# 2. Catalogue of Fish

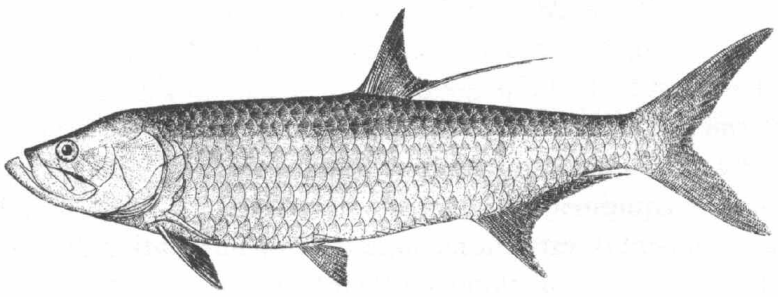
## *The Herring and Its Relations*

The Order *Clupeiformes*, which comprises the herring family and its relations, constitutes what is probably the most important group of food fish in the world.

The clupeoid or herring-like fish all have a single dorsal fin, placed near the middle of the body. They have no lateral line, but a network of sensory canals just under the skin of the head, which seems to fulfil a similar function. Most of them travel in huge shoals.

The family includes some species which spawn in, and are usually taken in, fresh water. These are the shad and their relations. Their abundance, indeed survival, depends on the state of the rivers in which they reproduce themselves. There are now far fewer shad to be had in Europe; but on the American side of the Atlantic they continue to be numerous and important as food.

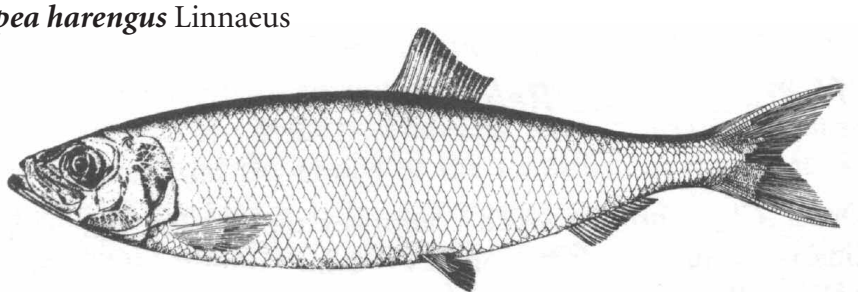
I should also mention here three fish which are related to the herring and which stray north as far as Cape Cod from the warmer waters where they really belong. These are ***Megalops atlanticus*** Valenciennes, the TARPON, a magnificent sporting fish which is illustrated at the foot of the page; ***Elops saurus*** Linnaeus, the ten-pounder; and ***Albula vulpes*** (Linnaeus), the bonefish. The first two belong to the family *Elopidae*, the last to the family *Albulidae*. None of them is important as a food fish in our area, but North American anglers take them from time to time, especially in the summer months.



## HERRING

Family *Clupeidae*

***Clupea harengus*** Linnaeus



REMARKS Maximum length 40 cm, but the usual adult length is about 20 to 25 cm. The back is dark blue, shading to silvery white below, sometimes with golden or reddish tints.

The species is distributed right across the North Atlantic, down to the north of France on one side and Chesapeake Bay on the other, but may be divided into different races or populations which belong to different areas and exhibit minor variations. One such race, the Baltic herring, seems to me to deserve separate treatment and is described on page 29.

*Spanish:* Arenque
*French:* Hareng
*Dutch:* Haring
*German:* Hering
*Polish:* Sledź
*Russian:* Sel'd'
*Finnish:* Silli, Silakka
*Swedish:* Sill
*Norwegian:* Sild
*Danish:* Sild
*Icelandic:* Síld, Hafsíld
*Other:* Scadán (Irish); Ysgadenyn, Pennog (Welsh); Ammassassuaq (Greenlandic); Sild (Faeroese)

Supplies of herring, the most important clupeoid fish in European waters, have fluctuated in a bewildering way for as far back as any records exist, for example in the era of the Hanseatic League. This is a biological phenomenon. But herring have also been affected in this century by overexploitation; and this seems to be the primary cause of the dramatic decline of the herring fishery in many countries. The North Sea herring stock is the most severely affected. The herring catch fell by half from the 1950s to the 1960s. Boats had to be laid up, or used for other purposes (like many of the vessels belonging to the great Scheveningen fleet, which now take tourists out for a day's sport fishing), or they had to find new fishing grounds. Mallaig, on the west coast of Scotland, has proved to be a good base for catching herring in quantities which the fishermen there had never dreamed of before. But the general picture is one of dwindling stocks being pursued by fewer and fewer boats with more and more sophisticated equipment; and of an increasing tendency to inhibit their activities by governmental restrictions, in an attempt to restore stocks to something like their former level.

There are important commercial fisheries for the herring in Canada and New England. In New Brunswick and Maine immature herring are canned as

'sardines'. The pioneer of this industry was a Mr George Burnham of Portland, who observed that myriads of small herring were caught annually at Eastport, Maine, and who made the first experiments in canning them, using French techniques, in the 1860s. However, the so-called 'Russian sardines', which were young herring canned in and imported from Germany, continued to hold the New York market until, in the following decade, German ports were blockaded by the French Navy and the traffic was halted. Eastport 'sardines' were then canned in a more successful way and captured the market.

One odd thing about the herring was described thus by Francis Day (*The Fishes of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1880–84): 'The noise made by herrings when captured is peculiar, and has been likened to various things – to the cry of a mouse, to the word "cheese", a sneeze, or a squeak …' This noise is thought to be the result of air being expelled from the air bladder.

Day, whose lengthy and serious work is pleasantly spiced with material of an entertaining nature, also tells us that a Manxman going to fish for herring would always take a dead wren with him. The logic behind this was that there had been a sea-spirit which haunted herring tackle and brought on storms, but which had finally changed itself into a wren and flown off; wherefore the presence of a dead wren signified that all would be well.

CUISINE The flesh of the herring is relatively fat and lends itself well to pickling. But it is not unduly fat, and it is perfectly in order to fry herrings. Coating them with oatmeal first, in the Scots fashion, seems to me to produce the best results. Serve boiled, not fried potatoes with them.

Herrings may also be grilled and baked; but they are not suitable for poaching or steaming. Kippers, however, can be cooked by pouring boiling water over them and letting them stand for a few minutes, with a weight or grid holding them down flat. It is well to place a pat of butter or margarine on each kipper fillet when serving them after they have been cooked in this way, or grilled, or baked. Ambrose Heath gives over two dozen recipes for kippers in his useful little book on *Herrings, Bloaters and Kippers*, including good instructions for making a kipper mousse. Since his book came out (in 1954) kipper pâté has become more popular, and deservedly so; but kippers have, alas, become more expensive.

RECIPES (see also recipes for Baltic herring listed on page 29)

*Shetland Herring Girls in the First World War – A Portrait*

'Jackie and Lizzie lived at The Ark, Haroldswick, and during the summer season, i.e., mid-May to end September would work as gutter girls at the herring stations at Baltasound. A typical week during the busiest time would cause a riot nowadays. They would get up at 4 a.m., dress and take baked bread and fresh milk with them to Baltasound, about an hour's walk, to their station below Uregarth. Here they shared a room with six girls in one of the wooden blocks of houses; 16 rooms in a block so they could hold 96 girls. Here they changed into their working clothes: Baltic boots (leather up to the thighs), cut-off stockings to protect legs above boots to as high as they would go, a short skirt above the knees, covered with a black oilskin coat with bib, straps and a gathered skirt to cover the tops of their boots. A red ribbed jersey with short sleeves and head scarf tied at the back with no hair showing. Their rig was now complete except for the bandages covering their hands for protection and made from flour bags. There was normally no time to take these off for meals and [they] might be on till they finished work at midnight.

'While Gutting the girls worked in pairs with another one packing. The fish were emptied into farlings – big boxes on stands about three feet wide and about four farlings to a station. Each girl would take a fish and with one movement slit and remove the guts and put it in which ever tub it was graded for – Fulls, Mediums, Madjes (empty herring), Matties (the smallest) and Spent (no good). If the heads were not intact, the eyes not right or anything else they were no good for salting. They were then packed into the appropriate barrels.

'The crew of three got paid 1s. for each barrel of herring gutted and packed – or fourpence each girl. A good crew could work three barrels per hour – there would be approximately 900 herring in a barrel. Some girls could gut at the rate of 40 herring a minute . . . At the end of each week – usually midnight on Saturday, the girls would finish and go home for Sunday. Walking back down the Setter road they would be practically walking in their sleep, and in bed instead of counting sheep to go to sleep it would be herring . . .'

(Charles Sandison, *Unst: my island home and its story,* Shetland Times, Lerwick, 1968.)


These drawings show a selection of the brand marks which used to appear on the tops of herring barrels. The left-hand brand was, of course, the best.

## BALTIC HERRING

REMARKS As I explained on page 26, the Baltic herring is merely a subspecies. Common names used in the Baltic countries generally are given on that page. Names used in particular of the Baltic variety are: Lithuanian, silkė; Latvian, reie; Estonian, silk or räim; Russian, salaka; Swedish, Strömming.

The distinguishing features of the Baltic herring are that it is smaller than the Atlantic herring and has a lower fat content. Even within the Baltic, different populations can be distinguished; but this general statement is true of them all.

CUISINE In the past, the Baltic herring was a staple food of the Baltic peoples and numerous different ways of curing it, so that it could be eaten inland, and all round the year, were devised. It is still a staple food, although no longer so dominant a feature of the diet, and most of the cures have survived because people have become used to the distinctive tastes which they impart. Salted Baltic herring is widely available. A good way of desalting it, practised in Finland, is to soak it in milk overnight. It may then be fried or grilled and served with small new potatoes in a cream and dill sauce – delicious!

Pickled herring is also very popular, in scores of different preparations. Perhaps the most remarkable of the cures, however, is the fermentation which produces the Swedish Surströmming (page 368).

The list of recipes below looks formidably long, but constitutes no more than a tiny proportion of those practised. I was told in Finland that in certain villages on the Bothnian coast a girl is judged ready for marriage when she is capable of preparing Baltic herring in twenty-five different ways. Apparently she is likely to attain this degree of prowess at about the age of twenty. But she can go much further. I have several books which contain more than 150 recipes each for Baltic herring.

RECIPES (see also recipes for Atlantic herring listed on page 27)

## WHITEBAIT

What is whitebait? People still ask the question. So far as Britain is concerned, it can be answered in two lines by saying that the name applies to the fry of *various* clupeoid fish, notably the herring and the sprat, and often mixed together. But the question used to cause great perplexity.

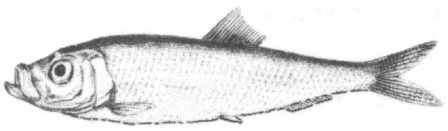
Whitebait are tiny fish, transparent or silver-white, which used to be fished in huge quantities in the tidal waters of the Thames, and elsewhere. Their size varies now, as it did in the past; but the figure of 180 to the pound weight may be taken as typical. Dr James Murie, in his *Report on the Sea Fisheries and Fishing Industries of the Thames Estuary* (1903), gave painstaking analyses of the contents of boxes of whitebait, and showed that as many as thirty-two different species might be found therein. The fry of twenty-one different fish, including eels, plaice and lumpfish, turned up from time to time, together with various shrimps, crabs, octopus and even jellyfish! But these intruders were few in number, compared with the tiny herrings and sprats.

Whitebait appeared on an English menu as long ago as 1612, although Buckland (*The Natural History of British Fishes*, 1883) records a claim that it was Richard Cannon of Blackwall who, in 1780, first persuaded the local tavern keepers to serve whitebait dinners regularly. Cannon had problems with the Thames authorities, who argued, correctly, that the practice involved the consumption of the fry of herrings and sprats. But he convinced the Lord Mayor of London that whitebait were a distinct species; and many natural historians shared this view, while arguing spiritedly among themselves about how to classify it. The Frenchman Valenciennes even instituted a new genus, *Rogenia*, to accommodate the species.

While the controversy raged, whitebait became more and more popular, so much so that Buckland could describe it as being an essential food for Londoners. The season ran from about February until August and not only engaged the attention of the wealthy and fashionable but would also provoke what one author called 'a vast resort of the lower order of epicures' to the taverns at which freshly caught whitebait were served.

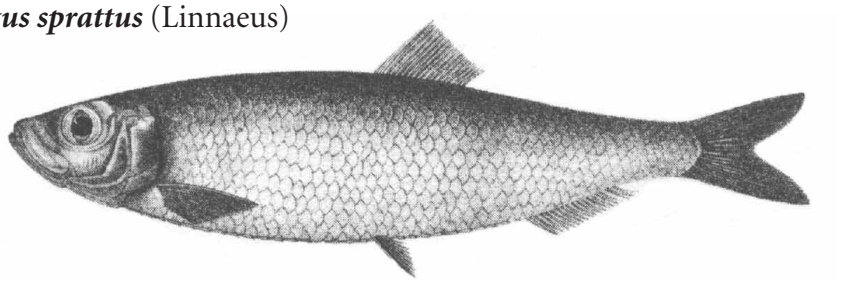
In the United States, especially in New England and Long Island, whitebait are usually silversides (page 79) or sand-eels (page 122).

Parnell (*Fishes of the Firth of Forth*, 1838) was among those who regarded whitebait as a distinct species. This is the drawing which he published in support of his view.



SPRAT Family *Clupeidae*

***Sprattus sprattus*** (Linnaeus)



REMARKS Maximum length 16 cm. The back is blue or bluish green, the sides and belly silvery. The lower jaw projects beyond the upper, giving the mouth an upwards tilt. The belly is sharply keeled, with a line of spiny scales running from throat to vent.

This small fish is a coastal species which can survive in waters of low salinity such as those of the Baltic (where it occurs in the form of a sub-species, ***Sprattus sprattus balticus***). It ranges from Norway to the Mediterranean.

As Wheeler (*The Fishes of the British Isles and North West Europe*, 1969) points out: 'In Norway conditions are ideal for a special sprat fishery where the fish are trapped in the long, narrow fjords by means of nets, then driven into keeping pens until required for the canning factories. There are two distinctive products made from sprats (both in Norway and Sweden): 'sardiner' are smoked and canned in olive oil or tomato sauce. For legal reasons they are labelled 'brisling', but 'sardiner' is still the more familiar term.

'Ansjos'/'ansjovis' (in Norwegian/Swedish) are cured in a spicy brine. A typical spice mixture would be e.g. salt, sugar, black pepper, cloves, allspice, ginger, marjoram, bay leaf, red sanders.

*Portuguese:* Espadilha, Lavadilha
*Spanish:* Espadín
*French:* Sprat, Esprot
*Dutch:* Sprot
*German:* Sprotte, Sprot
*Polish:* Szprot
*Russian:* Shprot
*Finnish:* Kilohaili
*Swedish:* Skarpsill, Vassbuk
*Norwegian:* Brisling
*Danish:* Brisling
*Other:* Silkele (Lithuanian); Kilu (Estonian); Garvie (Scottish)

CUISINE AND RECIPE As for the sardine/pilchard (page 39). Very small sprats are 'whitebait', as explained on page 30.

In Holland and Belgium small bundles of lightly smoked sprats are offered for sale at a low price. They are to be skinned before being eaten.

In Germany the sprats smoked at Kiel, known as Kieler Sprotten, are an established delicacy. They are hot-smoked, whole, and are consumed like Bucklinge (page 324).

A recipe for an Estonian sprat pâté is given on page 356. I have also come across a Polish one, quite similar but incorporating chopped black olives.