

The UK's oldest smokehouse is still open for business, producing smoked fish, garlic, salt and more using traditional methods.

Words and photography by STEVE NEWMAN.

# THE BIG SMOKE

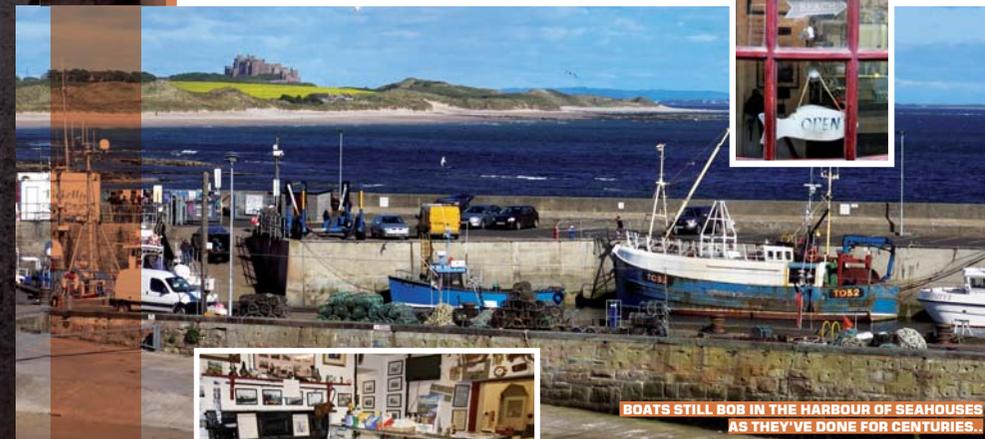
**A**t first glance it seems that the village of Seahouses on the North Northumberland coast is one of those old north east fishing villages that have been swallowed up by modern developments. Perched above the harbour, though, the old village still remains with its narrow streets and fishermen's cottages. In one such street you'll find Swallowfish, the UK's oldest working smokehouse. When you walk through the door, the old range and low beamed ceiling laden with working fishing tools take you back a hundred or so years in an instant.

Old sepia photographs smothering the walls seem to fit easily with the modern display cabinets holding crabs, lobsters, prawns and kippers whilst the Newcastle United scarf wrapped around the neck of the lad who walks past me does not seem at all out of place with his yellow wellies and white coat.

**SWALLOWFISH OWNER PATRICK WILKIN IS PROUD TO PRODUCE HIS GOODS IN THE TRADITIONAL WAY.**



**A TRADITIONAL NORTHUMBRIAN WELCOME AWAITS VISITORS TO THE SWALLOWFISH SHOP.**



**BOATS STILL BOB IN THE HARBOUR OF SEAHOUSES AS THEY'VE DONE FOR CENTURIES.**



**THE WELCOMING, CLUTTERED SHOP STILL ROASTS THE ORIGINAL STOVE.**



**DELICIOUS SEA FOOD INCLUDING PRAWNS, CRAB, SALMON, SHRIMP, SMOKED SEA SALT AND HADDOCK PACK THE SHELVES.**

here in barrels but the ban on herring fishing in the North Sea UK waters means I get up at 2 a.m. every morning to drive to the fish quay at North Shields. We also check the fires in the smokehouse throughout the night to ensure they're just right so they produce the best quality product."

Traditional kippers are produced by first splitting the herring, they are then brined (marinated in a plain solution of salt and water). The salmon is dry salted by being given a thick layer of salt at the head and a thin one at the tail before being smoked over shavings for about three to four days.

No one's exactly sure but the kipper is thought to have been 'invented' in the village when one morning in 1840 John Woodger discovered a fire in his herring warehouse. Upon managing to rescue some of the barrels, he found the smoked fish inside didn't taste too bad and decide to investigate further.

Working on a North Sea fishing boat is a dangerous occupation so when John Swallow who owned and ran Swallowfish Ltd. offered Patrick a job in the business working with fresh fish, shellfish and running the traditional smokehouses he jumped at it.

"We've tried to keep as much of the old building and equipment as we can to comply with health and safety regulations, and to be fair the authorities have agreed that much of what we do is part of our history and allowed us to continue operating in that way. We converted the old stables with its two-foot thick stone walls into the kitchen and preparation

"Yes, people always find the shop fascinating," says owner Patrick Wilkin who is maintaining the practice of producing kippers said to have started here in the nineteenth century. "We love that, as getting over the history of what we're trying to do here is just as important to us as keeping the traditional skills alive. What we're finding is that people really want the natural goodness back in their food. No additives, just what you see is what you get."

A former fisherman, son of a fisherman and once a member of the Seahouses' lifeboat crew, Patrick dressed crabs here when he was a lad and is passionate about keeping the old traditions alive. "It's not easy some days," he says. "In the old days the fish were landed in the harbour and rolled up

**SALMON FILLETS GO THROUGH THE PROCESS OF BEING SMOKED OVER OAK SAWDUST AND WHITEWOOD SHAVINGS.**



**PATRICK ALSO PRODUCES SMOKED GARLIC, IDEAL FOR ADDING A HINT OF SMOKINESS TO A RANGE OF RECIPES.**

room so we had to lose the original floor, but much of what we inherited we have amalgamated into the present way of running things. We felt it was important to do this so we get a bit of both working together. Although we didn't keep the thick salt laying around the base of the walls where you would normally expect to see a skirting board!"

It's not just the building that has been incorporated but also the traditional way of splitting and gutting the fish. "In the old days the girls would follow the herring down the east coast as they migrated and work the ports gutting and cleaning them and we know that the girls who came here slept in the room above the shop. Then in 1905, the owners installed a machine for splitting the fish. When we took over we decided to get it working again so another bit of history could be brought back. We had to cannibalise other machines and get new bits made but it's great to see it in use again. It's another bit of the jigsaw that makes us so determined to succeed with what we're trying to achieve. In fact when the health and safety people came they realised that what was happening was not just a production process but an art.

"It's the way our customers want it. Despite having a specialist slicing machine all the smoked salmon is sliced by hand and all the crabs are



**PATRICK OPERATES THE RE-FURBISHED SPLITTING MACHINE, WHICH DATES FROM 1905.**

dressed here too. People know our stuff is fresh as the fishermen radio us when they're about to come into harbour telling us what they've got on board so we can get everything ready. It simply doesn't get any fresher than that.

"Unfortunately as a nation we are visual shoppers. A lot of our shops are filled with bright yellow artificially-dyed fish. We only use traditional oak sawdust imported from a specialist traditional supplier in Kent on top of whitewood shavings which has no additives, preservatives or colourings of any kind and we let the natural flavours speak for themselves.

"We have three smoke houses and getting them just right is the biggest part of what we do. Different fish such as haddock or salmon, prawns and mussels require different amounts of smoke and time, so they have to be placed on different

racks and when I'm clambering about high up there beside the racks I'm checking on them all the time. You have to be careful with the fires, for example if it's a blustery day outside the wind can get in through the main doors that open on to the street and cause all sorts of uneven smoking with the draft and the kippers have to be smoked for 16 hours so we need to be vigilant."

## PATRICK'S KIPPER PIE AND SALAD

Serve 6

### Ingredients:

1 tbsp oil  
1 thinly sliced onion  
2 red chillis, very finely chopped  
250g/9oz crème fraîche  
100g/3½oz sliced kippers  
1 crushed clove of garlic  
150g/5½oz of white fish  
100g/3½oz small prawns  
100g/3½oz smoked salmon  
1 tbsp freshly chopped parsley  
1 tsp smoked paprika

### For the topping:

250g/9oz cooked mashed potato

### Method:

Preheat the oven to 180C/355F.

Heat the olive oil in a pan and fry the garlic, onion, and chillies until softened. Stir in the crème fraîche, beans, kippers, paprika, white fish, parsley and prawns then place the mixture in a baking dish. Put the mashed potato over the mix, making sure the filling is covered and bake in the oven for 20 minutes, or until the filling is cooked through and the topping is starting to brown.

Turn the grill up to high and grill the pie for 4 to 5 minutes (I like to put a bit of cheese on at this point), or until the topping is golden-brown. Serve the pie with green salad. (A few grapes in here make all the difference!)

Kippers have a strong flavour but they go pleasantly with the right wine. We like to use a strong wine that will cut through and hold its own. A Muscadet but sometimes a Soave for a white and a Lambrusco for red are usually our options.



**1. FILLETS ARE HUNG TO DRAIN AFTER THE BRINING PROCESS OF BEING SOAKED IN SALT AND WATER.**

**2. THE KIPPERS ARE HUNG ON WOODEN BARS IN THE SMOKEHOUSE.**

**3. AFTER SMOKING, THE HERRING FILLETS WILL END UP IN THE SHOP OR BE SENT OUT MAIL ORDER.**



It's interesting to note, too, that there are no aluminium bars here for the fish to be suspended from in the smoke house. The smokehouse uses traditional wooden tenterhooks. "It's where the expression comes from, as you can get very sore fingers when placing the fish on the nails and then hanging the wooden bars up," explains Patrick. The walls of the smoke house seem to have been painted in a black shiny paint but it's actually just less than 200 years of smoke and tar.

"You have to understand that I have wholeheartedly committed my life to this," says Patrick.

"We pride ourselves that we will always remain true to the traditional methods of producing smoked fish that date back to when the smokehouses here were originally established in 1843. We have an unflinching dedication to the quality of our products from the choice of fish and shellfish as well as the methods we use for their preparation."

This passion for bringing back a natural way of eating seems to be paying off, as more and more people come around to quality traditional foods without the mass production of the factories with their chemicals and additives.

"We do have plans to offer more, all businesses must survive. I recently found an old recipe book upstairs above the shop in which everything is handwritten and am working on some ideas from it. It's just another example of how the past is ever present in what we do here. One of the nicest things we find is the repeat business we get, not just from locals but with people coming back year after year and it's very flattering that word of mouth seems to be our biggest seller. So much so we had a gentleman in here who had served with Prince Harry in Afghanistan who had told him to come here."

To find out more or to buy online, visit [swallowfish.co.uk](http://swallowfish.co.uk).