



Seventy-five years ago, an elegant French restaurateur launched a competition to help revive the East Coast herring industry. **Steve Snelling** charts the remarkable story of Madame Prunier's fabulous trophy and the dream that faded.

The image is as powerful as it is poignant. It emerges from the mists of time like a distant dream of a vanished era when the great herring harvest was in full cry and autumn nights were a frenzy of activity as a vast fleet of sail and steam drifters criss-crossed one of the richest fishing grounds in the world.

From the Dowsing, via the Cromer Knoll, the Winterton Twenties, Hinder and Gabbard and the renowned Smith's Knoll, to the waters beyond Southwold, boats scurried in a race to shoot nets in the best positions to garner the biggest catches.

The lucky, or more skilfully skippered, ones laid claim to the most coveted stretches of sea while the remainder fanned out in every direction, spreading an estimated 3,000 miles of nets in which to trap their hapless quarry.

Years after, when that once-proud fleet had shrunk to a mere shadow of its former glory, a venerable fisheries officer scanned the hazy horizon of cluttered memory to picture again that lost heyday before the first world war.

"The scene by night was as from fantastic fairy land," he wrote. "Myriads of lights - red and green navigation, masthead and riding, and thousands of brilliant acetylene deck lights and flares - flooded the seas and glowed into the skies, paling the strongest moonlight..."

Among a kaleidoscope of recaptured images was one of the drifter crews. They were working like fury, "shooting gear, snatching brief rests and then, hour after hour, hauling, manhandling every shimmering netful of fish". Finally, their wearying night's work done and their holds crammed with "glowing iridescent herring", they could think of home.

Within an hour or two, as the sun lined the "grey troubling waters" with shaken light and the twinkling lights of the fleet faded one by one, they were nudging the quay heads once more and the labour of landing the catches had begun to the raucous accompaniment of swarms of shrieking gulls.

Technological advances aside, it was a pattern of life recognisable to generations of Lowestoft and Yarmouth fishermen into the 1960s, only by then the herring

stocks which had sustained two local coastal communities for centuries were in terminal decline.

As catches fell and the number of fishing vessels dwindled, the collapse of an industry was mirrored in the demise of its most prized and prestigious honour, the fabulous Prunier Trophy awarded annually for the best catch of herring taken in a single night during the East Anglian season by drifters operating out of Lowestoft and Yarmouth.

For the best part of 30 years, the distinctively-sculpted marble hand grasping a solitary herring had seemed an heroic symbol not just of an industry but for a way of life. Regarded as something akin to the 'FA Cup of fishing', its winners were lauded at glittering presentations where guests included aristocrats and royalty, generals and politicians.

But all that came to an end in the autumn of 1966 when Charles Duthie, skipper of the Scottish drifter *Tea Rose*, became the last holder of the famous old "troffee". Though no one knew it at the time, the final presentation would prove less a celebration than a lament for the passing of a grand, if short-lived, tradition.

It was all a far cry from the fond hopes that swilled around the industry in the wake of the award's institution 75 years ago.

Launched with a considerable fanfare in 1936, it was intended to revitalise a depressed herring industry which, after years of languishing in the doldrums, was, according to Lowestoft-based historian Malcolm White, already in a "parlous state".

Strangely, however, the inspiration for an award destined to become one of British fishing's highest honours came not from within the industry itself, but from a restaurateur - and a French woman restaurateur at that!

Madame Simone Barnagaud-Prunier, grand daughter of the founder of the world famous Parisian restaurant *Maison Prunier*, made it her personal mission in life to popularise a fish about which the British appeared to care little unless it was smoked and served up as a kipper.

In his book *Herrings, Drifters and the Prunier Trophy*, Malcolm White has charted the remarkable story of the award from its unlikely beginnings in London's

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Jumbo catch: the Prunier Trophy winning crew of the *Suffolk Warrior* in 1964 with skipper 'Jumbo'

Last hurrah fo

swanky St James' Street where a new Prunier's opened its doors to a largely upmarket clientele in 1935.

Specialising in succulent dishes that used such 'rough' fish as herring, mackerel, John Dory, hake and skate, as their base, the elegant Madame Prunier managed to persuade fashionable diners in London not merely to ask for herring but to actually enjoy eating it.

But having made her home in England, she was "surprised" to discover that the great British public did not share her enthusiasm for a fish some continental gourmets regarded as the 'King of Fish'.

"Various reasons were put forward for the herring's relative unpopularity," says Malcolm. "It was suggested that many people considered it 'cheap and common' while others thought it 'too bony'. Either way, most people seemed to prefer the kind of white fish they mostly had with their 'fish and chips'."

The result, he notes, was that "many hundreds of thousands of herring were being thrown back into the sea unwanted,

or were being reduced to fish meal for use in animal feed or fertiliser... having been sold off at a very low price".

Madame Prunier was appalled but undeterred. Having already worked a minor culinary miracle in the eyes of some British observers, she set about conjuring another by trying to change the dining habits of a nation.

Her far-sighted plan was to raise public awareness about the quality of the herring being caught off the East Anglian coast. She regarded them as the "finest" of their kind, full of spawn and nutritional value. All she needed was a gimmick to grab people's attention and to excite the media. And so, following meetings with industry leaders and support from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Prunier Herring Trophy was born.

In keeping with the East Anglian season, the competition ran from October 5 to November 28, a period it roughly adhered to throughout its existence, and culminated in a ceremonial luncheon at Prunier's London restaurant where the



Herring heyday: Steam drifters cram the quays at Great Yarmouth in the early years of the 20th century. Far left: Even then it was in decline, the astonishing haul of the 'silver darlings' can be seen in this 1953 picture.

Fiske, third from right, above left, herring laying by side of docks at Great Yarmouth.

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trophy would be presented together with a £25 prize and a distinctive weather vane to be displayed on the victorious drifter's fore or mizzen mast.

The inaugural winner, with a catch of 231 crans landed at Yarmouth, was Joseph Mair, skipper of the Banff-based Boy Andrew and the first of nine Scottish fishermen to claim the trophy.

Although the outbreak of the second world war interrupted proceedings and, incidentally, brought to a halt a run of Lowestoft successes, the Prunier Trophy had well and truly arrived, having captured the imagination of fishermen and landlubbers alike.

The late, lamented Lowestoft newspaper columnist Trevor Westgate once recalled how at the height of the season, around the time of October full moon which traditionally produced the best hauls, "word of a potential winning catch would always draw crowds of onlookers to the pier heads or the quayside to see the drifter concerned enter harbour".

One of the biggest gatherings was to

welcome home the Lord Hood, weighed down with what was for Lowestoft a record-breaking Prunier-winning haul of 314½ crans of herring. Among the hundreds of spectators was a young Malcolm White who had been taken by his parents to watch a piece of fishing history.

"Events like that were special," he recalls. "I can remember as a boy being taken down to watch the drifters sailing out as a fleet on Sunday mornings. It was always an occasion with a tremendous atmosphere. There'd be smoke everywhere, the mizzen masts would be hoisted and there was the screech of the gulls and the slop of the water as the drifters went past. It was something you'll never see again. They were truly memorable times."

But of them all, few were as unforgettable as the Lord Hood's much-heralded arrival on October 28, 1952. What Madame Prunier called "an astonishing voyage" was no exaggeration. When the black and red-funnelled steam drifter crept into port, laden to the rails and with only nine inches of free-board, she could barely

make two knots. Some 15 hours of hauling had been followed by an epic of patient and skilful seamanship as her 32-year-old home-grown skipper Ernest Thompson took 22 hours to bring her to port through rough seas without the loss of any gear.

It was the stuff of fishing legend, though the skipper's own verdict was characteristically blunt. "These big shots are a matter of luck," he declared.

In fact, Thompson chalked up a second Prunier triumph six years later as skipper of the trawler/drifter St Luke, although this time his catch was little more than half his earlier winning haul and at 162¾ crans was the second lowest ever to secure the trophy.

His double success was unparalleled in the competition's history, though it was an achievement that might have been matched by Ernest 'Jumbo' Fiske. Widely regarded as one of the greatest skippers of his generation, 'Jumbo' was a giant of a man who dealt in big catches at a time when herring was king no more and the local fishing industry, particularly at Yarmouth, was in sharp decline.

He had already been denied the trophy once through being diverted to Ymuiden in 1957 with what would have been a Prunier-winning haul when he enjoyed his finest hour aboard the drifter/trawler Suffolk Warrior. Following an 11-hour haul some 20 miles north east of the Smith's Knoll light vessel, he put into Yarmouth with 276½ crans - or, at least, that was the figure officially recorded.

Truth was, it should have been a bit higher. A couple of decades later, journalist Trevor Westgate recalled walking along the quay to congratulate 'Jumbo'. "Chuck your bag down here, boy," said 'Jumbo'... And I staggered back to the office to share out a stone or so of herring from the winning haul!"

'Jumbo' Fiske, who was subsequently made a MBE for services to the British fishing industry, was just one among a long list of colourful characters to feature on the Prunier roll of honour.

They included men like Stan 'Bounty' Hewitt, whose 1962 success at the age of 66 capped a 52-year seagoing career; Leo Borrett, who earned his prize the hard way in heavy seas whipped by gale-force winds, and the Peterhead brothers George and Peter Forman, the last-named of whom achieved the biggest catch in the competition's history when he brought 323½ crans of herring into Yarmouth in the autumn season of 1953.

And then there was George Draper.

The 44-year-old skipper of the Lowestoft drifter Dauntless Star had gone to sea as an 11-year-old and added the Prunier prize to the Distinguished Service Cross he earned during the second world war. Of his haul from the edge of the Well Hole, some 40 miles off the Haisbro' Light, he maintained: "We didn't expect anything like a catch of close on 190 crans. That night must have been a lucky one because Henrietta Spashett, which was fishing on our beam, had 170 crans, and Dick Whittington, which was on our quarter, hauled 169."

Typically modest though his comments were, Malcolm White begs to differ. Fortune may have played a part in the successes, but he believes much more was due to the crew's skill and judgment.

In the end, however, no amount of skill or technology could compensate for the shortage of herring in inshore waters where stocks had been plundered.

Seven years after Madame Prunier handed over control of "her" trophy to the Herring Industry Board, catches were considered so low as to be unworthy of honour and no claims were submitted. The following year Fraserburgh-based skipper Charles Duthie became the 23rd and last holder of the trophy with a haul of just over 128 crans.

By 1969, three years after the final Prunier Trophy competition, a thousand years of herring fishing at Yarmouth came to an end and an industry which once drew more than a thousand drifters to the port disappeared with it. Trawling helped keep the neighbouring port of Lowestoft alive for another 20 years, but Madame Prunier's dream of producing greater sales would never be realised.

That she had succeeded in raising the profile of the industry was undeniable, but all the column inches and hours of radio airtime counted for little when there was nothing left to catch.

"To many people," says Malcolm White, "the Prunier was a five-minute wonder in terms of the history of herring fishing. It lasted just 30 years and even when it began the industry was in decline and had been for some time."

As for the trophy itself, it found its way into Lowestoft Maritime Museum where it is still displayed.

Herrings, Drifters and the Prunier Trophy, by Malcolm R White, is published by Coastal Publications, priced £11.99. For more details visit: www.coastalpublications.co.uk