

The Browns, a Lough Swilly fishing family.

The Brown family of Inch Island have been one of the best known fishing families on Lough Swilly for some generations, but they are typical of many who earned their living from the sea.

In 1611 John Brown, an ancestor of the present Brown family, was granted a charter by James I to establish a ferry from Fahan to Rathmullen. The family tradition of running the ferry along with fishing and boatbuilding continued until recent years. The charter is held in Magee Campus of the University of Ulster.

In the mid 1800s, possibly around the time of the Famine, James Brown went to America and worked on steamboats on the Great Lakes. One of his fellow crewmen, a native American, was extensively scalded by a steam leak from the ship's boilers. James threw him into the ship's flour chest in the galley, preventing further fluid loss and thereby saving his life. For this he was made a blood brother at a tribal ceremony. When James came back to live in Inch Island in the late 1800s he resumed the family occupations of fishing, ferrying and boatbuilding. He sawed whole trees by hand into the planks he needed assisted by James Boyle from another Inch fishing family. In common with other Swilly boatbuilders he took orders for new boats from west Donegal crews. It is said that in late August these crews walked from their homes to Rathmullen and were ferried over to Fahan by James, placing their order for the new boat at the same time. They then took the train to Derry and travelled to Glasgow on the "Scotch boat". After working at the "tattie hoking" or potato harvest they returned to Inch Island where James had their boat ready and they paid for it with their earnings from Scotland. The crew then sailed and rowed their new boat out of the Swilly and westward to their home port in time to take part in the winter herring fishing. However, one boat disappeared with its crew on the delivery trip and it is said that after this event James never built another new drontheim. He lived in a cottage on the foreshore at Jeremy's Point but later moved to a cottage he built at Lacken Point. The tarred felt roof of the cottage was the most expensive part of the house so he moved it to the new dwelling by getting six strong neighbours to lift it bodily, walk it to the new location and set it down on the prepared walls. James was adventurous and quick witted – on one occasion while fishing herring in his drontheim a gale sprang up and his crew became concerned for their safety. Both wind and tide were against them so James knew the best option was to stay attached to the nets as a sea anchor until the tide turned and took them back to Inch. He said "Listen, boys, I'm as fond of my life as you are of yours so don't worry until you see me panicking" and with that lay down in the bottom of the boat and went to sleep! The tide duly turned and they got back home safely. The drontheim "Violet" used by the Brown family from this time until the 1980s is now in the Greencastle Maritime Museum.

He married Sarah Hodge, also from the island, and they had one son James. He followed in his father's footsteps but had a strong interest in horticulture, making the best use of his small plot of land. There is a sod dyke around it which was built by some shipwrecked sailors in return for their keep in the Brown household while they were waiting to travel home. James jr's wife Anne kept a cow and hens which went together well with James' potatoes and vegetables. When fishing was slack in the spring he bought herring to sell round the island from the Scotch drifters berthed in Bunrana.

James and Anne had four sons and a daughter born between 1910 and 1920. The boys were very keen on the new engines and the family soon began converting drontheims into motor boats. Sadly Johnny, the eldest boy, was drowned in Fahan Channel in 1926. The remaining three sons worked their way up to bigger and more seaworthy boats, fishing herring and whitefish as far afield as Downings, Bunbeg, Kincasslagh and Portnoo. When the boys were away Violet helped her father row and sail the ferry for the all important cash income. Violet and Maggie Hardy, another fisherman's daughter from Inch, often won the women's rowing race at Rathmullen regatta. During the 1939 – 1945 period, the Browns, in common with other Swilly fishermen, capitalised on the abundant fish stocks and good prices created by wartime food scarcity. In late 1945 they were

able to buy the "Girl Christina", a 40' fully decked Scottish fishing boat which had just been released from British Admiralty service. With the earnings from this boat they then bought the 45' "Shenandoah" and the 35' "Leonorah". These boats fished periodically from Killybegs as well as the Swilly area, seine netting for whitefish and ring netting for herring. The smaller halfdeckers were still used for salmon driftnetting as it was thought that the bigger boats were too unmanoeverable and uneconomic for this fishery. In 1957 Jim & Bertie Brown along with their crewmen Tom Porter and Eugene McGinley were drowned while salmon fishing when their boat, the "Playmate" drifted onto the rocky coast just west of Fanad Head. This devastated the family and left Willie, their remaining brother, to carry on with his sons. Around the 1980s the change was made to bottom trawling for whitefish and midwater trawling for herring. Along with drifting for salmon, sea angling trips and the new mussel fishing, the Lough continued to yield a good living for the Brown family. Although the ferry was no longer viable on a daily basis it still attracted huge crowds on the day of Rathmullen Regatta.

Today Alan and Kenny Brown farm mussels around Inch Island, Dermot and Gavin Brown continue to trawl for whitefish and herring. Fishing is as unpredictable as ever but the Browns are experienced in moving quickly and exploiting whatever opportunities present themselves for wresting a living from the sea.