

Solway Firth Partnership Conference February 2010

Pick 'n' Mix session 3

The Port of Kirkcudbright: 800 years of trade, fishing and leisure David R Collin: Chairman, Kirkcudbright History Society, sailor and former RNLI crewman

This is an overview of the presentation and questions and answers in this session, and represent the views of the presenter and audience; the views expressed here are not necessarily those of Solway Firth Partnership. Whilst every effort has been made to produce an accurate transcript of events, the Partnership cannot be held responsible for any errors made in the production of this account.

Kirkcudbright port has been active for the last 800 years. Many would assert that Kirkcudbright is not an artist's town with a fishing history but is in fact a fishing town with an artistic heritage. Kirkcudbright is a sea port on the North Irish Sea – it is not in the Solway Firth! Its history includes smuggling, and revenue cutters built in Kirkcudbright were the best and fastest to catch smugglers. In the 19th Century there was a boom in the local herring industry, as well as shrimp and oyster fisheries. In 1956 the harbour opened up to coastal tankers and later John King (senior) started lobster fishing in smacks while 'Young John' later moved on to fishing scallops. In the 1970s 24 trawlers were based in Kirkcudbright and these were great years for the fleet; there were also up to 60 tankers regularly seen.

Today, around 12 vessels are based at the port, with some Polish seamen taking on jobs as crew. Visitor traffic is also increasing as a result of the marina developments in Kirkcudbright as well as at Douglas, Maryport and Whitehaven. Local fishermen are far better versed with conservation issues than many people think and have been actively exploring new designs for more environmentally friendly dredges. Generally, both recreational and commercial users are reasonably happy with the port's facilities.

Points raised in audience discussion:

- Fishing and leisure are keeping the port alive and vibrant, and Kirkcudbright is also home to one of a series of RNLI stations along the Solway.
- Shrimping, musselling, scalloping and cockling industries have also added to the economy of Kirkcudbright.
- It is expensive for large vessels to visit ports, for example to bring in large sailing vessels as an attraction.
- Working ports may not necessarily want to be advertised as tourist attractions due to health and safety restrictions and vessel security restrictions on larger working vessels, tankers, bulk carriers etc.
- Dalbeattie Port restoration – a large ship visited as a tourist attraction. Dalbeattie Initiative had applied to 'People's Millions' to build a ship of stone using granite from the local quarry.
- There is a case for a maritime museum in Kirkcudbright – the Stewartry museum is restricted for space but lots of empty buildings could be renovated.
- The voyages of scallopers could be tagged like the Svalbard geese (larger vessels are already tracked)
- Use of an old vessel as a floating museum – felt to be prohibitively expensive to maintain.

Q: A few years ago there was there not mention of a hovercraft service from Kirkcudbright to Maryport?

A: There has been interest in the past but nothing came of the proposal, or enough people willing to make the journey. There has been a paddle steamer service in the past to Maryport and back. At Glencaple a local enthusiast owned a hovercraft but the environmental impact on wildlife and birds is huge so the hovercraft had to be sold. There was also a proposal for a link from Southernness some years ago. There are also issues with the old bridge in Kirkcudbright which has been reinforced and improved but is still ugly – and hit on occasions by tankers and fishing vessels.

Q: What happens to the shells of harvested shellfish?

A: They are broken up and laid on the land (if washed and cleaned) or sent to garden centres, landfill etc. Unwashed shells are also disposed of at sea and could result in formation of new scallop beds. Shells are also used in rendering for buildings. However, the processor in Kirkcudbright would welcome any new suggestions.

Q: Where can boat trips out to sea be run from?

A: The Lovely Nellie from Kirkcudbright takes trips out but can only take 12 passengers due to stringent legislation. The owner now has the Dundrennan Range safety contract so may not be continuing with boat trips from Kirkcudbright.

Q: Silloth/Maryport excursions across the Solway – are they not of interest to tourists?

A: Tidal restrictions won't allow day trips. Balmoral trips to the Isle of Man have been mentioned. Mull of Galloway launches can show people things from a seaward perspective but there are health and safety challenges in finding safe launch points. Large capital outlay and erratic income makes these types of businesses commercially risky.

Q: There are Army firing range restrictions: does this impact on tourists?

A: There have not been problems and this should continue to be the case so long as yachtsmen and fishermen abide by restrictions and advice given by the Range.