

Fishing

Fishing Industry

Devon has always been a seafaring county, and the fishing industry has played an important part in this tradition. At the time of the Domesday Book, Brixham was mentioned as a fishing port, and John Leland, in the Itinerary of his tour through the county in 1534-43 describes Exmouth thus:

On the Est side of Exmouth Haven [is] Exmouth, a Fisschar Tounlet, a little withyn the Haven Mouth

By the early part of the nineteenth century, trawlers from Brixham were important in establishing fishing in the North Sea, and by 1850 it probably had the largest fishing fleet in England. The growth in the fishing industry continued until the First World War, (at this time more than 200 vessels were based in Brixham) but as the War finished, the industry started to decline. In the mid-1970s, as other traditional fishing grounds became subject to international restrictions, Plymouth, Brixham, the River Dart and Salcombe accounted for the majority of all fish landed in the county. Each of these ports depended on different types of fishing: Plymouth the main port for the surface living (pelagic) fish, its fortunes following the rise and fall of the mackerel catch; Brixham concentrates on the sea bed living (demersal) fish and shellfish (particularly crabs) which command much higher prices; Brixham was the fourth largest English port in 1986, (in the terms of the value of catch landed), with over 50 per cent of the catch being exported.

Elsewhere in Devon, fishing is carried out on a much smaller scale. East Devon still use the traditional clinker-built boats (constructed of overlapped wooden planks riveted together). To supplement their income local fishermen often provide pleasure trips in these boats during the summer months. It is expected that despite the restrictions and quotas the Devon fishing industry will continue to play an important role in the economy of this maritime county. Not only does the fishing industry provide employment for the fishermen, it also generates additional employment on shore, for those in the handling and processing of catches, and the support services such as marine engineering and boat repairing.

1. Fishing

- *The Housekeeper's Guide to the Fish-Market*
Bellamy, J. C.
Plymouth: Edward Nettleton, 1843 p. 95

The fishery, as existing in Devon, is thus seen to be, in great measure, contrasted with that in Cornwall. Trawling is the main feature of the Devon fishery, while seining and

driving are the characteristics of the Cornish. The Hake is, in Devon principally taken by the Trawl, but in Cornwall, it is captured by the hook and line.

The greater part of more valuable sorts of fishes, captured in the port of Plymouth, are sent, by coach, to London, Bristol, Bath and Exeter, namely Soles, Turbots, Sturgeons, Surmulletts, [sic] Salmons, &c. besides a portion of Pilchards, Herrings, and Mackarels [sic]. The Steamers convey large quantities of Hake and other fish, to Portsmouth weekly. The Trawlers themselves often convey quantities of Hake to Portsmouth, and, vessels are often sent across to Jersey, and other Channel Islands, with Mackarels, Herrings, Pilchards, &c. The French convey away a deal of our Congers, Hakes, Skates, Pilchards, Herrings, Mackarals, &c. periodically, besides maintaining with us a regular trade in Crabs, Lobsters, and Crayfish, giving on the average 6d. a piece for these; they purchase Mackarels partly for sale in their own country as food, and partly for 'salting in' as bait for the Cod in their Newfoundland fishery. Not only is the *immediate* neighbourhood supplied with fish from our fishery, but, a large supply is taken in carts to all the surrounding villages and towns, including Tavistock and Launceston, which receive a quantity two or three times per week. This dealing forms the support of a great many persons.



Image 1 SC2500, View from the Beach at Sidmouth, Edward Finden, 1842

2. Beer

- *The Sea-fishing Industry of England and Wales*
Aflalo, F. G.
London : Edward Stanford, 1904 p. 287

Seaton, Beer and Sidmouth, do more with the lobster-pots, though Beer also has fifteen or twenty small trawlers, which work on the home grounds, where they catch rays and plaice. All these villages in East Devon lack harbour accommodation, which is not found until we come to the estuary of the Exe at Exmouth. As at Selsey, the small fishing-boats of Seaton, Sidmouth, and Budleigh Salterton have to be hauled up on the sloping shingle.



Image 2 SC2430, Views of Seaton and Beer, George Rowe, 1829

3. Brixham

- *The Sea-fishing Industry of England and Wales*
Aflalo, F. G.
London : Edward Stanford, 1904 p. 287

Brixham possesses the largest *indigenous* fishing-fleet on the South coast. There one hundred and fifty, more or less, of the large class of trawlers, smart craft of 30 to 40 tons; there are about half as many of the "mumble-bees," smaller boats of 15 to 25 tons; and there are twenty or so still smaller hookers. ... The number of men and boys employed at Brixham on the boats themselves must amount to close on a thousand. The apprentice, an obsolete institution at many of the larger centres, is still a feature of the industry at both Brixham and Plymouth.



Image 3 SC0248, Brixham, Edward Finden, 1837

4. Exmouth

- *The Sea-fishing Industry of England and Wales*
Aflalo, F. G.
London : Edward Stanford, 1904 p. 288

The Exmouth herring-fishery, so profitable twenty years ago that the London and South Western Railway Company would carry away as much as forty tons of herrings to Billingsgate on many days in the months of February and March, is an industry of the past. The capricious wanderer has deserted Exmouth in the same way as its cousin, the 'sardine,' or pilchard, has more recently deserted Brittany. The Exmouth fishermen, never a very prosperous class, could not afford to sink capital in their nets while waiting for the herring to return, so they sold their gear; and the shoals might visit that estuary to-day with impunity, since there would not be enough nets to catch them.



Image 4 SC1105, The Beach and Imperial Hotel Exmouth Devon, Rock & Co, 1871

5. Plymouth

- The Sea-fishing Industry of England and Wales
Aflalo, F. G.
London : Edward Stanford, 1904 p. 288

The Plymouth trawlers are, like those belonging to Brixham, from forty to fifty tons, and the greater number are built in the neighbourhood, though a few are bought from Brixham or Galmpton. The drift-boats, on the other hand, are mostly built in the yards of Penzance or St Ives.

The trawlers are cutter or dandy-rigged, and their crew includes the skipper, three men and a boy. There are besides, forty or fifty dandy-rigged boats of smaller size engaged in hooking. These also however, when the pilchard shoals come close enough to the land, lay aside their long-lines and use drift-nets for the surface fish.



Image 5 SC1955, Hamoaze Plymouth, J C Armytage, 1836

6. The Fishing Industry in North Devon

- *The Sea-fishing Industry of England and Wales*
Aflalo, F. G.
London : Edward Stanford, 1904 p. 288

North Devon , however beautiful to the tourists, is practically negligible in respect of its fisheries. The paltry hooking and drift-net fishing of Clovelly, Ilfracombe, or Lynmouth are an insignificant source of revenue when compared with the entertainment of the summer visitor.



Image 6 SC0385, Clovelly, Paul Gauci, 1837

7. The Fishing Industry in South Devon

- *The Sea-fishing Industry of England and Wales*
Aflalo, F. G.
London : Edward Stanford, 1904 p. 288

There are a few fishermen at Exmouth, Dawlish and Teignmouth, who carry on a little hooking for whiting and other ground-fish in the autumn and winter months, and a few lobster-pots are also set in the neighbourhood, while mackerel-seines work in August and September in the bays. The chief inshore fishery at Babbacombe is the setting of fixed nets for peal, the local name for Sea-trout.

Both Torquay and Paignton have a few small fishing boats, but their proximity to so an important a trawling station as Brixham robs their fishing of what interest it might have with a less unfavourable contrast.



Image 7 SC0310, Budleigh Salterton, W Finden, 1837

8. Fish Market

- *History and Gazetteer, and Directory of Devonshire*
White, William.
Sheffield : Robert Leader, 1850 p. 425

The Quay is a most interesting sight in the evening after a large catch, when heaps of fish, comprising turbot, soles, whiting, plaice, mullet, mackerel, gurnet, flounders, herrings, &c., are piled up and a sort of Dutch auction takes place; after which, all the prime lots are sent to Exeter, Bath, Bristol, London, and other markets.



Image 8 SC2441, Mouth of the Teign from Shaldon Beach, Thomas Hewitt Williams, 1828

9. Trawlers

- *The Housekeeper's Guide to the Fish-Market*
Bellamy, J. C.
Plymouth : Edward Nettleton, 1843 pp. 91-93

The Trawl boats of the Port, [Plymouth] 62 in number are, for the most part, decked sloops of 40 or 50 tons register, but 5 of them are Yawls not exceeding 18 or 20 tons burden. The trawl beam of the large vessels is about 40 feet long, and that of the Yawls is about 30 feet. Trawl owners now incline to think that a trawl sloop of about 35 tons, while it costs less, will effect as great a profit as a larger sized one; in addition also to this reduction of size, it is becoming usual to build vessels of less bulk and swifter passage, which thereby are capacitated for 'piloting' at the same time, the two lines of business being frequently combined. Trawl proprietors are usually tradesmen, or pilots who have been able to lay by a few hundred pounds from their earnings. Trawlers are managed by three men and a boy. A sloop of the largest size will cost about £500, including the net with fittings, which itself costs 40 or £50. The owners of Trawlers are licensed at the Custom house, and their vessels are entitled to all the protection given to ships of the greatest magnitude. The Yawls, before properly established as Trawlers, from the want of capital, employ themselves as Hookers, or combine both occupations. A trawl boat is not *insurable* property, in the common way, except at a very heavy rate; the Trawlers' Club, however, established at Brixham, undertakes to insure the boats to the extent of £250. The supply of fish brought to Plymouth market is mainly the produce of trawling, but, it is deeply to be regretted that this species of fishing should be conducted by men of such reckless proceeding. Vast quantities of *fish in their worst conditions*, great numbers, especially Hakes, Congers, and Flat-fish, *laden with spawn*, and still larger quantity of *young fish*, particularly the Gurnards, Pouting, Haddock, Breems, &c. are continually abstracted from their element to do only temporary [sic] negative good to the community, not to speak of the great proportion *consigned to the manure heap*, while the stock itself is thus materially injured. The common produce of the trawl in winter, consists of Gurnards, Mary-soles, Plaice, Thickbacks, Soles, Whiffs, Brills, Hakes, Rays of several kinds, Poutings, Whitings, Scads, Dorees, &c.; all taken in 30 or 35 fathoms.

It would be a very important improvement in economy, could measures be taken to compel the Trawlers to fish in smaller companies at a time, and in turn, and thus to give a more regular, and less redundant supply to the fish-market.



Image 9(a) SC0368, Clovelly on the Coast of North Devon, William Daniel, 1814

Rough Seas



Image 9(b) SC2498, Sidmouth, Thomas Lupton, 1830

10. Seiners

- *The Housekeeper's Guide to the Fish-Market*
Bellamy, J. C.
Plymouth : Edward Nettleton, 1843 p. 93

Our seiners are not numerous, but at Cawsand, there are 7 Pilchard seines conveyed in boats of 15 or 18 tons, and 5 Mackarel [sic] seines (with smaller boats) used in May and June. There are seines also at Saltash. The Drivers also, very commonly carry a small sein for the same fish, when met with large companies. At Challaboro' (not included in the Port of Plymouth), there are seines for Pilchards and for Mackarel. A Pilchard sein, such as there used, costs from £30 to £40.

- *The Beauties of Sidmouth Displayed*
Butcher Rev. Edmund
Sidmouth: John Wallis, 1820. Third Edition. pp. 11-13.

The boat having carried out the net to a certain distance, greater or less as circumstances may require, the seine is shot from the boat, which, as it moves on, forms a circle, being supported by a vast number of corks affixed, at equal distances, to the outside ropes of the net. From each end of the seine, when the semi-circle is completed, are cords extending to the beach, and which are held by persons stationed to *haul* or pull in the seine, when completely cast into the sea: these individuals form two rows, which gradually close as the net approaches the shore.



Image 10(a) SC0220, On the Teign below Bishopsteignton Seiners Regaling, Thomas Hewitt Williams, 1829



Image 10(b) SC0572, Dawlish, George Rowe, 1840

11. Drivers

- *The Housekeeper's Guide to the Fish-Market*
Bellamy, J. C.
Plymouth: Edward Nettleton, 1843 p. 94

Although those who here practice driving excuse themselves by saying that our bays are, unlike those of Cornwall, too contracted for their purposes, it rather appears that it is, with us a timid and experimental proceeding. A string of nets does not exceed in number, three or four, or at most, seven or eight, and these small. The cost of a boat and nets is from £30 to about £84. The crew of a driving boat is either four or five, and, these parties club together, and share the proceeds; they fish for Pilchards, Herrings and Mackarels [sic]. There are at Cawsand about 40 drift boats, at Plymouth, about 6, at Turnchapel, 3.



Image 11 SC1607, Lymington From Near the Pier, William Gauci, 1837

Sources

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