The submarine hung about the Mearns coast for a while and on the Sunday morning the captured Gourdon crew had an unusual view of their home village. The considerate captain edged cautiously underwater into Gourdon Bay and raised the periscope so that each of them could have a look. They could clearly see people walking about, but it would be more than two years before they would be back.

Meanwhile back in Gourdon, it was unclear what had happened to the "Bella". When the boat became overdue a search was made and parts of the vessel were recovered. It was thought she had been blown up by a mine, but servicemen home on leave, with knowledge of explosives, came to the conclusion that the "Bella" had been blown apart from the inside. The Germans had placed explosive charges on board after taking the crew prisoner. Three months later, after they had been given up for dead, a telegram arrived from the War Office to say that the Bella's crew were safe and well. They had been landed at Wilhelmshaven and from there transported to prisoner of war camps. The younger members of the crew were employed in the forests as wood cutters, but the older men were treated more like British officers. The Bella's crew were James Ritchie (Auld Brimy), skipper, John Cargill (Mild Johnny), William Ritchie, James Ritchie, son of the skipper, James Freeman Ritchie and David Cargill, son of John Cargill. All these men are now deceased, but when they talked of their experiences, they had nothing but praise for their captors, especially the U-boat captain. Young

Jimmy Brimy, Jimmy Freeman and Davity Cargill were just boys of 15 and 16 at the time. Several pictures of them with their woodcutter's axes over their shoulders still exist, and they don't look unhappy: All of them went back to the fishing after the war ended. Auld Brimy acquired a boat from Arbroath which he aptly named the "Happy Return". His son Jimmy later started up a fish merchant's business which is still carried on by his sons Neil and James Ritchie. In the early years of the last war, "Davity" Cargill, who had been invalided out of the Royal Navy, lost his life in Gourdon harbour when checking his boat's moorings. An Arbroath boat, the "Maggie Smith", also had a confrontation with an enemy submarine, but was allowed to return home after supplying the Germans with fish. The commander told the Arbroath skipper that he knew he would be reported, but he would be long gone by then. Another Arbroath boat, also named the "Maggie Smith", disappeared on February 13, 1918, under mysterious circumstances, while line fishing in the same vicinity. It has never been proved what happened to her.