The Hook

The long name point of Hook (an old English word meaning a promontory almost surrounded by the sea, located in south-west county Wexford, forms the eastern shore of Waterford Harbour. Because of its peninsular nature, the sea dominated everyday life. Fishing, both sea and shore-based, was an essential activity for food and profit, as was harvesting of seaweed and shellfish from the shoreline. Ships arriving at the ports offered casual work to day labourers.

The importance of the seashore to the community was reflected in the complicated system of coastal place names which evolved over the years. Many of these were in Irish, an indication that their origins go back at least to the mid-eighteenth century when Irish was still spoken in the region. These place-names, now in danger of being lost, contain considerable information of a social and cultural nature.

The Hook lighthouse was established in 1794, at a time when Ireland was still divided into counties. This was a period of economic hardship and emigration. The Hook, with its rich history and traditional maritime traditions, is an important example of this social and cultural heritage.

Recording our Maritime Heritage

Until the late twentieth century people from the Hook frequently sailed on the rocks along the shore. Some, out of habit, looked for 'wreck' (material from shipwrecks washed ashore) or searched the clifftops, others enjoyed walking by the sea in summer or winter. Many continued to interact with the seashore declined and the coastal zone dominated everyday life. Fishing, both sea and shore-based, was an essential activity for food and profit, as was harvesting of seaweed and shellfish from the shoreline. Ships arriving at the ports offered casual work to day labourers.

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FURTHER INFORMATION
Billy Coffey, The Hook Peninsula (Cork University Press, 2004)

Sea Fishing

The skills and crafts connected with fishing were widely practiced. The tradition of building small boats covered with tarred canvas, known as 'junks', survived until recent times. Men rowed long distances to fish the 'marks' which had been discovered over the years, and to set lobster pots made from pliable willow branches (salters). Boats were kept at Slade and at Ballyferring (Little Bay) in Churchtown, as they are at the present time. The 'marks', identified by using natural and man-made features in the landscape as co-ordinates, allowed fishermen to create a micro-navigation system which gave them a mental map of their movements on the sea. This maritime geography included a nomenclature for different parts of the sea, particularly areas where certain species of fish could be caught.

These names, which sometimes referred to prominent landmarks or to underwater features, included The Lump, The Lock, The Big Ground, and Short Head. Fish were also caught in the food-rich 'scarf' created by the meeting of two currents at the well-defined meeting of river and sea off the point of Hook.

Lobsters have a scavenging diet and can defend themselves with powerful pincers. Caves, crevices and holes provide suitable habitats for lobsters around the coast of Ireland. (BioMar)

The Hook, County Wexford

The Maritime Heritage of a Coastal Community

The Hook Lighthouse is one of the oldest intact, operational lighthouses in the world. Following the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland, William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke and Lord of Leinster, built the Tower of Hook as a light tower and landmark to guide shipping to his port of New Ross, founded in the early thirteenth century on the River Barrow. According to tradition, monks from a nearby monastery, founded in the early thirteenth century on the River Barrow, who were installed as the first lightkeepers, had maintained a warning beacon on the rocky promontory for centuries. The beacon consisted of a fire until 1771 when a lighthouse oil was installed. Following automation in 1996, the complex was made available by the Commissioners of Irish Lights to be operated as a Visitor's Centre, with guided tours of the medical tower.
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Seagrass (seaweed) were removed from the rocks, with an implement called a scian trá (a strand knife). Bárnachs (limpets) were removed from the rocks with an implement called a trá (a seashore knocker) (Patrick Byrne)

In Churchtown, as they are at the present time. The ‘marks’, identified by using natural and man-made features in the landscape as co-ordinates, allowed fishermen to create a micro-navigation system which gave them a mental map of their movements on the sea. This maritime geography included a nomenclature for different parts of the sea, particularly areas where certain species of fish could be caught.

These names, which sometimes referred to prominent landmarks or underwater features, included The Lump, The Old Grounds, The Big Rock, The Race, The Bend, The West End Ground and Short Head. Fish were also caught in the food-rich ‘scarf’ created by the meeting of two currents at the well-defined meeting of river and sea off the point of Hook.

Barnachs (laminaria) were removed from the rocks, with an implement called a strandknife. Seagrass (seaweed), which allowed the lobster to enter but not to leave. (Patrick Byrne)

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Seagrass (seaweed) were removed from the rocks, with an implement called a strandknife. Seagrass (seaweed), which allowed the lobster to enter but not to leave. (Patrick Byrne)

Lobster pots were made to a traditional design using iron, copper, silver or even gold alloyed material. The ‘neck’ was protected by a ‘trigger’, which allowed the lobster to enter but not to leave.

The Medieval Tower of Hook is one of the oldest lighthouses in the world. Hook Lighthouse is one of the oldest intact, operational lighthouses in the world. Following the arrival of the Anglo-Norman in Ireland, William Marshal, earl of Pembroke and lord of leinster, built the Tower of Hook as a light tower and landmark to guide shipping to his port of New Ross, founded in the early fourteenth century on the River Barrow. According to tradition, men from a nearby monastery, who were installed as the first lighthousekeepers, had maintained a warm beacon on the rocky peninsula for centuries. The beacon consisted of a fire until 1717 when a keeping whale oil was installed. Following automation in 1996, the complex was made available by the Commissioners of Irish Lights to be operated as a Visitors’ Centre, with guided tours of the medical tower.
**Hobblers and joutlers**

Apart from fishing, other traditional occupations on the Hook peninsula depended on the sea. Hardy individuals, known as hobblers, competed for work on ships while they were in port. Enduring considerable hardship they slept overnight in their small boats. Fish-buyers, known as ‘joutlers’, were a familiar sight in the small harbours around the peninsula. The hobblers depended on these individuals to buy their daily catch of mackerel, pollock or cod. Joutlers usually sold the fish from door to door in the adjacent hinterland, but some sold from stalls on the quay of Ross.

**Coastal Placenames**

The value of the seashore as a conceptual resource in the Hook led to the creation of an intricate system of coastal place names of complex origin, many of which reflect the nature of the knowledge of the seashore. Some of these names are forgotten and some could eventually become extinct.

**Shore fishing**

Although fishing was a large-scale industry, only the lucky few had access to boats. However, their method of catching fish closely resembled the sport of fishing. Different parts of the county were known for different types of fishing: South Hook peninsula, for example, was known for herring fishing. The north sea and the coastal areas were known for cod fishing.

**Coastal place names**

Until the late twentieth century, every rock and inlet around the Hook was identified by a very precise naming system. This method of identification was essential for the local community as the seashore made a vital contribution to everyday life. This intensive exploitation of the seashore resulted in the evolution of a sophisticated naming system which allowed any location on the coast to be instantly identified.

**Name associations**

Most of the coastal names are concentrated in the southern region of the Hook, where the majority of the population (252 people in 1841; about 120 at present) lived. These names are a mixture of Irish and English; the Irish word carrag (a rock) occurs frequently and the channels in between are referred to as ‘gulfs’, ‘chans’ or ‘holes’. Most of these local place-names have never been recorded and for the purposes of this leaflet are spelled phonetically.

Over the centuries the names of many local people were associated with coastal features. Some of these are reminders of a time when quarrying was engaged in on a large scale, to supply rock for the many limekilns in the district. Was the Johnny who quarried Johnny’s Rock out of solid rock, or the Charlie who gave his name to Charlie’s Chans? Other names are more mysterious. Is there a hint of Viking origin in the name ‘Hobblers’? Was the salmon whose boat was wrecked at Solomon’s Boat? Who was the paper who made the rocks into his music at Piper’s Hole near the lighthouse?

Other place names refer to divergent activities: Tobar na Staghere (Well of the steps), Hayrick Bay, Con Óg, ‘the rabbit’, and Lough Tormaich (a pool where sheep were washed). Some names can be deceptive: Carrag Ahoy was originally Carrag an Aith (Limekiln Rock) and not a place from which boats were hailed.

**Descriptive names**

Many names are descriptive and indicate the shape and appearance of the places they refer to: Base thing (little bay) of Carraig a’ Bheatha where boats were kept on the Churchtown side of the headland. Other names include Black Chan, the Round Bay, and Carrag-a-thiris hole. Gola Ean, the back of the foot splay describes a small ‘chan’ near the point of the headland and Selmody-gou is the name of a rock accessible only at low spring tide.

**The Seashore**

The seashore between the high water and low-water marks, known as the strand, was also an important food resource, with most of the gathering being done by women. Bánmac (black-tide) and pheahuins (patchín: pectinids) were collected as food for humans and ducks. Bánmac were removed from the rocks with an implement called a bán tí (a strand knife). Crabs were found in ‘crab hols’, which could be scavenged at low tide. Dlíth (dulse), an edible seaweed, was also collected to supplement a diet of fish and potatoes. Carrigreen moss was gathered as a cash crop. An early summer storm was welcomed, at least by farmers, as this brought the first crop of seaweed (called weed) on to the beaches, where it was collected for use as a fertilizer. Whelk-hunting also played an important part in the local economy. It was the principal source of timber for building and furniture, as well as firewood.

**Smugglers, pirates and shipwrecks**

The origins of the names Pteigewer, Tantarara and Pockhair are difficult to trace back to their true sources. The Earl of Sandwich was the landing place of four Irish pirates who robbed Spanish ships. The origins of the names Petiegewer, Tantarara and Pockhair remain obscure. Is there a hint of Viking origin in the name ‘Hobblers’? Was the salmon whose boat was wrecked at Solomon’s Boat? Who was the paper who made the rocks into his music at Piper’s Hole near the lighthouse?

As the seashore was a communal resource, many of the names have been forgotten and could eventually become extinct.

The Maritime Heritage of The Hook

The Seashore

Shore fishing

Coastal place names

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