

Helmsdale Fishing Village - 1890

A major Scottish herring port



Image: Screen capture from the Helmsdale reconstruction showing the coast.

During the nineteenth century the village of Helmsdale in Sutherland was one of the largest centres for herring fishing in Scotland. The village and harbour were built around 1818 as part of efforts at economic development by the Sutherland Estate. The new fishing port was intended to provide employment and housing for families who had been forcibly driven out from farms in the Kildonan area during the Highland clearances.

This reconstruction shows how Helmsdale may have looked in about 1890, when the herring trade was still thriving. Fish was unloaded on the shore and then taken along to the curing yards, where it was processed and packed into barrels for transport to other parts of the United Kingdom and overseas. Herring from Helmsdale was sent as far away as the West Indies – where in the early nineteenth century it formed part of the diet of slaves working on the plantations. The modern Timespan centre is on the site of the nineteenth century curing yard represented in this reconstruction.

The project is funded by the Northern and Arctic Periphery Programme (ERDF).

How Did We Know What to Reconstruct?

The reconstruction is rooted in research undertaken by the team at the Timespan Centre, and in particular advice from Jacquie Aitken (Heritage Officer for Timespan). There survive early nineteenth-century plans for the original design of Helmsdale, as well as a number of later maps. There are also numerous Victorian photographs, both of the buildings and of men and women at work in the fishing industry, which heavily informed this representation.

How Was the Reconstruction Created?

The buildings were originally modelled using SketchUp. They were then imported into Unreal Engine 4 (a platform for creating 3D virtual worlds). Videos and other media were created from the landscape in Unreal.

How Has the Reconstruction Been Used?

The reconstruction was featured as part of a [virtual event](#) in collaboration with Timespan in August 2020. It is part of the wider [CINE](#) project which focuses on digitally representing heritage in northern environments.

When Was the Reconstruction Published?

This version of the reconstruction was released to the public in August 2020.

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How to Access the Reconstruction?

There is a video preview of the reconstruction on [Vimeo](#).

A 360° tour can be found on [Roundme](#).

A tour of the reconstruction and discussion by Jacquie Aitken and Anne Coombs of the research behind it can be found [here](#).

Discover More

Information held by Historic Environment Scotland about pre-historic sites in and around Caen can be accessed via [Canmore](#). CANMORE

You can see how Helmsdale & its harbour look today on [Google Maps](#). 

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