

Alan Lander - Fisherman



I am the fourth generation of my family to fish for lobsters from Chapmans Pool. When starting with my Father; I was very young and often seasick. One misty summer afternoon during WWII, we were just east of St Albans Head when a suspicious-looking vessel appeared. My father rowed in behind a large rock until it disappeared. I was too young then to take the incident as seriously.

Pre-war my grandfather and father had a donkey and cart to transport fish and gear to and from Chapmans Pool. When fishing was good they could sell a cart full of Pollack in Kingston. Mother used it to take lobsters to the Swanage fishmonger, who had lobster tanks. Often they used old horses and cows for bait: the donkey probably went that way! After the war, Father carried the lobsters home in an old tradesman's bike with a carrier, or put them in a specially made carry pot, which he carried on his back. Mother took them to Swanage by bus, in bags made from wartime barrage balloons to avoid water leaking. Later the Wareham fishmongers collected them in their van, as they did when I started fishing.

During summer evenings and weekends we kids went swimming, beachcombing and messing around in a boat at Chapmans Pool. During school holidays I worked three or four old pots and perhaps a cotton gill net. The local fishmonger collected father's catch while on his fish round. He also delivered petrol for our boat. Once he bought mackerel I'd caught that morning and some forty pounds of lobsters, which I had stored up, at the going price of 3/2 a pound (16P). Sometimes mother sent father back to Chapmans Pool because I was late home only to find we boys had netted a shoal of Horse Mackerel and were busily taking them out of the net. His anger was soon forgotten when father realised we had several days useful bait.

When I left school in 1950 father had a man working with him, but he went back to quarrying so I took his place. It was September, when we targeted mainly prawns. We worked 50 or 60 prawn pots but only 20 lobster pots; it became difficult to sell lobsters in autumn. The prawns were cooked on an openfire which Mother lit early enough for the pot to be boiling when we arrived. If we were late, the wood ran out or the pot boiled dry and she had to start again. The prawns were sorted on size, counted by the hundred; a suitable box was made, filled and nailed down ready for the 5pm train. They were sold at Billingsgate Market next morning. At the time of the Lord Mayor's Show prawns could rise to a staggering £1 per hundred, much better than the prevailing lobster price. Sometimes the Billingsgate fish merchant asked for English Prawns for Salmon fishing.

At first lobsters were plentiful and in spring; there was a good run of brown crab, which has finished now. Local boats were from 12 to 18 feet in length, worked by one or two crewmen using no more than fifty pots per boat. Catches might approach a lobster a pot with more definite catching periods than today. Late May and the first week in June were poor, as was August. June to September, during neap tides, we worked 14 to 18 pots further offshore 'out in the tide', hauling up three times a day at slack water. This produced some large catches of lobsters, up to five legal-sized ones in a pot. Perhaps the lack of fishing during WWII accounted for the many lobsters and Brown crab.

Fishing finished and gear was brought in when the weather deteriorated in late October. Traditionally the winter was spent working in the quarry. Our gear couldn't withstand severe winter weather. After the cold winter of 1962/63 we started fishing in March as usual, but our pots came up empty. Even in mid April fishing was very slow.

It is increasingly difficult to work single pots and surface gill nets now, due to the many leisure craft cutting pot lines and nets with their propellers. I have not worked single pots for several years and only put a net in safe areas. Leisure craft pass close to working fishing boats at 40 knots and more, leaving them wallowing in their wake. The man working the hauler may have to stop, stacks of pots on the boat fall over, getting out of rotation. The only way to obtain bait was to net mackerel and horse mackerel. Today it can be purchased deep-frozen, providing a regular supply.