

HULL'S FISHING HERITAGE

Beginnings

Let us go back to 12th century Hull: It was then known as Wyke-on-Hull, and owned and looked after by the Cistercian Monks of Meaux Abbey, a settlement just south of Beverley.

In 1160 a charter was granted to the monks by Henry II allowing them to fish in the Humber Estuary and just outside in the open sea. The fish caught was mainly sold locally, as obviously, transporting fresh fish was not a viable proposition.

Over the next three centuries Hull's fishing trade carried on in a similar way. In 1598 after the discovery of Greenland, the first Whaling ships left Hull and by 1815-1825 Hull had a fleet of 60 whaling vessels, and 2000 men employed in the trade.

The history of Hull's whaling industry is well documented in our wonderful Maritime Museum, where you can see some remarkable exhibits. Amongst them are many examples of 'Scrimshaw'. Known as the 'art of the whaler' it is essentially carving created from the teeth and bones of whales and other marine mammals. Carried out during the long periods of inactivity 'scrimshandering' occupied the crew and kept them out of trouble!

Whaling – whatever we may think about it nowadays – is an important part of Hull's fishing history and it was an extremely dangerous occupation. Many whalers lost their lives and 800 ships were lost at sea between 1818 and 1869.

Following the introduction of steam powered whalers, the industry in Hull began to decline and by the mid 1850's there were very few Hull whalers left.

The demise of whaling for Hull ships finally came in 1867 when a disaster led to the deaths of 13 men when the ship Diana was caught in ice in the Davis Strait, a dangerous area between Greenland and Baffin Island. She was swept onto the Donna Nook where she broke up, a sad and rather poignant end to the whaling industry in Hull.

By the 1700's Hull's fishing industry was flourishing and the old harbour, which was in effect the River Hull, became too cramped. The government passed an act in 1774 for a brand new dock to be built. The first Hull Dock was opened in 1778 and was the largest in Britain at the time. Other docks to meet the growing needs of the industry soon followed.

Eventually in 1883 a purpose built fish dock was created; St Andrews Dock.

As most of the fishing families lived in an area very close to the dock - Hessle Road - a strong fishing community prevailed. Families supported and looked out for each other in good times and bad.

Hull's rise as a major fishing port began in the 1800's with the discovery of the Dogger Bank fishing grounds and in the late 1880's as steam replaced sail, vessel owners and skippers began to look further afield to the rich fishing grounds off Iceland and the Barents Sea.

At the beginning of the 1900's a Hull fleet of 'Boxer' trawlers fished in the North Sea. Their catches were boxed and loaded up each morning on to fast cutters and landed, still fresh, in Hull and London to be sold at the fish market.

With the development of the railways the fishing industry grew exponentially, and by the mid 1950's Hull's fishing industry was at its peak. Hull became a wealthy city as a result.

Freezer trawlers then became available, which meant the catch could be frozen on board, thereby making longer and more profitable trips viable. Once landed in Hull the catch was shipped throughout the country to various markets, particularly Billingsgate in London.

At its height approximately 8000 trawlermen and 320 trawlers worked from Hull, sailing to the rich deep water fishing grounds of the Arctic. Three times that number earned a land-based living from fish and fish processing.

Fishing was a hard and dangerous life. Health and Safety was not a major concern until much later; grievous injuries occurred all too often and the words 'lost overboard' were shockingly commonplace.

It was not until the 'Triple Trawler Disaster' of January and February 1968 when three Hull trawlers sank with the tragic loss of 57 men (there was only one survivor) that things changed. The tragedy triggered off a massive and largely successful campaign for better conditions by the fishermen's families. From then on Health and Safety started to play a much bigger part. Nowadays, of course, Health and Safety is paramount, and rightly so.

THE TRIPLE TRAWLER TRAGEDY.

St. Romanus. Kingston Peridot. Ross Cleveland

Such was the loss of life - 57 men perished, that urgent calls were made to improve safety.

The trawlermen and their families formed a close-knit community in Hull, and the first two losses were a devastating blow.

A safety campaign grew amongst the women folk of Hull's fishing community led by a formidable lady called Lillian Bilocca. Meetings were arranged between trawlermen's wives and trawler owners, and with government ministers. Some of the wives picketed the dock to ensure all departing ships carried radio operators. This attracted a great deal of national media attention and the national newspapers called it the '**The Headscarf Campaign**'.

As the wife's deputation arrived at the dock in front of TV cameras and journalists on 5th February 1968, for the meeting with the trawler owners, news broke of the third trawler *Ross Cleveland* was lost.

The following day the women travelled to London, again with massive media coverage, and met ministers to discuss a variety of reforms to the fishing industry. The same day, trawler owners were instructed to implement new safety arrangements based on the outcome of the meeting, with immediate effect.

These improvements included: tighter regulation of trawler design and construction, more and better safety equipment, legal standards for radio equipment, operators and reporting procedures and major improvements to employment, training, working practices and industrial relations.

The tragedy continued to influence subsequent UK legislation on maritime safety. The case of the one man who did survive the disaster was cited in Parliamentary debates in **1986** over improvements in the provision of lifejackets and of emergency clothing in life rafts.

The book '**The Headscarf Revolutionaries**' written by Brian W. Lavery gives a fascinating and graphic account of the story, from the beginning to the end, and is well worth a read.

In Hull's Maritime Museum where a Register of trawlermen lost from Hull is kept, perhaps the most common cause of death recorded is "Lost Overboard".

Drinking was not allowed on the ships, but often trawlers would set off for Iceland with many of the crew suffering the effects of a three day binge. All members of the crew were needed, and failing to turn up for the voyage was a criminal offence. For example, it was not unknown for the vessel to sail without a cook, 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 that campaign by the trawlermen's wives that Radio Operators were made compulsory. Certainly there was no requirement for a doctor, a role usually provided by a skipper often with very little knowledge of first aid.

The fishermen lived a hard and hazardous life and were away at sea for weeks at a time, eighteen hour shifts in freezing, stormy Arctic waters were not uncommon and being washed overboard would result in death from hypothermia within minutes.

When the trawlers returned home, the crew were given a share of the profits (settlings) from the catch. The better the catch the better the wages. The men worked hard and played hard. In the 3 days between trips they made the most of their time and money - mainly in the local hostelrys. They became known as 'Three Day Millionaires', a phrase which speaks for itself!

Fishing in Hull declined rapidly after the third and last Cod War in 1976, with the loss of deep water fishing grounds imposed by Iceland's Territorial Waters claim. The remaining deep sea fishing grounds were too distant and catches too unreliable to be commercially viable.

St Andrews Dock closed on 3rd November 1975 and the trawlers transferred to other Hull Docks. A sad day. Hull's fishing heritage will never be forgotten.

To this end, exciting moves are well under way with the Hull City Council's project - Hull: Yorkshires Maritime City.

You can read more about this, along with information on the building of the docks and how the development of the railways in Hull affected the fishing industry, in the Want to Know More Section on our website.

Let's have a look at the work to preserve Hull's Fishing Heritage:

VIOLA. The last of the British Steam Trawlers

Built in Beverley in 1906 the Viola fished out of Hull as part of a Boxing Fleet, that is to say she was part of a group of small trawlers fishing the North Sea. The catch was loaded up each morning in boxes and onto a fast cutter which took the fish to markets in Hull or London while it was still fresh.

This is her remarkable story:

At the start of World War One over 3000 fishing vessels and their crews were requisitioned into service by the Admiralty. Viola was one of them. For four years she was on the front line of the maritime conflict, sailing firstly off the Shetland Islands and later, closer to her home, along the east coast of England. She sailed through terrible dangers, and had many brave encounters with the enemy, including skirmishes with u-boats and an airship.

After the war she was sold to a Norwegian company, renamed Kapduen and sailed for several years as one of Norway's first trawlers. She was then converted into a whale catcher and renamed the DIAS, even sailing the coast of Africa. In 1927 she was sold again to an Argentinian company, Pesca, where she sailed from Grytviken in South Georgia, primarily for the taking of elephant seals.

She also assisted in expeditions; the first to South Georgia – the Kohl-Larsen Expedition of 1928-29, where the first cinematographic film of the island was taken. Other expeditions followed, including biological work carried out by the Falkland Islands Government and finally the Bird Island Expedition.

In 1960 Pesca sold out to the British company Albion Star, the whaling station of Grytviken was closed and Dias was mothballed and laid up.

Today Viola/ Dias still lies in Grytviken where she was re-floated and hauled to her present position.

In 1982, some Argentine scrap metal merchants landed with the aim of cutting up the ships. They hoisted their country's flag and triggered a war. Making Viola arguably the only vessel to have seen action in the Great War and the Falklands War.

But that is not the end of her story;

Distinguished Maritime historian Dr Robb Robinson took up Viola's story and such is his passion for returning her to Hull, that, amongst other things he has written a book about her, and along with some like-minded influential people has set up a Trust to do just that. The aim is to raise at least £3m to get her back and to set up an apprenticeship scheme giving people the skills to restore Viola as an education centre and as a lasting memorial to those who lost their lives at sea in the war.

The Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands has approved the Viola's return. The Governor of the Falkland Islands was so taken with Dr Robinson's book about Viola that he commissioned a set of stamps. One is an impressive First Day cover showing her involvement in the sinking of a UB15 off the Northumberland coast.



Once home she will be one of the jewels in the crown of Hull City's Maritime Heritage project, and occupy a berth being prepared, alongside the museum ship the Arctic Corsair. The refurbished Spurn Light ship is to be berthed in the Hull Marina near the new Murdock Foot Bridge.

THE ARCTIC CORSAIR

The Arctic Corsair is Hull's last surviving Distant Water Sidewinder Trawler, and is now a much prized and loved museum ship.

When she was built, in Beverley, in 1960, she was a state of the art fishing vessel, with all the latest technology and better working and living conditions for a crew of around twenty.

This is her chequered history:

She sailed to the traditional fishing grounds off Iceland and Norway, and was capable of bringing back in the region of 200 tons of fish. This was stored in the hold in crushed ice which was preserved by the aid of cooling pipes until she returned some three weeks later.

For many years she was one of the top money earners and in 1973 she broke the world record for the most cod and haddock caught in Russia's White Sea.

She was involved in the third Cod War with Iceland. In a confrontation with Icelandic Coastal Protection Vessel Odinn, who made three attempts to cut her trawl warps, Arctic Corsair actually rammed the ship. Both vessels were laid up and out of commission for a while.

I think it's worth telling that in 2017 as a gesture of co-operation, both vessels exchanged ships bells, and like the Arctic Corsair, the Odinn is now a floating museum exhibit in the Vikin Maritime Museum in Reykjavik Harbour.

The Cod War was lost and this resulted in fishing Hull's diminishing. However in 1985 she was brought back into service and, after 5 consecutive three week trips she again broke the world record earnings for a sidewinder.

Her life at sea finally came to an end in the late 1980's and in 1993 she was purchased by Hull City Council, and as previously mentioned, converted into a museum ship and was berthed in the River Hull, to the rear of the Street Life Museum in High Street.

The fishing heritage group STAND; St.Andrew's Dock Heritage Park Action Group - played a major part in her acquisition and refurbishment.

To this day the workforce is still very much in evidence, with many volunteers who do a wonderful job lovingly preserving and caring for this fine old lady. Many thousands of visitors from all over the world have been taken on tours round the ship by the team of incredibly knowledgeable volunteer guides, some of them ex-crew members; and indeed who better to impart their knowledge?

But her story is not yet over:

In August 2019 she was given an emotional send off as she was re-floated and carefully manoeuvred down the River Hull, along the Humber Estuary to a temporary berth in Alexandra Dock. She was moved from there in October 2021 and is now at Dunstan's Shipyard in William Wright Dock where she is being painstakingly refurbished and preserved in order to become yet again, a major tourist and educational attraction in Hull City Council's ambitious and exciting Yorkshire Maritime Project.



I am sure the end of that particular journey will be as emotional and spectacular as the beginning.

...and so to the present

THE KIRKELLA

For the first time since the 1980's, there is a trawler operating out of Hull: the KIRKELLA. She is a stern freezer trawler owned by the Hull based company UK Fisheries, built in Norway and registered here in 2018.

And what a giant she is!

At 81 metres long and weighing 4290 tonnes she is quite something. That often overused expression 'State of the Art' is no exaggeration here.

She sails with a crew of around 100 for 1500 miles, taking 5 days to reach the Deep sea fishing grounds of the Barents Sea, Greenland and Norwegian waters.

Aided by GPS and many sophisticated computerised control systems, so precise that she is capable of landing around 12 tonnes of fish per haul. Each trawl lasts between 30 minutes to 6 hours.

With automated processing, the catch is stunned, filleted, frozen, packaged and stored in the onboard freezers at -28 degrees Celsius, within 4 hours of being caught.

There is little or no waste, with the guts, skin and heads stored separately and processed into fish meal to be used in animal feeds and fertiliser.

The Kirkella is capable of bringing home 780 tonnes of fish in 60 days. This is mostly haddock and cod plus some halibut, whiting etc. With 80% of the catch being sold to the food industry, this equates to some two million fish suppers per year!

The living and working conditions onboard the Kirkella are a far cry from many trawlers of past years and are luxurious by most standards. She boasts comfortable cabins, buffet style food served in a large mess deck, a day lounge, a sauna, gym and laundry room, not to mention a well equipped hospital, which is of course statutory these days.



Sadly she now has a doubtful future since leaving the EU and with no agreement with Norway she has lost her main fishing grounds.

The story continues

The Maritime Museum

As can be seen elsewhere on the website, our magnificent Maritime Museum is at present closed. It is undergoing a massive refurbishment as part of the Hull: Yorkshire's Maritime City initiative and is set to re-open in 2023. To this end, there are several touring exhibitions planned during the closure, with events happening in and around Hull.

*Please check the Museums section of our website for further museum and art gallery updates and opening times.

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