by John MacLeod

I HAMMER down the west side of Lewis, rattling into Shawbost over the cattle grid. I've been coming here for as long as I can remember. Past peaty Loch na Muilne, the tweed mill, the tiny post office. Past the Free Church, the brisk wind pummelling at my car – and right at the crossroads.

But never, till today, for a fish supper.

Down the brae, past the beach – fishermen still wetted their longlines, from broad open boats launched from the surf, when I was small and Heath was PM – where the Atlantic grumbles in foam.

There have been no boats in decades. But, opposite the ruins of a traditional blackhouse, there whips a rainbow flag outside a little cottage, walls and panels and fencing likewise in an array of cheerful colours.

This is Mollans Takeaway. Run by a warm English couple, way out on the edge of Europe. The most northwesterly chippie in Britain – and the smallest in Scotland.

Run, too, to exacting standards. Rachel and Julie detest processed food. Loathe waste – especially plastic. Nothing comes from tins, packets and sachets. All is prepared from scratch. They only open for two or three days a week, and Rachel can only cook four suppers at once. Yet such is their food that folk come many miles to enjoy it. Somehow this unassuming pair hang on – at the extremity of a trade increasingly in crisis.

At its peak, around 1930, there were 35,000 chippies in the United Kingdom. So central to life that in neither World War did politicians dare put fish and chips 'on the ration'.

King George VI and Queen Elizabeth sent discreetly out, now and then, for fish and chips, chomping them happily out of newspaper at the Palace with the little Princesses. Decades later, and if not entertaining, our late Queen, on holiday at Balmoral, now and then would order a fish supper from Ballater.

Though we might choose to tiptoe past outrageously priced travesties of our weekend treat, such as chef Tom Kerridge's £37 'fish and chips' at Harrods.

Today there are but 10,500 British chip shops. And, against soaring costs, recruitment difficulties and deep reluctance to break the £10 barrier for what has always been regarded as a cheap and cheerful meal, they buckle all around us.

In August 2022, Andrew Crook – president of the National Federation of Fish Friers – warned of a looming 'extinction event'. Last July, he said a third of our chippies could close in the next five years. Two-thirds have already cut back their hours; others have hiked their prices – or dolefully retired.

It's the war in Ukraine, a prime source of cooking oil. Tariffs our Government heedlessly slammed on imported Russian fish. Last year's woeful harvest; potatoes yet rot in the soil.

An awful, sodden spring that may mean no 2024 harvest at all. General public belt-tightening – and ballooning energy costs.

The price of electricity matters when you have friers fizzing all evening. The cost of diesel has mashed fishermen's profit margins. And, as we all tighten our belts, many wonder if that Saturday night fish supper is still worth it.

> *'They even make their own salt'*

Saturday, because it was the one evening of the week when, beset with many duties – washing her hair, giving the children their weekly bath, preparing their 'repetition' for Sunday school – Mum usually refused to cook. Her one hot meal day off, save for the odd Royal Wedding.

Dad – and it was usually Dad – was sent out for fish and chips which, until banned in the late 80s, were wrapped in newspaper.

We'd sit around the kitchen table – the one meal of the week you were suffered to enjoy a fizzy drink – stuffing ourselves to the delicious reek of Sarson's vinegar (or, east of Harthill service station, brown chippie sauce). And then enjoy Doctor Who.

No one has ever definitively established who invented fish and chips. Fish fried in batter was almost certainly introduced to this island by Jews fleeing the Inquisition, and 'frites' seem to have first been enjoyed in Belgium.

That Scots still talk of 'chip shops' suggests chips were enjoyed well before haddock.

And, in an age before antibiotics, fish and chips, cooked short-order in boiling fat, was not just an affordable meal, but a safe one.

If a paradox. Vast quantities of sizzling oil, yes, but – properly made – fish and chips are light, delicious fare. You don't have that bloated feel you get after one too many cheeseburgers. One portion of fish and chips provides vitamin C, B6, B12, iron, zinc and calcium, as well as iodine, Omega 3 fatty acid and important dietary fibre.

No sugar, either – and remarkably low in fat: 9.42 grams of it per 100 grams. The average pizza has 11, the typical takeaway curry 15.5 and a doner kebab 16.2. And the typical fish supper has fewer calories than any of them.

Of course, you must shop around. Weeks ago, in transit through a certain town, I joined the queue at one crowded chippie.

More accurately, a rabble. I had to wait half an hour, and the resultant feed – chips unevenly sized, many little bigger than fingernails; the haddock overcooked to a fare-thee-well – was a great shame.

Last weekend I stepped into a Stornoway institution, the Church Street chip shop. Recently come under new management. Now a ticketed customer system. Serene staff each had their unhurried part in a masterly assembly line.

I had my fish supper within five minutes – cooked to perfection.

Today, Julie ushers me through a baby gate that keeps adorable spaniels clear of the back kitchen and a chippie hut so small it would not accommodate a grand piano.

We're in a cosy, lived-in room, each wall painted a different colour. The silky eared dogs retreat affably to their crate. A mug of tea is pressed into my hand.

'A large fish supper is £14,' Julie confides. 'A small one, £9. Everything we sell is gluten-free except the burger buns and the macaroni.'

It's hard work. 'Rachel started yesterday, peeling and chipping potatoes. We have gadgets for it now. I used to do it by hand, sitting down with a sack.' Julie makes a face. 'But I got repetitive strain injury.'

An overlooked part of the job is the chore of 'cleaning down' after a day's service. It takes Rachel an hour and a half, and she has to clean and sterilise everything yet again before the next bout of frying.

Quietly, Julie details the burgeoning expense. 'A 25-litre tub of rapeseed oil used to cost £20. It's now £40. Potatoes were £19 a sack. Last year, it hit £36. It's started, this year, at £24. And each fryer burns five kilowatts a day. And we've four fryers, on all the time when we're open, and you could go two hours without a

Rich food: Celebrity chef Tom Kerridge serves fish and chips at Harrods – for a princely £37

Fish super: No sugar, low in fat and full of vitamins

Has the humble fish supper really had its chips?

Soaring costs have seen two-thirds of our chippies shut up shop. But it's not all doom and gloom, as JOHN MACLEOD discovers on a visit to one of Britain's most remote fryers...

customer.'

Mollans Takeaway has had surprising success with greylag goose and chips – birds lawfully culled by local crofters. They even make their own salt, from the pure local seawater backwashing on the beach within earshot.

'From six litres of seawater, you get 160 grams. Patient work. And then, of course, there's the other costs. We have to order in fish and chip boxes, burger boxes, greaseproof paper. Delivery alone cost us £40 last time – it would have been free on the mainland.' And yet, with its loyal regulars, the takeaway survives. 'Everything Rachel cooks is probed. Fish, burgers, sausages must hit an internal temperature of 75 degrees.'

'It's only 72 degrees in England,' adds Rachel, who has just asked when I would like my fish supper. And with salt and vinegar?

The great secret of good fish and chips is the batter. Every shop guards its formula fanatically. But Julie stresses that technique is still more important, and it comes only from experience. The batter's consistency; knowing when the oil is at the right temperature; how many times to dip the fillet.

How Rachel must lower it into the fat at the right speed (just chuck it in, and the batter falls off). Keeping it on the move, with continued flicks of a long metal 'spider'. Knowing when it is almost done, that it will continue cooking for a spell even out of that 180 degrees rolling boil, and then for how long it must drain.

Some tourists do kick up a strop when told they will have to wait about 20 minutes or so.

Julie says: 'And we even had someone complain that the tartare sauce is too expensive. Well, I've made that sauce, just that morning. From scratch. Mixed the mayonnaise, lemon juice, capers, dill... But if you like, yes, I could give you a nasty little sachet for 30p instead.'

A more typical chippie, be it in a resort like Largs or Crail or an urban quarter with perennially hungry students, makes demands on vendors that have broken health and ended marriages.

Prepping starts at dawn; clean-down may well be after midnight. And, on top of the quarterly energy bill – in 2022, the monthly costs for a typical establishment soared from £600 to £2,000: that spelled the end, just like that, of Macduff's The Happy Haddock.

And there is the dread of fire. It was a fire in the summer of 2022 that put paid to the Pittenweem Fish Bar, to the devastation of locals. An institution for decades, it drew ravenous queues that stretched beyond the parish kirk.

But Julie reminds me, too, there are perils elsewhere in the supply chain. Fishing is one of the most dangerous jobs in Britain.

I know lads with fingers missing. Could name three Harris youths who – an ankle caught for a moment in the rope – went overboard with the 'fleet' of prawn creels. Few years pass in the Western Isles without a tragedy. In 2016 the MFV Louisa sank while at anchor off Mingulay as her crew lay sleeping. Three men died; one body was never recovered.

'Rachel's batter is for the angels'

'Down on Pittenweem harbour,' journalist Tom Lamont last year mused, 'two bronze statues – a mother and a daughter – face the choppy water, memorialising all the local people who have tried to make a living from the sea, as well as the 400 or so who have died trying since the 1800s.

'Many, many people in the East Neuk have lost a friend, an uncle, a cousin. Fishing is a serious matter here. Fish and chips is a serious meal.'

All four of my great-grandfathers were fishermen. But Rachel now brings my neatly boxed meal, printed in jokey newsprint.

Contents lashed with vinegar; dusted in that free-range salt. Chips cut in perfect evenness. At once crisp and yielding. And, if gluten-free batter sounds about as inviting as wholemeal pastry, think again: Rachel's batter is for the angels. But this haddock...

'It's so fresh,' I mumble, forking greedy mouthfuls again and again. 'Unbelievably fresh.'

'Landed in Stornoway just this morning,' beams Julie.

They will not hear of payment. And shortly, after grateful words, I motor back up the brae.

My mother was born and bred in Shawbost. Long before the Great War my forebears were climbing for home up this very road, wet and weary after their day's battle with the sea.

I follow in their ghostly tread, guiltily replete with fish and chips.

www.mollanstakeaway.com