

*JOHN RULE*

## THE SMACKSMEN OF THE NORTH SEA

### LABOUR RECRUITMENT AND EXPLOITATION IN BRITISH DEEP-SEA FISHING, 1850-90

The modern history of British deep-sea fishing begins with the railway expansion of the mid-nineteenth century. Rapid transport and the increasing use of ice as a preservative made it possible for fresh sea fish to enter the diets of the inhabitants of inland towns. Fresh sea fish was regarded as almost a luxury food before the railway age, yet by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, it had become a major protein source for the working classes of the industrial towns, and the fried-fish shop had become a working-class institution. The sea-fishing industry underwent a vast market-induced expansion. The census of 1841 enumerated only 24,000 males as being employed in fishing. By 1881 there were 58,000. If the inland consumer ever gave thought to the fishermen who supplied his table, he probably conjured up a picture of a weather-beaten village fisherman going daily to the fishing grounds to return in the evening to his waiting wife and children, bringing the silver harvest of the sea. While he had been at sea his family had busied themselves baiting lines, making and mending nets, and, in the case of the fish wives, performing their traditional function of selling the catch. Such a picture may have been broadly true of the fishing villages of Scotland, Cornwall, Northumberland or the South coast, but a feature of the second half of the nineteenth century was the creation of a new kind of fisherman who crewed the sailing trawlers of the North Sea. The expansion of the market has coincided with the discovery of the rich beds of the North Sea, and to such an extent did the North Sea trawling ports come to dominate the fishing industry that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Hull and Grimsby were together receiving as much fish as all the remaining ports of England and Wales put together. Those who toiled on the grey North Sea were known as the "smacksmen", and it is the extreme nature of their occupation which is the subject of this study.

The major ports from which the sailing smacks fished were in order of importance: Grimsby, Hull, Yarmouth and Lowestoft. The smacks from these four ports all fished the North Sea all the year around. There

were several older fishing ports, notably Brixham and Ramsgate, from which smacks fished the North Sea at times, but more usually fished in the English Channel. In this study it is the smacksmen sailing from the Humber ports and from Yarmouth who are the central concern. They were not only by far more numerous, but were the only ones who can be properly called North Sea fishermen.

The most important innovation consequent upon the mid-nineteenth-century market expansion was the introduction at the major ports of the "fleeting" system. In the interests of productive efficiency and the maximum return on capital invested in boats and gear, the smacksmen had to adapt to a new labour pattern, which brought them considerable social and environmental deprivation, and clearly distinguished their pattern of life and labour from that of the traditional village fisherman. When a boat fishes on its own, stores its own catch and returns to port when its hold is full, it is described as "single boating". Such a system has considerable drawbacks from the owner's point of view. Vessels are only being productive when they are actually at sea and engaged in catching fish. Journeys to and from port to unload fish are an unproductive use of time. Following the lead of Hewitts of Yarmouth, the large owners at the major trawling stations developed the fleeting system, under which the smacks went to sea in fleets numbering perhaps a hundred or more sail under the overall direction of an "admiral". These fleets remained at sea for eight weeks transferring their catches to carrier vessels who plied between the fleets and the ports. For the crews this meant eight weeks at a time at sea with only a week or so ashore between trips. The North Sea smacksmen could spend more than forty weeks of the year in the harsh, deprived conditions of the trawling fleets.

That fleeting was a system which suited the owners at the cost of a real deterioration in the quality of life of the crews was recognized by the Board of Trade inquiry into the industry in 1882: "We are of opinion that the 'single boating' system, whilst ensuring to the men less hardship, and probably conducing to instruct them in a more perfect knowledge of their business, is also productive of a great waste of fish. The fleeting system, on the contrary, is calculated to secure a more regular and continuous supply in a fresher state."<sup>1</sup> Traditionally the village fisherman was a shore-based worker making trips to sea. The

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by A. Ansell, "Trawling", in: *Fisheries Exhibition Literature* (1884), VII, p. 323. For a general discussion of the rise of the British sea fisheries in the nineteenth century see J. G. Rule, "The British Fisherman 1840-1914", in: *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No 27 (1973). This essay suggests some of the distinctions which should be drawn between the conditions of trawlermen and those of other fishermen.

smacksman was sea-based, his spells ashore being mere breaks in a life which was almost totally lived at sea.

For the most part the North Sea smacksmen toiled out of sight and out of mind of the shore-based population. Those few who sought them out, or who chanced upon them, were agreed on one thing: they could imagine no harder life than that of the deep-sea fisherman. One experienced observer thought there was no form of seafaring life comparable in “severity, exposure, hardship, and stern peril”. Another thought them the “forlorn hope of the great Army of Labour”, and described their lot as one of: “Suffering – monotonous, ceaseless suffering; gallant endurance; sordid filth; unnamed agonies; gnawing, petty pains; cold – and the chance of death.” Leone Levi, an authority on the condition of labour, compared their lot unfavourably with that of the miner.<sup>1</sup>

The trawling smacks were ketch-rigged vessels, generally 60 to 70 feet in length and of about 50 to 60 tons in weight, although towards the end of the sailing era larger vessels were being built. They were manned by small crews, normally five men and boys in those sailing from the Humber ports and six in those sailing from Yarmouth.<sup>2</sup> Designed with function in mind, they were kept small in the interests of speed and manoeuvrability. Of the little space available much was of necessity taken up in stowing the gear and storing the catch. The crew had to live, from boy-cook to skipper, in a single cabin usually about ten feet wide and from 12 to 17 feet long. Walter Wood’s description of the cabin as a “dog-hole” seems apt. A writer who sailed on a smack in the 1880’s wrote of a “smokey, stifling, grimy cabin” containing a cooking stove, a miniature pantry and a few wooden shelves for beds. The cabin was barely high enough to permit standing upright. Often the cabin would be wet or flooded for weeks on end, while for long spells in rough weather such would be the movement of the ship that it would be impos-

<sup>1</sup> R. H. Ballantyne, *The Young Trawler* (1884), Appendix, p. 425; J. Runciman, *A Dream of the North Sea* (1889), pp. 146, 292; Leone Levi, “The Economic Condition of Fishermen”, in: *Fisheries Exhibition Literature*, IV, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics of vessels lost in the March gale of 1883 give an indication of the crew size:

Port	Vessels lost	Crew size				
		4	5	6	7	not given
Hull	27	1	25			1
Grimsby	8		7	1		
Yarmouth	5		1	3	1	
Lowestoft	2	1	1			

Source: E. J. March, *Sailing Trawlers* (1953), pp. 130-31.

sible to prepare hot food or drinks. Often the crew, once on the fishing grounds, gave up sleeping in the bunks:

“Yer see, surs, when we comes below after a hard set-to above, with maybe, a stiff squall and a strong shower, its too much trouble to unship our togs, an’ besides, one niver knows when skipper or night watch may sing out, ‘All hands on deck!’ Yer see, surs, sleep isn’t worth while if ye’ve got to turn out an turn in, now off, an now on, with these here heavy sea-togs, an’ so we just lies down at the handiest spot on the cabin floor, with a pair of sea-boots, a blanket, or a bit o’ board for a pillow.”<sup>1</sup>

A wooden ladder with half a dozen steep steps formed the usual means of entering and leaving the cabin. Light was provided by a small skylight through which air was also admitted when the weather was fair enough to allow it to be other than firmly secured. When steam capstans were introduced to haul the nets, although labour was significantly abridged, many of the living problems were intensified. Often the fore part of the cabin was entirely taken up with the engine and boiler needed to power the winch. This made the whole cabin unbearably hot. One visitor claimed never to have experienced heat so stifling. Even if the boiler was situated outside the cabin, it was only separated from it by a thin wooden partition, the door in which was usually open so that the hot air came through to the cabin even on a blazing summer day.<sup>2</sup>

The labour of fishing from a trawler can be very simply described. The trawl is cast overboard, towed behind, hauled in and emptied. The fish are then gutted and packed. The smack has to be sailed, food for the crew prepared, necessary repairs to gear made, and when fishing under a fleeting system the catch has to be taken in small boats to the carrier vessels who will sail it to port. The lowliest member of the crew, the youngest apprentice, acted as cook, and in addition assisted the fourth, or deckhand, in cleaning the deck and trimming and maintaining the lights, flares etc. When hauling it was his job to coil the warp. The fourth hand had to be able to take his watch and handle the smack in fair weather. He was also expected to be able to handle the small boat, splice ropes, take soundings, help gut the fish and know the sails. The third hand had to be able to handle the smack with the gear down, prepare the gear for shooting, manage the small boat when

<sup>1</sup> W. Wood, *North Sea Fishers and Fighters* (1911), p. 75; A. Gordon, *What Cheer O?* (1890), pp. 16-17; Ballantyne, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 75; Sir E. Lechmere, “A Cruise of a Brixham Trawler”, in: C. Gregory, *Brixham in Devonian* (Torquay, n.d.), pp. 114-15.

taking fish to the carrier vessel, and take his share in gutting and icing the fish. The second hand, or mate, had the special responsibility of keeping the stores and had to be totally competent in that he would have to take charge of the smack in the event of anything happening to the skipper. The skipper had to order and control the whole labour process. In adverse circumstances he had to be able to make life or death decisions. When single-boating he had to make the vital decision of when and where to fish.

From evening to evening the twenty-four hours of the smacksmen's life followed this pattern. As night set in the great trawl beam with its network bag was "shot" from the side of the vessel and dragged along the seabed until the signal to haul was given by the admiral in charge of the fishing fleet, usually at about 11 p.m. or midnight. The interval between shooting and hauling gave most of the crew a respite from labour. In normal conditions only one hand would remain on deck, while the others could sleep until roused for the hauling. When effected by steam power, which became general in the larger fleets in the 1890's, this task could be over in twenty minutes to half an hour. If the gear was being hauled by hand, then the process involved an hour or two of real strain: "At first the handles flew round merrily enough, but by and bye, when the warp was 'up and down', the strain became fearful. Tugging, pushing, panting". The fish had then to be removed from the net, and when it was empty it went down again while some members of the crew continued cleaning and packing the fish. When this had been done, with the exception of the watch, the crew could sleep again until the signal for the second haul came at dawn. The hauling and packing process would then begin again, and only when it was complete would the crew pause for breakfast. After breakfast catches had to be taken to the carrier, and the vessel sailed to the grounds for the next evening's fishing.<sup>1</sup>

The labour was unpleasant, exhausting and dangerous:

"Often enough the crew, working in the blackness of a winter night on the Dogger, would toil incessantly for three hours before the cod-end could be hoisted on deck and the fish released. Then, when even the powerful frames of North Sea smacksmen were exhausted by their labours, the men would have to set to work to clean, gut and box fish which froze as it was being handled."

Even after the introduction of the steam capstan, the labour was, according to one witness, "hard enough to satisfy even the most robust

<sup>1</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-33; Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58; E. J. Mather, *Nor'ard of the Dogger* (1888), pp. 114-16.

of toilers". While the gear was being hauled it was the special function of the boy-cook to go down into the dark hold and coil the warp, a task hardly less unpleasant than hauling the trawl itself: "as it came winding in [...] I had to catch it above my head, the streaming water used to run all over me, and I had to spend my hours of sleep more often wet than dry". With most of the labour being performed on the slippery deck of a tossing ship, few occupations were more subject to accidents, which ranged in severity from bruised fingers to broken limbs or fractured skulls. Medical attention was rarely at hand, and it was not just the risk of accident which intensified the severity of the smacksman's labour. A surgeon familiar with conditions in the fishing fleets wrote: "the smacksman runs the risk of a hurt of some kind in every minute of his waking life. He must work with his oilskins on when rain or spray is coming aboard, and his oilskins fray the skin when the edges wear a little; then the salt water gets into sore and makes a nasty ulcer, which eats its way up until you see men who dare not work at the trawl without having their sleeves doubled to the elbow. Then there are the salt water cracks which cut their way right to the bone." He also wrote of "that hideous poisoned hand which, like death, cometh soon or late to every North Sea fisher".<sup>1</sup>

No task, however, compared in danger to that of boarding the fish. When fishing in fleets the catches were transferred from the trawlers to the carrier vessels in small boats. These boats were crewed by two men, usually the second and third hands. So dangerous a task was it, that one old fisherman claimed that the lower hands would sometimes avoid promotion rather than have to undertake it. It was simply a very dangerous task to throw out a small boat in half a gale of wind, fill her up with heavy boxes of fish, and row her through heaving seas to put those boxes over the rail of a steamer, which was herself tossing and wallowing. Walter Wood described the boarding of fish in rough weather:

"A dangerous sea would be running, but the admiral would not consider it essential to order that no attempts should be made to board. Some of the skippers had sent off their boats in worse weather, and they would not want to miss the market and lose the fruit of their all-nights toil. So the boats were thrown out and the trunks put in, a few skippers only preferring to suffer loss of money rather than pay toll in life and limb.

Of necessity a host of small craft would be afloat struggling

<sup>1</sup> Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 61; Sir Wilfred Grenfell, *The Harvest of the Sea* (1905), p. 21; Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-91, 268.

with the vicious cross-seas. The men [...] stood up to their work, one facing the bow and one the stern, so that a watchful eye can be kept on the seas that change from all quarters simultaneously. But iron nerve, giant strength, and wonderous skill availed nothing – a snarling comber came, and, when it had roared past, the boat had capsized and the men were struggling in the savage seeth. Short the fight must needs be; for the fisherman's heavy clothing, and ponderous boots bore him down, and, unless help was just at hand, he was doomed."<sup>1</sup>

Sir Wilfred Grenfell claimed that as many as fourteen men could be upset in a single morning out of these boats, and that the annual loss from the North Sea fleets of some 350 men and boys was mostly accounted for in this way. One owner told the founder of the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen that 35 men a year on average were lost in boarding fish from the smacks which he owned. Small wonder that the latter commented that "while the market is caught in the interests of trade, it is too frequently caught at the cost of human life". Significant statistics on this matter were presented in a paper delivered in 1883 by the Duke of Edinburgh, then commander of the naval reserve. He drew attention to the fact that over the two years previous to that date, the death rate per thousand fishermen in England had been 7.55, whereas in Scotland it had been 1.8. He established that the difference could not be explained by a difference in the number of vessels lost at sea, and that if the trawling districts were excluded, then the English death-rate figure did not differ significantly from that of Scotland, where trawling was at that time practically non-existent. The conclusion was inescapable. The higher death rate was a function of trawling, and it had to be explained by factors other than the loss of vessels at sea. He established that the boarding of fish was the prime cause of death at sea among trawler crews. Another authority thought that for every man lost in consequence of a casualty to a fishing vessel, five men were drowned in the North Sea without any such casualty occurring. These were largely accounted for either by loss of life in boarding fish, or in laying out long lines from the line-fishing smacks in small boats. Since line fishing represented only a minority section of the deep-sea fishing industry, it can be fairly claimed that the concurrent testimonies of experts point firmly to boarding fish as the cause of the higher death rate in trawling. The significantly greater occupational risk in trawling was then a product of the fleeting system, in itself a product of the increasing capitalization of the industry.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> March, *op. cit.*, p. 118; Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Wilfred Grenfell, *A Labrador Doctor* (1920), pp. 65-66; Mather, *op. cit.*,

How was the labour force recruited for such an extreme occupation? The traditional village fisheries recruited naturally from the fisher families. Fishing was traditionally an hereditary occupation, and before the rapid expansion of the great trawling centres there was little need to think of drawing outside labour into the industry. But local sources of supply could not keep pace with the rapidly increased demand for labour inputs occasioned by the rise of the East-coast trawling ports. A Grimsby smack-owner looked back in 1878 with regret to the cozy days when fisherlads had been apprenticed from the families of neighbours, and a writer in 1884 found the fishing smacks of Hull, Grimsby and Yarmouth to be under the necessity of taking apprentices from "whatever place they can obtain them", and such had been the practice for many years. At Grimsby only ten per cent of apprentices indentured in the five years following 1880 came from the town itself.<sup>1</sup>

The bulk of the apprentices came either from other towns, 43.35% between 1880 and 1884, or were apprenticed from public institutions, at first from workhouses and later, as reports of bad conditions in the industry made many boards of guardians reluctant to continue supplying fisherlads, increasingly from reformatories. 37.89% of lads apprenticed 1880-84 came from public institutions, and the proportion increased to 48.07% 1885-90 and 60.80% 1890-94.<sup>2</sup> A Board of Trade committee which enquired into the fishing industry in 1882 reported that the number of apprentices at the main trawling ports aggregated several thousand, and that the chief source of supply had by then become the union workhouses and reformatories in London and the South of England. A considerable proportion of those who were neither local nor came from public institutions were runaway lads who from various causes had left their homes and found their way to the seaports in "a more or less destitute state".<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of the smack era in the late 1880's and 1890's, casual hands, i.e. unapprenticed and serving on a wage basis, were increasingly employed to make good the growing shortfall in the supply

p. 17; Duke of Edinburgh, "Notes on the Sea Fisheries and Fishing Population of the United Kingdom", in: Fisheries Exhibition Literature, IV, pp. 43-46; S. Walpole, "Official Report", *ibid.*, XIII, p. 121.

<sup>1</sup> E. Gillet, *History of Grimsby* (1969), pp. 249, 258; J. Bertram, "The Unappreciated Fisherfolk", in: Fisheries Exhibition Literature, II, p. 231; D. Boswell, *Sea Fishing Apprentices of Grimsby* (1974), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Calculations based on data provided in Boswell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Board of Trade Inquiry into Relations between the Owners, Masters, and Crews of Fishing Vessels etc. [Parliamentary Papers, 1882, XVII], p. vii, § 21. Hereafter cited as Report.



of apprentices, but in the main the institution of apprenticeship was the main means of crewing the smacks until the end of the sailing era. Under the usual covenant the apprentice was bound to the age of 21, *irrespective of his age at the time of taking his indentures*. Most lads were bound at from 13 to 15 years of age, so the term apprentice covers not just ship's boys, but full-grown crew members as well. On a five-man trawler it was usual for the three hands below skipper and mate to be apprentices. The 445 sailing trawlers at Grimsby in 1877 were crewed by 910 paid hands and 1,340 apprentices. When it is realized that the non-apprenticed labour can be almost entirely accounted for by the skippers and mates, and further that it was far from unknown for young men to serve as mates or even skippers before their indentured period expired, it becomes clear that when we talk of the conditions of apprentices, we are, at least before the 1890's, talking of the conditions of the majority of the trawler crews. Apart from the specialized functions of the skipper or mate, when we describe the nature of the smacksmen's labour, we are describing the labour of apprentices. In fact the smack-owners solved the problem of labour supply in a way which strikingly recalls the methods of the factory masters of the early Industrial Revolution: they relied upon poor-law apprentices.<sup>1</sup>

Skippers, mates, casual hands and apprentices, grown or half-grown, lived and worked together as the crew of a sailing trawler. Under the fleeting system they did so in eight-week spells, with only a few days break to separate them. In considering the functioning of the crew as a social system it is useful to think of the fishing smack as a "total institution" in the sense developed by Erving Goffman. Goffman suggests that a ship can be so regarded because it is an exception to the basic social arrangement of modern society that an individual tends to sleep, play and work with different co-participants in different places, under different authorities and without an overall rational plan. The central feature of a total institution is the absence of the barriers which ordinarily separate these three spheres of life. It is useful to think of a trawling smack as a total institution in this sense. The crew members were not just workmates, apart from isolated occasions such as visits to Mission ships the crew members were to each other, for the eight weeks of the trip, the only persons with whom any kind of contact or interaction was possible. Tensions, stress, aggression, frustration has to be contained, sublimated or given expression within the crew.

<sup>1</sup> G. L. Alward, *The Sea Fisheries of Great Britain and Ireland* (Grimsby, 1932), p. 206.

Work and rest, recreation and relaxation were confined both in terms of situation, and in the possible range of co-participation.<sup>1</sup>

While it is useful, indeed essential, if we are to fully appreciate the smacksman's circumstances to think of a smack as a total institution in the sense so far implied, Goffman pursues his idea of a total institution in a direction which makes it less applicable to the situation of the smacksman. He writes that a key characteristic of a total institution is the handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people. He was primarily interested in understanding the situations of such groups as asylum inmates, long-stay hospital patients and prisoners. At this point the concept becomes less applicable. We must instead emphasize two related facts about trawler crews, which clearly differentiate them from the inmates of the kind of institution with which Goffman was most directly concerned. Indeed it is possible that they also distinguish the crew of the trawling smack from the crews of larger naval or merchant vessels.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, the trawler crew was in theory a system characterized by perfect mobility, and there was an approximation to this perfect mobility in practice. Most skippers had passed through the stages of crew membership from boy-cook to deckhand, third hand, mate and skipper. The keen apprentice who found himself suited to the occupation could not only hope to reach skipper, but could hope to do so with a rapidity which was consequent upon the rapid expansion of the industry and its high labour turnover. Some even served as skippers before their apprenticeships ended. Secondly, the trawler crew was characterized by the uniformity of origin of its members, and by the fact that position in the crew cannot be explained by reference to educational opportunity or to social class. In many ways the authority of the skipper over the crew amounted to absolute power, and he made decisions in life or death situations. His position depended upon his experience and his demonstrated ability to catch fish. He might, especially when fishing on a profit-sharing basis, be inclined to see his interests as co-inciding with those of the owners, but in the context of society as a whole he could be placed only in the working class. It is significant that although the skipper was sometimes known as the "master", he was most usually known simply as the skipper, and never as the "captain" with its higher-status "officer" connotations. It is

<sup>1</sup> E. Goffman, *Asylums* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. J. Tunstall discusses the value of Goffman's concept for the understanding of present-day fishermen in the introduction to the 1969 edition of his important study *The Fishermen*.

also noticeable that skippers adopted a deferential attitude to middle-class persons and in turn were patronized by them.<sup>1</sup>

So far we have characterized the smacksmen's life as being excessively deprived in its physical conditions, and as being attended with a high risk of death or injury. To this we must add a large degree of social and cultural deprivation. Estimates suggest that the smacksmen of the North Sea formed a floating population of some 12,000 to 15,000 souls. A writer in 1888 compared a fleet of 1,500 smacksmen with an inland industrial village of the same size:

"The inland village lay snugly at the foot of a range of hills, with a river flowing placidly by. The North Sea village was constantly tossed to and fro upon the grey wilderness of a foaming ocean, swept by winds as pitiless as the hand of death. The stationary village boasted, for its 1500 inhabitants, two churches, two chapels, four doctors, a dispensary, a town-hall, a mechanics institute, and a lending library. The cruising village possessed absolutely none of these various advantages."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, when confronting the smacksmen, middle-class observers tended to react with a fascinated horror which resembled the response, a generation earlier, of "respectability" to the new working class of the industrial towns. They could hardly help recoiling from a culture of poverty and deprivation which was governed by none of their norms and responded to few of their sanctions. Unless re-shaped into conformity, it might become as far removed from their control as it already was from their comprehension. A writer at the height of the smack era typifies this reaction:

"Behold a people in the North Sea, a scattered flock without a shepherd. Behold a race of men with noble instincts and admirable latent powers, sunk in deplorable ignorance and semi-barbarity; a people labouring in the black night of national neglect; coping with all weathers, and battling with innumerable dangers; rude in speech, uncouth in garb, and reckless in behaviour; outside the pale of society because strangers to the kindly social spirit; too often hard drinkers on land and at times still harder drinkers at sea; brothers neglected by man and appearing almost to be forsaken by the great Father in heaven;

<sup>1</sup> See for example the tone of the literature of the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. For a comment on the proletarian identification of present-day Hull skippers see Tunstall's above introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Mather, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

men treading the cheerless pathway of life in pain of body, weariness of toil, absence from home and friends, without God and without hope in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

For the most part the nature of the smacksman’s occupation left little time to be occupied by other than work or sleep. But there were circumstances which were beyond the control of even the most assiduous trawler-owner: he could not control the wind. Slack winds insufficiently strong to drive smacks with their heavy trawls down produced periods of enforced idleness at sea. In such periods the extent of cultural deprivation became apparent. There was little to do: there was nowhere to go and normal social intercourse was impossible. The over-worked, bored, tired smacksmen living under constant threat of injury and death, formed a ready market for cheap alcohol if such could be got to them. It could. Vessels known as “copers”, sailing mainly from Dutch ports, were the source of supply. They were trawler-sized and crewed by six or seven, including a skipper who was rarely the owner and usually sailed on a profit-sharing basis. Ostensibly their purpose was to provide the fleets with tobacco. Tobacco was regarded as a necessity by the smacksmen. As well as being chewed to keep the pangs of hunger at bay during the long pre-breakfast hauls it was chewed to alleviate the pain of toothache and smoked to give an illusion of warmth against the cold. Copers could supply it at 18d a pound compared with a shore price of 4/-. This trade would have been profitable enough, but the real profits came from the sale of distilled liquor. The coper was in fact a floating grogshop. It purveyed cheap forms of fiery aniseed brandies. In the periods of ennui and discontent when no fishing was possible, and few forms of social or intellectual recreation available, the coper riding in the centre of the fleet offered a tempting prospect of comradeship, a point of contact with other crews, and a temporary escape from a bleak existence. The crews would lower their boats and go carousing or, in their own variant, “cruising”.<sup>2</sup>

Drunken skippers and older hands certainly contributed to making life at sea even more unbearable for some of the younger fishing lads. Cruelty and ill-treatment at sea certainly added to the harshness of life for too many apprentices. Public attention was suddenly directed onto the treatment of the lads at sea when two notorious cases of cruelty reached the national press. In 1881 a fourteen-year-old apprentice was brutally assaulted and starved by his 27-year-old skipper. The lad finally passed out from his beatings and from lack of food, and,

<sup>1</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41; Mather, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

in an effort to revive him, the skipper dangled him over the side of the smack. He never regained consciousness. In 1882 the mate of a Hull smack savagely attacked an apprentice, denying him food and forcing him to walk the deck naked with a bucket of sea water on his head. On one occasion he hacked at the boy with his booted feet until the boy's hands were bare to the bone. The boy was then daubed with his own excrement by one of the other men before the mate finally pushed him over the side to his death. At about the same time as these two widely reported murder cases, the skipper, second and third hands of the Grimsby smack *Achievement* were convicted for "cruel, debasing and disgusting treatment of two lads at sea".<sup>1</sup>

The publicity which attended these cases helped precipitate the setting up of a Board of Trade inquiry into the conditions of the apprentices, which began to collect evidence towards the end of 1882. Despite the hundreds of pages of double-columned closely printed evidence which is appended to the published report, it is difficult for the historian to reach any firm conclusions as to the extent of cruelty to fisher lads at sea. The report presents several problems. In the first place, it has been aptly described by a recent historian of Grimsby as a "paper tiger" in that the committee represented only the interests of the owners.<sup>2</sup> In the second place, the witnesses questioned would be for the most part unlikely to give evidence which might be damaging to the industry.

The owners believed the institution of apprenticeship was essential to the fishing trade and would hardly volunteer information likely to discredit it. The skippers and mates resented what they felt was a general accusation against them, and were in any case the successes of the system. The very fact that they had risen from boy-cook to their present positions was in itself proof that they had possessed a high degree of adaptation to the conditions of the industry. They were likely to view harsh treatment with that retrospective complacency which often leads successful men to view the deprivations of their childhood and youth as indispensably related to their success in adult life. As one skipper told the committee: "As to apprentices, I should like apprentices to go through the same hard rule as we went through. They are too well treated, I think now. They are more like gentlemen's sons than apprentices to the fishing trade."<sup>3</sup> As for the apprentices themselves, it was hard indeed for a boy to testify at a public hearing in the presence of the owners and skippers to having been cruelly

<sup>1</sup> Tunstall, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27; Report, p. x, § 33.

<sup>2</sup> Gillet, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

<sup>3</sup> Report, p. 54, § 2155.

treated. We find one lad who stated that he had never himself been ill-treated, subsequently admitting that a skipper had thrown a bucket of water over him when he was too weak to hold the warp. When another tried to tell the committee of the ill-treatment received by a shipmate, he was quickly shut up by the chairman and told to speak only of his own experience.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the missing evidence is that which could have been provided by those who had left the trade – the system's failures rather than its successes, for it is clear that the former were more numerous than the latter. Certainly a lad who had suffered the bullying of a harsh skipper would have been less likely to have acquired the aptitude for the trade which could have pulled him up the steps to skipper. Joseph Hammond of Grimsby illustrates such a case. He had been cruelly treated during his apprenticeship. "I have been knocked about, sir – I used to get it every day, sir." He had after nine years become a third hand, a position more usually reached after three years. Even allowing for the feelings of resentment which he not unexpectedly harboured, his evidence is of special interest. He was not a success and he answered questions with a rugged independence which contrasts with the overawing of most of the apprentice witnesses by the presence of their masters in the room. They parroted monosyllabic acquiescence to the loaded promptings of this interested committee. Hammond explained his slow promotion by claiming that he had never been taught his trade by the bullying skipper and mate with whom he had had to sail. Asked what he thought of the masters' proposal that a proportion of the lads' earnings should be compulsorily saved by deduction at source – the masters' purpose was twofold: they envisaged a fund from which the lads could pay fines imposed for breaches of discipline and they thought that a curtailment of spending power might effect a moral reformation of the lads' use of their little time ashore –, Hammond replied: "I think let a fellow have what he earns." Asked why he had not explained his reasons to the magistrate who had once committed him to prison for desertion, he replied: "They did not give me a chance, the gaffer had all the talk." When it is remembered that in Grimsby all wealth came from the fishing and an unbiased magistracy was not to be hoped for, one is inclined to believe him.<sup>2</sup>

The skippers were at pains to point out that to include the vast majority of them in a sweeping accusation of harsh treatment at sea would be a gross distortion. Most, however, acknowledged that there was a minority who treated the lads badly. One Yarmouth skipper

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12, § 480, 492, 494; p. 25, § 1053.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24, § 857-1008.

stated that lads had never had rough treatment from him, but agreed that there had been cases with other skippers. The mayor of Yarmouth also thought there were exceptions to the general rule of good treatment, a view which was also held of Brixham. Sir Wilfred Grenville acknowledged the existence of a class of hard, brutal skippers, while a Hull witness thought that as a rule skippers treated the lads as if they were their own children, but agreed that instances of cruelty did occur.<sup>1</sup> The context of cruelty was the brutalizing deprivation of the fisherman's life. Within the crew tempers became strained and patience wore thin. Over-tired lads made mistakes in fishing or cooking, and the level of tolerance was low. Some instances of brutality can be directly related to specific forms of deprivation. Tunstall has pointed out that in both of the notorious murder cases there were strong sadistical homosexual elements, and we have noted the conviction of the top hands of the *Achievement* for "disgusting" treatment of two apprentices. The founder of the Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen found forms of sin "only to be mentioned with bated breath and for which the Divine writings reserve the most scathing rebuke – sins for which is reserved the wrath of Almighty God".<sup>2</sup>

The committee of inquiry was at pains to differentiate between two kinds of cruelty: bullying by the crew, and punishment-related corporal assaults by skippers and mates. The former category was fairly freely acknowledged to exist. The following are two exchanges with separate witnesses at Grimsby:

"When there is not a very smart boy do the hands brighten him up, as they call it? – As a rule sailors do sir, if they get one a little behind the mark."

"Therefore you think some of the ill-usage which has been spoken of by some people is really a good deal of what may be called larking between the crew rather than punishment? – I think that is so."<sup>3</sup>

As for the second category, it was claimed that skippers needed some form of disciplinary control over a body of lads, who, given their origins, were not likely to have been the easiest of labour forces to order. They came, as one witness put it, from "the dangerous classes". There was general agreement that control over the reformatory lads was a much tougher proposition than had been control over the lads

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96, § 3759-60; p. 78, § 3041; Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Grenfell, *Harvest of the Sea*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> Tunstall, *op. cit.*, p. 25; Mather, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Report, p. 38, § 1576; p. 44, § 1784.

from the workhouses, but, as it was pointed out at Yarmouth, it would have been difficult for the owners to have found a better class of lads, since intelligent, well-conducted men would hardly go fishing. A Grimsby skipper was asked about, or rather asked to agree to, the need for a certain amount of discipline:

“If you have a bad boy you have scarcely any remedy at sea but a certain amount of reasonable brightening up? – Yes sir, we have a lot of them too.”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from simple kicks and blows, the most common forms of physical chastisement were rope’s ending, described by one recipient as “being taken by the collar, thrown on the deck and unmercifully lashed and cut about the body with the rope”, and drenching with buckets of sea water. While it is true that many lads accepted such treatment as little more than their due (“I have never been hit by a skipper unless I have given them cause for it”, claimed one Grimsby apprentice), evidence abounds of skippers handing out punishments disproportionate to the trivial offences which young, tired lads committed. A Hull apprentice had a bucket of water thrown over him on his first trip when, because of his weakness and the cold, he was unable to keep hold of the warp. Another reported frequent blows and kicks: “It was because I did not do my work, I suppose, the first time I went, I suppose I was too small.” Another recalled two occasions when errors had brought painful retribution to him. On his first trip after some lamp glasses got broken, the skipper kicked him all around the deck, chucked about forty buckets of water over him and threatened to throw him overboard. On another occasion the second hand had kicked him for about half an hour: “I forgot to peel the potatoes and so the second hand landed me.” For such unfortunate lads the harshness of their occupation was further intensified by the harshness of the treatment which they received from skippers or higher placed hands. It is true that perhaps only a minority of skippers were guilty of extreme forms of cruelty, but, as a writer well placed to know pointed out, the trade had little cause for complacency when it was admitted by one of the largest owners that a man turned away for cruelty would soon find another employer, “very likely the same day” if his record of fish-catching were good.<sup>2</sup>

Walter Wood thought it a “marvel” that men and boys could be found

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61, § 2379; p. 53, § 2114.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Report, p. 50, § 1905; p. 12, § 492-95; p. 26, § 1057-58; W. M. Adams, “A Popular History of Fisheries and Fishermen”, in: *Fisheries Exhibition Literature*, I, p. 539.



to undertake so extreme an occupation. The peculiar pattern of recruitment means that only a minority of apprentices can be regarded as having had total freedom of choice in the matter. A large proportion of those who contracted as individuals can clearly have had little idea of the severity of the life to which they were being bound. The real question is what held men to the trade. It is true, as Tunstall has pointed out, that we need to separate the motivations of the skippers and mates from those of the rest of the crew. The apprenticed lower hands were tied by the terms of their indenture. In fact a very large number indeed broke their indentures or had them cancelled. The numbers who absconded amounted to almost a third of the total who signed between 1880 and 1889, and of the remainder only 35.8% actually completed the full period of their indentures. Others quit as soon as their period of indenture expired. At Grimsby between 1868 and 1878 4,277 lads were bound. If all of these had stayed at sea the total labour force by 1880 should have numbered well in excess of 5,000; in fact it numbered less than 4,000, and the trade had certainly not stagnated in the intervening years. In 1877 there were 1,790 apprentices at the port, yet between 1868 and 1876 no less than 3,193 had been bound, and in the space of those few years only a matter of a few hundred could have completed their indentures. Neither the rapid growth of the industry nor its high death rate can account for the fact that half of all the hands on trawling smacks were apprentices under the age of twenty-one.<sup>1</sup>

It will be argued below that certain specific negative sanctions were employed to ensure that the crews kept to their ships, but we should first examine whether positive motivations can explain the adherence of those fisherlads who completed their indentures, and indeed continued thereafter to go to sea. Remuneration of apprentices can hardly have been a significant factor, since apprentices received only pocket money or small amounts derived from the sale of perquisite fish. However, ambition to become a skipper presumably included an assessment of the financial rewards of being a successful skipper. In this sense financial expectations could have had a long-term relevance. How real was the ambition? Most skippers and mates had been apprentices. They were thought to make but poor masters of smacks unless they had served their time in one. The case of a Grimsby skipper can be regarded as typifying the usual progression. He had served two years as a cook, three as a deckhand, four months as third hand and had, at the time he gave evidence, just completed two months as a skipper.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics derived from Report, Appendix 30, p. 204, and Appendix 47, p. 235; G. L. Alward, *op. cit.*, p. 206; Boswell, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

Such examples were constantly before the fisherlads, and it was reasonable for a lad, provided a) he found the life bearable, b) he received sufficient instruction in his trade (and this was not always so), and c) that he possessed sufficient aptitude for the job, to hope to become a skipper. One Grimsby lad told the committee of 1882 that he looked forward to becoming a skipper. He, however, was one of the favoured. He had no complaints of cruelty and thought that he had learned his trade pretty well.<sup>1</sup>

Fishing did, then, have something to offer. A socially disadvantaged lad from workhouse or reformatory had the opportunity of not just acquiring a job, but of entering a structured career. Contemporaries made much of this opportunity. One owner who had himself begun as a union apprentice thought that every lad in the fishing trade had the same chance as he had had: "I had nothing given or left me in any way, but have had to work hard for what I have." James Bertram saw the trade as offering an opportunity to those who were in normal circumstances unemployable: trawling employed a section of the population "at all times rather ill to manage". Street arabs transformed through the medium of a healthy outdoor life into usefully productive citizens! "They come to us pale and thin, and in a few months you would hardly recognise the same boys", said one witness, "I have often told them that a kind Providence has in this way given them something to balance the hardships they undergo."<sup>2</sup>

One knowledgeable authority thought otherwise. Spencer Walpole, nationally known as an expert on the sea fisheries, and a man who had no financial stake in the profits of deep-sea fishing, perceived that the success of some was being used to justify a system which brought misery to greater numbers:

"A philanthropist might readily conclude that nothing could [...] be better than to apprentice the boy to the healthy life of a fisherman [but] it is not every boy who has either the strength or the courage which fits him for the hard sea-faring life of a fisherman. It is not every master of a vessel who has the patience or the heart to make allowances for the short-comings of a timid weak lad."<sup>3</sup>

Henry Smethurst, the leading Grimsby owner, himself master of eighty to a hundred apprentices (his uncertainty about the number is instructive), told the committee: "you will not find one boy in twenty

<sup>1</sup> Report, p. 2, § 24; p. 53, § 2100; p. 50, § 1930-31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182; Bertram, *op. cit.*, p. 232; Report, p. 28, § 1191.

<sup>3</sup> S. Walpole, "The British Fish Trade", in: Fisheries Exhibition Literature, I, p. 17.

who is apprenticed but what does well." The rate of desertion which we have noted above suggests that the real case was very different.<sup>1</sup>

If financial motivation was weak and ambition can have motivated only a minority, then it follows that the majority of apprentices adhered or were held to their occupation either through resignation (a Hull apprentice told the committee: "I do not exactly like it, but I have to do it because I do not see anything better") or, more likely, through the operation of negative sanctions. The publicity given to the cases of cruelty first turned public attention to conditions in the industry, but concern was further increased when publicity was given to another unsavoury aspect of the trawling industry.<sup>2</sup>

The national press carried reports of chained lines of fishing apprentices being regularly led through the streets of Lincoln to the county gaol. A shocked public realized that without the sanction of imprisonment the trawling smacks could hardly have sailed fully crewed from the great trawling stations. When Joseph Chamberlain, then President of the Board of Trade, heard of this situation in 1881, he reacted with shocked surprise to a deputation of smack-owners:

"What you mean to say is this, that unless you have the power of taking a man up and putting him into prison you cannot get him to carry out his bargain – that you cannot get men to work except under threats of imprisonment. That would be reducing matters to a state of serfdom. As to the apprenticeship system, I am not sure it is not a system more honoured in the breach than in the observance."<sup>3</sup>

Under section 243 of the Merchant Shipping Act of 1854 seamen or apprentices were liable to summary imprisonment not exceeding twelve weeks for desertion, and ten weeks for being absent without leave or refusing to join ship. No warrant from a magistrate was necessary. Under section 246 of the act master, mate, owner, ship's husband or consignee were empowered to apprehend crewmen for these offenses without police or warrant and convey them on board or take them before a court, and, if the last, to detain them in custody. At the major trawling ports use of this power was extensive. At Yarmouth the number of convictions under the act was:

1876	91	1878	85
1877	122	1879	75

<sup>1</sup> Report, p. 51, § 2259.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9, § 326.

<sup>3</sup> Gillet, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

At Grimsby the numbers proceeded against under the act in these years were:

1876	425	1878	557
1877	487	1879	494

Of these the numbers convicted were 250, 280, 339 and 320, respectively. Figures for Hull are not so easily available, but here too extensive use of the act was made. In the year ending 1st August 1879, 269 apprentices were committed at that port.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that both casual hands and apprentices could be proceeded against under the act, but it could hardly have been a useful sanction unless it had been linked with the legal institution of apprenticeship. A casual hand signing from voyage to voyage, if convicted, could after serving his sentence choose not to sign for any further trips. The apprentice had no such choice. He was bound to his master. The owners saw the act together with the legal binding of apprentices as essential to the well-being of the industry. Despite this sanction desertion and absenteeism were not uncommon, but we can only guess at how much they would have been increased had there been no power of summary imprisonment. Clearly the loudness of the owners' protests when the legal situation was changed indicates how highly they regarded it.

Evidence suggests that desertion and absenteeism on the part of those lads who did not intend to abscond was only rarely the direct consequence of ill-treatment. In fact absenteeism is a more accurate description of the short-term phenomenon of not joining ship. As a problem it closely paralleled that faced by the factory- and mine-owners of the early Industrial Revolution. It was a natural reaction against the harshness and monotony of the occupation. Lads asked why they did not appear to re-join their smacks after short breaks ashore replied that after a few nights ashore drinking and whoring they simply chose to stay ashore and risk the consequences. As a Grimsby apprentice who was twice convicted for failing to join his ship told the committee: "The first time I was lead astray, and the second time it must have come into my head." Indeed the committee summed up in its report:

"it is due to a feeling of insubordination, the result of dissipated and intemperate habits acquired from evil associates especially in large towns; to disgust at the monotony of the trawler's occupation; to thoughtless and reckless disregard of consequences on the part of irresponsible youths."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Statistics from Report, p. 80, § 3095 (Yarmouth); Appendix 6, p. 174 (Hull); Appendix 9, p. 180 (Grimsby).

<sup>2</sup> Report, p. 50, § 1937; p. xiii, § 46.

Lads might sometimes choose not to rejoin their vessel while fully aware that this meant the likelihood of a spell in prison. Many knew the reality of gaol life from their own experience, a large number having been committed on more than one occasion. An investigator found that among the lads gaol was known as "college" and found it not at all remarkable that if the weather promised to be especially bad, or if a lad was suffering painfully from venereal disease that prison might be preferred to the smack. The governor of Hull prison reported that he frequently saw the same boys again and again, and that some who had complained of ill-treatment had told him they would rather be in prison than on board a smack.<sup>1</sup>

For the most part the sanction was undoubtedly useful to the owners. Lads might not mind the odd spell or two of imprisonment, but those who were questioned by the committee, although prepared to accept gaol on occasion and certainly not unduly depressed by their experience of it, preferred to go to sea. Charles Jordan, a Hull apprentice, several times imprisoned, thought gaol in general a poor exchange for the smack. As he put it, he would rather go to sea even in the winter because there was "good food".<sup>2</sup>

The situation was suddenly changed in 1880 when the passing of the Payment of Wages Act removed the right of summary imprisonment. Hands who failed to join ship could still be proceeded against in the civil courts after issue of a warrant, but since apprentices had no wages or property, civil remedy against them was futile. Further the new act enabled lads to free themselves from the charge of desertion by giving forty-eight-hours notice of their intention not to sail, and gave discretionary powers to the courts to annul apprenticeships. With the greater freedom of the new act, few lads were prepared to stick to their indentures when they knew that labour-hungry employers were now having to pay good wages to casuals who sailed as cooks or deckhands on a voyage-to-voyage basis. The committee found that not a quarter of the North Sea fisherlads adhered to their indentures after 1880. In fact the new act meant the virtual ending of apprenticeship as the predominant form of labour at Hull and Yarmouth. A Hull witness thought there were not a hundred apprentices left in the port by 1882, whereas before the act there had been 1,200. At Yarmouth apprenticeship had been falling away for some years before 1880 owing to recruitment difficulties, but the act completed the process. At Grimsby a leading owner thought that in 1882 there were less than a thousand apprentices in the port, whereas before the act there had been

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 37, p. 218; p. 19, § 729-30, 696.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12, § 523.

quite two thousand. A fifty-percent drop certainly, but a much smaller one than at the two other major trawling ports. In fact at Grimsby local justices were interpreting the law in a different way, one which clearly favoured the owners.<sup>1</sup>

At the other ports the owners decided that without the sanction of imprisonment apprenticeship was a redundant institution. At Grimsby it was decided that if an apprentice gave forty-eight-hours notice of his intention not to join ship, this could be regarded as a breach of his indentures under an unrepealed section of the 1854 act. The lad could, they held, be proceeded against for disobedience of a lawful order. At the other ports this was taken to mean disobedience at sea. At Grimsby the courts stretched it to cover disobedience of the order to join ship. Accordingly, when imprisonment of apprentices virtually ceased elsewhere, Grimsby continued to use imprisonment to preserve its "peculiar institution". At Hull the total number of imprisonments for desertion from 1883 to 1893 was 172; at Grimsby it was 1,304. After 1893 there were no further imprisonments at Hull; at Grimsby there were a further 385 before they finally ended in 1902. Even at Grimsby apprenticeship was ceasing, however, to be the dominant form of labour. Now that port stood alone, it was virtually impossible to get back lads who fled to other ports. One large owner told the committee that he had had about forty or fifty apprentices, but since the act twenty had run away. Recruitment fell off, and the industry became increasingly dependent on weekly hands. As serving apprentices came out of their time, they were not replaced. Behind all this lay an even bigger change. After the 1880's the sailing smacks ceased to dominate deep-sea fishing. A rapid and irreversible take-over by steam trawlers created demand for different kinds of labour. Very few years after the virtual ending of apprenticeship, came, so far as the large North Sea ports were concerned, the virtual ending of the occupation of smacksman.<sup>2</sup>

Skippers and mates sailed as share fishermen. Although they had commenced their careers as apprentices, their motivation for remaining in the occupation of trawlerman was clearly distinct. Cruelty was not an issue, they were the purveyors, not the subjects of disciplinary measures. To an extent they were at less risk, for they avoided the most dangerous of all tasks, the boarding of fish. Skippers and mates had become conditioned to the extreme nature of the occupation with its unusual strains and routines. Although not outstandingly well paid

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii, § 45; p. 3, § 61; p. 78, § 3027; p. 42, § 1745-47.

<sup>2</sup> Figures from Gillet, *op. cit.*, pp. 302, 261.

in terms of the hours they worked, they normally made more on the share than they could have made as casual labourers ashore. Unable to spend for eight weeks at a time, except perhaps for an occasional visit to the coper, they received their wages in sizeable sums, with but a few days ashore in which to spend them. This pattern of life might well have been a factor in holding men to the occupation once they had become accustomed to interspersing long stretches of bleak labour with periodic bouts of indulgence. Mates had one obvious ambition: they wished to become skippers.

The committee of 1882 thought that being paid by a share of the catch, and being dependent upon the owners for their position, skippers and mates clearly knew that their interests were "in general harmony" with those of the owners. A skipper could lose his vessel if he crossed the owner. A mate might never get his own vessel if he did so. In fact so clearly did they see their interests as distinct from those of the apprentices, that a spokesman for the Hull share fishermen expressed himself to the committee as being in favour of the summary imprisonment of apprentices. No less than owners, share fishermen stood to lose if days were lost through the absenteeism of apprentices.<sup>1</sup>

Some share fishermen may have been motivated by a higher ambition. The capitalization of deep-sea fishing had been so recent that for the most part the smacks were owned by a first generation of owners, many of whom had themselves begun as working fishermen. The career of J. Plastow of Grimsby illustrates such a progression. Apprenticed from the Hackney Union in 1854 to the Hewitt firm then at Barking. He came out of his time in 1861:

"a good man's wages at that time was 14s per week in summer and 16s in winter. I saved out of that amount £20 per year, for two years, then I came to Grimsby in 1863. I saved £65 for eight months making a total of £105 in less than three years. I then took a smack to work out, and paid £100 down, and paid the remaining part £650 and interest clear off in three years. I went to sea for two years afterwards, and saved £700 in cash. I then had another smack built and stayed on shore. I then started as a fish salesman. I am now the owner of several smacks, and represent 26 sail out of this port."

It was certainly possible in the pioneer days of the industry for successful skippers utilizing mortgage facilities to purchase and pay off a smack. In general, however, opportunities of achieving ownership ambitions were always limited, and became more so as the capitaliza-

<sup>1</sup> Report, p. viii, § 18; p. 32, § 1342.

tion of the industry increased. As bigger and better smacks were commissioned by prospering owners the cost of entry had by the 1880's become prohibitively high. One owner recalled that when he had first become an owner a smack cost from £600 to £650, whereas in 1882 they ran from £1360 to £1600.<sup>1</sup>

Opportunities for mortgage purchase complicate the problem. Some large owners, notably Hewitts of Yarmouth, encouraged skippers whom they judged worthy to work out a mortgaged vessel. The importance of this possible route to ownership has been overemphasized. No less an authority than Sir Wilfred Grenfell put these words into the mouth of a trawlerman:

“It was the custom for the more pushing men to mortgage a vessel from their owners and call it their own, working it just as if it was. The owners supplied them with all they needed and charged them with it. As security they held the ship's papers, and stopped so much of the earnings as they liked each year to pay off the interest and a part of the capital. Thus they had no risk if a vessel didn't pay, for they foreclosed. The owner too, insured against the vessel's being lost. If she did well [the] owner at least did not suffer. Not one in a hundred of the men who were thus working out their ships ever got to pay for them, for if it seemed that the owner was going to lose control of one, it was easy for him to insist on some new expense, such as new decks, or a new suit of sails. The admiral, as he earned more than the rest, had more chance. But as a rule when any man did get to own his own ship, it was too old to be of any value. It was a fine thing though, to be able to say the boat was one's own; at least we used to think it so. It made you seem independent, though you really were never your own master; for you had to drag on, and drag on year after year, while only the owner made anything out of it.”<sup>2</sup>

The traditional village fisherman normally had a stake in the fishing venture in which he was engaged. He owned, or more usually part-owned, the vessel, or else he brought his own nets. Crews were to a large extent co-partnerships, and ownership of more than one vessel was rare. Pure wage labour was commonly hired only during seasonal peaks of activity. In trawling an ownership stake in the industry, though possible, was achieved only by a small minority. Of 353 smacks at Hull in 1877, 93 were owned by persons owning only one vessel. On the maximum assumption that all 93 single-boat owners were

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67; p. 1, § 10.

<sup>2</sup> Grenfell, *Harvest of the Sea*, pp. 52-54.



working skippers, and on the basis of the usual crew size of five, it can be estimated that 1,672 smacksmen out of 1,765 had no share in boat ownership. In fact the trawling industry was dominated by large fleets. Single-boat owners working out mortgages were hardly detached from the fleet owners, and even fully independent owners would need to attach themselves to the fleets in order to avail themselves of the services of the fish carrier. Yarmouth was especially noted for its fleets. Hewitts, who had moved there from Barking, had 82 smacks in their Short Blue Fleet in 1882. At that time the Leleu firm had 20 to 25, Morgan 180, the North Sea Trawling Company 72, E. A. Durrant 35, and Samuel Smith and sons 21. Henry Smethurst, the biggest private owner at Grimsby, owned 50 smacks, but at this port the capitalization of the industry was further intensified by the merging of allied industries with smack ownership. The Great Grimsby Ice Company became a large-scale smack-owner. It was never easy to realize ownership aspirations. One historian has suggested that a Grimsby apprentice had a better chance of being drowned than of ever owning a smack. Boat ownership became an impossible ambition for a working skipper to realize by the 1890's, when expensive steam trawlers replaced the sailing smacks. In the nineteenth century as now, the typical trawlerman had no capital stake in the industry. The separation of capital and labour was already clear in the days of sail. Steam needed only to supply the finishing touches.<sup>1</sup>

It remains to consider whether there were any significant attempts to ameliorate the conditions of the smacksmen. Improvement might have come through three possible agencies: action by government, by independent agencies, or through self-action by the fishermen. Government intervention of a remedial kind certainly occurred but came only at the end of the smack era. Before 1880 the Board of Trade was inclined to give the industry a clean bill. New regulations issued in 1880 brought the lads under the supervision of the superintendent of mercantile marine, and required skippers and mates to hold certificates, although all those who were already skippers or mates were given them without test. The Merchant Shipping Act of 1880, as we have seen, was intended to stop imprisonment for desertion, and, as we have also seen, it did do so at most ports, but not at Grimsby, the largest of all. It is only possible to conclude that legislative or regulatory intervention came so late that it can only be said to have affected the very end of the smack era of deep-sea fishing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Figures from March, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41, 157, 160; Report, p. 58, § 2303; Gillet, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

The only outside agency to significantly involve itself with the smacksmen also became involved only at the very end of the smack era. E. J. Mather, the founder of the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, made his first visit to the fleets in 1881. The sight of thousands of godless men adrift on the ocean filled him with excitement:

“What perils by reason of the elements! What distressing, excruciating agony from accidents, unrelieved by surgical aid! What loss of life at sea! What broken hearts on shore! What rampant unchecked riot of evil! What vast possibilities for good!”<sup>1</sup>

The first Mission smack, the *Ensign*, was fitted out in 1882, and three more were commissioned in 1883-84. By 1888 there were eight, but there were no less than nineteen North Sea fleets for them to serve.<sup>2</sup> The prime concern of the Mission was with the spiritual welfare of the fishermen, but the methods through which it chose to reach the men, and its own very real sense of the practical good which could be done, brought considerable secular benefits to the fleets.

Of these benefits the provision of medical care was without doubt the most important. Sir Wilfred Grenfell was only the best known of a line of missionary doctors whose brand of practical godliness was responsible for the relief of a good deal of physical suffering. The smacks were provided with fully equipped dispensaries and sick bays, and although it was not always possible for them to carry fully trained doctors, their skippers were given a medical instruction equal to dealing with the normal round of cases. Previously an injured crewman had either to make do, or endure the rough injury-aggravating trip to shore on the fish carrier. Now prompt treatment often meant that after a few days men were able to return to their work. If a man were sent home, then he not only suffered, but he lost his employment and his family suffered. If he were transferred to the Mission's sick bay, his place was filled for a while by one of the spare hands carried by the Mission smack, and his berth was saved for him.<sup>3</sup>

The Mission smacks tried to make good other areas of deprivation. They carried reading material to the fleets, and claimed that their provision of books sometimes extended into reading classes, discussions and lectures. Books were solicited from donors who were invited to send anything from which they had themselves derived “pleasure, amusement, or benefit”. Although the contents of a typical book parcel

<sup>1</sup> Mather, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>3</sup> Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-75. For Grenfell see his autobiography, *A Labrador Doctor*, and a recent biography, J. Lennox Kerr, *Wilfred Grenfell* (1959).

suggest the predominance of the “benefit” function, pleasure and amusement were clearly not neglected:

“2 Second hand Bibles, 5 do. hymnbooks; 12 nos. of Good Words; 1 packet of Spurgeon’s Sermons; 15 weekly copies of the Graphic; 10 weekly copies of the Illustrated London News; 2 copies of the Cornhill Magazine; 1 bundle of tracts, chiefly by Bishop Ryle; 1 Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 1 Life of General Gordon, 1 copy of Ivanhoe, 1 School History of England, 1 Homes Without Hands by Rev. J. G. Wood.”

The Mission boasted that the proportion of “good to frivolous and worthless, productions” read in the fishing fleets would have favourably compared with the statistics of “most free libraries in populous democratic neighbourhoods”.<sup>1</sup>

The Mission saw itself as being in a direct confrontation with the devil in the form of the coper. The copers were frequently alluded to as “devil ships”, and this explains the heavy emphasis on temperance in the teachings of the Mission. Even the provision of books was a conscious reaction to the copers’ purveying of literature and pictures of a very different kind. The need to counteract the appeal of the coper also explains the decision to supply cut-price tobacco. The smacksmen regarded tobacco as a necessity, and so long as there was no alternative source of cheap supply, it would have proved impossible to have removed them from the influence of the coper. Until 1887 the government was unwilling to allow the Mission duty-free supplies, and at first the smacks loaded at foreign ports. Later they were supplied at cost by Wills of Bristol.<sup>2</sup>

The religious services held by the Mission either on the Mission smack, or, in exceptional periods of calm, on the decks of several smacks lashed together, were designed to provide excitement and involvement. Known as “experience meetings”, they consisted mainly of rousing hymn singing interspersed with smacksmen’s confessions and recounting of their spiritual experiences. The entertainment was varied. One of the Mission’s doctors records that the related experiences ranged from awe-striking through pitiful to near-comic. At meetings the signing of the temperance pledge was exhorted, and religious ephemera distributed. Much of the latter was purpose-designed for the Mission. There was a “gospel compass” with texts printed at the various points, and a “spiritual chart”, on which were presented to the smacksmen’s eye the various shoals, quicksands and rocks of sin through

<sup>1</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>2</sup> Runciman, *op. cit.*, p. 278; Mather, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-22.

which channels could conduct him “from the regions of Darkness to the Realms of Light”. The Mission’s founder made no secret that all the Mission’s activities were subordinated to the central purpose of preaching the gospel:

“If he comes to the dispensary, he hears of the Great Physician of the soul; if he comes for books to read, he is taught that the best book in the world is the ‘Record which God gave of his Son’; if he comes to buy tobacco, or for the warm woollen clothing, he hears of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose love will warm his heart: whatever his motive in coming, he finds that the motive of those who send out the Mission ships is to bring him to the Saviour.”

The fact that they were purpose-related, however, hardly invalidates the effects of tangible benefits, and few religious agencies can claim to have effected so significant an improvement in the conditions of a section of the working class as can the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, without denying the reality of its material contribution, it is difficult to see that the Mission did more than palliate the conditions of the smacksmen. The effect of eight Mission ships on nineteen fleets in 1887 could hardly be viewed as comprehensive, and in any event the Mission had not been formed until the worse aspects of apprentice exploitation were over. The Mission may even have affected the inclination of the trawlermen towards self-action. It saw itself not just as saving, but as “civilizing” the smacksmen. It did not just convert, it attempted to socialize. The founder claimed that men who went to sea “wild, profligate, and godless” returned completely changed, to lighten the load of the police in the ports, and to prove to their employers that sober, godly servants were worth more than drunken godless ones. Another spokesman saw the Mission as waging especial war against “that flippant, scurrilous spirit of infidelity which, having forsaken the ranks of the cultured and the learned, has found fit home amongst revolutionary socialists and rampant secularists”. He thought the effect of the Mission was to mollify the bitter feelings which the men might otherwise have borne towards the owners, who, he admitted, had “profited enormously by the ill-recompensed exertions of their employees”.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of the Mission in this direction can hardly be seen as crucial, but rather as contributive to the lack of effective union organization among the smacksmen. Although the separation of labour

<sup>1</sup> Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-101; Ballantyne, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-68; Mather, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Mather, *op. cit.*, p. 95; Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp. 149, 165.

and capital in the trawling industry did create a context for strike action alien to the situation of the traditional village fisherman, there was little effective unionism. The industry was a new one. Its labour force was largely first-generation, up-rooted and scattered in its origins. There were accordingly no traditions of defence. The interests of the skippers and mates were separate from those of the rest of the crew, and so there was little potential leadership. I have found strikes only at Grimsby. These two strikes in 1880 and 1885, directed primarily against the smack-owning Great Grimsby Ice Company, succeeded in preventing the extension of winter fleeing, but a few years later the owners were able to resume winter fleeing without provoking any further action.<sup>1</sup>

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century the trawling industry was transformed by the advent of steam trawlers. Introduced in the 1880's at the major ports of Hull and Grimsby they had triumphed by the end of the 1890's. The smack era, lasting from the middle to the closing decades of the nineteenth century, represents the beginning of the modern history of British deep-sea fishing. A new industry created a new class of fishermen. They were recruited differently, not being hereditary fishermen. They spent much longer at sea in a new market-dictated rhythm of production. They were at greater risk of injury and death. Forced by the demands of productive efficiency to practically live at sea, they lived lives bleakly devoid of social and cultural provision. Not co-partners in fishing ventures, they were an exploited and, to an extent, an unfree labour force. The crews of the sailing trawlers experienced conditions of life and labour so different from those of the boat-owning or venture-sharing, village-dwelling, hereditary fishermen that, in contrast to the essentially peasant image of the latter, they could be termed a fishing proletariat.

<sup>1</sup> Gillet, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-68. Only at Grimsby does there seem to have been a strongly articulated opposition to winter fleeing, although there was certainly some expression of resentment at Hull. At Yarmouth fleeing all the year around seems to have been usual.