

All in a Day's Work

Robbie Murphy – Oyster Farmer



PROFILE

Robbie Murphy lives and works on Sherkin Island, Co. Cork. He and his brother Michael run Sherkin Oysters Ltd. The company grow Pacific oysters on the island and export them to countries such as Germany and France.

A Day in the Life of Robbie Murphy

How do you farm oysters?

In the spring time, we buy oyster "seed" (weighing between 2-5 grams each) from hatcheries on Guernsey in the Channel Islands and Cumbria in North West England. It takes two years to grow these oysters to a harvestable size. Oysters are grown in plastic mesh bags, which are laid on top of steel frames, called trestles, and these are placed on the shoreline at the low water mark. There, oysters feed on the plankton-rich water that flows through the mesh bag.

How do you stop the oyster bags from floating away?

Oyster bags are held on the trestle bars with hooks and rubber bands. The tops of the bags are closed by weaving a long, narrow plastic rod, called a "jonc", through the mesh. Trestles are generally long enough to carry ten bags side by side.

Do all oysters grow at the same rate?

Some oysters grow faster than others. After one year's growth the oysters are taken out and graded on a machine. This separates them into different sizes before they are put back onto the trestles on the shore. After another year's growth, the biggest oysters are taken out first and graded again for selling. Some customers prefer large oysters, while others prefer smaller ones.

What do you do when you're not grading oysters?

All the grading of half grown and fully grown oysters takes place between October and April. For the other months, May to September, our work involves turning the oyster bags on the trestles during very low tides (spring tides). Each bag is turned once a month and it takes a whole month for both of us to turn all the bags. Green seaweed (*Enteromorpha* spp) tends to grow on the part of the bag that faces the light. This seaweed clogs the mesh, stopping the flow of water and food through the

bags. Turning them causes the seaweed to fall off naturally and exposes clear mesh underneath.

On each turn we also shake them. This encourages the oysters to grow into the desired teardrop shape and stops them from growing into each other, or into the sides of the mesh bag, and becoming mis-shapen.

Where do you sell the oysters?

The oysters are generally sold in bulk to France and Germany, with a small percentage sold to a local distributor. When selling, the oysters are placed into bags, similar to onion bags and stacked on pallets, with each pallet carrying 1 tonne of oysters. We transport them by tractor to the main pier on Sherkin where we load them onto the pallets. After wrapping them with plastic to keep them secure, a forklift loads them onto a roll-on roll-off ferry, which brings them to Baltimore. From there a refrigerated lorry transports them to their final destination. The temperature in the lorry must be between 5-10°C and this will keep the oysters fresh, until they are placed back into water in 2-3 days time.

What do you like and dislike about your job?

I like my job because it is so varied and I'm working outdoors most of the time, surrounded by nature. In the grading season, work can be very intensive and you need to work very long days, with very little time off.

Have you always wanted to be an oyster farmer?

When I was at school I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I started oyster farming with my brother when I left secondary school and have been at it ever since. If I didn't farm oysters I think I would like to pursue my hobby, which is nature photography.

Right: Oysters in mesh bags on trestles.

Bottom right: Pallets of oysters waiting to be transported to Baltimore.

Bottom left: Michael grading oysters in the shed.

