

## **Birth of a Village**

Exhibition of the Reykjanes Local History Museum



## **Fishing Season**

Over the centuries people travelled here on foot, on horseback or by sea, to the Suðurnes region, for the annual fishing season. Most would join the crews of fishing boats, while others came to the fishing stations to buy and sell various commodities. People gathered here from all parts of Iceland, and even from abroad, to stay for the weeks or months of the fishing season. Different groups came at different times of year – sometimes one after the other in succession. Local people carried on their lives as usual, or even travelled to other parts of the country for seasonal employment. Little clusters of houses expanded into hamlets and villages, and new communities came into existence, where life revolved around catching fish, then preparing it and selling it. And that gave rise to a community. That was the tenor of life in the Suðurnes region, down the centuries and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Life by the Sea**

Danish traders' buildings appeared among the lava fields: exotic and foreign, inhabited by people who spoke Danish and wore foreign clothing. Around them a community of Icelanders grew up. Some locals found work with the Danish merchants, and even worked their way up to respected and well-paid positions.

Most of the local people, however, lived in poverty, dependent upon the fisheries or employment with the village merchants. Many strove to earn a little extra, by building boats or furniture or making barrels or horseshoes; they built sea-walls, or worked as tailors, made fishing nets, knitted woollen socks and mittens, or worked loading and unloading ships, or gutting fish for sale.

It was a hard life; those who gutted, salted and dried fish, for instance, had to work out of doors in all weathers. The hardships took their toll on people's health: by middle age many were burned out and unable to work, or even disabled.



### Birth of a Village

Until the 18th century Keflavík was a farm; though a poor agricultural property, it had good fishing nearby. Until the 19th century Icelanders had only rowing boats for fishing, and so they could not travel far out to sea to fish. Keflavík was also a trading port. The farmstead buildings were thus not typical for an Icelandic farm.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Danish merchant Holger Jacobæus made his home at Keflavík with his family. Until that time, merchants had operated their businesses in Iceland only in the summer months, but now the Danish merchant company in Keflavík became a year-round enterprise, and a family home. Around the buildings of the Danish trading companies, Iceland's first villages developed. The Danish buildings varied; some were fine structures, which remain standing to this day. Clustered around the impressive Danish wooden buildings, Icelanders made their homes in small traditional houses of turf and stone. The lowly turf houses contrasted sharply with the lofty buildings of the Danish merchants.

These homes were known as *tómthús* (=empty houses), because their inhabitants had no livestock. A *tómthúsmaður* or "empty-house man" lived from hand to mouth, by fishing or other casual employment. In the old Icelandic society, the only security lay in owning land and livestock, and the landless lived in near-bondage to their masters on the farms. Those who dared leave the relative security of life on the farm to seek their fortune by the sea were regarded as a menace to the status quo. Only in the 1860s did the poor of Iceland gain the freedom to live where they wished.

In due course the villagers prospered enough to build larger homes – in some cases wooden houses – and they grew food in vegetable patches. Some even gained permission to keep a cow. *Icelandic society was taking its first steps from rural stasis to urban development.*



### **Iceland and the Outside World**

For nearly seven centuries Iceland was ruled by foreign kings – first Norwegian, then Danish. This long history has forged a close bond between Iceland and the other Nordic nations.

In the middle ages English and German seafarers came to Iceland, attracted mainly by the fisheries, but also to trade with Icelanders. The rivalry between English and German factions led to conflict and even bloodshed. In 1602 the King of Denmark imposed a trading monopoly in Iceland: Icelanders were permitted only to trade with Danish merchants, under strict rules. For nearly 200 years this highly restrictive system remained in force, until the monopoly was abolished in 1787. All trade remained in Danish hands, however, until 1855 when Free Trade was granted.

In Keflavík, Danish merchants retained a dominant position until well into the 20th century. The last of the Danish trading companies was the Duus company, which was sold in 1920.

With the introduction of Free Trade, Icelanders were able to take their destiny into their own hands. Icelandic businesses developed, and Icelanders also launched their first co-operative organisations, purchasing in bulk direct from abroad; these organisations would lead in due course to the development of a hugely successful co-operative movement.

### **Precious Fish**

Traditionally fish was caught on hook and line, but in the 18th century long-lines and nets were introduced. Fishing nets were a controversial innovation, as many Icelanders felt they would affect fish stocks.

In the Suðurnes region, a large-scale fishery operated, owned by the King of Iceland and Denmark. The size of fishing boats varied; in the village of Njarðvík the boats were generally small, as the fishing grounds were just off-shore. In the first half of the 19th century, Jón Sighvatsson of Ytri-Njarðvík built a schooner (sailing vessel) for his fishery. Few Icelanders owned schooners, and the early schooner fishery was mainly dominated by Danish merchants.

The Duus trading company operated many fishing schooners, which sailed from Reykjavík. The schooners required more developed harbour facilities than the traditional rowing-boats, which were designed to be easily beached.

Schooners revolutionised the Icelandic fisheries in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it became possible to go much farther in search of fish, and bring home bigger catches. With the development of the schooner fishery, fishing towns grew and flourished. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, motorisation of the fishing fleet and the introduction of trawlers gave another massive boost to the fisheries and to urbanisation.



### **A Sense of Community**

Social life is one aspect of making a cluster of houses into a community. But few people lived in villages, and a huge gulf divided rich from poor. What kind of social life could develop under such conditions?

In 1869 a rifle club was founded in Keflavík. Membership was restricted to the social elite and the male sex; in its first year the club had 34 members. A clubhouse was built, and the club met there for the first time in 1872. For many years the clubhouse was the only building in Keflavík where meetings and social gatherings could be held.

After the rifle club, more associations were founded. In 1885 a temperance lodge was formed for Keflavík and Njarðvík, named *Vonin* (Hope) no. 15. The temperance movement was a powerful influence in Icelandic society at the time, leading ultimately to a period of Prohibition after 1915. More temperance lodges followed. The IOGT (International Order of Good Templars), which had been founded in the USA in the 1850s, was open to all: men and women, rich and poor. Thanks to this inclusiveness, the movement was a great success, in Iceland as elsewhere. The primary aim of the temperance movement was to reduce and preferably eliminate alcohol consumption, and the movement placed great emphasis on reaching out to young people. Special lodges were established for children and youngsters. Aiming to offer a healthy and sober alternative to drink, lodges organised such events as dances, lectures, readings and plays.

After 1900 temperance lodges went into a decline, but youth associations continued the campaign against alcohol and in favour of a healthy lifestyle. *Ungmennafélag Keflavíkur* (the Keflavík Youth Association), founded in 1929, offered a broad range of social and cultural activities. In due course the youth associations came to focus primarily on sports.

### ***Fishermen trudged through the lava field***

The journey across the rugged lava field is a hard one. Travellers must take care to avoid fissures and clefts in the brittle volcanic rock. It is easy to go astray. Groups of fishermen are heading to the Suðurnes coast for the fishing season. Some have walked from distant regions of Iceland. In the confusing lava landscape, cairns have been piled up to mark the way. They are nearly at their destination. What kind of a fishing season lies ahead?

It was important to arrive in time for the start of the fishing season. Over the centuries the winter season commenced at Candle-mass (2 February), and continued until 11 May, known as *lokadagur* (Final Day). The fishermen then set off to walk home and start their summer work, generally on a farm.

*Pórarinn Tómasson: memories of a distant time*

*At the beginning of the fishing season, every house filled up with men from all over the country. There were hundreds in a single hamlet – and in the whole of Suðurnes one can only imagine how many they were.*

*These visitors brought with them a breath of fresh air. Most of them were in the prime of life – energetic, good company. Their influence was good in so many ways.*

*At the end of the season the fishermen set off for home, and a few weeks later the Suðurnes men departed in hundreds in their turn, to work on farms for the summer. Most of them headed north, and they stayed there at least eight weeks.*

*That is how the Icelanders developed their excellent feeling of unity and mutual understanding, as they worked together, on the land and at sea.*