



Jones, E. T., Starkey, D. J. (Ed.), Reid, C. (Ed.), & Ashcroft, N. (Ed.) (2000). England's Icelandic fishery in the Early Modern period (Eprint). In England's sea fisheries: the commerical fisheries of England and Wales since 1300. (pp. 105 - 110). London: Chatham.

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/about/ebr-terms.html>

### Take down policy

Explore Bristol Research is a digital archive and the intention is that deposited content should not be removed. However, if you believe that this version of the work breaches copyright law please contact [open-access@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:open-access@bristol.ac.uk) and include the following information in your message:

- Your contact details
- Bibliographic details for the item, including a URL
- An outline of the nature of the complaint

On receipt of your message the Open Access Team will immediately investigate your claim, make an initial judgement of the validity of the claim and, where appropriate, withdraw the item in question from public view.

## England's Icelandic fishery in the Early Modern period (Eprint)

The following Eprint is the final pre-publication draft of:

Evan T. Jones, 'England's Icelandic fishery in the Early Modern period' in D. Starkey et. al. (eds.), *England's Sea Fisheries: The Commercial Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300* (Chatham Publishing, London, 2000), ISBN 1 86176 124 4.

The text given below is almost identical to that found in *England's Sea Fisheries*. Any differences are a result of editorial corrections or amendments by the book's editors. The copyright of both the printed version and the electronic version rest with the author.

Since this chapter was published in *England's Sea Fisheries* the author has published some additional work in this field. An article on the place names of Iceland can be found in: E. T. Jones, 'Charting the world of English fishermen in early modern Iceland', *Mariner's Mirror*, 90 (2004). The journal of the *Marigold*, which is mentioned in this chapter, is available in electronic format as: E.T. Jones, 'The Journal of the Marigold, 1654 (e-version)' in Bristol Repository of Scholarly Eprints (ROSE) (Bristol, 2006), <http://hdl.handle.net/1983/597>. An alternate transcription of the journal, which uses modern spelling and punctuation, is to be published as: E.T. Jones, 'The Journal of the Marigold, 1654' in: Susan Rose (ed.), *The Naval Miscellany*, Vol. VII (Navy Record Society, forthcoming, 2009).

---

### England's Icelandic fishery in the Early Modern period<sup>1</sup>

Mention Iceland to most British medieval or early modern historians and they will recall only that brief flourishing of Anglo-Icelandic trade in the fifteenth century, first described by Carus-Wilson and more recently investigated by Wendy Childs.<sup>2</sup> This piece of late medieval commercial history is best remembered as an element in the Cabot story, for it is generally supposed that John Cabot chose Bristol as the place from which to launch his voyages of discovery because that city had pioneered the Iceland trade and possibly learnt of North America from the Norse sagas.<sup>3</sup> In this context the development of the Anglo-Iceland trade can be represented as England's first step into a wider Atlantic world, thus assuming a significance within exploration and imperial histories out of all proportion to the trade's limited commercial importance. It is perhaps because of the focus on the Icelandic venture as a precursor to the Cabot voyage that there has been relatively little interest in England's involvement with Iceland after 1497. Indeed many historians on the eastern side of the Atlantic have assumed that the connection was terminated after Cabot discovered Newfoundland, and his Bristol compatriots returned with their boast that 'they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland, from which place there comes a very great quantity of the fish called stockfish.'<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For their comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, I would like to thank: Poul Holm, Olaf Janzen, Ken and Shirley Jones, Peter Pope and Jón Th. Þór .

<sup>2</sup> E.M. Carus-Wilson, 'Iceland trade' in E. Power & M.M. Postan (eds.), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1933); W.R. Childs, 'England's Icelandic trade in the fifteenth century: The role of the port of Hull' *Northern Seas* (1995).

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Williamson, *A Short History of British Expansion: The Old Colonial Empire* (London, 1945 edition) 68.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Raimondo de Raimondi de Soncino to the Duke of Milan, 18 December 1497: J.A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Cambridge, 1962) 210.

The widespread assumption among English historians that their nation lost interest in Iceland after 1497 is reflected in Dyson's history of the British fisheries which asserts that within a few years of Cabot's discovery 'there was an annual 'cod rush' of ships sailing to Newfoundland' and thereafter for 'four centuries...Newfoundland dominated the distant-water fishing scene.'<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Gelsinger, writing on the history of Iceland, suggests that 'After equally rich fisheries in the New World were discovered in 1497' the English 'began travelling there instead.'<sup>6</sup>

On the western side of the Atlantic, Canadian historians know better, if only because they have read their Hakluyt and are familiar with Anthony Parkhurst's 1578 letter, which explains that the English had been slow to develop a fishery off Newfoundland because they were still obtaining most of their cod from Iceland.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, most North American historians have assumed that England's interest in Iceland died out once it developed a large-scale North American fishery in the late sixteenth century. Harold Innis and Gillian Cell both suggest that Denmark's tighter control over Iceland in the 1570s-80s led to a decline of the English fishery from that time, while more recently Kurlansky has asserted that, although the English did initially retain their Icelandic connection, 'conflict between England and the Germans of the Hanseatic League grew worse' and 'uncharacteristic of the British, after a brief fight they simply withdrew from the Icelandic fishery.'<sup>8</sup>

The primary purpose of this paper is to chart the history of England's early modern Icelandic fishery and to dispel some of the myths that surround it. In particular, it will be shown that, contrary to most expectations, the fishery's greatest periods of expansion occurred at times when the respective groups of historians mentioned above supposed it to be in decline. It will therefore argue that the fishery's main periods of growth were in the years 1490-1530, i.e. at the same time the early voyages of discovery to America were taking place, and in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, when England's Newfoundland fishery was being developed. It will be shown that, although England's Icelandic fishery did disappear in the end, this did not happen until the late seventeenth century, leaving a gap of 150 years before a new English fishery, centred on Grimsby, grew up to exploit Icelandic waters.

Since so much confusion surrounds the history of England's early modern Icelandic fishery, the first part of the paper will be devoted to outlining the basic pattern of the fishery's development and to examining the reasons for its changing fortunes. Once this has been done, matters relating to the prosecution of the fishery will be discussed and its technical, financial and commercial organisation will be examined. The sources for this study include official state papers generated in response to perceived threats to the fishery, especially during war, and pamphlets published by those who sought to promote the fisheries as a means of enhancing both the wealth of the nation and the number of trained seamen available to the navy. In addition a number of studies conducted by other historians have been employed. Most of these are little known and are either unpublished or have had only limited distribution. They include John Webb's analysis of the activities of Henry Tooley – an early

---

<sup>5</sup> J. Dyson, *Business in Great Waters: The Story of British Fishermen* (London, 1977) 40.

<sup>6</sup> B.E. Gelsinger, *Icelandic Enterprise. Commerce and Economy in the Middle Ages* (Columbia, 1981) 194.

<sup>7</sup> R. Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589) Vol. V (Everyman edition, 1907) 345.

<sup>8</sup> H.A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (Toronto, 1940) 49; G.T. Cell, *English Enterprise in Newfoundland 1577-1660* (Toronto, 1969) 23; M. Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (London, 1998) 52-4.

sixteenth century Ipswich shipowner, Neville William's brief examination of East Anglia's late sixteenth century Icelandic fishery and Anthony Michell's unpublished doctoral thesis on Great Yarmouth in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

## The Growth and Decline of the Fishery

As historians have long been aware, England's relationship with Iceland in the fifteenth century appears to have been primarily a commercial one. *The libelle of Englyshe polycye*, written in 1436, asserts that from Iceland there came little save 'stokfishe', the cod and ling caught and air-dried by the Icelanders before being sold to the English.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, written at the start of the sixteenth century, describes Iceland as an island 'unto which in sommer season yearlie our merchaunte men doe reпарie to bie their fisshes.'<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on trade, rather than fishing, relates to a time when merchants from Bristol, Hull and Lynn acquired special licences to allow perhaps half-a-dozen ships a year to sail to Iceland.<sup>12</sup> Yet by the early sixteenth century England's commerce with Iceland was in decline as Hansa merchants from Hamburg and Lübeck forced their rivals out of the trade.<sup>13</sup>

This does not mean though that the English stopped visiting Iceland. Rather, as the major commercial ports withdrew from trade, East Anglian fishing ports developed their Icelandic enterprises, thus ensuring England's continued supply of cod and ling. The Anglo-Danish treaty of 1490, which eased the restrictions on Englishmen visiting Iceland, facilitated this move. The only requirements on them after this time was that they had to acquire a licence, which lasted for seven years, and that when leaving Iceland merchants and fishermen would have to pay a fee. For fishing vessels this fee, or custom, was initially the fairly nominal sum of 6s. 8d.<sup>14</sup>

In the decades that followed the 1490 treaty the English fishery developed into a major industry. Its importance is already apparent from the reaction of government ministers to a perceived threat to the fleet in 1513. Informed that the Scottish privateer, Hob a Barton, was passing into the North Seas 'to seke his profit' Lord Howard wrote immediately to Thomas Wolsey, Henry VIII's chief minister, to inform him of the fact, adding with feeling 'I pray God

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich: Portrait of an Early Tudor Merchant* (Ipswich, 1962) 71-92; N.J. Williams, *Maritime Trade of the East Anglian Ports 1550-1590* (Oxford, 1988) 85-96; A.R. Michell, 'The port and town of Great Yarmouth and its economic and social relationships with its neighbours on both sides of the seas, 1550-1714: an essay in the history of the North Sea economy (Cambridge PhD, 1978) 51-131. For a very brief published summary of Michell's findings see: A.R. Michell, 'The European fisheries in Early Modern History' in E.E. Rich & C.H. Wilson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe* Vol. V. (Cambridge, 1977) 161-66. Only one attempt has been made to synthesise the data on the fishery over its whole history: H. Benham, *The Codbangers* (Colchester, 1979). This popular account contains much useful information, especially from oral history sources, but its treatment of the pre-eighteenth century material is derivative and uncritical.

<sup>10</sup> George Warner (ed.), *The libelle of Englyshe polycye : a poem on the use of sea-power 1436* (Oxford edition, 1926) 41.

<sup>11</sup> H. Ellis (ed.), *Polydore Vergil's English History*, (Camden Misc. first series, Vol. 36, 1846) 10.

<sup>12</sup> Between 1436-84, when the fifteenth century trade was at its height, 98 English licences were granted to allow 124 ships to visit Iceland: Childs 'England's Icelandic trade in the fifteenth century', 18. Although English fishermen from the east coast of England certainly visited Iceland during this period, there is no evidence that a regular fishery developed and it appears that only small vessels, of perhaps 10-15 tons burden, were employed: Carus-Wilson, 'Iceland trade', 172.

<sup>13</sup> Carus-Wilson, 'Iceland trade', 177-82.

<sup>14</sup> Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 84.

he mete not with the Island fleet'.<sup>15</sup> Even greater concerns were expressed in 1523 when Lord Surrey wrote to Wolsey that 'the Scotts entende to set forth vi or vii ships to the Ilonds to mete with the Islonde flete in retornyng homwards, wich if they do a mervelous damage shall ensue, and the costs of Norfolk and Suffolk undone and all Inglond shalbe destitute of fish next yere'.<sup>16</sup> It seems unlikely that this was much of an exaggeration, for by 1528 a list of English vessels engaged in the northern fisheries records that no less than 149 ships had made the voyage to Iceland that year – almost all of them coming from Suffolk and Norfolk.<sup>17</sup> The importance of this fishery is further stressed by a slightly later list, which recorded the size of the ships involved. This reveals that most of the ships sailing to Iceland from Norfolk and Suffolk were in the region of 30-90 tons burden with the mean size being 57 tons.<sup>18</sup> On this basis the 1528 fleet would have been in the region of 8,500 tons burden in total. This would have represented a sizeable proportion of England's total marine and indicates that a truly phenomenal growth had occurred since the fifteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

Despite its rapid growth in the early decades of the sixteenth century, the Icelandic fishery appears to have gone into a decline during the 1530s that was not reversed until the early seventeenth century. In 1533 only 85 ships went to Iceland and by the early 1550s the fleet was reduced to 43 ships – much to the bitterness of those inhabiting the impoverished East Anglian ports.<sup>20</sup> The exact reasons for the decline of the fishery are unclear. The blame for it may partly lie with the Danes, who, as the overlords of Iceland, had doubled the duties on English fishermen in 1530 and, thereafter, increasingly restricted the activities of the Englishmen in favour of Danish interests.<sup>21</sup> The decay of the fishery was, however, also attributed to developments at home. In particular, an Act of Parliament passed in 1534, which sought to prevent abuses of the white fish market in England, seems to have damaged the fishery. This Act, which showed a particular concern for 'the fysshe that comyth from Iselande', outlawed fishermen from selling their catches to merchants on the shore, or even from selling their shares in the catch, called 'doles', to the owner of the ship.<sup>22</sup> These measures were adopted to prevent unscrupulous English merchants from buying up stocks of fish with the aim of cornering the market and inflating the price of salt-fish at the three great East Anglian fish fairs – held at Sturbridge, St. Ives and Ely. The trouble, of course, was that it prevented both the fishermen and those financing fishing expeditions from seeing a quick return on their ventures. Although the Crown repealed the Act a decade later and passed another in 1548 to prevent officers of the Admiralty for exacting unofficial 'levies' on the Iceland fishers, the industry did not experience a noticeable recovery.<sup>23</sup> The lack of growth

---

<sup>15</sup> Public Record Office [hereafter PRO] PRO SP 1/229 fo.184.

<sup>16</sup> PRO SP 49/2 fo. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic*, Henry VIII, Vol. IV pt. ii, 1526-8, no. 5101.

<sup>18</sup> This certificate provides full details of 84 ships, totalling 4,758 tons: PRO SP 1/80 fos. 61-78.

<sup>19</sup> A 1572 list of English shipping, recorded the total tonnage of English shipping to be 50,000 tons: R. Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1962) 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic*, Henry VIII, Vol. VI, 1533, no. 1380; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Elizabeth 1601-03 with Addenda 1547-65, 426.

Vol. IV, No.56.

<sup>21</sup> Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 84; Historic Manuscripts Commission [hereafter HMC], *Salisbury Mss*, Vol. XIII, 70-1.

<sup>22</sup> 'An Acte agaynst forstallyng & regratyng of Fyshe', *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. III (London, 1817) 440-1. Although the act also limited trade to Iceland to those venturing £20 or more, this would have affected only those engaged in commerce.

<sup>23</sup> 'An Acte for the repealinge of a certan Statute concerninge the bringinge in of Salt Fische and Stockfyshe': *Statutes of the Realm* Vol. III (London, 1817) 964; 'An Acte againste the exaction of money or other things by any officer to traffike in to Iceland': Vol. IV, pt. I, (London, 1819) 44-5.

was now attributed to the rise of Protestantism, which removed the spiritual incentive to observe 'fish' days, and the continued ability of mayors to set the price of fish in their markets at an unrealistically low level.<sup>24</sup> These problems were not addressed until 1563 when an 'An Acte towching certayne Politique Constitutions made for the maintenance of the Navye' was passed, which sought to encourage the fisheries in order to increase the supply of experienced seamen available for the navy.<sup>25</sup> To this end it ordered that both Wednesdays and Saturdays should be fish-days and that, henceforth, it would be illegal 'to set price make any restraint or take or demaunde Toll or Taxe of any seafish to be brought into this realme' by Englishmen in English ships.

Despite the problems experienced by the Icelandic fishery in the mid-late sixteenth century, it never collapsed entirely. A 1565 muster Roll of Norfolk indicates that the county then possessed at least 33 ships engaged in the Iceland fishery.<sup>26</sup> Since Norfolk contributed about half the ships to the 1528, 1533 and 1593 fleets, this would imply that the English fleet as a whole consisted of about 60-70 ships. As mentioned earlier, Anthony Parkhurst's letter testifies to the vigour of the Iceland fishery at the time the English Newfoundland fishery began to develop in the 1570s, and in 1593 at least 55 ships sailed to Iceland.<sup>27</sup> The next few decades were, however, to witness a growth of the fleet as rapid as that of the early sixteenth century. Although it is unclear whether this expansion began in the 1590s, or was delayed until the end of the Anglo-Spanish war in 1604, by 1614 the Iceland fleet consisted of about 125 ships – almost all of them from Norfolk and Suffolk.<sup>28</sup> In absolute terms the number of ships involved in the Iceland fishery was slightly less than the 150 ships reported to be involved in England's Newfoundland fishery by this time, but this does not necessarily mean the Newfoundland fishery was more important, for the author of the *Trades Increase* (1615) implies that the Newfoundland enterprise employed smaller vessels and fewer men.<sup>29</sup> Over the next few years the Iceland fishery grew even larger. By 1628 it was reported that 160 ships were ready to sail to Iceland and in 1632 an English commentator confidently claimed that Iceland 'is the greatest fishing in the Kingdom and exceedeth the Newfownd Land and hering fishings'.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Elizabeth 1601-03 with Addenda 1547-65, 426.  
Vol. IV, No.56.

<sup>25</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. IV, pt. i, 422-8.

<sup>26</sup> PRO SP 12/38 fos. 15-40.

<sup>27</sup> BM Add. Mss. 34729 fos. 63-64 'A true reporte of all the shippes and barks that have this yeare made their voyage into Islande and returned'. The list indicates the origin and nature of the vessels as follows: Harwich 3 ships, 1 bark; Orford 1 small bark; Aldeburgh 2 small barks; Sizewell 1 small bark; Walberswick 1 small bark; Southwold 4 ships, 12 barks; Dunwich 1 small bark; Yarmouth 6 small barks; Blakeney, Wiveton and Cley 5 ships; Wells 10 ships, 3 barks; King's Lynn 5 ships. Neville William's claim that this fleet contained 111 ships is the result of a miscount: Williams, *Maritime Trade*, 96.

<sup>28</sup> This account, written by a member of Southwold's leading shipowning / fishing families (they owned five of the ships in the 1593 list) describes the origin of the ships as follows: Harwich 3 or 4 ships; Orford and Aldeburgh 10 or 12 barks; Southwold, Dunwich and Walberswick 50 barks; Yarmouth 20 barks; Blakeney and Wells 20 barks; Lynn 20 ships; Tobias Gentleman, *England's Way to Win Wealth* (1614) reprinted in *Harleian Miscellany*, Vol. III (London, 1809) 240-3. Gentleman's figures were used as the basis for a work written the following year: J.R. *The Trade's Increase* (1615) reprinted in *Harleian Miscellany*, Vol. III, (London, 1809) 295, 301.

<sup>29</sup> This work notes that the 'Iceland voyage entertaineth one-hundred and twenty ships and barques. Newfoundland employeth some one-hundred and fifty sail, from all parts, of small ships'. The author later asserts that Iceland fishery employed 2,500 mariners/fishers and the Newfoundland fishery 1,500: J.R. *The Trade's Increase*, 295, 301.

<sup>30</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Charles I 1627-28, 512; PRO SP 16/229 no. 80.

The resurgence of the Iceland fishery in the early seventeenth century may in part be a reflection of the government's efforts to encourage it. Yet the apparent delay between the creation of the pro-fishing measures of the 1540s to 1560s and the recovery of the fishery between 1593 and 1614 suggests that other factors were more significant. Perhaps the most important reason for the expansion of the industry was that during the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries the rapid growth of England's population pushed up food prices, so that fishing, along with agriculture, became more profitable. The Iceland fishery was especially well placed to benefit from this, since the East Anglian based industry was perfectly located to supply London, which was growing very rapidly in this period and was the most important market for the industry's fish. On the supply side of the equation, the Iceland fishery is also likely to have benefited from the general boom in shipping investments that followed the peace of 1604, while increased competition from the Dutch in England's East Coast herring fishery may have encouraged East Anglian fishing capital to switch from herring to Icelandic cod during the early seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup>

If the early 1630s marks the high-point of the Icelandic venture, trouble was not far ahead. Short of funds, King Charles sought ever more desperate and questionably legal measures to raise money. This included increasing the toll of fish he took from ships returning from Iceland, raising the duties on salt, and, above all, stopping the fishermen from claiming back the duty on salt imported from Biscay if the salt was subsequently used in the fishery. In 1639, Great Yarmouth, an important centre for the Iceland fishery, issued a petition to complain about these new measures, in which it was claimed that in just five years the number of vessels sailing to the Vestmann Isles had halved.<sup>32</sup> Of the policy changes it appears that the last, requiring duty to be paid on salt used in the fishery, was the most damaging, for salt had always been one of principal items of expenditure in the fishery.<sup>33</sup>

If the Icelandic fishery was already suffering before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642, it seems that the war itself, which led to an increase in privateering and general maritime lawlessness, resulted in a further decline.<sup>34</sup> This sorry state of affairs continued in the early years of the Commonwealth, due to high levels of privateering before and during the First Dutch War (1652-54).<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the resilience of the fishermen and their ability to respond to such short-term shocks is demonstrated by the way the Icelandic fishery was built-up in the latter years of the Commonwealth, when, operating under naval protection, the fishery began to grow once more. In 1656, 33 vessels sailed to Iceland.<sup>36</sup> This increased to 60 ships in 1657, 72 in 1658, and by 1659 a naval officer was able to report that he had successfully convoyed no less than 77 ships back from Iceland.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, this positive state of affairs did not long outlast the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. As early as 1662, one commentator was complaining that East Anglia's

---

<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 8; M.E. Allen, 'The development of the borough of Aldeburgh, 1547-1660: aspects of the economy of the borough' (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Wales – Aberystwyth, 1982), 63.

<sup>32</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Charles I 1639-40, 162-3.

<sup>33</sup> Even in the mid-sixteenth century, when customs dues were minimal, salt was a major item of expenditure. For instance, when the *James* of Dunwich sailed to Iceland in 1545, the cost of salt was £28 8s. 4d. out of a total fitting-out and victualling bill of £151 2s. 11d.: E. R. Cooper, 'The Dunwich Iceland Ships', *Mariners Mirror*, 25 (1939) 172-5.

<sup>34</sup> E. Gillingwater, *An Historical Account of the Ancient Town of Lowestoft* (London, 1790) 110-11.

<sup>35</sup> Michell, 'The port and town of Great Yarmouth', 75-6.

<sup>36</sup> *Calendar of State Papers*, Commonwealth 1656-57, 422.

<sup>37</sup> *Calendar of State Papers*, Commonwealth 1656-57, 381; 1658-59, 441; 1659-60, 478.

cod fisheries were in severe decline and that fishermen would rather 'let their vessels lie and rot in haven than to undergo much pain and peril for that which would not at their return quit cost in any proportion because their fish turn to no account.'<sup>38</sup> By 1668 the Iceland fleet was down to 39 ships, in 1675 only 28 ships sailed there, and by 1680 the fishery was so decayed that the writer of *Britannica Languens* claimed that England now had 'not a fourth part of the trade we had twenty or thirty years since'.<sup>39</sup> From this point there was a final and fairly rapid slide to oblivion. In 1702 it was asserted that 'We formerley imploy'd in the Iseland and Northern-fishing, more than 10000 men and now not 1000'.<sup>40</sup> At Yarmouth, once an important port for the Iceland fishery, the same writer reported that no ships had been sent north during the previous two years. Although there were sporadic voyages to Iceland over the next few decades, the Icelandic fishery was effectively finished from this point on. This does not mean that the East Coast cod fishery entirely died out, but it became increasingly focussed on the Dogger Bank in the North Sea and the main ports for this fishery were now Harwich and Barking at the mouth of the Thames Estuary. This fishery remained viable because, with the development of well-smacks, cod caught close to England could be kept alive in the hold of the vessel for as long as a fortnight before being brought to London – thus circumventing the need for salt.<sup>41</sup> Gradually even the memory of the once great Icelandic fishery disappeared, eighteenth century promoters of England's fisheries rarely mentioning it in projections that focus almost exclusively on the herring industry.

As to why the fishery disappeared, it seems that, while a number of factors may have been at work, the principal cause was the salt tax. During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the duties on the 'bay' salt favoured by East Anglian fishermen increased dramatically and an excise was created on salt from both England and abroad.<sup>42</sup> The level of tax on salt increased from a 5% *ad valorem* custom levied on imported salt in the sixteenth century to a 300% peace-time excise on English salt by the late eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Foreign salt was taxed at even higher rates, since it had to pay both customs dues and a higher rate of excise.<sup>44</sup> Although attempts were made to allow fishermen to claim tax remissions on salt used in the fisheries, the State's obsession with preventing fraud meant that the regulations were so complex and stringent that, in practice, it was impossible for the cod-fishermen to collect them.<sup>45</sup> In consequence, English fishermen found that they could no longer produce Icelandic salt cod, or indeed many other types of salted fish, as cheaply as their foreign

---

<sup>38</sup> T. Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662, reprinted, London, 1840) 34-5.

<sup>39</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Charles II 1667-68, 547; HMC, Hastings Mss 78, Vol. II, 327; Anon. *Britannica Languens, or a Discourse of Trade* (1680) reprinted in J.R. McCulloch, *Early English Tracts on Commerce* (Cambridge, 1856) 409.

<sup>40</sup> F. Brewster, *New Essays on Trade* (London, 1702) 7.

<sup>41</sup> Although this form of fishery was practised by some Englishmen as early as the 1680s, it was only in the eighteenth century, as the cost of salt increased, that well-smacks became a common feature of the English fishery: John Collins, *Salt and Fishery* (London, 1682) 111; H. Benham, *The Codbangers*, 31-33.

<sup>42</sup> While 'bay' salt originally referred only to that produced on the French coast of the Bay of Biscay, over time the term came to be applied to all sun-dried salt – whether it came from salt-pans in France, Portugal or southern Spain.

<sup>43</sup> T.S. Willan (ed.), *A Tudor Book of Rates* (Manchester, 1962) 51; Adam Smith, *An Inquiry in the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1785) V.ii.k.11.

<sup>44</sup> E. Hughes, *Studies in Administration and Finance 1558-1825 with Special Reference to the History of Salt Taxation in England* (Manchester, 1934) 171-82.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, in 1713 'An Act for allowing a Drawback on the Exportation of Salt to be made for the curing of Fish taken at North Seas or Iseland' was passed. This noted the complexity of current regulations and that 'the said fishing trade cannot be so effectually carried on unless salt for curing cod taken ther may be had free of Excise.': *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. IX (London, 1822) 901.



rivals.<sup>46</sup> The result was that the English were ousted from the Icelandic venture and, over time, much of the nation's fish came to be supplied by the Dutch. That the salt taxes had devastated the fisheries was finally accepted in a 1785 House of Commons report on the state of the British Fisheries. This included a number of depositions from fishermen and shipowners on the impact of the salt taxes, including one from John Shelly, a Yarmouth shipowner, who noted at the end of his statement that there once:

'was a fishery carried on from Yarmouth upon the coast of Iceland, which employed about 200 vessels – That the fish usually caught there were cod, taken with hand lines, and were dry-salted in the hold of the vessel – That the reason why that fishery is not now carried on is, that, except in the fishery for Herrings, the duty for all the salt not expended in the curing of fish must be paid'.<sup>47</sup>

Although the House of Commons report recommended a reduction in the excise to encourage the fishery, the French Revolution of 1789, and the quarter century of conflict that followed it, prevented the government from even considering a lowering of this iniquitous tax. Indeed, during the Napoleonic Wars, the duties on English salt were increased to their highest ever levels – equivalent to a staggering *ad valorem* tax of 1,500%.<sup>48</sup> In consequence, it was only after the peace of 1815 that the issue of the salt taxes could again be addressed. Once more proponents of the fisheries, including those who wished to establish a new Icelandic fishery, recognised the vital importance of reducing the salt taxes if this was to occur. In this context, Samuel Phelps, who was closely involved in promoting a new English fishery in Iceland asserted that:

'The greatest obstacle which can possibly be named to impede or annoy the fishing trade, is certainly the duty on salt:- for though it may be obtained duty free for that purpose, yet the waiting for permits and the attendance of excise officers; the danger of transport, fear of mistakes, and of incurring heavy penalties, are such tremendous considerations, that few are bold enough to run such risks; and numberless cargoes of fish are not taken and cured in consequence.'<sup>49</sup>

In the end, Phelps and his fellow protagonists got their way and the hated salt excise was finally abolished in 1825, thus creating the conditions for the development of a new Icelandic fishery. The change of heart came, however, more than a century too late for the small-scale cod fishermen of East Anglia, whose Icelandic fishery had long since disappeared and largely been forgotten.

---

<sup>46</sup> For the impact of the salt taxes on Scotland's herring fishery, see Dr. Anderson's 1785 report 'Survey of the Hebrides' quoted in: Hughes, *Studies in Administration and Finance*, 448-9.

<sup>47</sup> 'First report from the committee appointed to enquire into the state of the British Fisheries – 1785' *Reports from the Committees of the House of Commons, Miscellaneous Subjects*, Vol. 10, 1785-1801 (London, 1803) 11.

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Studies in Administration and Finance*, 182.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Merchant Phelps, *Observations on the importance of extending the British Fisheries and of forming an Iceland Fishing Society* (London, 1817) 35.

## The Prosecution and Organisation of the Industry

Having outlined the primary features of the fishery's growth and decline, the second half of this paper will consider how the fishery was conducted and organised. This will first consider the technical aspects of the fishery, such as the timing of the voyage, the size of the ships used and the methods of fishing and fish curing employed. It will then examine matters relating to the organisation, financing, and ownership of the Iceland venture, as well as the way in which the fish was marketed in England.

During the whole period under examination the Iceland voyage was a once-a-year affair, involving fairly large vessels, typically of 30-100 tons burden, leaving East Anglia in March and returning in August or early September. The smaller barks were said to have had crews of up to twenty men, while the largest ships had crews of about forty.<sup>50</sup> In both cases this represents a considerably higher manning ratio than was normal for merchant ships at the time, which helps to explain why England's fisheries were regarded as the 'chiefest Seminarie and Nurserie' of the Navy.<sup>51</sup> The large Icelandic ships were regarded as particularly valuable as training vessels for mariners, both because they were willing to hire raw hands and because the crew were engaged in voyages that were as long, hard and rough as any they were likely to encounter in the navy.<sup>52</sup> The large ships may also have been regarded as providing good preparation for naval service because they had hierarchical and occupationally differentiated crews; when the *James* of Dunwich sailed in 1545, its 29 man crew included a master, a master's mate, two skiff masters, a boatswain, a carpenter, a cook, a cooper, a merchant, a gunner and a soldier.<sup>53</sup>

To sail between England and Iceland could take as little as a week, or as much as a month, depending on the winds.<sup>54</sup> The most dangerous section of the journey was the passage through the Pentland Firth, between Caithness and the Orkneys, which is known to this day for its ferocious tides and was described in a 1542 letter as 'the most daungerouse place of all Christendom'.<sup>55</sup> Once they had cleared the Orkneys it seems likely that most fishermen followed the route taken by the republican naval ship, the *Marigold*, when it convoyed a fleet from East Anglia to Iceland in 1654.<sup>56</sup> Heading north-west past the Faeroes, the fleet made landfall in the region of Igney (Vatnajökull), the glacial heights of which could have been visible from a great distance. From this point English fishermen typically made for the rich fishing-grounds on the west coast of Iceland. Westmony (the Vestmann Isles), on the south-

---

<sup>50</sup> Notes attached to the 1593 list of ships sailing to Iceland: BM Add. Mss. 34729 fo. 64.

<sup>51</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. IV, p. 1058, 'An Acte to encourage the Seamen of England to take Fische, wherebie they may encrease to furnishe the Navie of England' (1603). The Elizabethan shipwright, Matthew Barker, suggested that to sail a ship required one man for each five tons burden: W. Salisbury 'Early Tonnage measurement in England', *Mariner's Mirror* 52 (1966) 46. By the late seventeenth century the ratio in the European trades was normally about one man per eight tons: Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Since the large ships set out earlier in the year and could 'fyshe and ryde it oute in the extreamest wrought seas' it was said that experience in them 'doth both harden and bolden the maryner', promoting their 'skyll' and 'courage': B.M. Add. Mss. 34729 fo. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, 'The Dunwich Iceland Ships', 176. The gunner and soldier were probably included because England and France were then at war.

<sup>54</sup> Although a 1540 voyage from Cley to Iceland was said to have taken just eight days, convoy reports from the mid-seventeenth century record the voyage as taking between two and four weeks: PRO HCA Libels, 5/22, 41; PRO SP Vol. 75, no. 44, fos. 134-7, 140-3; *Calendar State Papers, Domestic, Commonwealth 1656-57*, 422; 1658-59, 441.

<sup>55</sup> *Hamilton Papers*, Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1890) no. 193.

<sup>56</sup> PRO SP 75 no. 44, 'Journal of the *Marigold*'.

west coast are frequently mentioned in English sources of the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries and were praised for their ling fishery from as early as the fifteenth century.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, some of the mid-seventeenth century sources imply that the fishing grounds off the north-west peninsula (Westur-Norður Isafjarðar Sysla) were also popular. Indeed, the *Marigold's* journal reveals that, during 1654, all the English ships were fishing in the waters between the Ragg (Hornvik) and Lowsey Bay (Tálknaförður), while a 1658 letter stated that the English fishermen were again concentrated in the region of the Ragg and Kettle Bay (a bay to the west of Hornvik).<sup>58</sup>

In the early days of the fishery the Englishmen were able to operate close to the shore but when the Danes, as the overlords of Iceland, began to tighten their licensing practices in the late sixteenth century, the fishermen shifted their activities to deeper and more distant waters beyond Danish control. Secretary Coke's notes 'Concerning the Fishing of Island' (1632) claim that the English fishermen paid no duties to the King of Denmark and that normally 'Our fisher men take there fish 6, 8, 10 or 20 leges of the shore. They never go nearer except fowle weather force them in for succoure.'<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, that year the King of Denmark had complained that some English fishermen were encroaching on the coast and even engaging in illicit commerce with the Icelanders. The King was particularly upset by reports that up to twenty unlicensed falconers were accompanying the Englishmen to Iceland and, with the aid of the inhabitants, were catching and exporting birds of prey. In response to these complaints the Council in England issued orders that forbade

Englishmen from fishing less than six miles from the shore and required them to stop their illicit activities, in case they 'draw anie danger or supression uppon ther trade'.<sup>60</sup> The concern of the Council seems to have rested on recognition that, while the fishermen were not formally beholden to Denmark, the goodwill of the Danes certainly made it easier for them to carry out their business. This was because, apart from the protection Iceland's havens offered during rough weather, the English did in practice go in-shore for a variety of reasons, such as fetching fresh water, acquiring drift-wood for cooking and even to buy fresh food from the Icelanders.<sup>61</sup> The Danes seem to have normally tolerated such visits so long as the Englishmen behaved themselves and only stayed a few days.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, by suspending such 'visiting rights' they could have made life much more difficult for the English fishermen.

The cod and ling fishery during the early modern period was always conducted with lines rather than nets and appears to have taken two different forms – hand-lines and long-lines. The process of fishing and fish processing practised off Iceland in the late seventeenth century is detailed in John Collins' *Salt and Fishery* (London, 1682). This volume has been little used by writers working on England's early modern fisheries, has never been

---

<sup>57</sup> Carus-Wilson, 'Iceland trade', 172.

<sup>58</sup> PRO SP 75 no. 44; *Cal. SP. Domestic, Commonwealth*, Vol. XII, 414. This 1658 letter also mentions 'Organ Bay' ('organ' being another name for ling) the location of which is unclear.

<sup>59</sup> PRO SP 16/229 no. 80.

<sup>60</sup> HMC, *Various Collections* 55, Vol. IV (London, 1907) 295; PRO SP 16/229 No. 80.

<sup>61</sup> During its 1654 voyage the *Marigold* went into shore for all these reasons, as well to acquire extra ballast, hear news and to seek protection from storms or ice: PRO SP 75 no. 44.

<sup>62</sup> From the earliest days of the fishery it appears to have been the custom that English fishermen only paid dues to the Danish Crown if they stayed in an Icelandic harbour for more than three days: Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 84-5.

republished, and would not be readily accessible to most readers.<sup>63</sup> For these reasons, as well as for the clarity of its explanations, Collins' work is quoted in some detail below. Writing specifically of the Iceland fishery he states:

'The manner of Catching is thus,  
A Fisherman hath a Line of 90 fathom or more, with a Lead at the end of it called a deep Sea-Lead of about 6 or 7 pound weight to sink it, above which is a cross-Stick called a chop-Stick, with two Lines andhooks at them with baites.'<sup>64</sup>

Such hand-lines, with two hooks at their end separated by a spacer-bar, were used in the North Sea cod-fishery until modern times.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, even after the advent of steam-trawlers in the late nineteenth century, they were still employed for deep-sea fishing in areas where foul ground could damage a trawler's nets. Although Collins suggests that hand-lining was the only form of fishing practised off Iceland in the late seventeenth century, in earlier times, when Englishmen had been permitted to fish in shallower waters closer to the shore, they had also employed long-lines. These lines would be laid for hundreds of yards, or even miles, behind a ship. The main line would be buoyed at each end and fixed to the seabed at intervals with small anchors. Short lines, called snoods, with baited hooks on them, were attached to the main line about three yards apart. The use of long-lines is attested from the start of the sixteenth century when the Icelandic Althing complained that their use by Englishmen was preventing the cod from reaching the very shallow inshore waters that the Icelanders fished.<sup>66</sup> The continued use of long-lines until at least the mid-sixteenth century is apparent from references to 'long warps' in the inventory of goods lent to the crew of the *Mary Walsingham* in 1536.<sup>67</sup> Mention of 'skiff-masters' on fishing vessels also implies that long lines were being employed, since the principal task of these men was the efficient spreading of the lines.<sup>68</sup>

Once caught, the fish were immediately prepared for curing. While the Icelanders practised a slow wind-dried cure, which produced stockfish, the English fishermen salted their fish to save time and to protect their summer-caught fish from blow-flies. In the mid-sixteenth century it was said that a wey of salt was enough for between eight hundred and a thousand cod, or five hundred ling.<sup>69</sup> Saltfish and stockfish were accounted by the long-hundred (120) and a wey of salt weighed one ton, indicating that roughly two pounds of salt was used per fish.<sup>70</sup> Records from this period state that the fish were pickled in barrels, an assertion supported by the frequent reference to coopers accompanying Icelandic voyages.<sup>71</sup> Although the production of such barrelled fish had apparently ceased in the Iceland fishery by the late

---

<sup>63</sup> Both Michell and Benham appear to have been unaware of this work: Michell, 'The port and town of Great Yarmouth'; Benham, *The Codbangers*.

<sup>64</sup> Collins, *Salt and Fishery*, 87.

<sup>65</sup> For a description of the hand-line and long-line techniques, see: Benham, *The Codbangers*, 99-103.

<sup>66</sup> Carus-Wilson, 'Iceland trade', 172.

<sup>67</sup> Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 76.

<sup>68</sup> Cooper, 'The Dunwich Iceland Ships', 176; Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 82.

<sup>70</sup> Stockfish and saltfish had been accounted as 120 fish, or sometimes 124 fish, from the 15th century: H. Hall and F.J. Nicholas, 'Select tracts and table books relating to English weights and measures', *Camden Miscellany*, Vol. XV (London, 1929) 17; BM Add. Mss. 34729 fos. 63. By the late 16th century a wey of salt was 40 bushels, a bushel of salt later being set by Statute at 56 lbs.: T.S. Willan (ed.) *A Tudor Book of Rates* (Manchester, 1962) 51; *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. VII, (London, 1820) 137.

<sup>71</sup> Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 81-2.

seventeenth century, the technique was still used in the North Sea during Collins' time. Describing this process, he writes that, after the fish had been headed, gutted and split:

'They salt them well with refined Salt, laying them Circularly round the barrel with the Tails towards the middle, where to supply the Descent, a whole Cod is laid in; between each lay of Fish they put in a Lane of Salt, and so fill up to the Head which is well covered with Salt, where after 24 hours time they will settle and make room for more; and when the barrel is full they head them up full of Pickle.'<sup>72</sup>

By the late seventeenth century it seems that Icelandic fish were no longer pickled in this way. The fishermen still, however, employed a heavy salt cure that was undertaken in the holds of the vessels. Collins describes the full process as follows:

'The Cod being haled on Board, they are laid upon the Decks in the Vessel, (or may be on boards or Tables;) One Man chops or wrings off the Head throwing it over-Board, and enters a Knife at the Navel, and cuts it up to the Throat and downwards, taking out the Guts, Garbidge, and Rows, to throw away; as also the Livers to reserve in barrels to make Oyle of.

Another, the Splitter, takes out the back bone, and lays the Fish open to the Tail. Then they salt them, and lay them Nape and Tail in Bed on the Deck, as fast they can dispatch.

The manner of salting is, a Man hath a small salting Platter that may hold about a quart, which he disperseth chiefly on the middle or thickest part of the Fish, from whence it runs off on the Tail and thinnest part.

And when one lay is done, they pile them up in their Holds, and proceed to another, making in the middle of the the Hold, the course of Fish higher by two foot than on the sides, that the Pickle descending may fall on the sides.'<sup>73</sup>

The note that the salting platter held 'about a quart' implies that roughly the same quantity of salt was used per fish as in the sixteenth century. The advantage of the latter technique was that it dispensed with barrels. This meant that storage costs would be reduced and more fish could be taken back to England.

Apart from the fish flesh, the only other article to be extracted from the cod were their livers. These were preserved for their valuable oil, which was used in lamps and also by certain craftsmen, such as curriers and ship's carpenters. The importance of this by-product, which could fetch £30 per tun, is reflected by the detailed description of its extraction that Collins again provides.

'The Livers being barrell'd up, three barrels of their own nature without any Artifice, yeild one barrel of foul Oyle, the which is thus got, let the barrels stand 48 hours on their Heads and the Oyle will swim at top, from whence it may be keeched with a pot, so long as the Oyle may be taken off without Blood, which they put in an empty barrel, let it stand six hours and then scum it off, and there will be left about half or more in Blood and Guts.

The Remainders or Residue are called bluber-Livers, when brought home, or to a convenience for Boyling are Boyled up, and 7 or 8 barrels of Livers may yield one barrel of Oyle.'<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Collins, *Salt and Fishery*, 112.

<sup>73</sup> Collins, *Salt and Fishery*, 88.

<sup>74</sup> Collins, *Salt and Fishery*, 88-89.

The extent of a ship's annual catch would have depended on the size of the vessel, the luck of the fishermen and the degree to which the crew concentrated on trying to catch cod or the larger and more valuable ling. A rough estimate of the expected size of the catches can be derived from sixteenth century accounts listing the amount of salt provided for fishing voyages. For instance, Henry Tooley's ship, which was probably about 70-80 tons burden, took between eighteen and twenty-five weys of salt on its voyages, implying that the crew expected to catch as many thousand cod.<sup>75</sup> Tooley's ship was somewhat larger than average but his expected catches roughly tally with accounts of French ships engaged in the Newfoundland fishery during the sixteenth century.<sup>76</sup> These indicate that a hundred-ton ship could expect to take between twenty and twenty-five thousand fish during a season.<sup>77</sup> On the basis of these two estimates it seems reasonable to assume that a ship engaged in the Iceland fishery might have expected to take about a 'thousand' (i.e. 1,200) cod, or half as many ling, for every four tons of the ship's burden. On this basis the 1528 fleet could have caught around two-and-a-half million cod – enough to supply one fish to almost every person living in England at the time.

Fishermen, on the whole, were fairly poor men and although some masters were also the owners of their vessels this appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. The 1533 certificate of ships returning from Iceland, which lists both owners and masters, indicates that only two of the eight-five ships were owned by the shipmaster.<sup>78</sup> The implication, that there was a clear distinction between those who owned the vessels and those who hired and sailed them, is also borne out by the 1593 certificate of ships returning from Iceland. This reveals that in several cases one owner possessed a number of different vessels engaged in the Iceland venture, implying the existence of a separate ship-owning class, who might be involved in backing and managing a voyage but who would rarely, if ever, have made the trip north themselves.<sup>79</sup> The best model for this sort of relationship is that found in the account books of the Ipswich merchant-shipowner, Henry Tooley. During the 1520s-30s Tooley chartered his vessel, the *Mary Walsingham*, to Icelandic fishing crews on at least four occasions. Since such voyages took place between March and August, he was able to use his ship for freighting wine and salt from Biscay to England during the autumn and winter. When Tooley employed his ship on the Iceland voyage, he supplied the provisions and equipment and even offered some of the crew advances, in the form of cash or personal equipment. All of these costs were paid back to Tooley after the voyage when the mariners sold their shares, or 'doles', of the catch. While such an arrangement reduced the crew to minor partners in the venture, in other cases it seems that they remained more independent, taking a vessel on something like a bare-charter and seeking independent finance for the voyage. One of the most common forms of finance was the lending of money 'a venture' from small tradesmen and other petty lenders, such as prosperous widows. In such cases money would be lent at an interest rate of 20-25 per cent for the six-month voyage.<sup>80</sup> The rate, which seems exorbitant by modern standards, reflected the standard provision that the debt was only repayable if the ship returned to land. Since secured loans could generally be had at about 8-10 per cent per

---

<sup>75</sup> In 1527 Tooley supplied the ship with 25 weys salt, in 1534 and 1536 it took 18 weys. Although the exact size of the ship is unknown, its largest known cargo of merchandise was less than 70 tons: Webb, *Great Tooley of Ipswich*, 34, 72, 74.

<sup>76</sup> The mean size of ships in the 1533 fleet was 57 tons: PRO SP 1/80 fos. 61-78.

<sup>77</sup> Innis, *The Cod Fisheries*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> PRO SP 1/80 fos. 61-78.

<sup>79</sup> BM Add. Mss. 34729 fos. 63-64.

<sup>80</sup> Michell, 'The port and town of Great Yarmouth', 114.

annum in this period, the high premium for the provisional loans can itself be taken as grim evidence of the high proportion of ships that never made it home.<sup>81</sup>

When the more fortunate ships did return to England, all that remained was for the shares in the voyage, called 'doles', to be distributed and the fish marketed. While many ships appear to have gone straight to their home port, others went to major urban ports, such as Lynn, Ipswich or London, where the fish might be delivered directly to pre-arranged buyers – who were also often the financiers of the voyage.<sup>82</sup> On the arrival of a ship, the first thing that happened was that royal officers took the Crown's toll of the catch – known as 'prise' or 'composition' fish.<sup>83</sup> This Crown right was established during Henry VIII's reign and throughout the sixteenth century the toll amounted to a hundred ling or two hundred cod per ship, although it appears that the Crown itself usually received a money payment rather than the actual fish.<sup>84</sup> Once payment had been made, the doles in the catch would be calculated. If the crew had not previously agreed to sell the catch to a particular merchant at a set rate, they would then be free to keep or sell their fish as they saw fit. Most would probably have immediately sold their shares to one of the merchants who came to the coastal ports to buy the fish 'upon the stone'. After this the fish would be sent for sale at a major town, such as London or Norwich, or to one of East Anglia's three great fish-fairs. These were held in September and October at St. Ives, Ely and, most importantly, Sturbridge, which was held outside of Cambridge.<sup>85</sup> It was to these fairs merchants and purveyors from as far afield as Oxford and Coventry would come to purchase their supplies of salt fish for the coming year.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has served to chart the growth, decline and prosecution of one of England's most dangerous and far-flung early modern fisheries. Although the importance, or even existence, of this fishery has rarely been recognised, it was in its time a major supplier of fish to England's domestic market. By providing a relatively cheap source of protein, it would have helped to sustain the rapidly growing population of sixteenth-seventeenth century England and, in particular, facilitated the development of London into a great metropolis. In addition, the fishery provided an excellent, albeit brutally tough, training ground for England's

---

<sup>81</sup> An interest rate of 25% was also standard for West Country fishing voyages to Newfoundland in the late sixteenth century: R. Hitchcock, *A Politique Platt for the Honour of the Prince* (London, 1580).

<sup>82</sup> For instance, the 1593 list notes that two ships from Aldborough and Dunwich had gone direct to London, while two from Wells had delivered their cargo at Lynn. It also noted that wealthy London fishmongers sometimes provided ships and equipment for the voyage: BM Add. Mss. 34729, fos. 63-4.

<sup>83</sup> This toll only applied to fish caught by Englishmen. Stockfish, along with any other fish or merchandise purchased in Iceland, paid customs duties in the normal way.

<sup>84</sup> Notes accompanying the 1593 list make it clear that although the officers selected their hundred fish according to an established custom, they passed a set sum of £6s 13s. 4d. per hundred ling (or two hundred cod) to the Crown: BM Add. Mss. 34729, fos. 63-4. This sum is a fair reflection of the price of ling and cod in the 1520s but rising prices, especially for ling, in the sixteenth century, would have enabled the officers to make a considerable profit on the sale of the fish: J. E. T. Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, Vol. IV, (London, 1882) 545; Vol. V (London, 1887) 429.

<sup>85</sup> These were the three fairs mentioned in the 1534 Act. The Sturbridge Fair, described in 1589 as 'by far the largest and most famous fair in all England' was held in Cambridge's fields about a mile east of the town. It lasted from 24 August - 29 September. St Ives and Ely both had two fairs per year. The fairs referred to in the Act were presumably those held at St Ives' around Michaelmas (29 September) and that held at Ely around St Lambert's Day (17 September): *VCH, Cambridgeshire*, Vol. III, (London, 1959) 92-5; Vol. IV (London, 1958) 50; *VCH, Huntingdon*, Vol. II (London, 1932) 217-8.

<sup>86</sup> *Statutes of the Realm* Vol. III, 964; Rogers, *History of Agriculture and Prices*, Vol. V, 419.

mariners, that was supported by the Crown because it could provide skilled seamen for a navy on which England was becoming increasingly dependent.

While this account has concentrated exclusively on English enterprise off Iceland, the venture was not entirely separate from the North Sea fishery. In the seventeenth century the North Sea cod fishery, first off the coast of Scotland and later on the Dogger Bank, grew into a major industry. The North Sea vessels were smaller than those employed off Iceland and, as Collins shows, the fishing and curing techniques differed. Nevertheless, most East Anglian fishing towns had an involvement in both the Iceland and the North Sea cod fisheries and there would undoubtedly have been a substantial crossover between the personnel involved in them. In the eighteenth century the Iceland fishery died out while the North Sea fishery survived, since the North Sea fishers could avoid paying the high salt taxes by adopting well-smacks and concentrating on the production of 'live-cod'.

Although the Icelandic fishery's failure to survive into the modern era has undoubtedly contributed to the historical amnesia that has developed around it, the difficulties and uncertainties to which it was subject are perhaps what make it most interesting. As a business, the Icelandic fishery was always a high-risk venture. In part this was because the frozen and stormy waters of the Arctic Circle were a dangerous place to operate, particularly as the fishermen had few navigational aids and the Icelanders were poorly equipped to help them if they got into trouble. The venture was, however, also risky in financial terms, since it required major extensions of unprotected capital to finance what were, in fishing terms, very long voyages. The level of commitment and risk involved in any one voyage was therefore much greater than for those operating in the North Sea. Nonetheless, in the end the industry's most vulnerable point proved to be that, like England's modern Icelandic fishery, its continued survival depended on political, as well as economic, factors. In the 1970s, Britain's modern cod fishery off Iceland was destroyed when the Icelanders imposed a 200-mile territorial fishing limit around their island. The collapse of the early modern industry was also political in nature but, in this case, the decline occurred because the English Crown gave insufficient weight to the needs of the fishermen as it scabbled after the tax revenues needed to finance England's wars for maritime and commercial supremacy.

**Evan Jones**



**Map: Principal Fishing Ports for the Early Modern Icelandic Fishery**

