The Last Mud-Horse Fishermen

By Tony Jackson

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The history of the primitive fishing practice of using a wooden mud-horse

There's the mud horse, said Adrian, pointing towards the distant edge of the bladderwrack, “and the nets are three or four hundred yards further out, where you can just see the stakes.” We stood on the stone-riddled Somerset foreshore, gazing across acres of brown, slippery seaweed fringing the empty sea-washed mud of Bridgwater Bay. Behind us loomed the grey menacing bulk of the nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, and I was struck by the strange contrast of 21st century technology and the time-lost manner of fishing in which we were about to engage.

The tide was now at its lowest ebb, revealing miles of grey mudbanks glinting under a pallid sun washed by drifting clouds. In the far distance, 20 miles across the empty bay, Wales was a mist-shrouded blur and the only sound was the plaintive call of gulls. Adrian, stooped under the weight of baskets and a large sieve, grasped his walking pole and, together, we set out for the mud horse.

Timeless way of life

Earlier, I had talked to Brendan Sellick, Adrian’s father, and he explained something of the history of this unique method of fishing of which the Sellicks, father and son, are the last practitioners in the country. Brendan said his great-great grandfather gave up his job as a stone mason around 1820 to marry a local girl who then persuaded him to turn to fishing for a livelihood. At that time there were a dozen or more families in this area of Bridgwater Bay, all of whom were making a good living from the sea. Today, the Sellick families live in the tiny village of Stolford, their cottages little more than a stone’s throw from the beach, and they still pursue this age-old way of life.

Brendan has been fishing for some 60 years, and is the fourth generation of his family to do so. He told me that when he started several local families were still fishing, but the construction of the Hinkley Point power station half a century ago attracted local labour, and the Sellicks were all too soon the only family left fishing. Both Adrian and Brendan believe that the nuclear power station has had a detrimental effect on the fishing and the wildlife of these tidal waters.
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“Vast amounts of water go through the system,” Adrian said, “and so much sea life must be destroyed. It’s the same with eels, which are fast disappearing through the over-fishing of elvers, which can make £200 to £300 or more per kg. Over the past 20 years, stocks have dwindled and the eel is now becoming a rarity.”

“The brown shrimp is our main source of livelihood,” said Brendan. “We used to send them all over the country, particularly for potted shrimps, but now the majority of the catch is sold here. We also catch bass, sole, whitebait, sprats and cod in the winter. The shrimp fishing starts in April, and come mid-summer and autumn they’re usually in abundance but vanish when the first frosts come.”

A primitive tool

The mud horse has been used by the family for nearly two centuries. A simple construction of wood, it is a primitive tool but the only way of getting across some of the worst mud patches without sinking. It has undoubtedly been in use as a fishing aid since time immemorial. Indeed, the remains of a mud horse, believed to be about 4,000 years old, have been dug up in the Somerset Levels.

Primitive it may be, but it is also highly effective as Adrian demonstrated. Leaning on the back of the mud horse, with his gear stowed over the centre planks and on the up-curved front, he waded through the sloppiest mud with relative ease and had no fear of becoming trapped.

Now I have a confession to make. Wearing only rubber boots and overtrousers tied at the ankles, the prospect of wading through several hundred yards of leg-gripping mud to reach the nets was not appealing. I knew that within a short space of time I would be enveloped by the mud and would probably have to be rescued. I therefore nobly agreed to remain behind while Adrian and our photographer, Brian Phipps, sensibly clad in waders, set out for the distant stakes and nets. On this occasion, Adrian chose not to use the mud horse but to guide Brian along a course of mud which, he claimed, would support them both.

It was, as Brian told me later, an exhausting experience. The nets were held on stakes driven into a relatively hard section of mudbank, but there were leg-pulling stretches which demanded all his ingenuity and strength to stay upright and also to protect his cameras. However, several nice sea bass and a brace of shad and some flounders were recovered from the nets, while long tube nets held brown shrimps and sprats. At this point in the proceedings, the sun vanished behind dark clouds, while a sea fret rolled across the bay from the Welsh coast. Both men vanished into the mist and I was left standing amidst bladderwrack, peering in vain out to sea.

Delicious bounty

The silence was broken only by the call of a gull. For close on an hour I anxiously waited and then, at last, as I was beginning to imagine a scenario involving rescue helicopters, two distant specks, dark against the grey mist, advanced across the mud and into view. Adrian was weighed down with a large basket on his back filled with the catch. Though he said that the shrimps were few in number compared with catches later in the summer, there were at least three double handfuls.

Later that day, I boiled half a pound or so of shrimps for four minutes until they were pinky-brown and then set about them. No need to shell, just pinch off the head and tail, and enjoy. What a
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contrast to the tasteless cotton wool prawns from the Far East. Salty and tasting strongly of the sea, little wonder that these brown shrimps are so eagerly sought after. It was, by Adrian’s and Brendan’s standards, a modest catch for the day but nevertheless, three fine sea bass — the heaviest 4lb — two shad, some flounders, shrimps and sprats made the effort well worthwhile in my book.

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