



Mr Main at work with creels and lobsters on the "Christine."

A Lobster Fisherman's Day—By PETER SMITH

ON most days of the year the 28-foot diesel-engined yawl "Christine" may be seen in the early hours of the morning heading from the small tidal harbour of Hopeman, on the Moray Firth. The yawl belongs to David Main, a lobster fisherman who has spent his days on the waters of the Firth in search of that elusive delicacy.

I have had the privilege of spending many happy hours at the wheel of David's boat, sometimes in weather conditions which made the trip a real adventure. On more than one of these occasions David's cheery grin has been the only reassuring thing in sight in a world which had become to me an elementary matter of flying, face-biting spray, salt in my mouth and cold sea water running down my chest beneath heavy oilskins: days when my arms were no longer mine but had become as though hewn from iron with the strain of hauling aboard a "line" of nine lobster creels through five fathoms of seething water, when I have been hard put to keep my footing on a deck awash with brine.

On the other hand, I have known on those same waters days of indescribable calm and beauty. I have watched the yawl slip over great clumps of rock with but a few inches to spare, and studied at close hand the garden of the sea-bed exposed to view through the limpid water. The gentle tendrils of weeds floating softly, the jagged upthrust of sombre rock, the darting of numerous fishes—all thrown into relief by expanses of white sand and shells.

Unfortunately such days as the latter are rare on the turbulent Firth and David has to battle with the elements on most of his trips, which he does alone in a boat often behaving like a thing untamed.

David's day varies with the tide and he may set off at any hour of the morning.

Examining the Creels.

He sails out perhaps a mile from the shore describing a circle up to seven miles in radius from the harbour and watches for the floats attached to his line of creels. These located, he takes the boat alongside, heads it into the wind and begins hauling. Slowly, one after another, the cement-weighted ropework baskets are dragged over the side of the vessel and the catch extracted. This can be very disappointing work when the creels are empty; as they often are. In addition to the much-prized lobster there may be a variety of crustaceans in the creels. Crabs are very plentiful at some seasons and shell fish of the molluscan species are almost always to be found. Frequently a codling or some other fish has invaded the creel and is unable to escape through the narrow entry funnel.

All the creels being emptied, and re-baited with fish heads where necessary, he lines them along the side of the boat and cruises around until he sees a likely spot to shoot them for the next day's fishing. When he has found this he merely has to push the end one of the line overboard and without any further effort on his part they are dragged, one by one, into the depths to await the visit of the lobster in search of food.

David shoots forty-five to fifty creels a day, although this figure may be increased to as much as seventy in fine weather, and he generally takes just over three hours to locate the various lines of creels, empty them, bait them and shoot them overboard again. When a creel is slightly damaged he carries out running repairs on the spot. If it is heavily torn he detaches it and takes it to shore for overhaul.

On the return journey he sets his course for home and busies himself sorting out his catch. This done, he ties the claws of the lobsters, which will later be sent to the markets in the south, so that they cannot fight with each other when they are kept in close proximity in a box partly submerged in the harbour to await transportation. Only those which are nine inches in length or over may be sold. The others have to be returned to the sea under regulations laid down as a preservative measure.

Finally he reaches the haven of the harbour and empties his catch, which may be any number of lobsters from six to thirty-six, into the box in the harbour.

Repairing the Damage.

The remainder of the day is spent in his small workshop repairing damaged creels and making new ones. Before he can make a creel he has to obtain, from the woods of the surrounding countryside, ash branches. These are supple enough to bend and form arches over the flat bottom board on which cement has been allowed to harden to give weight. String netting is then stretched over this framework with funnels giving entry to both ends of the creel.

In one ten-day period David lost no fewer than one hundred and twenty-four creels through bad weather, so that the task of replacement is no light one.

In closing this brief account of the day-to-day life of a lobster fisherman I would like to pay tribute to the men who follow this remunerative but often precarious calling. Their lives call for a degree of toughness and courage which is a heritage from their forefathers and they are at one with nature in a way denied to most of us.