



## REVIEW ARTICLES



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## Fishermen Cavalry

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Chaineux, M.-C. and Charlier, R.H., 2016. Fishermen cavalry. *Journal of Coastal Research*, 32(2), 434–442. Coconut Creek (Florida), ISSN 0749-0208.

The short Belgian coast has been subject to numerous transformations in its physical and human geography aspects. Major changes have affected its economic geography. From an area essentially devoted to fishing, and, more inland, agriculture, it is nowadays more centred on tourism. With that new vocation some former occupations have vanished, yet some have survived as part of the folkloric patrimony. A specific and colourful example is shrimp fishing on horseback.

**ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS:** *Belgian coast, shrimp, horses, tourism.*

## INTRODUCTION

*‘The shrimpboats are coming!’* used to be a recurrent ballad decades ago celebrating the fishermen of the southeastern United States. In Oostduinkerke (Figure 1), on the Belgian North Sea coast, the *ritournelle* could be ‘the Horseback Shrimp fishermen are there.’ Their image is everywhere in town: on streetmarkers,<sup>1</sup> on the beach, on bas-reliefs, on paintings, on sculptures, greeting you as you enter town, in the just renovated and spruced up National Fisheries Museum, and as you sit down to enjoy one of the multiple types of beers at a pre-wars (WW I and WW II) period establishment—*de Peerdevisscher*<sup>2</sup>—that also serves the local variation of Irish coffee, the *peerdevisscher-koffie* (Figures 2). Marine life study goes back at least 170 years (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup>

As there are, for instance, Brotherhoods of Wine Producers (Jurats de St Emilion, Commanderie du Bontemps du Médoc, Compagnons de Bordeaux), there is also a 1967-created Order of the Shrimp Horsebackfishermen. Membership is of course minimal because the fishermen’s number dwindled from 40 in 1940, to seven in 1968, ‘surging back to’ eight by 2010.

The Belgian coast is a mere 67 km long; if you add to it the segments lost to France (now called Flandre Française, French Flanders) and to the Dutch (Zeeuws[ch] Vlaanderen, Zeelandish Flanders), Flanders’ coast may well have been near 120 km.

But horseback shrimp fishing involves no more than the two adjoining towns of Oostduinkerke (East Dunkirk) and Coxyde (Koksijde), both at a stone’s throw from the border with France. And yet, reputedly initiated more than five centuries ago, once upon a time, horseback fishing was practiced along the coasts of French Flanders, Zeeland Flanders, on all Flanders beaches, and on those of southern England. Coastal farmers used some fish as fertilizer in their fields, while the fishermen brought home their shrimp, fed some to their family, and sold the majority at market. Today it is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization as one of the remaining types of artisanal fishing.

These few kilometres of coast have, however, squeezed in an unusually large number of geological, geographical, historical, and economic developments. On Belgian territory only a single sizeable river finds its sea-exutory, the IJzer, which has its source as Yser in France. The Yser region was the theatre of the horribly murderous first world war—the trenches can still be visited—and the river drew a separation line during its four years (1914–1918) between Allied and Central Powers front lines. The opening of its locks flooded the entire Flanders plain, drowning German soldiers and their canons.

No matter what direction one turns here, there is a military cemetery with hundreds or thousands of graves, and in Oostduinkerke even the civilian burial grounds accommodate fallen British soldiers, not far from another memorial cemetery, which is dedicated to fishermen lost at sea.<sup>4</sup>

DOI: 10.2112/JCOASTRES-D-10A-00014.1 received and accepted in revision 16 December 2010; corrected proofs received 19 March 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> See the figure on p. 375 in Charlier (2004b).<sup>2</sup> West Flanders Flemish dialect, in literary Flemish [pst-1946 spelling] *paardevisser*, horse[back] fisherman.<sup>3</sup> A coffee served with a small piece of thin gingerbread (in Flemish *speculatie*, in French *speculoos*), an inch-square piece of dark chocolate, and a mini-shot-glass of *advocaat*, a Dutch egg-based liqueur.<sup>4</sup> Flemish fishermen, like French (*cf* Pierre Loti: *Pêcheurs d’Islande*, a classic of French literature) used to ply the Icelandic waters. These waters were often treacherous, as were/are those of the North Sea; the cemetery is where those fishermen’s bodies that were recovered are entombed. The remembrance is still keen and a major square of Oostduinkerke is IJIsland Plein. Restaurants’ and shops’ names commonly include the term Iceland.



Figure 1. Location map Belgian coast. Scale: approximately 67 km from De Panne to Knokke. Oostduinkerke and Schipgat former inlet, lower left; Zwin inlet, upper left. Gravelines former inlet, in France, extreme lower left.

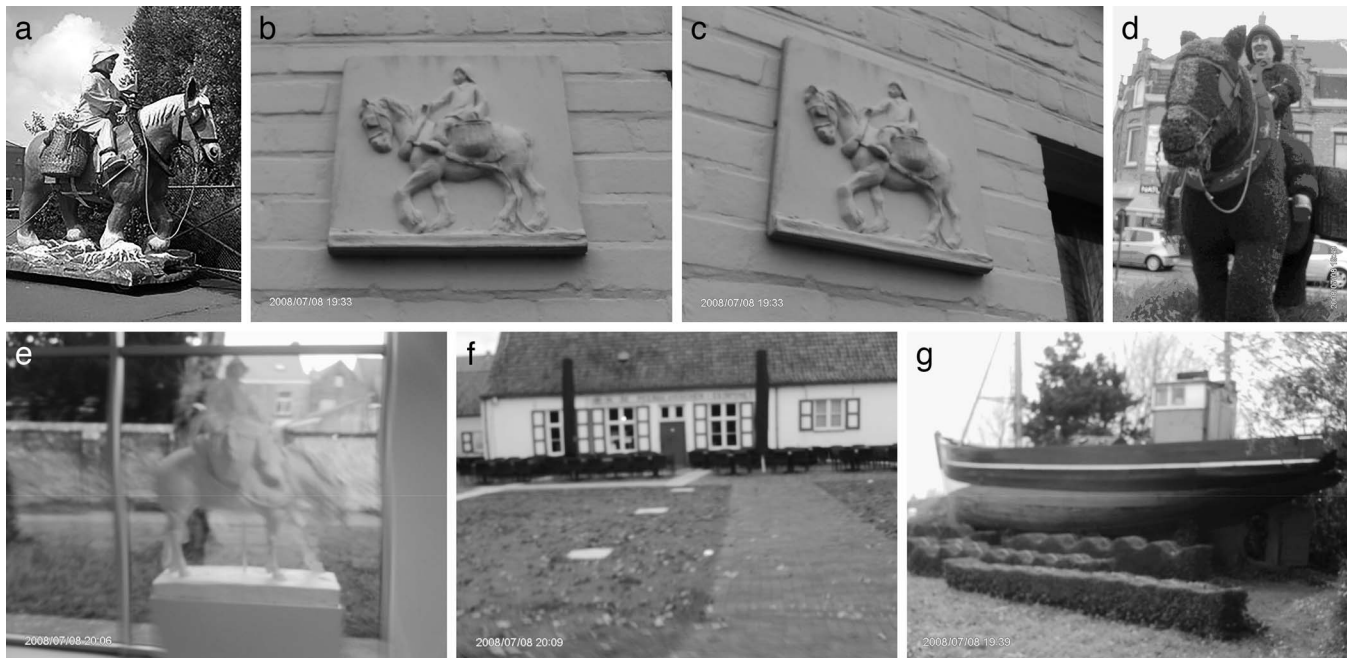


Figure 2. (a) At the Feast of the Shrimps (*Garnalen Festival*) a parade is organized, and among the several floats, shrimps and shrimp fishermen are central personages. Here one such parade 'float' represents a horseback fisherman on his horse in the shallow surf. (Photo Koksijde [Coxysde] Tourist Office). (b) and (c) Bas-reliefs adorning fishermen's houses' facades located along the Nieuwpoort-Dunkirk Canal. (d) Ten metres high monument of horseback shrimp fisherman made entirely from plants. (e) Sculpture of *paardenvisser* in the entrance hall of the National Fisheries Museum, Oostduinkerke, Belgium. (f) The only remaining old pub (*estaminet*) of Oostduinkerke 'De Peerdevisscher'. (g) Old fishing vessel now mounted at the entrance of the village of Oostduinkerke.

This short coast had, throughout geological, and even historical, times several sea inlets: from west to east, across contemporary borders, there used to be one near Gravelines (Grevelingen) and then in Oostduinkerke an inlet allowed at one time ships to penetrate the land towards Dixmude (Diksmuide) (Figure 1). The few metres that today hardly ever

<sup>5</sup> Literally "the hole (or opening) for ships", as these could enter the channel at high tide.

get invaded by the North Sea are nevertheless still known as *het Schipgat* (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>5</sup> And the current Belgian–Dutch (Flanders–Zeeland) border is marked by the Zwin, the remnant of an inlet that a particularly heavy storm created, allowing the sea penetrate all the way to Bruges (Brugge), thus making that city the wealthiest one in Western Europe from the 13th through the 16th centuries (Figures 6a–f). See also Charlier (2011).



Figure 3. The world's first marine biology research station, erected in 1843 in Ostend [Oostende, Ostende] Belgium. Though fish and oysters study were the principal concern of this institute, founded by professor P.-J. Van Beneden, shrimps were not ignored. This is an archive photo as the station was completely wiped out to widen Ostend's port access.

### FROM FISHING AND LAND TILLING TO RESORT AND PLAYGROUND

The sea has, at various times—and not the least during the Pleistocene and Anthropocene—invaded the land, brought sediments to the littoral, dug and filled inlets, created sandbanks, moved them and the shoreline, and swallowed entire villages. A large variety of dunes have been built and removed—not all Nature's own doing, however.

Monks have sprinkled the land behind the string of dunes with abbeys, some that left some timid traces, some that even maintained themselves to the present. They tilled the land with the help of oxen and sturdy horses and got a solid reputation as the producers of the three Bs: butter, bread, and beer, whose quality are never doubted. Excavations by archaeologists made in 2010 unearthed the oldest medieval town of the shore area: Leffinge, near Ostend, was a human settlement established after the Gallo-Roman Period on a manmade butte (compare to the Netherlandish *'terpen'*) in the 8th century. The area must have been important since a church dating to the 10th century was found.



Figure 4. Oostduinkerke, Schipgat close-up view. Access for horseback shrimp fishermen to beach.

The economy of the Flanders' maritime plain has, however, undergone major changes in the historical period. Hardly is one aware today that Flemings of the sleepy resort of Wenduine, which prided itself as Princess-of-Beaches resort, were once reputable whale hunters whose tradition lives on in the 'Flemish Islands', now called the Azores (Charlier, 2004a)? It is equally difficult to visualize most of the generous dozen of towns lined up along the coast as fishing communities and, except for three or four among them, all stranding<sup>6</sup> harbours. Gone are the boats carrying initials C, O, B, W, *etc.* Gone too are the narrow houses huddled behind the protective sea dikes (Van Bladel, 1930). Gone even are the fancy Victorian-type sea promenade villas—occasionally referred to as Art Nouveau or Belle Époque—that Nazi-occupation forces cemented together during WW II (1940–1945) to form part of the 'impregnable' *Atlantik-Wall*. Wiped out for as long as a



Figure 5. (a) Oostduinkerke. Schipgat former inlet. (b) Fig. 5b Schipgat (literal translation: ship's hole) access to the sea (Note: Metal structure in far background is work of art that has no relation to former function of the sea inlet nor to current access path of shrimp fishermen to beach and surf).



Figure 6. (a) The wet lands around the former Zwin Inlet. (b) Zwin inlet. (c) Zwin inlet as tide rolls in. (d) Zwin Inlet near high tide. (e) The Zwin channel (2010). (f) The Zwin ornithological reserve.

century are the remnants of the very first marine station in the world.<sup>7</sup> And vanished were the oyster breeding beds nearby (so appreciated by the British), until their timid 'resurrection' during the last lustre. Gone also are the ornate thalassotherapy facilities and mineral water springs of Ostende-Thermal (La Barre, s.d.; Charlier and Chaîneux, 2009).

The fishermen-tradition has yielded to tourism, now a year-round economy; several former farmers are now bed-and-breakfast operators; the seals are sunning—even reproducing—protected on breakwaters and close-to-shore sand banks; the celebrated Zwin of the 14th to 16th centuries is now a

natural reserve, home to rare plants such as the elusive Zwinneblomme, an ornithological haven and a natural swimming pool overarching an international border (Figures 6a–f; Charlier, 2005). New thalasso-care centres are aimed at the very well-heeled traveller. The narrow-gauge railway that celebrates this year the 125th anniversary of its first steam-traction run between Ostend (Oostende, Ostende) and Newport (Nieuwpoort, Nieuport) is now the electric tramway that for a while was the *zonn tram*, now the *kust tram* that runs from the French to the Dutch border.<sup>8</sup>

#### SHRIMP FISHING ON HORSEBACK

If the once thriving fishing harbours of Nieuwpoort, Ostend, Blankenberge, and Zeebrugge-Heist have yielded much of their commercial activity to make room for pleasure

<sup>6</sup> After the French terminology *port d'échouage*, a port where there are no portuary facilities and where ships beach themselves, unload their cargo, and then await the next high tide to refloat and depart.

<sup>7</sup> Built in 1843 by university professor Pierre-Joseph Van Beneden.

<sup>8</sup> *Zonn tram*, the Sun-Tramway, *Kust tram*, the Coast Tramway.



Figure 7. Baskets are attached to both sides of saddle as seagull watches ready to pick into the haul.

crafts accommodation, traditions have been kept alive in Oostduinkerke. True the shrimp fishing on horseback has principally a folkloric cachet left, but it is nevertheless a colourful event well appreciated by the tourist and seasonal residents and a bonanza for the establishments serving breakfast! The question might logically be raised 'Why did this type of artisanal fishing maintain itself on only one beach of Belgium?' The reason might well be that, for some obscure administrative motive, Oostduinkerke remained the only resort where no breakwaters were installed, thus no interference exists to the free passage of horses and trailing nets.

Perched high on the powerful Belgian horses, with big baskets attached to each side of the wooden saddle, garbed in long *impermeables* (all weather raincoats, slickers, *cirés-jaune* to the French because it is an 'oil' coat of yellow colour) modernized into less heavy and less cumbersome yellow outfits made out of nylon, capped with the well-known 'southwestern', fishermen deambulate as stately as a procession of judges would, down the main street of Oostduinkerke on the way towards dike and strand, according to the schedule of the tides. Low tides are now the fishing time (Figure 7). And onto the beach. The horses unhesitatingly enter the surf, sometimes to their underbelly,<sup>9</sup> as their riders rake up the rather small-size grey shrimp (prawns) then scoop them up into the baskets (Figure 8). However, according to archive records, the fishermen also accessed the sea by way of the Schipgat, the former inlet, now protected as a natural reserve, as the Zwin has been (Figures 4 and 5).

The Belgian draft horses are fitted with wooden saddles and drag fishing nets behind them (Figures 9 and 10). Originally the nets were seines, dragged by two horses, but gradually such nets were replaced by the *schée*, an oblique board about 4

<sup>9</sup> Some veterinarians and equestrian fanatics claim that horses develop arthritis because of the low temperatures of the North Sea waters. This might be true, but as the activity has become seasonal, the chances of developing the disease have been considerably reduced.



Figure 8. Shrimp fisherman mounting his horse after baskets have been fitted to wooden saddle; chains are attached to the 'net' (Photo Koksijde Tourist Office).

metres long that slides over the sand and lifts the shrimps into the net. Mules were preferred but have disappeared from the scene. The nets are kept open horizontally by two side boards, a chain drags on the sand, and floaters keep the upper side of the

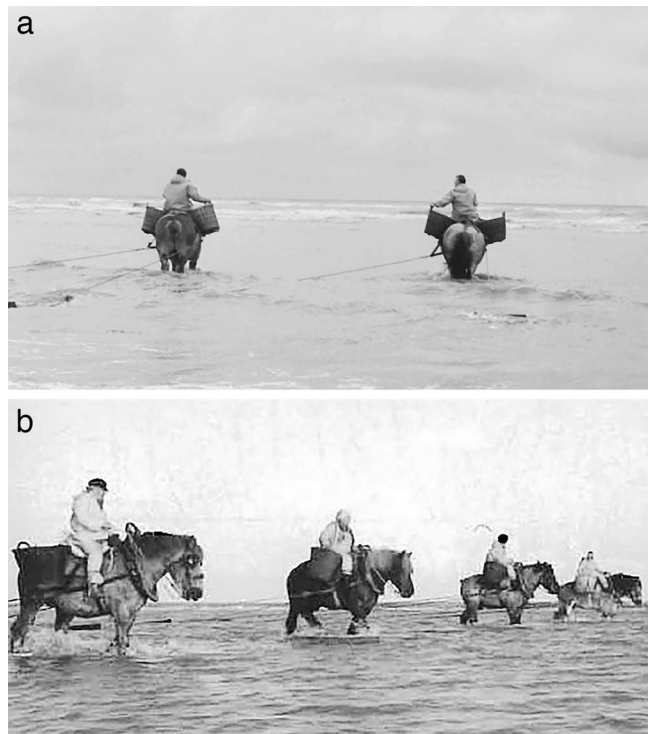


Figure 9. (a) Horses enter the water to their underbelly. (b) Group fishing (Photo Koksijde Tourist Office).



Figure 10. (a) Nets, baskets: preparing horses to start fishing (Photo Koksijde Tourist Office). (b) View of 'dredge-net' (backside) (Photo Koksijde Tourist Office) (c) Front view of net cable and maximum depth of fishing (Photo Koksijde Tourist Office). (d) Starting operations. (e) Ready to go!

net afloat. When the horse and its rider reach the low tide water line, the cart is unhooked, tools set aside, and the baskets affixed to the saddle. Fishing time lasts generally 3 hours, during which one follows low tide.

Still on the beach, the catch goes through a sieve, and collateral products such as some flat fish, crabs, and small jellyfish are thrown back into the sea, as they are useless to enrich soil inland.



Figure 11. Heading back for shore (photo Nancy D. Brown, Equestrian Photography).



Figure 13. Horses and fishermen providing joy ride on their day off to small and big (Photo Koksijde Tourist Office).

The shrimps are gathered in the baskets, the net is washed out, the cart hooked on, and the trip ‘back home’ started (Figures 11 and 12). There, the hard-worked horse is fed oats. The catch is washed again, sand is removed as much as possible before the shrimp are thrown in the broiling brine. Once boiled, the shrimps are no longer grey or brown, but red. The brine is poured off, and the small prawns are ready for the market.

Fun is not excluded, and joy rides are provided on days off during summer tourist season (Figure 13). Catching shrimp was not the only form of beach fishing, as is shown in the Oostduinkerke-based National Fisheries Museum.

Two years ago the Belgian government requested that horseback fishery be registered on the World’s Cultural Heritage List (Supeley, 2005; Van Loo, 2009).

It’s rare to see them anymore, the Belgian draft horses carrying a shrimp fisherman on their backs while they drag fishing nets behind them. In days gone by, coastal farmers used the fish as fertilizer in their fields, while the fisherman brought home their shrimp both to feed the family and to sell at market.

Overfishing of the crustacean—not just locally—has rendered this type of fishing hardly profitable, and the second stage of the process—cooking in vats or drums—is done at the fisherman’s home in a brine of his own concoction; it is part of the ‘show’ only in the peak tourist season (July–August). *Crangon crangon* (Figure 14) is *Noordzeegarnaal* to the Flemings and *Crevette de la mer du Nord* or *crevette grise* [from the original Picard language word *chevrette*] to the French. Why grey shrimp is known to the Anglophones (who often designate the crustacean as prawns) and as Brown Shrimp is unclear. But there are still more than enough grey shrimp to offer in the shore eateries the celebrated shrimp tomato (see Appendix) and the shrimp croquettes (once a ‘popular’ dish, now at premium prices) or, in the gastronomic fish restaurants the *sole ostendaise* (similar to the *sole dieppoise* of the French).<sup>10</sup>



Figure 12. Gathering tools and catch (photos N.D. Brown).

<sup>10</sup> Named after the ports of Ostend, Belgium and Dieppe, France. Both sole preparations encompass a creamy sauce with grey shrimps.



Figure 14. *Crangon crangon*.

Down these succulent dishes with a dry white wine and you will never forget the horseback shrimp fishermen. A shrimp *omelette* is not to be looked askance at either!

### CONCLUSION

The demise of the coastal shrimp fishing has been announced several times. It seems though the pronouncement is somewhat premature. First there is training of paardenvissers in Oostduinkerke and a well alive confrérie, albeit of that, only a generous dozen are still active, but many are young men keeping the tradition alive. Next, UNESCO has just given it its seal of recognition (2013). And in its program of August 3, 2014, the BBC-2 (11 to 20h) showed the potential successors to the draught horses: motorized mini-trucks providing for the “Saturday kitchen best bites.”

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank Ambassador of the Netherlands (ret.) Hendrik van Pesch and Prof. (ret.) J. Rudy Senten for their help with the illustrative materials.

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## APPENDIX: RECIPES

### SHRIMP TOMATO

A ‘beefsteak’ type tomato is cut at one-third of its top. It is somewhat scooped out then filled with a mayonnaise based filling containing a generous portion of grey (brown) shrimps. It is then capped by the top cut off earlier.

4 sprigs of flat leaf parsley  
 4 very nice red tomatoes  
 juice from ¼ lemon  
 4 tablespoons (tbsp) mayonnaise  
 ¾ pound (350 g) peeled shrimp  
 salt, pepper

Remove the parsley leaves from the stems and chop finely. Cut off the tops off the tomatoes with a knife so that they can act as lids. Save these tomato lids; scoop out the insides of the tomatoes. Flip the scooped-out tomatoes upside-down and let them drain for 15 minutes. It is important they be as dry as possible. Save some of the tomato juice that drains from the skins.

### Preparing the Stuffing

Put the lemon juice and mayonnaise in a bowl. Add the parsley and a tablespoon of tomato juice; mix well. Add the shrimp and mix again. Adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Stuff the insides of the scooped-out tomatoes generously with the shrimp. Put the lid back on and serve chilled.

### SHRIMP CROQUETTE

1 pound small to medium size shrimp, boiled (reserve about one half cup of the boiling liquid) and drained  
 2 tbsp butter  
 ½ cup finely chopped onions  
 3 tbsp + ¼ cup all purpose flour  
 ½ teaspoon (tsp) paprika  
 1 cup milk  
 ½ cup shrimp broth  
 2 egg yolks  
 2 cups fine dried bread crumbs  
 ½ tsp salt  
 ¼ tsp cayenne  
 1 egg  
 3 tbsp water  
 vegetable oil for deep frying

Peel and devein the shrimp. Chop finely. Set aside.

Melt the butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Add the onions and cook for about two minutes, or until wilted. Add the 3 tablespoons of the flour and the paprika and stir. Add the milk and the shrimp liquid, stirring constantly with a whisk until the mixture is thick and smooth. Continue cooking; stirring constantly for 2 minutes. Add the shrimp and egg yolks; Stirring constantly, cook for about 30 seconds. Add half of the bread crumbs, salt, white pepper, and cayenne. Blend well. Cool thoroughly. Divide the mixture into 16 equal portions. Shape each portion into a small ball;



roll the balls in the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup flour; Beat the egg with the water. Roll the croquettes in the egg mixture and then in the remaining bread crumbs. Press to help the crumbs adhere. Shake off any excess. Heat the oil to 360°C in a deep pot or fryer. Fry the croquettes, 3 to 4 minutes, or until they are golden brown. Drain on paper towels.

### SOLE À L'OSTENDAISE

Steamed filets of sole are rolled and presented on a platter that is covered thinly with a white cream sauce containing cooked grey shrimp and decorated with a few cooked mussels. Serves 2 people.

1 cube of fish bouillon  
300 g filets of sole, cubed  
1 soup spoon of butter  
1 soup spoon of flour

2 soup spoons of fresh cream  
1 lemon  
12 mussels  
50 g peeled grey shrimp  
4 soup spoons of grated cheese  
salt, pepper, chopped parsley

Boil about  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of water; add the bouillon cube and mix until dissolved. Lower the flame and put into the liquid the cut up filets of sole. Keep on low flame for 10 minutes. Melt the butter slowly; prior to any colour change, add the flour, turn off flame, mix well. Add 2 ladles of the bouillon of fish juice, agitate on the flame, and whip. When sauce is smooth, add fresh cream, a bit of lemon, the well-drained mussels, and the shrimp. Heat gently. When fish is cooked, place it in 2 cassolettes, put on sauce, sprinkle with grated cheese, and *gratinate* under the oven grill. Sprinkle with chopped parsley.

#### □ Résumé □

La pêche à la crevette grise, ou crevette de la Mer du Nord, une pêche artisanale répandue jadis sur toutes les côtes de la France du Nord, de la Belgique, de la Flandre Zélandaise et du sud de l'Angleterre, ne se pratique plus qu'à Oostduinkerke (Flandre occidentale, Belgique). Il est douteux que cette activité soit encore rentable mais elle garde un attrait touristique qui ne pâlit pas. Une demande a été faite pour son inscription au patrimoine mondial de l'humanité (UNESCO). L'article décrit le rituel encore observé et retrace brièvement l'histoire de ce métier d'autrefois. La disparition des pêcheurs à cheval est fréquemment annoncée, mais tout porte à croire que ce n'est pas pour si tôt.

#### □ Samenvatting □

Het paardenvissen op noordzeegarnalen was destijds een beroep uitgeoefend op de kusten van Noord-Frankrijk, België, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen en Zuid-Engeland. Vandaag de dag is het enige spoor van deze artisanale vismethode terug te vinden in Oostduinkerke, een Belgische gemeente in West-Vlaanderen, op de grens met Frankrijk. Hoogstwaarschijnlijk is deze manier van vissen niet meer economisch rendabel, maar het biedt nog steeds een onsterfelijke toeristische uitstraling. De auteurs overlopen kort de geschiedenis van het paardenvissen, beschrijven het ritueel en vermelden dat in 2009 een aanvraag werd ingediend tot inschrijving op de Werelderfgoedlijst van het UNESCO. Het verdwijnen van de paardenvisserij werd herhaaldelijk voorspeld, maar er zijn genoeg indicaties dat dit nog niet zo nabij is.