

The
ROYAL NAVY
and
FISHERY PROTECTION

From the Fourteenth Century to the Present



A.R. Gould

Jon Wise

THE ROYAL NAVY AND FISHERY PROTECTION

For my granddaughter Sidney and in loving memory of my parents Bill and Dorine

‘I said that in default of a special agreement, we had never admitted the right of any country to interfere with a British ship beyond the 3-mile limit. This was the standpoint we were taking with regard to Russia at the present time, and we could not contend for less with Norway. It was a principle on which we might be prepared to go to war with the strongest power in the world.’

*Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary, 26 June 1911,
relating to the arrest of the trawler Lord Roberts.*

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>		vii
<i>List of Photographs, Maps and Diagrams</i>		ix
<i>Introduction</i>		xii
Chapter One	A Nursery for Seamen 1379–1815	1
Chapter Two	Seeds of Dispute and Conflict Amidst Conventions & Accords 1815–1905	29
Chapter Three	‘To Foster a Bond of Mutual Sympathy and Respect’ 1905–58	54
Chapter Four	How the Protected Became Protectors 1914–45	75
Chapter Five	Gunfire off the Murman Coast 1917–30	99
Chapter Six	Norway’s Red Line 1882–1951	125
Chapter Seven	In Home Waters 1815–2005	139
Chapter Eight	A Settlement and a Gathering Storm 1930–58	165
Chapter Nine	A War of Nerves – of Sorts 1958–70	189
Chapter Ten	The Last Gasp of <i>Mare Liberum</i> 1971–76	213
Chapter Eleven	The Offshore Tapestry 1976–99	248
Chapter Twelve	What’s in a Name? 2000–22	273

Appendix One	Royal Navy Fishery Protection Ships 1896–2022: A Statistical Comparison	288
Appendix Two	The Icelandic Coastguard Vessel Fleet	290
Appendix Three	‘Voices’	292
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	294
	<i>Glossary</i>	296
	<i>Notes</i>	298
	<i>Bibliography</i>	329
	<i>Index</i>	335

Foreword

Rear Admiral John Lippiett CB CBE DL

EARLY IN 1976, at the age of twenty-six, I took command of the ‘Ton’-class minesweeper HMS *Shavington* serving in the Fishery Protection Squadron (FPS). Thus I entered an entirely new world of naval operations, equipped after a short course with a basic knowledge of the newly changed laws of our UK waters regarding licences and inshore fisheries limits. Now, nearly fifty years later, it is ironic to note our exit from the European Union has renewed fresh disputes about fishing licences. In that same timescale, regrettably, the size of the UK fishing fleet has shrunk spectacularly, with the Scottish fisheries representing some 70 per cent of the entire UK output. The Royal Navy has a role today, as it did fifty years ago, in policing our waters. Indeed, the official RN website currently points out that our Exclusive Economic Zone is the fifth-largest in the world, and that fishing rights have always been an emotive and politically sensitive issue, and in the wake of Brexit, fishery protection will be more important than ever.

Incidents at sea can create tensions between nationalities and can flare up into a major dispute, even sometimes with shots being fired, ships rammed and boarded, and hostages taken. The Royal Navy has been seen by UK fishermen as the guardian of ‘their’ waters – that is, until they are apprehended for infringements that put themselves on the wrong side of the law. However, at times when fishing vessels face a crisis on board such as a fire, flood, medical emergency, or whatever, their radio call for help might well be answered by an FPS vessel.

Importantly, the interactions between the FPS ships and the fishermen around our coastline have created a mutual understanding and respect for each other’s professionalism, and recognition of the hardships each

bear. Small ships, both warships and fishing vessels, are hard hit by foul weather as they continue their tasks in conditions in which most would run for shelter. This relationship has, over the centuries, further strengthened our national maritime capabilities and standing.

Dr Jon Wise names his first chapter ‘A Nursery for Seamen 1379–1815’, looking at the early history of fishery protection. From those earliest days the fishing fleets produced hardy seamen who, in times of war, might help man the warships required for fighting. More importantly, perhaps, for centuries fish provided the meal for three days of the week at sea in warships, so the fishing fleets were vital for victualling the Navy. That the fishing fleets were active in Tudor days right across the North Atlantic has recently been proven by the DNA of a codfish found in a barrel on board the *Mary Rose* (which sank in 1545), showing that it came from Newfoundland waters.

Jumping to the 1970s, the FPS still held a role as a nursery for seamen. I, for one, learned a huge amount during my eighteen months in command. We faced the challenges of operating in a small ship the year round, in gales, snowstorms (with an open bridge!) or thick fog, in tricky navigational waters, and in even trickier diplomatic incidents. Lessons were learnt and self-confidence built up. Yes, mistakes were made, but usually small ones. Ship handling in tiny ports could be interesting, to say the least, and leadership of a small ship’s company in sometimes challenging situations was, to me, the most demanding, yet satisfying and interesting aspect of being in command. I count my time in the FPS to be a significant stepping stone in my career, and to be one of my most rewarding and enjoyable appointments.

The Royal Navy and Fishery Protection: from the Fourteenth Century to the Present gives the reader a fully comprehensive insight into the long history, spanning over 600 years, of the Navy protecting our fishermen and our waters, a story well worth recording. I have found Jon Wise’s work to be a well-researched and very thorough study, telling us so much about the work of the Royal Navy in a rarely sung role.

List of Photographs, Maps and Diagrams

Photographs, between pages 142 and 143 and pages 270 and 271

1. HMS *Godetia*: Arabis-class ‘fleet sweeping vessel’ or sloop, photographed in 1924. (World Ship Society Photographic Library)
2. HMS *Doon*: Mersey-class trawler. (Abrahams, Devonport)
3. HMS *Hastings*: 1930s sloop used extensively in the fishery protection role. (Author’s Collection)
4. HMS *Mariner*: despatched to the Murman coast during a tense post-Second World War stand-off with the Soviet Union. (World Ship Society Photographic Library)
5. HMS *Hound*: the last Second World War vintage FPS vessel in active service. (World Ship Society Photographic Library)
6. The Fishery Protection Squadron base at Port Edgar in 1960. HMS *Russell* and probably HMS *Wotton* can be seen. (UK MoD)
7. & 8. Checking nets aboard a French trawler on the Dogger Bank. (Courtesy of Adrian Wilkinson)
9. The Fishery Protection Squadron operations room at Port Edgar in the late 1960s. (MoD)
10. HMS *Wotton*: originally a member of the FPS ‘Home Division’, this ‘Fish Ton’ had been fitted with an enclosed bridge by the time the photo was taken in 1983. (Author’s Collection)
11. HMS *Lincoln* with prominent wooden protection in the bow area, which was fitted too late to see action during the last Cod War. (UK MoD Crown Copyright, 1976)
12. HMS *Palliser*: the Type 14 played a central role in the *Milwood* incident in 1963. (Author’s Collection)
13. HMS *Leopard*: the ageing Type 41 frigate was involved in the Second and Third Cod Wars and placed on the disposal list soon afterwards. (Author’s Collection)

14. ICGV *Baldur* sheers away from HMS *Mermaid* after colliding on 6 May 1976. (UK MoD Crown Copyright, 1976)
15. ICGV *Ódinn* just prior to a collision with the *Leander*-class HMS *Galatea*. (UK MoD Crown Copyright, 1976)
16. The RN's first purpose-built offshore patrol/fishery protection vessel, HMS *Jersey*, in the Bruges Canal in 1988. (Courtesy of Mike Louagie, Ostend)
17. RFAs *Wave Ruler* and *Wave Baron* were criticised for their poor performance and design in a Report of Proceedings during the First Cod War. (UK MoD)
18. ICGV *Ódinn* cuts across the bows of the trawler *Arctic Corsair* on 1 May 1976. (UK MoD Crown Copyright, 1976)
19. 'Dutch herring busses on the fishing ground' by W V Velde. (National Maritime Museum PAH 1711)
20. HMS *Champion*: HMS sloop on the North America & Newfoundland Station in the late 1820s. (National Maritime Museum)
21. 'Fleeting': the face of fishing's increasing industrialisation in the 1870s. (North East Lincolnshire Museums Service)
22. HMS *Hearty*: fishery protection vessel in the 1890s. (Author's Collection)
23. HMS *Halcyon*: torpedo gunboat and senior naval officer command North Sea Fisheries, in 1905. (Author's Collection)
24. HMS *Harebell*: *Anchusa*-class sloop, which undertook extensive service on the Murman coast in the 1920s. (Abrahams, Devonport)
25. *S/T Lucida*: HMS *Doon*'s adversary during the Skipper Jinks 'saga'. (Author's Collection)
26. The reactivated Batch 1 'River'-class HMS *Tyne* at Falmouth in January 2019. (Author's Collection)
27. The infamous trawl cutter gifted by the Icelanders to the Maritime Museum at Hull. (Courtesy of Maritime Museum: Hull Museums)
28. & 29. Neither the 'River'-class MSF HMS *Blackwater* nor the 'Bird'-class HMS *Kingfisher* proved adequate for fishery protection work. (Author's Collection)
30. The innovative 'Castle'-class OPV HMS *Leeds Castle* entering Portsmouth Harbour. (Courtesy of John Jordan)
31. A brand-new Batch 2 'River'-class HMS *Medway* photographed in 2019 with HM Naval Base, Portsmouth, in the background. (Courtesy of Stephen Dent)

Maps

Map 1: Distant water fishing grounds. (Stephen Dent)	30
Map 2: The British Isles, showing the principal fishing ports. (Stephen Dent)	55
Map 3: North Norway and the Barents Sea. (Stephen Dent)	100
Map 4: Iceland. (Stephen Dent)	190
Map 5: Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, and the much-contested fishing grounds, are pictured in this late nineteenth-century print. (Author's Collection)	Plates

Diagrams

Figure 1: HM <i>Mersey</i> -class Admiralty trawler, general arrangement, 1917. (John Lambert Collection)	77
Figure 2: Types of trawler fishing. (Stephen Dent)	140

Introduction

ON 3 FEBRUARY 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, having helped to secure the public vote to leave the European Union, stood in the Painted Hall at Greenwich beneath Sir James Thornhill's paintings of some of the nation's most glorious naval interludes and declared with unmistakable symbolism, 'This is the newly forged United Kingdom on the slipway.'

Ironically, aside from the seemingly intractable problem of what became known as the Northern Ireland Protocol, the only other shackles that threatened to restrain the Brexit 'ship' from executing an untrammelled launch – was fishing. Fishing was an issue that, according to one writer, had become 'totemic among Brexiters', despite accounting for just 0.03 per cent of the total UK economic output and involving a workforce of 11,000 people.¹

It remained a contentious issue in the aftermath of Britain leaving the EU. For example, in May 2021, a dispute over the issuing of fishing licences brought urgent calls for the Royal Navy to intervene as French boats threatened to block the entrance to the port of St Helier. The Royal Navy's Fishery Protection Squadron (FPS), which the Navy claims as its oldest front-line squadron, became directly involved.

Yet ironically, despite an ancient lineage, fishery protection is not part of the warp and weft of mainstream British naval folklore. Nor indeed does the subject merit more than a passing reference or footnote in some of the more authoritative and academic works on the subject. Nevertheless, the protection of the country's fisheries remained a vexed matter right to the end and beyond the signing of the exit agreement. Why was this the case?

Before answering that question one has to ask if the United Kingdom is still a maritime nation, one that cares about the sovereignty of the waters surrounding it, the fishers who work in its much-diminished

industry, its seaborne trade routes and its Navy – the ultimate provider of protection along its extensive coastline. The answer is probably no. Unless, of course, the matter becomes newsworthy through any threat to daily life, for instance a disruption to the smooth passage of the 95 per cent of the country's trade that arrives or leaves by sea each year.

If the country can no longer be considered 'maritime-oriented', there is enough evidence to show a fondness for being by the sea and, by default, for sea-fishing. One can point to the popularity of both documentary and dramatised televised depictions of fishing communities and their work. Sadly, such is the aspirational draw of owning a second home in a picture-postcard fishing village that many of the indigenous population have been simply priced out of the market. By the same token though, there is lasting admiration for those who work in one of the riskiest and yet most unregulated of occupations.

It can be plausibly argued that the Brexiters capitalised on the UK's dispute with the EU over fishing because of what might be called the natural insularity of British people. Jan Rüger, describing the increasing fervour in 1905 that led to the Anglo-German naval rivalry prior to the Great War, writes, 'The "island nation" was a powerful trope in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Evoked in cultural as much as in political discourses, it served as an important *Leitmotiv* in British identity politics.'² Winston Churchill, of course, used a similar 'trope' in 1940 by helping to engender the 'Dunkirk spirit'. In reality, Johnson's 'Brexit launch' too played on the nostalgic assumption that, although this was a new beginning, our history told us we had been 'great' as an independent nation in the past. By contrast, Edward Heath's 'new greatness', when celebrating Britain's successful joining of the EU in 1971, meant just that – a true step into the unknown.³

One comes back to the question of how much is known about or matters to the populace that Britain, Northern Ireland Protocol apart, is an island nation, 'compass'd by the inviolate sea'.⁴ Certainly, the country is no longer educated about the Navy. Big ships are often referred to in the media as 'battleships', while small ones are 'gunboats'. Navy Days at Portsmouth, Devonport and other naval bases have been quietly dropped from the annual calendar, while probably the last of the fifty-four Royal Fleet Reviews, dating back to 1346, was held in 2005. Significantly, at that event, a *Daily Telegraph* reporter remarked, '... spectators on the beaches and seafront (facing the Solent) enjoying the largest international review of its kind, admitted that they were

embarrassed about their knowledge of the naval battles that shaped the modern world ... At times it seemed that the spectacle unfolding before them was a source of curiosity rather than national pride.⁵ No warship was present in the Thames near Tower Bridge or elsewhere to fire a valedictory salute at the passing of Queen Elizabeth II and there was no fleet review to mark the ascendancy to the throne and Coronation of King Charles III – in spite of all his personal and family associations with the Senior Service.

This then is the background to a book about what can be very loosely termed the ‘fishery protection squadron’, which first came into being well before the Royal Navy even existed, was only officially called a ‘squadron’ fairly recently and has since been subsumed within the obscurely named Royal Navy Overseas Patrol Squadron. Yet to marginalise the existence of this branch of the service is to ignore an aspect of the Royal Navy’s history that exactly mirrors the nation’s rising and declining naval fortunes and likewise its status as a world power. Moreover, the Royal Navy, on its website, reiterates its age-old remit to keep guard over home and international waters in order to protect citizens and allies alike and to ensure that trade can flow freely. Fishery protection forms part of this tasking. Fishery protection forms part of this tasking.

This book mostly follows a chronological pattern, although several chapters overlap in time. Chapters Three, Four and Seven deviate more extensively for reasons that will become obvious. Chapter One covers a long period, starting in 1379 and concluding with the end of the Anglo-French Wars in 1815. The earliest requests for fishery protection to be provided were born of necessity, ‘... the sea was widely perceived as a lawless realm beyond the frontiers of all nations, where neither law nor truce nor treaty ran’.⁶ Thus, command of the sea surrounding the British Isles was very soon perceived as a prerequisite if the country was to prosper. ‘Cheryshe marchandyse, kepe thamyralte/That we bee maysteres of the narowe see ...’.⁷ The recognition of the importance of fish as an economic asset, the need for its safe conveyance and the significance of territorial waters all served to highlight the philosophical question of who, if anyone, ‘owns’ the seas. The eighteenth century introduced a further dimension. The fishermen themselves were increasingly recognised and cherished as providing a ‘nursery of seamen’ for the Royal Navy.

Britain enjoyed unrivalled economic hegemony for at least the sixty-year-period 1815–75 and, as Chapter Two relates, its all-powerful navy could rightly claim ‘command of the sea’. There was still no organised system of fishery protection in the modern sense, although the Coastguard provided a form of monitoring and regulating service and responded to need when required. Later in the century, the introduction of steam power revolutionised fishing. The agreements emanating from the North Sea Fisheries Convention of 1882 was the most significant event with regard to international consensus on the increasingly contentious matter of the right to exploit what many regarded still as an endless bounty.

Chapter Three presents an overview of the Royal Navy’s fishery protection responsibilities from the beginning of the twentieth century until the first of the three major disputes with Iceland in 1958. The function and very need for the Navy’s participation was debated against a backdrop of international upheaval. Successive governments continued to respond to the need to support one of its key industries. In complete contrast, Chapter Four describes a reversal in role when the fishermen and particularly their trawlers and drifters played a key part in both world wars. The usefulness and durability of the fishing boats, together with the experience and hardiness of their crews, proved invaluable particularly in combating mines and enemy submarines.

International disputes over territorial delimitation in more distant waters, particularly with the Soviet Union and Norway, are related in Chapters Five and Six. Britain’s position as the premier naval power was starting to be challenged at the same time as there was growing opposition to the historic adherence to the 3-mile territorial limit. British fishermen fiercely supported this delimitation, true to their doggedly, independent spirit.

Chapter Seven, ‘In Home Waters’, is intended to give a flavour of some of the squadron’s activities in the UK’s coastal waters covering the whole of the twentieth century. There are a variety of headings, including a historic overview of the provision for Scotland, which was slightly different from that pertaining to the rest of the United Kingdom. The settlement to the long-running dispute with the Soviet Union and the origins of the looming crisis of relations with Iceland are described in Chapter Eight, while the three so-called Cod Wars are related in Chapters Nine and Ten.

The Fishery Protection Squadron, as it was at last officially called, had a much altered and enlarged set of responsibilities after 1976 and these are the subject of the chapter entitled ‘The Offshore Tapestry’, which covers the last quarter of the twentieth century. Although coastal tasking remained largely unaltered, the squadron now also policed the 200-mile extended fisheries zone (EFZ), including a growing number of oil and gas fields, particularly in the North Sea. At last, the FPS was equipped with vessels that were designed and built for the purpose. The century ended with a fresh round of calls for protection duties to be privatised.

Chapter Twelve brings the story of fishery protection to the present day. The Royal Navy now works in partnership with the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and has a contractual arrangement to provide a fixed number of days of fishery protection per year. Currently, just three vessels are tasked with these duties in addition to a range of other offshore patrol undertakings.

The statistics provided in the last chapter starkly demonstrate the decline in the fishing industry in the period since the Second World War. The UK has been a net importer of fish over the last four decades, while Scotland currently accounts for just under 70 per cent of the total UK output covering fishing, aquaculture (fish farming) and fish processing. An overall decline had been evident for many years though. In an article written in 1969, E.E.D. Day showed that, in the 1960s, although the British Sea Fishing Industry was at time the fourth largest in Western Europe after Norway, Spain and Denmark, production had fallen from 1,098,149 metric tons in 1938 to an average landing of 883,316 metric tons in the period 1962–66.⁸

Certainly fish is no longer an essential part of the British diet as it was in past times. Rough comparisons in price per kilo show that meat is now cheaper to buy than fish: a kilo of cod or hake costs about the same in a supermarket as beef steak, while other meat products such as mince or chicken are considerably cheaper. Recently, the cost of living crisis has resulted in fish and chip outlets fearing for their futures as in some areas of the country prices have risen to £12 per portion, making this traditional ‘takeaway’ meal simply unaffordable.

Therefore, fish is now something of a luxury food, mostly consigned to a filleted state in a plastic package on a supermarket shelf. Where it came from and how it arrived at the table are matters that have largely dropped from the public consciousness. Likewise, words such

as dredgerman (who fished for oysters), condor or balker (whose job it was to look for shoals of fish from a high vantage point ashore), and kedger (an ordinary crew member), have dropped almost entirely from common knowledge and usage.⁹

Traditionally, fishing was a family business, sometimes involving more than one generation. The derogatory term ‘fish wife’, and its associations with coarseness and swearing, can be explained by the fact that their wares were highly perishable and so lost value if not sold quickly. This narrative deliberately uses the gender neutral word ‘fisher’ in the last chapter only because prior to the millennium sea fishing was almost entirely a male occupation.¹⁰ Even in 2022, women made up only 23 per cent of Europe’s entire aquaculture workforce.

This book limits its scope to describing fishery protection in the waters around the British Isles, the North Atlantic and the Arctic. It does not cover the whale fishing industry nor the administration of close inshore or riverine fishing. The Royal Navy employed a wide variety and number of ships for this role. These have only been purpose-built comparatively recently; in the past they were drawn from other duties, often for very short periods of time. Therefore, the listings are necessarily illustrative rather than comprehensive.

This is not a narrative filled with the exploits of inspired individuals or feats of outstanding bravery. However, a few persons have influenced the tide of events in quite different ways. A Dutchman, Hugo Grotius, influenced how the British regarded freedom of the seas for over three hundred years. Admiral Peter Warren, in the mid-eighteenth century, used striking strategic and political intelligence to grasp the importance of and link between sea power and fishery protection. Captain G.C. Dickens, in the 1920s, very cogently and perhaps uniquely, articulated the nature and innate value of his service’s role in protecting the nation’s fishery. Finally, David K. Brown, of the Royal Corps of Naval Constructors (RCNC), was responsible, during the 1980s, for the design of only the second class of the Royal Navy purpose-built fishery protection vessels. The unusual and unique profile of the ‘Castle’ class is testament to the attention Brown paid, for the very first time, to the requirements of the very demanding tasks undertaken by these ships.

Chapter One

A Nursery For Seamen

1379–1815

THERE IS EVIDENCE that the East Anglian port of Great Yarmouth used guard-ships in 1379 to defend its fishing fleet. It is likely that the town paid for this service, as had been the case the previous year when Scarborough was raided by the French for the same reason. Yarmouth's prosperity had benefitted greatly from the traditional annual harvesting of herring on its southerly, autumn migration. Although King John had granted this increasingly prosperous town its Charter and the right to self-govern in 1208, the prerogative was later disputed and not settled again in the town's favour until the reign of Edward III. This occurrence is often cited as the first example of a call to a central authority for protection to be provided for an English fishery, a request that was to be repeated many times over the centuries.

The seas surrounding the British Isles in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century were widely regarded, 'as lying beyond laws, treaties and truces ...'.¹ The east coast fishing ports were isolated and therefore vulnerable to raids by the French and the Scots, and there was no assurance that outside assistance would be forthcoming. Indeed, Parliament had decreed some years earlier that the cost of such a service would have to be borne by the owners of the fishing and trading vessels themselves.

Sea fishing, and its development as a commercial enterprise, grew in importance from this time onwards and the need to protect this 'asset' evolved commensurately, though not evenly. This chapter shows how a range of factors have contributed to the claim that the 'Fishery Protection Squadron' is the Royal Navy's oldest unit, with a lineage that can be traced back to 1379. The starting point of this narrative pre-dates the establishment of the Royal Navy (RN) itself. However,

evidence of its earliest interventions is fragmentary and, as such, is a subject that merits further investigation.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were to witness the ascendancy of an efficiently organised Navy adopting a central role in relation to Britain's rise as a commercial power, a trading nation and later a colonialiser. The four, so-called Dutch Wars spanned the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and included a battle over the rights to harvest herring in the North Sea. The vexed question of the 'freedom of the seas' and territorial rights to the waters adjacent to a nation's shores grew in importance as commerce became more sophisticated and regulated.

The eighteenth century, in particular, found Britain at war or in confrontation for long periods of time with its European neighbours, culminating in the protracted conflict with France that began in 1793 and lasted well into the next century. The chapter concludes with an account of the colonial wars on the north-eastern American seaboard and the climax of the French wars during the second decade of the nineteenth century, by which time fishery protection and its safe convoying as part of the nation's trade had become an essential part of the Royal Navy's remit. Alongside that, the security of the workforce, ensuring a ready supply for the RN to draw upon in time of war, was an oft-repeated maxim at the time and later, '... a glorious nursery for seamen upon whom the security and prosperity of Great Britain does very much depend'.²

Something of a luxury

The geographical location of the British Isles on the North West European continental shelf provides immediate access to one of the largest areas of shallow seas in the world. The combination of water depth, climate, currents and supplies of essential nutrients help to create an abundance of fish.³ In medieval times, seafood of various kinds formed a major part of the diet for those living adjacent to the shore or to lakes and rivers. Shellfish bred prolifically on some parts of the coast and could be gathered easily in shallow waters.

Thus, there was a wealth of fresh and sea water fish in rivers that could be caught using unsophisticated techniques mostly bereft of technology – by hand, in weirs and traps or by hook and line. Similarly, open fishing boats were basic affairs propelled either by oar or by rudimentary sails.⁴ Many commentators have noted that sea fishing is a unique pursuit, a

final iteration of the ‘hunter-gatherer’ of ancient times, that it, ‘defies many conventional land-based classifications of economic activity’. It is not agriculture or transport, nor is it a typical ‘industry’ in the strict sense of the word, yet it shares many characteristics of all three pursuits.⁵

However, throughout the more than four centuries covered in this section of the book, transportation presented a major obstacle that prevented fresh fish from being available to poorer people inland. This product remained a luxury for most until the coming of the railways in the second half of the nineteenth century.

An insight into the central importance of fish in the diet of a prosperous settlement in the Middle Ages is accessible in the Durham Priory accounts for the year 1333–34. Fish accounted for around one third of the Priory’s annual expenditure on food and drink. The variety of species consumed seems truly expansive, with two thirds comprising demersal fish such as cod, conger, plaice, skate and turbot, while herring and mackerel represented the principal pelagic fish purchased.⁶

By contrast, the only option for the less well-off was cured or salted fish. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with farming existing at a subsistence level, there was a general scarcity of meat. Most cattle had to be slaughtered and salted at the onset of winter; there were insufficient supplies to feed the growing urban populations. However, crucially and quite fortuitously, the last of the winter weeks did coincide with the six-week Christian observance of Lent when the Catholic Church decreed that there should be abstinence from consuming flesh on Fridays. Pragmatically, this could be considered as an economic necessity: at such times of the year the country simply could not have fed itself on a meat diet anyway.⁷

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

There was already an awareness of the importance of the sea and of shipping to the prosperity of the country well before 1379, as witnessed in this 1344 edict during the reign of Edward III:

We order that you choose four of the most intelligent men of your town [in this instance Great Yarmouth but over 40 other coastal towns as well], best informed about the state of the shipping of our kingdom of England, and send them to London to arrive without fail on the Monday after next Quadragesima Sunday; in order that we the Council may be informed about maritime affairs.⁸

However, the idea that such a meeting led seamlessly to the birth of what we now call the Royal Navy is misleading. At the time, there was no concept, let alone organisation, of a fighting service in England. For example, when the word 'Navy' was used in the House of Commons in 1415 as being, 'the chief support and prosperity of the kingdom' it described the merchant fleet as a whole and not an organised, standing military force prepared to come to the aid of besieged coastal towns or vulnerable fishing boats.⁹

Despite the general lawlessness on the high seas to which the Crown actually contributed by encouraging privateering and maintaining a dubious relationship with those who practised outright piracy, there was nevertheless an acknowledgement of the commercial value of the fishing industry. This is illustrated in the willingness to intervene in matters of domestic dispute, such as the one between Yarmouth and the Cinque Ports. The Crown was also inclined to adjudicate on matters of the supply, quality and price of fish. Interestingly, the necessity to conserve fish stocks was recognised: fine-mesh nets being discouraged or banned.¹⁰

When Henry V came to the throne in 1413, the country he inherited was not renowned for its exploitation of sea power. There was limited usage made to resupply besieged castles on the Welsh coast during the Owain Glyndŵr rebellion, for instance, and the continuation of a proxy war with the French involved privateering rather than an outright conflict between nations.¹¹ The ships actually owned by the Crown were never numerous during the time of Henry V's father, Henry IV. The royal fleet numbered three when he ascended to the throne in 1399 and had declined to just two by 1409. When his son became king there were four vessels but two were non-operational. Ian Friel notes, 'The king's ships were not a state navy in the modern sense. They were, quite literally, the personal possessions of the sovereign. This meant that while fighting was part of their "remit", they were used for all sorts of other purposes.'¹²

When larger numbers of vessels were required for particular operations, such as the transportation of troops, the ships and crews were hired from private contractors. But these requirements were, by nature, impermanent. 'The navy that came into being was initially a very *ad hoc* affair, men and ships called to serve at their king's command from fishing and trading resources and dissolved and dispensed with by similar caprice.'¹³ Nevertheless, it seems that between 1413 and 1416

there were a number of trading voyages that involved the king's ships. It is thought these vessels were used principally to escort convoys and also to undertake 'war operations'. Nevertheless, what was described as a fishery protection cruise did take place in 1413. England was still in the middle of the Hundred Years' War with France and fishing fleets were encouraged to sail in convoys, copying the practice adopted by the wool and wine trades.¹⁴

It is possible that the 1413 cruise included some form of war-like action against raiders, probably of a defensive nature. Administrative accounts show a considerable expenditure of weaponry on that occasion. Two balingers, *Peter* and *Paul*, were included in this fleet, which numbered eight ships. Balingers were extremely versatile vessels and fishery protection is listed as one of the minor functions they were called upon to perform.

They could move under sail as well as oars, they were of relatively low tonnage, and they were fast and manoeuvrable when compared with vessels driven only by sail. As oared ships, they needed to be long, narrow, low-built and light, to accommodate a rowing crew, to enable the oars to reach the water and to make the most of the power developed by the rowers.¹⁵

These vessels, and their equivalents, varied considerably in size. The number of rowers could be altered according to the nature of the undertaking. When functioning as convoy escorts they carried a double crew, the additional members often comprising troops. The balingers *Peter* and *Paul* were listed as being of '24 tons burthen or burden' – the old measurement of displacement used to calculate the amount of tax to be levied on the hire of ships. They shipped one mast and could carry a maximum of twenty-one and twenty oars respectively. Crew size varied between twenty-four on *Peter* and twenty-four to thirty-four on *Paul*.¹⁶

John Bohun is an example of a private ship-owner contracted to undertake protection duties on behalf of the Crown. He was commissioned to escort a shipment of wool to Calais in 1413 and later to ensure the safety of English fishermen and other subjects at sea. In September 1413, three royal balingers, *Gabriel*, *Paul* and *Peter*, undertook a month-long deployment in the North Sea, the aim being to deter aggressors rather than to fight them. Apart from the 1413 operation and a small sea-keeping patrol in 1418, however, Henry did little to 'police' the North Sea, and it does not seem to have been high on his list of priorities. However, towards the end of Richard III's reign

an actual fishery protection squadron was formed with the specific purpose of guarding North Sea fishermen against Scottish attacks, which were becoming ever more frequent.¹⁷

These few early examples show that fish was sometimes considered to be an important enough commodity to warrant expenditure by the Crown in the form of armed escorts for convoys, or for groups of fishermen, in order to deter aggression. But there was the lack of a consistent policy. The seas were still open to all; the concept of territorial waters did not exist at the time. Thus, around the British Isles, fishermen from France, the Low Countries, the Iberian Peninsula and England were all engaged in working the same waters in competition with one another.

It was only in the 1480s, following years of *ad hoc* and private arrangements, that a more regular form of protection was introduced and paid for by the Crown. There were calls for a permanent or standing naval force a few years before that, in a document called *The Governance of England*, written around 1470. 'And though we have not always war upon the sea, yet it shall be necessary that the King have always some fleet upon the sea, for the repressing of rovers, saving our merchandise, our fishers, and the dwellers upon our coasts ...'¹⁸ The use of convoys remained the best form of deterrence for fishing fleets or for the conveyance of fish. In fact, convoys in England had been in use from the reign of Henry II in the twelfth century.

In the fifteenth century, the country was not an exporter of fish. Its chief exports at the time were wool, cloth, tin and grain. Instead, it imported fish from Iceland, Ireland and from Scandinavia.¹⁹ Fishermen had exploited Icelandic waters for several centuries and, during the reign of Richard III (1452–85), convoys were instituted in order to protect the Iceland trade.

It is at this period that the English language developed its first words relating to convoy: to 'waft' and a 'wafter'. The 1484 Iceland fleet was informed that William Combershall, captain of the *Elizabeth*, was appointed 'your conveyer and wafter to such place or places as he shall think convenient', and that they were, 'to be ordered and guided by him and in no wise to depart from him unto such time as the whole fleet of you shall come together and meet with other of our army now being upon the sea'.²⁰

The Icelandic convoys of the 1480s were thought to be among the first occasions in which oceanic voyages were undertaken accompanied

by English warships. Why the cargo carried warranted properly administered convoying was due to the fact that by then cod constituted a staple part of the country's diet. The technique of drying what was often called stockfish in the sun and wind and then salting or smoking it, meant that the fish could withstand being transported overseas and kept in a preserved state for later consumption.²¹

Disputes with England had begun to emerge when Norwegian merchants started to import dried fish from Iceland to Bergen. English merchants sought to copy the practice and shortly after 1400 began sailing to Iceland themselves both to catch fish and to buy it from local fishermen. The Danish crown repeatedly tried to stop this trade and ill-feeling was exacerbated in 1467 when the Danish Icelandic governor was killed while trying to enforce regulations. But generally, what was then called the Kalmar Union simply lacked the means with which to defend this resource from being exploited.²²

The need to provide escorts for the Icelandic convoys continued into the next century. For example, records show that a small force of warships was despatched in 1557 to meet a home-bound Icelandic fishing fleet off Orkney.²³ The commander, Sir John Clere, unwisely decided to land on the island, where he was repelled and later drowned while attempting to escape along with three of his captains. The Scots had been a 'thorn in the flesh' during the previous half century, dominating the North Sea to the detriment of the east coast English fisheries. At the same time, the prosperity of the herring trade was diminishing at the hands of the Dutch.²⁴

The naval legacy of King Henry VIII

One has to be careful not to assume that the English Navy that existed by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries resembled its contemporary equivalent. 'The basic confusion arises from a refusal to acknowledge that navies, in our modern sense of the word, are a modern creation, a product of the early modern and modern state. Naval warfare existed long before navies, but it took other institutional forms.'²⁵

Henry VIII was the first king to organise the Navy as a permanent force, with an administrative and logistical structure, funded by tax revenue and supervised by a newly created Navy Board. As a result of the war with France, it was decided to keep the thirty ships active during peacetime and by 1540 the Navy consisted of forty-five ships. Alongside the establishment of a standing naval fleet, a number of shore

facilities in the form of storehouses were also commissioned. Although historians argue that Henry lacked strategic nous with regard to the actual execution of sea power, they do agree that the legacy he left of an administrative and logistical structure ensured that the Navy would not be allowed to wither through neglect, as had happened in the time of several of his predecessors. Nothing like it existed anywhere else outside the Mediterranean, with the possible exception of Portugal, and the resulting naval infrastructure established could be regarded as the single most important achievement of the English sixteenth century with regard to the development of sea power.²⁶

Following John Cabot's 1497 voyage to the coast of North America under the commission of Henry VII of England, fishing fleets from France, Portugal and Spain began to work the grounds off Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Cod was brought ashore to be cured before being despatched to Europe. Although the English had voyaged to Iceland for centuries, they were slower to make use of North American waters than their continental counterparts. But, by the second half of the sixteenth century, West Country fishermen in particular started to exploit the Newfoundland area as the Portuguese and Spanish presence declined. In its place, Anglo-French rivalry began to fester towards the end of the 1700s, which would develop into outright conflict during the next century.²⁷

Territorial waters

John Grainger describes Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe between 1577 and 1580 as constituting, 'the first seaman-like view of the Pacific and Indian Oceans by an English captain'.²⁸ Logically, and perhaps inevitably, exploitation followed on from exploration and the possibilities of access to untold amounts of wealth from the navigational possibilities that these early adventurers uncovered with their voyages into the unknown, led in time to the creation of the vast British Empire. The English global explorers found that the Portuguese and Dutch had preceded them in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and, as with the French and later the Americans on the north-eastern seaboard, settlement and with it the matter of offshore territorial rights, assumed the kind of importance that has profoundly affected sea fishery and its protection ever since.

The notion of the significance of a ship entering territorial waters was introduced during the reign of James I when the English tried to

define what they termed *the narrow seas*. These were the two areas of water that lay between England and France (the English Channel) and England and the Netherlands (the southern North Sea). The Scots had preceded them by declaring sovereignty over the waters adjacent to their shorelines. Other European nations also developed similar systems. The Scots, for several centuries, charged foreign fishermen for the rights to work in coastal and inland waters; boats had to carry licences if they fished within a 'land-kenning' of the shore. Later, this crude measurement of distance was replaced by the distance a cannon could be fired, before that too became an obsolescent form of calculation.

James's initial concern during a period of neutrality was to safeguard the country's coastal integrity. The waters were defined as, 'the "King's Chambers"', within which the belligerents (of other nations) were not to supposed to fight'. All foreign ships entering these narrow seas were expected to salute, by lowering topsails and striking their flag, if they encountered an English warship.²⁹ An admiral of the narrow seas was appointed, whose duties included patrolling the fisheries and enforcing the salute. This claim of English sovereignty was maintained until the official adoption of a 3-mile delimitation in 1822 by several European nations including Britain.

Piracy and Privateering

Piracy had been a menace on the high seas for several centuries and was not recognised as a crime in English courts until 1536. The Cinque Ports were prominent among the offenders. Internecine rivalry among the various 'Portsmen' erupted intermittently and the port of Yarmouth, mentioned above, which had several enemies in other ports, was undoubtedly the worst culprit.³⁰

Piracy and privateering continued to threaten commercial trade during the seventeenth century; its effect was also felt on fishing and consequently on the livelihoods and indeed the very lives of the fishermen themselves. What are somewhat erroneously referred to as Barbary pirates, during the early years of the century, constituted a particular danger to West Country fishermen on the East American seaboard. In 1611 they lost no fewer than twenty boats either in the Atlantic, as the North Africans ventured as far west as Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, or in the Mediterranean, where the fishermen brought their fish to sell. The crews, sold on as slaves, constituted the key targets

rather than their cargoes. Even coastal towns and villages in the West Country were not safe from attacks by the Barbary pirates; in 1625 Plymouth lost a thousand seamen and the tiny village of East Looe in Cornwall a further eighty in 1628 and sixty-nine a decade later.³¹

Closer to home, the tolerance, indeed encouragement of privateering, was exploited when the country was torn apart in the 1640s by the English Civil War. As noted earlier, Great Yarmouth's prosperity had grown in part due to the herring fishery, which had contributed greatly since the town's foundation. The valuable catch also spawned shore-side industries including craftspeople who refitted and equipped the fleet and provided smokehouses, casks and salt to pickle the town's most popular product – the red herring. However, as had occurred two centuries earlier, due to its geographical location, Yarmouth was vulnerable to threats from the sea.

The Navy had declared for Parliament at the onset of the Civil War but the security of the North Sea was not an issue until the Royalists began to contract privateers. They were based in English, Welsh and Channel Islands ports, while Ostend was used as a marketplace to sell the vessels that had been captured. Consequently, by 1643–45, the Royalist fleet numbered some 250 vessels, dominating the North Sea and posing an immediate problem for Parliamentary Great Yarmouth.³²

In 1644 Thomas Allin, a Royalist privateer and merchant from nearby rival town Lowestoft, instigated a 'confederacy against Yarmouth, to retaliate the injuries they had received from that town [this included a personal grudge as his boat had been confiscated and later sold by the Great Yarmouth Assembly after a previous abortive uprising in Lowestoft] ... with the design of fitting out vessels to distress the trade at Yarmouth'. This 'distress' consisted of harassing and attacking the Yarmouth herring fleet at the vulnerable points of their annual fishing expeditions. Allin, in 1644, managed to seize twenty out of the twenty-three Great Yarmouth boats travelling to Iceland, This had an immediate, adverse effect on the price of fish and the town's herring trade was practically wiped out in 1643–44.

The town's Assembly, in desperation, appealed to Parliament for guard-ships. After protracted negotiations and further heavy losses during the winter of 1644, five vessels were secured with additional protection afforded by its own warship, the *Adventure*, a former merchantman captured while transporting troops and equipment to England. *Adventure* was initially outfitted for, 'the takeing (sic) of such

prize Shippes (sic) vessels [and] goods as belong to persons or places that are in hostility against the Parliament'.³³

The near destruction of Yarmouth's herring fleet had the effect of distancing the town's authorities from its fishing community. The mood of discontent continued until the end of the Civil War and despite Great Yarmouth, at Parliament's persuasion, paying compensation for those most afflicted, there was an uprising by disgruntled fishermen in 1648.

Freedom of the seas

Thomas Mun was one of the first 'mercantilists'. These economic theorists broke away from medieval thinking on economic matters and presented, 'a composite rather than an integrated body of ideas, with variations from country to country, from time to time'. However, with respect to those countries that bordered the sea, they were united by a profound concern for the fishing industry.³⁴ Mun believed that a nation's holdings of gold were the main measure of its wealth and that governments needed to regulate trade in order to produce an excess of exports over imports to gain more gold for the country. He came into public prominence during the economic depression of 1620. Many people had blamed the East India Company for the country's economic downturn because it financed its trade by exporting £30,000 in bullion on each voyage. Mun argued more broadly that governments should regulate trade in order to produce an excess of exports over imports and thus provide an economic balance.

He singled out the Dutch Republic to illustrate his argument:

The fishing in his Majesties sea of England, Scotland and Ireland is our natural wealth, and would cost nothing but labour, which the Dutch bestow willingly, and thereby draw yearly a very great profit for themselves by serving many places in Christendom with our Fish, for which they return and supply their wants both of forraign (sic) wares and Mony (sic), beside the multitude of Mariners and Shipping which hereby are maintained ...³⁵

He concluded his diatribe with a particularly pointed attack at the United Provinces, which included an accusation that the Dutch were planning to seize the island of Lewis in the Hebrides.

Mun's original thesis, which was possibly added to in the interim, was still being quoted some forty years later, during the debate about

the exploitation by the Dutch of the North Sea herring fishery. Willem Beukelesz had discovered in the late fourteenth century that herrings could be preserved by pickling them. Earlier, herring traders had used a lot of salt in the process, but the industry benefitted from a vital innovation. 'Instead of gutting and salting the herring, the Dutch realised that gibbing (gutting the herring, leaving the liver and the pancreas in the fish), allowed preservation with much less salt.'³⁶ This method turned a perishable foodstuff into a commercial commodity that was to assume huge national importance in the United Provinces. The yearly arrival of the season's herring catch was cause for celebration, a tradition that lasts to this day in the Netherlands. 'The first herring of the year, or new herring, was the focal point of widespread festivities in the fishing villages and, indeed, throughout the country, and it was accorded near mythical status.'³⁷

The management of the Dutch fishing fleet in the seventeenth century was one of the most tightly organised in Europe. The boats were only allowed to sail to strictly specified areas off the Scottish and English coastlines on certain dates during the summer and autumn of the year, thereby tracing the southerly migration of the herring. All operations were brought to a halt on 31 January. The catches were forbidden to be sold abroad and were brought back to Dutch ports in 'busses' for pickling, which was managed under strict guidelines in order to maintain the quality of the product.

The introduction of the Dutch herring busses marked an important technological advance in fishing boat design. These decked vessels were much larger than the English open boats of the period and provided a greater sailing range. They could also carry a number of smaller boats that could be lowered into the water, which helped to increase the catch at certain times. Comparisons have been made with twentieth-century fishing 'mother' ships. Approximately one thousand busses were used in what was popularly known as 'the Great Fishery' and it has been reckoned that half a million people, not much short of a fifth of the country's total population, was involved in the industry at the time.³⁸

The concern about the scale of this operation, which had been articulated earlier by Mun, and later by other commentators, was the subject of Anglo-Dutch diplomatic discussions for many years, after a proclamation was issued in 1609 stating that any person wanting to fish off the English coast would require a licence. The problem extended

beyond political and economic issues and embraced the matter of legal right concerning the freedom of the seas.

In the same year as the English Proclamation about fishing licences, a book on international law titled *Mare Liberum* was published in Latin, the work of the Dutch jurist and philosopher Hugo Grotius. In *The Free Sea*, Grotius declared a new principle whereby the sea should be considered international territory and all nations should be free to use it for seafaring trade. It was intended as a riposte to the Portuguese claim of monopoly on their East Indian trade, which was an example of the policy of *mare clausum*, the closed sea, meaning a body of water under the control of a state that is closed or not accessible to other nations.

The Dutch adopted Grotius's theory as they had traditionally supported the argument that the seas should be open to all. This was backed by the mercantilist contention that a successful nation grew rich and thus powerful through the development of productive resources. This development could be fed by achieving the maximum access possible to natural resources, such as fish, which Grotius inaccurately described as 'an endless resource'. This helps to explain why the Dutch Republic held such a tight rein over the organisation of its fisheries.

Thomas Mun's interpretation of the mercantilist's path to economic prosperity was different. In his book *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade* (1664), he contended that productive resources consisted of two elements: natural and artificial wealth. Well-organised food production benefitted and grew the population, which led on to prosperity and with it power, and hence, the creation of artificial wealth. Successful exploitation of a natural resource such as fish could only be achieved if the English fishermen could undertake their work while undisturbed by foreign boats. This brought about the annexation of sea areas under sovereign authority.

Another effort was made by the English king in 1616 to enforce the issuing of licences after an unsuccessful attempt to do the same seven years earlier. This time it drew an aggressive response from the Dutch ships being used to protect the busses. The matter was then not revisited until 1635 when the Dutch ambassador to England was notified that King Charles was, 'preparing a fleet, "to preserve and maintain his sovereignty and hereditary rights over the sea, and for the preservation and protection of commerce. ... No one henceforth was to be allowed to fish in the King's Seas without express licence and suitable acknowledgment."³⁹

This time the threat to take action was backed by the weight of intellectual argument in the form of a treatise on the nature of maritime sovereignty. John Selden's *Mare Clausum Seu Maris* (Of the Dominion or Ownership of the Sea), effectively supported the king's right to exclusive sovereignty over the waters surrounding the British Isles. Ironically, as will be demonstrated on numerous occasions, Britain normally vigorously defended the principles of *mare liberum*. But this time, however, it suited it to adopt the exactly opposite stance. Claims of historical precedence, that traditionally there existed a belt of waters of unspecified width around the country's coastline (in 1618 it was stated as being 14 miles), were largely unsubstantiated. Barback remarks, 'English monarchs from James I attempted, in a switch from Elizabeth's policy, to reassert what was held to be an ancient right to sovereignty over the whole of the sea area around the British Isles. Foreigners might fish in this vaguely defined sovereign area, though sometimes it was attempted with varying degrees of success to make them buy a licence to do so, and in return they would receive protection by the English navy.'⁴⁰

However, what gave Charles I the 'clout' to enforce his claim was the introduction of 'Ship Money', which enabled him to raise a quite formidable fleet to be used to collect this levy. This scheme had been employed at various times in the past, including demanding payment for protecting coastal towns, as in the case of Great Yarmouth. A properly argued scheme, supported by historical research into the matter, was introduced in 1634 whereby firstly counties with maritime borders, and later inland ones, were required to pay an annual stipend to pay for naval defence. The principle of levying Ship Money was neatly justified in Selden's treatise, in order to counter, 'the many depredations, violence, and hostile acts committed daily on the Narrow Seas, and even within his Majesty's ports – to the dishonour of his Majesty's sovereignty in those seas ... amid the infinite disturbance and prejudice of trade'.⁴¹

'Ship Money Fleets' were adopted as a means of drawing the correct measure of obeisance from neighbouring states in the form of saluting the English flag. Most countries complied in the interests of diplomatic nicety. But when Charles tried to exercise his powers to extract further revenue by issuing fishing licences to foreigners, he was met with stiff opposition from the Dutch Republic, as had happened in his father's time.

A fleet of twelve English ships sailed in July 1634 under Vice-Admiral Pennington to enforce the new ruling and levy the toll. Despite Dutch

protests, this move was repeated in October, this time led by the Duke of Northumberland. The Dutch retaliated by despatching thirteen ships to provide defence for their busses: the threat of open warfare now appeared imminent. Wilson states that it was only extreme caution, exercised by both the Duke of Northumberland and his counterpart Admiral van Dorp, which prevented an already tense situation from escalating.⁴²

Two years later, the reticence of Philips van Dorp to demonstrate the right degree of aggressive intent was to cost him his job. The English fleet arrived late in the 1636 herring season and only managed to issue approximately 200 licences. The Dutch, however, were much unsettled on both a political and economic level by this existential threat to their precious herring trade. The following year their fishing fleets were provided with much stronger escorts under a new command.

The commercial tensions between England and the Netherlands were brought to crisis point when Parliament approved the First Navigation Act in 1651. This meant that imported merchandise had to be brought directly in English ships or those of the exporting country. This Act had the effect of subordinating Dutch trade to the advantage of the British and is perceived as a major cause of the First Anglo-Dutch War, 1652–54.

The old claims about recognising sovereignty in the narrow seas and fishing levies surfaced once again. The navies of both nations were activated under their respective commanders, Admirals Robert Blake and Maarten Tromp. The Dutch fleet was handed a dual trade protection role both in home waters and to ensure the safe arrival of ships returning from the East Indies. The remaining naval ships were ordered to protect, ‘the great fishery, which is of so great importance to the State’.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, the English orders for battle largely echoed their opponent’s strategy. In addition to harassing the Dutch East Indies convoys, Admiral Blake was required to, ‘arrange that “the Dutch fishery upon the coast of Scotland and England, and in those seas, may be interrupted and disturbed and their busses and other ships attending thereupon taken and secured ...”’.⁴⁴ Although the plans fell short of open warfare with the Netherlands Navy, the intention was plain: to bring about the downfall of the Dutch economy.

Blake successfully attacked the Dutch in Scottish waters in the summer of 1652, scattering their busses and sinking or capturing

the accompanying warships. Meanwhile, Maarten Tromp had sailed north and on 4 August was in sight of the English ships. That night a tremendous storm put paid to the chances of battle and in the midst of the resulting confusion a Dutch East Indies convoy arrived in the locality, which instantly took precedence. Although Blake had succeeded in one respect by disrupting the fishing fleet, he failed in relation to the greater prize, the capture of the lucrative convoy from the Far East. There were further clashes at sea during the rest of the war, which was ended on 15 April 1654 with the signing of the Treaty of Westminster.

There were numerous attempts, during the Stuart period and again in the middle of the eighteenth century, to reinforce the *mare clausum* theory through the formation of large-scale fishing companies with the immediate aim of countering the Dutch busses and helping to train Yarmouth citizens to pickle their own herring catch. These companies were bestowed royal patronage: the Corporation of the Royal Fishery was created in 1664 following the failure of earlier private enterprises. The company boasted the services of the Duke of York and his thirty-two assistants included some well-known members of the Court, the Navy and the City of London. Among them was Samuel Pepys, who was said to be ‘flattered by the honour’, especially perhaps as he benefitted personally from the promise of an annual stipend. Unfortunately, Pepys’s fears that the enterprise would ‘come to little’ were realised when he found that, in its first year, the sole power the company had acquired were licensing lotteries and the services of a certain Captain Poyntz, a gaming house proprietor, presumably in the capacity of technical adviser. Subsequently the Corporation’s accounts descended into chaos and, ‘it disappeared in ignominy like its predecessors, a byword for corruption and incompetence ...’.⁴⁵

Battle for dominance on the East Atlantic Littoral

The last section of this chapter covers the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and includes colonial wars on the east coast of what became Canada and the United States of America. Protection of the British migratory fishing community, principally off Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, formed an important part of the Royal Navy’s responsibilities. Inevitably, the sheer distances involved in safely transporting the fish ‘harvest’ to Europe and at the same time protecting the fishing grounds themselves, coupled with the competing demands of what was becoming

a near-global conflict with France in particular, meant that the Navy easily became, in modern parlance, overstretched.

This may well account for this example, much closer to home, in 1747. J. Collier of Hastings wrote first on 21 April to Andrew Stone, Under Secretary of State to the Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for the Southern Department of the Admiralty. The mackerel season was about to commence and as the Hastings fishery usually engaged a number of boats in this task, he was applying for protection in the form of a 20-gun ship, 'or one of the sloops of war'.

Just over three weeks later, Collier wrote again. This time, his tone was much more urgent:

We are in a bad situation. Two or three small Boulogne, Dieppe or Dunkirk privateers keep lurking on our coast. We have upwards of sixty boats employed in the mackerel fishery, and the prime of the season commencing, on sight of one of these pickaroons [scoundrel or in this case pirate/privateer] they durst not stir out, which is some hundreds of pounds sterling loss to the fishery. In Queen Anne's wars, when greater complaints were made against the conduct of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, we never failed having one or two men-of-war to protect our fishery, and now we only request a 20-gun ship or sloop of war.⁴⁶

The British were late to respond to the possibilities afforded by the migratory habits of white fish along the North-East Atlantic coastline of America, particularly in the sea areas around Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia. Migratory European fishermen led by France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain had exploited the region in the sixteenth century, with France assuming a dominance during the 1700s as its European neighbours' involvement declined. Britain only started to outstrip France in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴⁷

The particular prize was cod. Atlantic cod prey on smaller fish, which in turn feed off the plankton that blooms in the cold, nutrient-rich coastal waters. Such conditions are to be found where the Labrador Current flows across the ragged eastern Newfoundland coastline with its promontories, inlets and small islands. The best of the catch is to be sourced closer inshore; the fish caught off the Grand Banks further out are generally of an inferior quality.

The early European exploitation of the fishery was by custom a migratory operation rather than one undertaken by settlers. They fished

in small sloops and other open boats. A larger vessel brought the men and equipment across the Atlantic for the start of the summer season. A base, or 'fishing room', was established on shore where the daily catch would be cured on wooden drying platforms. The workforce returned to Europe each autumn with their cargoes in what were called 'sack ships' bound for the continental markets.

Archaeological evidence points to the fact that fishermen from specific towns returned year on year to the same location on the North American littoral and one can appreciate that they derived comfort from mixing with their own townsfolk while working in such an unknown and potentially hostile environment. A custom of 'first come, first served' developed. In the words of the Western Charter of 1634, which regulated the fishery on Newfoundland's English Shore, 'according to the ancient custom every ship or fisher enters a harbour in behalf of a ship, [will] be Admiral of the said harbour, wherein for the time being he shall reserve only so much beach and flakes or both as needful for the number of boats that he shall use ...'.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, this otherwise pacific arrangement could not last and the demarcation of the Newfoundland coastline into the 'English Shore' and the 'French Shore' contributed to the open warfare that later took place between the British and French.

The migratory population was gradually eclipsed by permanent settlers but, although collapsing as a system in the 1790s, it did not disappear altogether until the nineteenth century. Both the periodic Anglo-French Wars and the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) contributed to general depressions in the fishing industry in the second half of the eighteenth century. A combination of enemy naval and privateering activity, the closure of markets and the depletion of the labour force owing to the demands of war, made the transatlantic trade both dangerous and costly.

The link between fishery and sea power has already been discussed in relation to the mercantilist theories of the previous century. A further factor in this equation relates to the traditional valuing of the workforce itself to the ongoing prosperity of the Navy, especially at time of war. 'From the days of Elizabeth (First) British statesmen saw in the fisheries a national incubator for seamen, "a feeder of the fleet as unrivalled for the excellence of its material as it was inexhaustible in its resources".'⁴⁹

This 'feeder' was never 'inexhaustible', of course, but was a key factor with respect to the long series of Anglo-French conflicts on the North

American coast during the eighteenth century. What became popularly termed 'the nursery for seamen' drew the fishermen away from their work in time of war. Thus, control of the seas around Newfoundland came at a price as the requirement for naval protection fed directly into the health of the nation's fishing trade.

In terms of the peace treaties that routinely ended these conflicts, specific articles were invariably included that addressed the Newfoundland fisheries themselves. The Peace of Utrecht in 1713, for example, which concluded the War of Spanish Succession, handed Britain sovereignty over Newfoundland but allowed France to retain fishing rights. The emergence of the United States of America, following the American Revolutionary War, resulted in three countries gaining access to the Newfoundland Fisheries in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. As a consequence, none of the diplomatic changes emanating from the peace treaties actually served to resolve the Anglo-French impasse.

Three examples follow, each of which show the importance of sea control of the American littoral in this period in relation to the all-important fishery. Naval strategists generally acknowledge that true 'command of the sea' is rare and that, 'the uncommanded sea is the norm'. Neither Britain nor France, and certainly not the nascent United States, was able to claim command of those waters in the years between 1740 and 1790. The goal for the two European nations was a limited form of sea control, defined as, 'freedom of action to use the sea for one's own purposes in specified areas and for specified periods of time and, where necessary, to deny its use to the enemy'.⁵⁰ The USA employed what would now be called a form of asymmetric warfare in an attempt to achieve its particular objective.

Firstly, King George's War (1744–48) saw an inconclusive series of engagements between Britain and France for supremacy on the east coast of the continent. It formed part of the greater 'War of the Austrian Succession' (1740–48). During the conflict, an important victory was achieved through the capture of the French fortress at Louisbourg, Cape Breton Island. This gave the Royal Navy some measure of control over the Acadia (Nova Scotia) fisheries and a wider, strategic advantage at the entrance to the Gulf of St Lawrence.

Secondly, the French raid on the Newfoundland Fishery in 1762 witnessed an attempt by the French to achieve a better bargaining position for peace towards the end of what had been a series of chastening

defeats during the Seven Years' War (1756–63). The campaign served to underline the maxim that true control of the sea could only be achieved through control of sea communications.

Lastly, during the Revolutionary War (1775–83), the Americans realised that the Newfoundland fishery was vulnerable as it lay at the end of a long sea communication route. The British might be persuaded to abandon its attempts to crush the rebellion if its precious fishing fleet was attacked and harassed. Like the French, the revolutionaries' aim was to disrupt the Royal Navy's maritime superiority on the littoral rather than openly to contest sea control.

Captain, and later Admiral, Peter Warren played a key role both before and during the war of 1744–48. He had commanded the 24-gun sixth rate HMS *Squirrel* between 1736 and 1742, operating out of Boston, Massachusetts. *Squirrel* was by then quite an old warship, having been launched in 1707 and rebuilt in 1727. During that time Warren had gained a good knowledge of the French fishery on Cape Breton Island at the north eastern end of Nova Scotia. He wrote a long report to the Admiralty in London in June 1739, for example, giving a detailed description of the fishery and of the strength of the French garrison. He included outline plans for the reinforcement of the British settlement at Canso, further south on the Nova Scotia mainland, showing an acute awareness of the strategic advantages accruing from a future challenge to French domination of the region.⁵¹

Four years later, with war looming, he was directed by the Admiralty Board, 'to consider maturely and let them know your opinion and judgment how the French may be annoyed in their fisheries and settlements to the northward of Boston, and what strength would be proper to carry out any attempts you may think advisable'.

A year later, Warren wrote to the Admiralty Secretary from HMS *Launceston* (this time his command was a new 44-gun fifth-rate ship) with bold and expansive proposals for seizing control of the Cape Breton peninsula. 'To be sure nothing could be a greater acquisition to Great Britain and its dominions, than the dispossessing the French of Cape Breton, by which the whole fur and fish trade would be in our hands.'⁵²

The actual impetus for mounting an assault on the key fortress of Louisbourg came from the General Assembly of Massachusetts. Although the Massachusetts militia could raise the manpower, the assault required the Royal Navy to provide transport. Commodore Peter Warren responded immediately by despatching four warships