



Robbie Cowan

SUNSET ON AN ANCIENT CRAFT

Mark Neilson meets the haaf netters of the Solway.

CAN you imagine a more dangerous way of making a living? Standing chest-deep in the tidal flows of the Solway Firth for five hours at a stretch, holding a heavy wooden frame in front of you, its net wrapping round your legs and feet, as you fish for salmon?

Haaf netting is an ancient craft, brought over

by the Norsemen. In old Norse, *haaf* means the ocean, or deep sea: here, locals say it refers to the deep channels where they fish the estuarial currents with nets which have scarcely changed over centuries.

Think five-a-side soccer goalposts — the wooden frame for the posts and crossbar is known as a haaf back, and is 15 feet

wide, and five feet deep. There is a central vertical spike, or spar, off-set to the right to let a right-handed netter stand in the centre of his frame, while holding this against the current. The off-centre design also helps to balance the frame, for carrying the net over your shoulder when you're walking out to where you're going to fish.

their wives will testify.

It is a tough, hard craft, made treble dangerous by its location: the Solway Firth has arguably the strongest and most unpredictable currents in Britain. My grandfather, who came from the area, always claimed that the tide came in at the speed of a galloping horse.

When I checked with George Willacy of Annan, a haaf netter all his adult life, he nodded.

"You'll never out-run a Solway tide, that's for sure," he said grimly.

The Solway tidal rise and fall can be as high as seven metres: a huge volume of water squeezing itself into an ever-narrowing estuary, which has the effect of accelerating the speed of the flow. Add to this the infamous Solway silt, and you can readily understand why minor channels through the estuary change from tide to tide. Even major channels move position regularly.

A major dispute rages round the central channel which traditionally marks the estuarial border between Scotland and England. This has moved into "English" territory, and water bailiffs with sat-nav equipment are trying to arrest Scottish haaf netters for doing what netters from both sides have done for centuries — simply follow the channel as it changes.

The Solway is full of salmon trying to ascend the rivers which surround its miles of coastline: rivers like the Esk and Eden to the east, or the Annan and the Nith on

the Scottish side. The haaf netter picks a channel and faces the current from behind his net, which billows out behind him in two "pockets", the centre trapped against his body and thighs — preferably not his feet, to trip him up. His right hand holds the central spar which projects above the cross-frame, and his left hand grips the wooden frame itself. In the thumb of his right hand, he gathers up a few "hanks" of mesh: if a fish enters either pocket of the net, it will hit the mesh and give a sudden tug. He has fractions of a second in which to react, because the salmon will instantly turn to bolt for freedom.

The old haaf netters had a trick of stepping back with the current, then flipping the sudden slack of net under and over the cross-spar, to close its neck. Modern netters simply lift the frame as quickly as they can manage.

From a rope round his waist, the netter draws his "mell", to stun the salmon: then, holding it by a finger through the gills, drags his shoulder bag forward from his back, and slips the salmon head-first into it. Not easy: try handling a slippery fish with fingers from which all feeling has long-since gone.

Haaf netters can work as individuals but, traditionally, they fish as a line — or "back" — across a channel, standing frame to frame. This covers the channel better, and gives the added security of company should any man

Haaf netters with their wooden haaf-backs at Caerlaverock.

Haaf netters fight the heavy currents for hours, spray sluicing over their heads and shoulders. The length of the shift is set by practicalities: at full tide, the water is too deep and dangerous, therefore netters typically fish the last two hours of the ebb, and the first two to three hours of the flood. This lets them retreat to safety, before being cut off by the incoming tide — although fishermen typically lean against time margins, as

get into trouble. Apart from being cut off by the tide on the open estuary, the most common accident is where his net becomes snagged round a netter's feet (they wear rubber soles without metal studs, to minimise this risk), and trips him up. The heavy current does the rest, and sweeps him off and away from the others.

“Haaf netting is dangerous, and not everyone wants to shiver uncontrollably for hours.”

“That frame becomes your lifebelt,” Tommy Thomson of Glencaple said. “Your chest waders are filling wi’ water, and any air is trapped down in the legs. That makes them want to swing above your head, leaving you upside down. So you hang on to your wooden haaf-back, to keep your head and shoulders above water. Then, kick and swim to where somebody can help you . . .”

The wooden haaf-back saves lives. “We regularly get English boys washed up on our side,” George Willacy said. “We take them home, an’ dry them out. Then drive them back to their own side. They do the same for us . . .”

Their common fight against the elements makes for bonding. When George was young, he lost his bearings and found himself inside English territory. An old English haaf-netter asked him who he was, and

where he came from: by pure chance, he knew George's father. They became firm friends, over years of meeting on the open Firth, and it was this Englishman who taught George most of what he knows.

“Old boys always pass on their tricks when they see a young boy that wants to learn,” said George. “It’s part of keeping the craft alive.”

In the past, maybe a third of haaf-netters were full-time fishermen, and the majority ran the work alongside another job — in agriculture, or working on a local estate. There is an apocryphal story about a dairyman near Glencaple, whose cows learned to cross their legs until the tides permitted their milking.

Much has changed over the last 20 years, and in some locations the ancient craft has struggled. “Modern folk have too much money,” Tommy sighs. Haaf netting is dangerous, and not everyone wants to shiver uncontrollably for hours. In the old days, they wrapped blankets round their chest and waist, and towels around their legs, beneath the waders. Modern wet-suits and dry-suits help, but not many have them.

Robbie Cowan handles licences for the Caerlaverock Estate. “It’s always been part-time work,” he said. “Now, if men are in it purely for the money, then they can get that easier from working overtime in their main job.”

As a result, he watched ticket sales slump from

44 licences for the Estate down to 14, six years ago. On his own initiative, he launched a drive to attract people from outside the estate's boundaries: people who had always wanted to haaf net, but hadn't qualified for a licence before. This brought in 20-plus new licences.

“Experienced netters pass down the craft and show newcomers how to fish,” Robbie says. “We keep an eye on them, until we think they’re safe enough to go out on their own.”

Another positive trend is that the men who used to be part-time netters, but gave up to concentrate on their jobs, have started to drift back as they reach retirement. “It gets them out of the house,” said Tommy. “And gives them a bit o’ money on the side. The craic among the boys is good — but they’re devils for playin’ tricks on you . . .”

A favourite trick is to quietly tug a friend's net, when you're passing behind him in a line. Then laugh when he struggles to hold his balance and close his empty net.

When haaf netters fish in a “back”, at the edge of the channel, there is constant movement as men change position. Those deeper into the channel wait until the rising water becomes dangerous then lift their nets and wade out, passing behind the others to take a new position at its shallow end (known as “settin’ doon at the shal end . . .”).

George Willacy of Annan, a haaf-netter all his adult life, resetting and cleaning “poke” nets.

One of the dangers of the Solway is the bore, or the tsunami-style wave which precedes the incoming tide. Its height and speed vary with the tidal rise/fall, the direction of the wind (a south-wester “pushes” the tide up the Solway), and the narrowness of the channel which compresses it. The Nith's own bore can be anything between a foot and four feet high — not something you would want to hit you when you're standing in a heavy current.

“It’s no’ as bad as it was about seven or eight years ago,” mused Tommy. “Back then, you could hear the roar of it coming in, when you were up the hill behind the village.” In Glencaple, haaf netters get out of the water until the bore has passed.

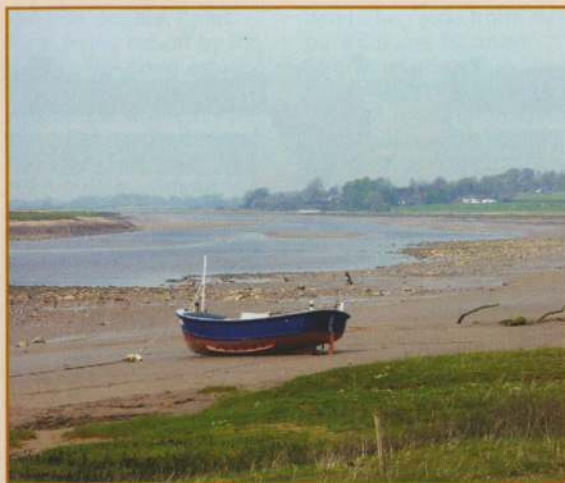
“It’s still safer than the open estuary,” Robbie Cowan said. “Out there, you need to stay sharp. We’ve got sinking sands — we call them ‘bubblers’, because you can see the mud bubbles breaking through the surface. Or you can be facing the tide, thinking you’ve plenty time — only to turn and find that it’s crept up behind you, through a creek that wasn’t there a week before. Fog is the worst.” He grimaced. “You can lose your bearings completely, walk into all sorts of trouble. We get off fast, when the fog rolls in . . .”



One of the uses of the Glencaple inshore lifeboat, of which both he and Tommy are crew members, is for helping stranded netters.

Why take such risks? “I get as big a kick from catching salmon as any rod angler,” explains Robbie. “Because, like that angler, I have to do my homework. Walk the water at low tide. Mark the best channels, judge where the fish will swing near their banks. That pluck on my net is as skilful as taking a salmon on a fly.”

In Glencaple at least, the nature of haaf netting has changed: the hardy commercial fisherman has gone, and the craft survives more as a hobby than a source of cash. Men fish for pleasure and their family's salmon-smokers, only selling fish to buy replacements for damaged gear. The craft has drawn in people who have never fished before: one of the new Caerlaverock licences is held by a London lawyer who comes up to his holiday cottage every summer, then rushes



Glencaple Channel.

of the main flow.

They also look for where a tidal flow is "shawling", or pouring fast across big areas of shallow water. Here you can see the dorsal fins of the salmon above the surface, and race to place your net in front of where they pass — provided you can keep your footing, because the water pressure can be tremendous.

George tells of a gloaming 30 years ago when, with a couple of friends, he set out to fish a channel close to the English side. As they walked and waded over the estuary, they found that the ground had changed since their last visit. To reach their target, they had to cross a stretch of several hundred yards where the water spilled across shallows at a tremendous pace. They tried to wade this, but were forced to give up.

With their legs braced, the force of the water was such that it sheeted from their ankles up over their heads. Lose your footing, and you would simply be rolled helplessly away and drowned.

We talked of global warming. "It's here," he said, "whatever politicians say. We're catching warm-water fish at the top of the estuary that have never been seen before. One of the boys caught a big flounder that had a blue spot running through from side to side. We sent photos for identification. It was a tropical fish. And I caught a tuna, about

Robbie Cowan and Tommy Thomson are both members of the Glencaple inshore lifeboat crew.

15lbs, in my haaf net — never been heard of here. And the sea bass that used to run only at Luce Bay are right up to the top of the estuary now. Some of the boys are going for them, instead of salmon — they pay far better."

He pulled a face. "The saddest things we catch are the salmon that escape the salmon farms. They're poor beasts. We aye throw them back. You can tell them at a glance — their dorsal fins and tails are nibbled down to nothing. They're limp, no muscle to them. Can't swim in a heavy current — they get washed side-over-side, and drowned. The sand is covered with dead uns, some days."

What does he fear most, out on the Solway? Is it the sudden fogs which come rolling in or the tides? "You always carry a compass," he said. "We're too far out to get in before a fog, most times. If you head North, you're bound to hit the Annan shore. But the sands are aye changing, treacherous. Not just new channels, but sinking sands..."

Is that his ultimate nightmare? He grins: "No, it's an empty bag flapping on your shoulders, when you're trudging home. That's the heaviest bag of all..."

Tommy Thomson's worst fear is to find a leak in his waders. These men who risk their lives don't talk of things that really



scare them — this might bring bad luck. They edge away, with a flip comment which draws a smile.

Their respect for the Solway Firth is total: it takes no prisoners. Remember Sir Walter Scott's comment in *Red Gauntlet*: "He that dreams on the bed of the Solway, may wake up in the next world." It applies to day-dreaming also.

What drives these men? They love their ancient craft. George Willacy said, "Haaf netting's been handed down for 1,000 years. It's our responsibility now to pass it safely to future generations. Keep our heritage alive." Back in

the lifeboat shed at Glencaple, Robbie Cowan stared out of a window before saying almost the same. "Why care? Because haaf netting has been part of us, our local history, for a millennium. We can't sit back and let it die. Not on my watch anyway..."

So the fish may be changing, and the men who hold the haaf backs might be London lawyers, up on holiday. But the ancient Norseman's craft is in safe, sure hands and will be around for a few more years. Trust me — and men like Robbie and George — on that. **[E]**

Main Photography by Mark Neilson

down to check the tide. "Ma keen," said Tommy.

Other locations differ. Annan has known lean times, when local newspapers publicised special meetings to which anyone interested in learning the ancient craft was invited. But out of the 42 licences — which date from a charter being granted by James V in 1538 — no less than 32 are taken up by local haaf netting families.

"It's in the blood," George Willacy says. "Some boys still keep their grandfather's gear." I'd found him in his garage, giving TLC to an ancient frame and net which hadn't seen salt water in many years.

George, who has squeezed being a local councillor and a JP — as well as haaf netting — into his working life, argues that the hobby option doesn't apply to the "Annan Box" (the ancient boundaries decreed by Royal charter). Haaf netting here is on the open Solway, fighting

treacherous shifting sands, the weather and tidal currents at their most savage.

"We're strictly commercial fishermen," he said. "It's serious work — laying your life on the line if you get too careless."

On the open Firth, learning to "read the water" is crucial — otherwise where should you put down your net? One of the tricks is to "fish the hem" of a strong current (within which salmon are likeliest to be swimming): here, you look for the line of brown foam which shows the movement of a faster current through a slower flow.

Currents follow channels, and if the fishermen can see where a corner in the under-water channel throws off the faster current, they can set their nets in the slower water at the edge of this — it would be impossible, dangerous even, to try to hold a haaf back against the full force