

Hull's Fishing Past.

Think of Hull and many will associate the City with fishing. That used to be correct, but not anymore and not for many years.

Hull's fishing industry was, and I emphasize WAS of great importance to the City. It grew rapidly with the growth of the railways, and freezing fish to enable this delicate cargo to be shipped throughout the nation and particularly to Billingsgate Fish Market in London and at its height, several fish trains a day ran from Hull to London in what were originally painted white, sealed fish vans. They didn't remain white for long though.

Hull's fishing industry was at its peak in the 1950s – more than 60 years ago now. Hull was a wealthy City on the back of fishing and although the pay, in terms of shares of the catch proceeds, ran from affluence for owners, skippers and boson, it was less so for fishermen and deck hands (deckies) and it was possible to settle in debt (meaning that the costs of a fishing trip were more than the proceeds of sale of the catch).

The work was hard, and dangerous, life uncertain, and fishermen made the most of the short periods in between voyages by copious spending, much in local pubs, because there was no certainty that there would be future pay days. A good catch sold at a good market resulted in lots of cash for many fishermen, who became known as “3 day millionaires”, the 3 days being the time ashore between trips to sea.

By the mid-1950s about 8,000 trawler men worked out of Hull, from about 320 trawlers and probably three times that number earned a land based living from fish and fish processing.

Many fishermen were lost at sea, fishing being perhaps the most dangerous occupation of all. More fishermen were killed as a ratio of those employed even than mining, the second most dangerous occupation and fishing at its height killed four times as many men as mining. The work involved long hours at times (20 hour shifts were not uncommon) in arctic waters and subject to arctic storms. Boats were not (by modern standards) large. About 500 tons for most sidewinder trawlers and about 800 tons for stern trawlers. Sidewinders are trawlers that haul the nets over one side of the boat, a dangerous practice in itself and “lost overboard” was one of the most frequent causes of death. To be washed overboard would result in death in minutes, not necessarily from drowning but from the shock of the freezing water, where survival was measured in two or three minutes. Many fisherman could not swim, not seeing the point since it would not be possible to swim to land from the middle of the White Sea of Russia, for example.

Black ice (frozen sea water) would cling to the upper decks, to rigging and masts and the weight became as heavy as to cause the boat to capsize. Cutting this ice off the boat was an unpleasant but vital job. On a trawler weighing 500 tons, the weight of ice carried aloft could be as much as two hundred plus tons, so ice cutting and clearing was vital to avoid capsize.

In 1968 three trawlers were lost from Hull in two months, January and February. The trawlers were called the St Romanus, Kingston Peridot and Ross Cleveland. Such was the loss of life (57) that urgent calls were made to improve safety.

An example of a sidewinder trawler remains at the back of the Transport Museum in the High Street and visits can be arranged through the next door Hull and East Riding Museum reception. The boat is called the Artic Corsair. A sidewinder trawler hauled its nets and catch over the side of the boat.

Stern trawlers, which hauled the nets via the stern of the boat, were not really any safer, as witnessed by the loss of the Hull Trawler the "Gaul". Heavy seas could wash into the boat through the stern haulage area.

The main fishing ports of Grimsby, Hull, Fleetwood and Aberdeen lost 125 fishing boats between 1946 and 1975 and many hundreds of men were lost, many from Hull. The causes of losses were collisions, fires, swamped by stormy seas, sinking (leaking boats) and vessels running aground. In the Maritime Museum a register of lost Trawler men from Hull is kept and perhaps the commonest cause of death is "lost overboard". This is because the nets were hauled on board where the boat had the lowest freeboard (the area between the deck and the sea) and many fishermen were vulnerable to being "lost overboard".

Drinking was not allowed on board fishing boats, but boats would set off to Iceland with many of the crew suffering the effects of a 3 day binge. All members of the crew were needed, and failing to turn up for a voyage was a criminal offence, but it was not unknown for a vessel to sail without a cook for example, and feeding the crew was left to those who thought they could do it.

Health and safety regulations in the 1950's were rudimentary and it was only after a campaign by trawler wives that radio operators were made compulsory. Certainly there was no requirement for doctors, a role usually provided by a skipper with a little knowledge of first aid.

Crewmen often suffered grievous injuries, such as the loss of a finger, but in order to obtain a share of the settlings, the crewman would remain on board until landing in the home port, rather than be hospitalised in Iceland or Norway.

Fishing was ended for Hull by the loss of fishing grounds imposed by Iceland's territorial waters claim. In many ways this was more about oil finds than fishing. Fishing limits followed shoreline and continental shelf "ownership" and were extended from an original 3 miles, to 12 and then to 200 to protect marine (oil) ownership, but also killed off fishing in these areas. The remaining deep sea fishing grounds were too far away and productivity was unreliable to be commercially viable and the industry rapidly collapsed.

Trawler owners did alright though, by way of compensation for laying off vessels, but the trawler men, as usual, did less well, being regarded as casual labour and not entitled to redundancy payments (this being eventually overturned by the Courts but far too late for the lost crewmen and the many men who had died after a sea career).

Nonetheless the sight of the estuary being packed with fishing vessels was impressive and unique and Hull owes a debt for the commercial gains of its long gone fishing fleet.