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Book chapter

**"Ready for to go to the sea": maintaining fishing families in Late
Medieval Hythe
Sweetinburgh, S.**

“Ready for to go to the Sea”: maintaining Fishing Families in Late Medieval Hythe

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For Kent, as a maritime county, fishing has been a paramount industry for millennia.¹ The rich estuarine and marine waters, both coastal and deep-sea, offered a range of opportunities to catch a variety of species throughout the year.² Moreover, the proximity of London and northern France, especially English Calais during the late medieval and early Tudor periods, as well as the county’s large number of urban communities, provided extensive markets for fresh and processed fish through the network of local and foreign ripiers.³ Nevertheless, such

¹ For a useful national overview of the industry that includes medieval Kent evidence, see; M. Kowaleski, ‘The Early Documentary Evidence for the Commercialisation of the Commercial Sea Fisheries in Medieval Britain’, in *Cod and Herring: The Archaeology and History of Medieval Sea Fishing*, ed. J. H. Barrett and D. C. Orton (Oxford and Philadelphia, 2016), pp. 26, 28, 29–30, 33–6. Although she discusses England’s east coast fisheries, Wendy Childs does not mention Kent, instead she concentrates on Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and East Anglia in ‘Fishing and Fisheries in the Middle Ages: The Eastern Fisheries’, in *England’s Sea Fisheries: The Commercial Sea Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300*, ed. D. J. Starkey, C. Reid and N. Ashcroft (London, 2000), pp. 19–23. However, Alison Littler’s doctoral thesis remains the most comprehensive study of English medieval sea fishing: ‘Fish in English Economy and Society down to the Reformation’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales-Swansea, 1979).

² S. Sweetinburgh, ‘Fishermen and their Families in Late Medieval and Tudor Kent’, in *The Routledge Companion to Marine and Maritime Worlds, 1400–1800*, ed. C. Jowitt, C. Lambert and S. Mentz (Abingdon, 2020), pp. 202–20; A. J. F. Dullely, ‘The Early History of the Rye Fishing Industry’, *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 107 (1969), 36–64.

³ M. Mate, *Trade and Economic Developments, 1450–1550: The Experiences of Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 44–6. The absence of coastal trade from the customs accounts hampers an understanding of the scale of materials, including fish, entering London; M. Kowaleski, ‘The Maritime Trade

opportunities were matched by the dangers and uncertainties the fishermen experienced. Even though industrialisation has reduced some of the dangers, fishing remains a precarious occupation, while the size and distribution of fish stocks have always been subject to climatic and other natural factors, as well as matters such as over-fishing.⁴ Consequently, over the centuries those involved have had to adopt strategies, both regarding their own livelihoods and those of their families and communities more widely, and where possible have sought to aid succeeding generations.⁵

For the fishermen and mariners of Hythe on Kent's southern coast, this must have been especially apparent in the early fifteenth century following a catastrophic disaster when a hundred men were lost at sea.⁶ The town, too, continued to suffer from outbreaks of plague that also deeply affected the local population, and, as Jenny Kermode showed, it was rare for merchant families in urban communities to survive for more than three generations during the late Middle Ages.⁷ In addition, Hythe, like other south-eastern ports, was experiencing serious coastal problems due to longshore drift and work to try to maintain its haven was a continuing struggle (see Kowaleski, this volume) at a time when the country's western ports

Networks of Late Medieval London', in *The Routledge Handbook of Maritime Trade around Europe, 1300–1600*, ed. W. Blockmans, M. Krom and J. Wubs-Mrozewicz (Abingdon, 2017), pp. 392–4.

⁴ D. Whitmarsh, 'Adaptation and Change in the Fishing Industry since the 1970s', in *England's Sea Fisheries*, ed. Starkey et al., pp. 227–34. To assess the level of interest in such topics within the current industry and more generally, see; <https://britishseafishing.co.uk/conservation/commercial-fishing-articles/>

⁵ The bequeathing of nets and other fishing equipment by testators still happens in twenty-first-century Kent. I should like to thank Keith Parfitt for this information.

⁶ The civic authorities petitioned the king in 1401 saying that the previous year Hythe had suffered several crises, for as well as the loss of five ships and the hundred mariners, more than 200 houses had burned down and plague had ravaged the town; *CPR 1399–1401*, p. 477.

⁷ J. Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 16, 41–2.

were beginning to expand their fishing operations.⁸ Taking account of these challenging conditions, this study of Hythe's fifteenth-century fishermen and their families explores the livelihood and inheritance practices of members of the Stace family in the context of their peers as they sought to maintain their place in the industry.

The civic authorities of medieval Hythe were keen to retain the town's rights and privileges as one of the Cinque Ports (see Draper, this volume), which at times brought them into conflict with their archiepiscopal overlord. Like the other Ports, they had long realised the value of written records in their struggle for autonomy and as a means to establish their civic identity, both as individual towns and collectively.⁹ Consequently, the town archive is extensive and includes a range of administrative documents. Among these are local taxation records called *maletotes*, and at Hythe, unlike the other Ports, they survive for several decades in the fifteenth century as working documents in the form of detailed annual entries at the level of the individual taxpayer.¹⁰ Regarding the level of coverage for the fifteenth century, there are incomplete records for three years in the second and third decades, and for 1495/6, but from 1441/2 to 1483/4 there is an extensive set of records, albeit five years are completely missing and elsewhere certain tax payers are missing from specific annual

⁸ On the rise of the West Country fishing industry, see M. Kowaleski, 'The Expansion of the South-Western Fisheries in Late Medieval England', *Economic History Review* 53 (2000), 429–54.

⁹ Although primarily discussing the town *customals*, Justin Croft also noted the value placed on other urban record-keeping: 'The *Customals* of the Cinque Ports c.1290–c.1599: Studies in the Cultural Production of the Urban Record' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1997).

¹⁰ Most householders made their return in January, that is before the end of the civic year that ran from 2 February to 2 February (Candlemas); for an assessment of the production of such records; A. F. Butcher, 'The Functions of Script in the Speech Community of a Late Medieval Town, c.1300–1550', in *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300–1700*, ed. J. Crick and A. Walsham (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 157–70.

accounts.¹¹ In part such deficits were rectified by charging taxes retrospectively, the greatest period being the seven years William Stace was taxed on in 1472, but two or three years was more common.¹² Alternative processes to ensure households fulfilled their obligations involved individuals covering the taxes of others, in certain cases perhaps because the person concerned was away from Hythe, including undertaking activities on the town's behalf.

The tax can be envisaged as a combination levied on occupation and sales (see Kowaleski, this volume), and for fishermen the tax varied according to fish species and the size of the catch, as well as a set amount for taking part in different fishing fares or seasons.¹³ For example, a fisherman paid 4d for each last of herring 'taken greene', while the maletote for a similar last of sprats was a half penny, and mackerel were taxed by the thousand. The standard rate of tax for fishing during the 'small hooks' season that ran from the Hythe fair (19 November) to Candlemas (2 February) was 9d, unless the fisherman caught three lasts or more of sprats, in which case he paid solely for each last taken. If he used 'small hooks' in the season during Lent, this too was taxed at a flat rate of 9d. The same rate was applied for the tramel season when the fishermen deployed tramel or trawl nets for sea floor dwelling

¹¹ A few earlier records also survive, including an entry for a John Stace, from 1366. MS KHLC H1019; H1052; H1053; H1054; H1055; H1058; H1059.

¹² The dates used in this article are the end of the civic year; MS KHLC H1058, fol. 75v.

¹³ MS KHLC H1061, fols 6–6v. Fishing fares varied port to port but broadly followed the same seasonal pattern, in part a response to royal legislation; Littler, 'Fish in English Economy', pp. 134–6; M. Kowaleski, 'The Seasonality of Fishing in Medieval Britain', in *Ecologies and Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. S. G. Bruce (Leiden, 2010), pp. 122–6; K. Parfitt, B. Corke and J. Cotter, *Townwall Street Dover: Excavations 1996* (Canterbury, 2006), p. 397; Dulley, 'Rye Fishing Industry', 42–4.

fish such as plaice, the catch designated 'netfish' in the records and taxed at a rate 12d to the Church and 6d to the town.¹⁴

Nevertheless, even though the level of detail available is valuable, the complexity and diversity of fishing compared to occupations such as cloth making complicates the analysis, especially because it is not always clear how, or if, these taxation categories were applied to all the fishermen. Furthermore, the archive has suffered from damp and other damage, and, as noted above, there are missing years from the mid-1460s, while the entries for some individuals are more complete than others. Yet, the taxation figures for herring, mackerel and sprats, the principal fish species recorded, do demonstrate annual fluctuations in the size of the town's catch for each species.¹⁵ This was a product of natural and man-made factors outlined above, but in addition during some years certain fishermen were engaged in other activities on their own behalf and/or that of the town. In 1470, for example, John Edway, although taxed on his fishing, claimed considerable allowances because he had been on two voyages to the north for the town, one with John Keriell, the other with the duke of Clarence and the earl of Warwick.¹⁶ Nonetheless, as an indication of the relative health of the town's fishing industry herring was especially abundant in the mid-1450s and again twenty years later, whereas mackerel numbers peaked in 1459, 1478 and 1479, and the best years for sprats were 1453, 1457 and 1471. This is broadly reflected in the number of fishermen taxed per year by

¹⁴ Tramelling seems to have been especially popular at Hythe and Rye from the thirteenth century; Littler, 'Fish in English Economy', p. 135.

¹⁵ Cod and cod species were designated 'saltfish', and the term cod is very rarely mentioned in the *maletotes* which means it is difficult to gauge its relative importance. For comparison, cod numbers were listed at Dover but whether the figures cover the total catch seems unlikely; Parfitt et al., *Townwall Street Dover*, p. 399. Other species that may be under-recorded in the Hythe records are whiting, thornbacks, turbot and ling; MS KHLC H1019, fol. 72v; H1058, fols 229; 257v; 265v.

¹⁶ MS KHLC H1058, fol. 26v.

species, but equally a fisherman's annual catch often varied. Of the six years when twelve or more fishermen were taxed on mackerel, four of these years corresponded to the largest total of fish, but 1471 was a relatively poor year when the total number of recorded mackerel was 66,000 compared to the peak in 1479 of 212,000 fish.

Looking at the marketing of the fish caught, the tax on fish purchases and sales, when added to catches and fishing seasons, demonstrates that the industry in total involved a significant proportion of the local population, in addition to those from outside the town. For example, John Hayward (1465) paid 6s 9d in tax concerning the receipts of various foreign rippers who had been operating next to the shore.¹⁷ Due to the length of the herring season and the combination of deep sea and coastal fishing, more Hythe fishermen were listed as catching them compared to any other type of fishing. However, it was rare for these fishermen to rely on a single species for their income and, by engaging in several fishing seasons, many sought to fish for most of the year, albeit with some overlap among the fishing seasons, especially during Advent and Lent.¹⁸ Yet as major periods of fish consumption for religious reasons this option was presumably useful for the Hythe men. In addition, the system of sharing the catch, based on a 'mansfare' or *dola* as denoted in these records (a portion), among the master and crewmen, as well as those who also had shares in boats or who provided nets meant that it

¹⁷ MS KHLC H1019, fol. 148. Among the foreign rippers that year were two men from Harrietsham; MS KHLC H1019, fol. 145. Similarly, Thomas Malyn (1480), who was a weaver by profession, also sold herring and wine at retail, as well as paying tax on the receipts of foreign rippers operating in Hythe; MS KHLC H1058, fol. 215v.

¹⁸ Such flexibility was presumably welcomed by fishermen who might, therefore, use either nets or lines with hooks depending on circumstances to catch different fish species; M. Kowaleski, 'The Internal and International Fish Trades of Medieval England: The Internal Fish Trade', in *England's Sea Fisheries*, ed. Starkey, et al., p. 27; C. M. Woolgar, "'Take This Penance Now, and Afterwards the Fare will Improve": Seafood and Late Medieval Diet', in *ibid.*, pp. 36–7, 39–40.

was not solely fishermen who benefitted from this division.¹⁹ For example, among those not actually fishing, in 1470 Alice Stace's share comprised two bushels of fish, a mix of herring and cod, the following year it was a barrel of herring, two and a half barrels the year after and more herring in 1473, but in 1474 she was buying herring, presumably to sell, and in 1475 she relied solely on her brewing activities to generate a sufficient income.²⁰ Similarly, Walter Johnson (d.1500) intended that after his death Agnes his widow should receive the profits of his half share of a crayer called *The John*, during the next flew (deep-sea herring) season.²¹

Equally, however, even though many fishermen confined their commercial interests to fishing, others sought to spread the risk by combining fishing with other activities. The fisherman-farmer is often cited in the historiography (see also Kowaleski, this volume), but at Hythe coastal and overseas trading was more common, as well as timber production in the form of firewood or renting property to their fellow townsmen.²² In 1463/4 William Gowld had fished successfully for herring and mackerel, in addition to going trammel fishing and fishing with long and harbour hooks, yet that same year he also sold at retail nine pipes of

¹⁹ S. Sweetinburgh, 'Strategies of Inheritance among Kentish Fishing Communities in the Later Middle Ages', *The History of the Family* 11 (2006), 96; M. Kowaleski, 'Working at Sea: Maritime Recruitment and Remuneration in Medieval England', in *Ricchezza del Mare. Ricchezza dal Mare, secc. XIII-XVIII*, ed. S. Cavaciocchi (Florence, 2006), pp. 917–21.

²⁰ In 1470 she is referred to as Alice Borne, the following year Alice Stace alias Alice Borne and thereafter Alice Stace; MS KHLC H1058, fols 24v, 40, 64v, 79, 98, 155v.

²¹ MS KHLC PRC 32/6, fol. 1.

²² S. Dimmock, 'Class and Social Transformation of a Late Medieval Small Town: Lydd c.1450–1550' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1998), pp. 121–7, 130–41, 149–51, 154–7; now published as *The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600* (Leiden, 2014), see ch. 9; H. Fox, *The Evolution of the Fishing Village: Landscape and Society along the South Devon Coast, 1086–1550* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 165–7, 181–6; Kowaleski, 'Working at Sea', pp. 915–16.

wine and other commodities.²³ Moreover, some fishermen seemingly only remained in the industry for a few years and familial longevity over several generations was even more unusual. In part this was due to demographic factors with a low number of sons outliving their fathers to continue the male family line. Yet a degree of continuity was maintained for some fishing families through the female line, and even though testamentary bequests of fishing equipment to daughters are rare, in Hythe wills and the wills of Kent fishermen more generally, certain families did deploy such a strategy.²⁴ In these circumstances, in exchange for the use of their nets, hooks or boat shares wives and daughters could gain an income from their share of the catch, either through the work of their menfolk or in the boats of others from the local fishing community. Thus, testamentary materials are a valuable complimentary resource, albeit such records only offer a snapshot of the testator's assets often on the deathbed and very rarely elude to earlier *in vitam* transactions involving fishing equipment.

Nevertheless, even though they are extremely unusual, those families that demonstrate longevity offer useful ideas regarding how and why they were able to achieve such continuity in the later Middle Ages. Deploying the records for the Stace family between c.1410 and c.1480, it is feasible to examine a range of familial relationships involving close male relatives, as well as wives and daughters. In addition, the Hythe records provide ideas about the significance of kinship beyond the nuclear family, to the role of ties within the fishing community linked to servanthood, and to a shared working environment both at sea and on land at the fishermen's cabins on the Stade, but perhaps to a lesser extent place of residence within the town.

²³ MS KHL C H1019, fol. 112.

²⁴ Although not numerous, the fishing families of Lydd and Folkestone offer comparative examples; Sweetinburgh, 'Strategies of Inheritance', 93–105.

In 1413, like several of his fellow fishermen John Stace resided in Hythe's West Ward, although even more were living in the town's East and Middle Wards, and it was only Market Ward that was seemingly unattractive from their perspective. Whether he fished throughout the year is unclear, but he did fish locally in the English Channel using small hooks and then trammel nets between Easter and Michaelmas, before turning to herring fishing in the autumn. This necessitated working in the North Sea and the use of the Yarmouth herring fair, although he does not appear to have sold fish at Scarborough like his neighbour John Leygh senior.²⁵ Both men also landed herring at Hythe where it was presumably sold for local consumption, as well as further afield. In addition, the porpoise caught by John Stace was seemingly landed at Hythe, although it did not enter the local market, instead part of it was taken to Archbishop Thomas Arundel as the town's overlord.²⁶

John Stace was still fishing c.1420, although John Leygh junior had seemingly taken the place of his father, and for most families it was the next generation who were among the town's fishermen when the maletote records are next extant for 1442. Exceptionally, John Overhaven senior and this John Leygh seemingly span this quarter of a century, but both men died soon after.²⁷ Alexander Leygh may have started fishing before John's death, he is noted as selling herring in 1443, but he was not taxed as a fisherman until two years later.²⁸ Among the Stace family, it is feasible that Thomas and John Stace senior were the earlier John's sons, and William may have been a third brother or their cousin, all three being Hythe householders by the mid-1440s. William did not follow the family's traditional occupation

²⁵ MS KHLC H1052, fol. 54; H1053, pp. 215, 217.

²⁶ MS KHLC H1052, fol. 54; H1053, p. 217.

²⁷ MS KHLC H1052, fol. 51v; H1053, p. 211; H1059; H1055, fols 11v, 25, 37. John Overhaven senior bequeathed shares in two boats to John his son, as well as two silver items, but it was William his servant who received four shot and four flew nets; MS KHLC PRC 32/1, fol. 54.

²⁸ MS KHLC H1055, fols 26, 54v.

because he is listed initially as a tailor before becoming a frequent dealer in locally-produced woollen and occasionally linen cloth.²⁹ Yet he did maintain links to the sea because his mercantile activities included selling wine and ‘diverse merchandise’, and from the mid-1450s he added first herring and then salt to the commodities he traded. Some of this fish probably represent his share within the mansfare system, possibly from Thomas or John Stace’s boats. For example, in 1459 as well as cloth, and diverse merchandise valued at £64, William sold 3 barrels of herring as well as buying and then selling 11,000 red herring.³⁰

William’s mercantile interests were reflected in his place of residence in Hythe because he lived in Market Ward, one of the two central wards, and presumably to the north of Middle Ward that, like West and East Ward, was close to the sea. Nevertheless, unlike Dover that had twenty wards in the fifteenth century, the presence of only four wards in Hythe means that occupational enclaves, if they existed, are hidden.³¹ Furthermore, even though there were fewer fishermen recorded in East Ward, Middle and West Wards seemed to appeal equally, as exemplified by Thomas and John Stace, the former living in West Ward the latter in Middle Ward until the early 1460s. Thereafter John Stace senior moved to West Ward, although whether this was due to his son John Stace junior becoming a householder and fisherman in Middle Ward is unknown; nonetheless it is feasible. However, why John senior moved again in 1471 to East Ward is not clear, but he had reduced his involvement in fishing by this time and died soon after in 1474. Yet even if their houses were not grouped together, the Hythe fishermen, like their peers at the other Kentish ports, had lodges or cabins by the shore where they stored their fishing equipment and prepared the catch for sale.

Among these men were Henry Herman, who bequeathed most of his fishing equipment, his lodge

²⁹ For the period 1443 to 1446; MS KHLC H1055, fols 25v, 36v, 54v, 72.

³⁰ MS KHLC H1019, fol. 77v.

³¹ MS BL Add. 29615, fols 161v–62.

and his capstan to his three sons; while Thomas Broun intended his wife would inherit all his implements associated with fishing except a large table, two trestles and a large chest.³²

The careers of John Stace senior, Thomas his brother and their sons exemplify the differing livelihoods of those involved in the fishing industry. Even though John senior is not listed annually in the surviving records, if the completely missing years and the years when he is absent are discounted, there are only two years when he was not taxed on at least one of the four main fishing seasons. Moreover, in 1447 it seems likely he had still been involved in the industry because he was responsible for giving a conger eel to the archbishop of Canterbury, while eight years later Thomas paid for his brother's tramel fishing and the fish he caught.³³ He seems to have favoured this form of fishing in that he paid taxes on netfish more than any other type of catch, and in four years this is the only part of the industry he was taxed on, although, as in 1472, he did buy herring, presumably for resale.³⁴ His apparent preference for tramelling was more pronounced during the decade before his death, while his greatest involvement in fishing for herring was in his first fifteen years, and in 1450, 1454, 1456 and 1458 he was taxed on over twenty lasts per annum. However, unlike some of his fellows, such as Thomas Rykdon, Richard Rawlyn and William Cole amongst others, he seems to have had much less involvement in the deep-sea herring industry, 1444 being one of the few years he was paying dues to the bailiff at Yarmouth.³⁵ This desire to fish closer to home meant that he was equally likely to be taxed annually on his sprat and mackerel catches as he was on herring, and for both of these fish 1453 was his most productive year with

³² MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 554 (Henry Herman); MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 312 (Thomas Broun).

³³ MS KHLC H1055, fol. 84; H1019, fol. 9v.

³⁴ In 1472 he was taxed on the purchase of 5,000 herring; MS KHLC H1058, fol. 61v.

³⁵ MS KHLC H1055, fol. 30v. For example, Thomas Rykdon sold much of his catch at Yarmouth in 1447, while William Cole and Richard Rawlyn landed herring at Yarmouth and Hythe the following year, and Richard was taxed on 4 lasts at Scarborough and 12 lasts at Hythe in 1449; MS KHLC H1055, fols 86, 96v, 98, 113v.

29,000 mackerel and 60 lasts of sprats. Thus, in addition to using nets, he fished locally with small hooks during lentfare, and more occasionally later in the year he deployed longer harbour hooks, which reflects the relative popularity of such fishing techniques among his peers.³⁶

John senior's son and namesake is first known to have been fishing in 1463, and like his father trammel fishing was his principal activity, although sprats and to a lesser extent mackerel were his quarry, but he is not recorded as fishing for herring until 1469. Thereafter for the next decade he was more likely to fish for herring than either mackerel or sprats, including North Sea herring fishing. In 1474, for example, he is noted as paying taxes to the Yarmouth bailiff, but he also went tramelling each year except in 1476 and 1478.³⁷ The latter was the year before his death and he seems to have operated in some sort of partnership with Roger Gebelot that year, not only for tramelling but also for the small hook season from Hythe fair until Christmas, the harbour hook season and for the herringfare.³⁸

Unlike his cousin and uncle John, Thomas' son, was apparently more involved in catching herring than any other fish, including landing part of his catch in Yarmouth, but he only seems to have been taxed as a fisherman for a few years after his father's death in 1473 and before his own six years later. This may help to explain his father's sole fishing bequest of a sprat net to his cousin, who was already an independent fisherman, especially because

³⁶ John Barbour frequently used small hooks during lentfare during the 1440s and 1450s, and harbour hooks perhaps more than any other Hythe fisherman during the same period (in 1447, 1449–51, 1453, 1458).

³⁷ MS KHLC H1058, fol. 102.

³⁸ MS KHLC H1058, fol. 179. The autumn small hooks season was sometimes designated as being from the feast of St Edmund king and martyr (20 November) until Christmas.

John had yet to marry and instead his principal inheritance comprised land and property in Hythe and surrounding area.³⁹

Even though all three men probably saw themselves as fishermen, they did not rely exclusively on fishing for their livelihood. Perhaps because they were relatively young men, the two cousins only supplemented their income from the rents they collected, whereas John senior employed a variety of means. Some enterprises were linked to the sea, but he did own livestock, selling cows in 1447 and 1454, and the billets (firewood) he sold may similarly have been produced locally.⁴⁰ Whether the tan or oak bark, or the 30 barrels of beer he sold retail in 1454 were Hythe products is unclear but the salt and red herring he bought and sold that year were maritime commodities, the salt presumably brought from Bourgneuf Bay.⁴¹ The following year he similarly sold beer and other goods, including figs and raisins, which suggests that when he was not fishing at least some of his time was spent in mercantile overseas trade. Furthermore, as a mariner he was able to claim allowances from the Hythe chamberlains for in several years he undertook voyages on the town's behalf, including to Bordeaux, with the duke of Clarence and the earl of Warwick, and to bring Queen Margaret back from France during the Radeption.⁴²

In contrast, although Thomas Stace was taxed on fishing in some form for over 50% of the years for which records survive, he seems less committed to the industry. Like his brother he seems to have engaged in farming to a limited extent, having both arable land and sheep. For example, in 1453 he was taxed on the sale of forty lambs, while it was bread wheat, oats,

³⁹ MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 244. John left his property to Thomasina his wife, the couple having a young daughter; MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 434.

⁴⁰ MS KHLC H1055, fols 68v, 84, 186; H1019, fol. 57v.

⁴¹ Kowaleski, 'Expansion', 440–4, 448–50.

⁴² MS KHLC H1055, fol. 186; H1058, fols 40, 61v.

malt and hay in 1464.⁴³ Nevertheless, it was probably his activities as a maritime trader that were of more interest to the Hythe chamberlains. As a North Sea herring fisherman, he was able to engage in coastal trade at the various east coast ports, and, in addition to red and other processed herring, this included sea coal from Newcastle, as well as iron and perhaps gunpowder on the town's behalf.⁴⁴ Moreover, presumably salt, wine, figs and raisins indicate his continental overseas activities and he also traded with Calais.⁴⁵

This level of diversity, especially where mariners could spread the risk by working with others was extremely advantageous. In some families fishing partnerships might involve kinsmen, and Henry Harman's equal division of most of his fishing equipment and his shotter boat among his three sons suggests he intended they should work together after his death.⁴⁶ However, some fishermen involved those from outside the family, and this spreading of risk could be extended through owning or having shares in several boats. As well as naming his three boats in his will, William Howgyn, a contemporary of the Stace brothers, bequeathed several nets to Thomas his young son, but he gave boat shares to his wife, and to two other Hythe fishermen, John Denys [Denes] and Thomas Waller, as well as his capstan by the shore.⁴⁷ In addition, all three were named as his executors, which similarly indicates he was expecting that they would manage the family's fishing enterprise until Thomas came of age.

⁴³ MS KHLC H1055, fol. 192; H1019, fol. 119v. When he made his will, he had a wheat crop in at least one field, with hay in his barn; MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 244.

⁴⁴ In 1455 he traded iron worth 50s, as well as buying gunpowder, and four years later he sold coal and salt fish valued at £7; MS KHLC H1019, fols 9v, 74v.

⁴⁵ For example, Thomas sold 132 quarters of salt in 1458 and a dole of wine the following year; MS KHLC H1019, fols 59, 74v.

⁴⁶ MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 554. A shotter boat was between 6 and 26 tons and used for mackerel fishing; Littler, 'Fish in English Economy', p. 323.

⁴⁷ These were the *Peter the More*, *Peter the Less* and the *Trinity*; MS HKLC PRC 32/2, fol. 227.

Women undertook a variety of roles within fishing families, and Alice Howgyn was not alone in her action of successfully safeguarding her late husband's fishing assets for their son.⁴⁸ However, even though Thomas later followed his father's occupation, having no sons of his own the only fishing equipment listed in his will (1510) was bequeathed to his two male servants.⁴⁹ Yet William Howgyn's strategy seems to have aided more than his own nuclear family because John Denes similarly valued his wife to maintain his fishing business. In John's will, dated 1494, she was to receive his shares in three boats and a capstan with its apparatus, while their three daughters each received several nets, which may represent at least a part of their dowry.⁵⁰

Furthermore, in the first months after the death of a fisherman, his widow, perhaps also in her role as executor, might be expected to maintain the family's livelihood, such women listed as answering for their household's commercial activities. John Stace senior had died in July 1479, and in the following February his widow answered before the town chamberlains for 8,000 mackerel and a thousand herring received from Thomas Vigor, as well as for the family's mercantile trading in the form of a pipe of wine, and for rents collected locally. Yet the sale of ropes valued at 40s and two horses may indicate she could not or did not wish to continue her involvement in fishing.⁵¹ In certain cases, the widow's engagement in the industry was probably less short-term. Should his wife Alice wish to remarry, Thomas Mychell intended that half the sea craft goods she had received were to pass

⁴⁸ For example, John Edway and Alexander Tanner each instituted a similar arrangement for his wife and two sons; MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 267; PRC 32/4, fol. 137.

⁴⁹ MS KHLC PRC 32/10, fol. 51.

⁵⁰ MS KHLC PRC 32/4, fol. 25. Johanna, as his widow, is listed in 1496 as having received herring from certain fishermen, including Robert Staple; MS KHLC H1059.

⁵¹ MS KHLC H1058, fol. 214. William Rust, another fisherman, bequeathed seven sea horses (to pull boats ashore) to Alice his wife; MS KHLC PRC 32/4, fol. 170.

to his son Thomas.⁵² Nonetheless, the half she retained may have been valuable for her new household if her new husband was a fisherman.

As noted above, daughters, too, might receive fishing equipment and thereby similarly act as conduits to help maintain the Hythe fishing community, even if not their natal family directly. For example, whether this was her dowry or dower as a remarriage is not clear, but when Thomas Rust made his will in 1504, he bequeathed to his wife all the fishing craft things, except the boats, that she had brought at marriage.⁵³ Furthermore, he envisaged his daughter might similarly aid her husband because Agnes was to receive her share of the ‘craft to the sea’ at marriage. Even after marriage daughters might receive fishing equipment if their husbands were fishermen, thereby strengthening links between families and the fishing community more broadly. For Thomas Chaundeler this extended to his stepdaughter and her husband, the couple given several nets and other fishing tackle.⁵⁴

Yet some families did not or were unable to use such methods, fishermen looking beyond their family to others or intending such materials should be sold, although presumably these, too, mostly remained within the local fishing community. One individual who seems to have gained considerably in this way was John Patte who was designated a servant by John Rawlyn in 1479 when he bequeathed a flew net to him because almost twenty years later Patte was named as one of William Leygh’s executors.⁵⁵ He received several bequests, including one of Leygh’s lodges by the sea, and the opportunity to purchase boat shares, another lodge and a capstan for £6 13s 4d.⁵⁶ William also trusted him to act as

⁵² MS KHLC PRC 32/4, fol. 157.

⁵³ MS KHLC PRC 32/8, fol. 21.

⁵⁴ There is no reference to a son in his will; MS KHLC PRC 32/3, fol. 303.

⁵⁵ MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 434 (John Rawlyn). MS KHLC PRC 32/5, fol. 24 (William Leygh).

⁵⁶ Both men are listed under West Ward in 1496, Patte as a fisherman, although Leygh seems to have more active as a ripier that year; MS KHLC H1059.

guardian for his young daughter's inheritance, John Patte expected to sell Johanna's third share of nets and other fishing equipment and to employ the money for her benefit until she reached eighteen years of age.

This level of testamentary provision among fifteenth-century Hythe fishermen and the likelihood that such men would serve within the town's governing body indicates that some fishermen-householders were leading citizens. In addition to being jurats or holding other civic office, men such as John senior and Thomas Stace frequently travelled to London and other places to conduct civic business, including attending Parliament, as well as sailing to Normandy as part of Hythe's service to the king. Furthermore, the Stace family wills made by both the fishermen and their wives and widows highlight their wealth, and others among this community were similarly prosperous. For example, the two Stace brothers held a considerable amount of land and property, including John senior's mill and a tenement in Middle Ward, while Thomas had more than one tenement and several pieces of land like his brother. Although not exclusively the preserve of the Stace female testators, both Katherine (Thomas' widow) and Christine Stace were able to bequeath silverware to their children, and Katherine also gave a gold ring to each of her three daughters.⁵⁷ The family were similarly active within the town's sole parish church, often supporting the various lights and fraternities, including offering a belt with a silver clasp and a large mazer with silver ornament. At a cost of £5, Thomas in his will sought to establish a temporary chantry of one priest celebrating for his soul and those of his parents for four years, while Katherine supplemented this provision with a bequest of 33s 4d to ensure a priest celebrated for three months, adding her soul to those stipulated by Thomas.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 297 (Katherine Stace). MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 309 (Christine Stace).

⁵⁸ MS KHLC PRC 32/2, fol. 244 (Thomas Stace).

‘NEW SECTION’

To conclude, fishing was an important aspect of Hythe’s local economy, involving not only the fishermen but a sizeable number of ripiers and those who worked in allied crafts such as shipbuilding. Moreover, the fishermen-householders of Hythe did not confine their commercial activities to fishing, even though the various fishing seasons allowed them to fish all the year round, but instead many were involved to a greater or lesser degree in coastal and overseas mercantile trade, albeit some expanded their activities to include farming, firewood production (see Introduction, this volume) and the renting of property. Consequently, this complementary use of their time and assets such as boats meant that for some fishing was a comparatively lucrative occupation. In addition, such prosperity and social standing meant they were town office holders and leading members of Hythe’s town and parish communities. In addition, female members of these fishing families might be involved as the owners of fishing assets, of value for their own livelihood, but equally as the means to retain these assets within the family and community. Nevertheless, only a small number of fishing families were successful either regarding their wealth or longevity, and as the apparent demise of the Stace fishing family suggests, the precarious nature of the industry in Hythe was as visible at the end of the fifteenth century as it had been at the beginning.