

Fishing and other Industries in Victorian North Devon

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Apart from Cornwall, Devon has the greatest proportion of coastline to area of any English county and the sea has played a major role in its history. For those living within reach of the coast, ship owning, shipbuilding, mercantile trade and fishing were features of everyday life. Traditionally, the ports and fishing villages of South Devon enjoyed more prosperity than those on the less hospitable north coast. The exception was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when ports such as Barnstaple and Bideford had a significant role in the, then flourishing, Newfoundland cod trade. With the decline of the cod fishing, the industry in North Devon was increasingly at the mercy of the vagaries of the herring shoals. The early 1800s saw several years when the fish failed to appear at all.



Reuben Braund (branch 2) on the Ebenezer

Although improved transport links heralded a widening market for their produce, as the nineteenth century progressed, the role of the fisherman in the economy of North Devon saw a steady decline. What remained was, in the main, small scale and local; with family-owned boats drift netting, trawling or potting in an effort to catch herring, pilchards and shell fish. In addition, there were the subsistence, often part-time, fishermen who caught fish to feed their families and combined fishing with another occupation. By 1904, Aflalo

was to write, 'North Devon, however beautiful to the tourist, 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 visitors.'¹

'By the nineteenth century the growth of British trade, both coastal and overseas, meant an increasing number of ships off the coasts of Devon.'² Much of this activity consisted of ships bound for Bristol, who had to cope with the notorious weather conditions off the North Devon coast; loss of life and perhaps more significantly, cargo, was not infrequent.³ The North Devon ports of Bideford and Barnstaple were engaged largely in more local trade, notably in the transport of coal and culm⁴ from South Wales. The ports and smaller quays at places such as Ilfracombe and Hartland exported agricultural produce from the rural hinterland.

Shipbuilding in North Devon weathered the decline, following the drop in demand after the Napoleonic Wars. Post Napoleonic revival centred on Bideford, rather than Barnstaple. Largely due to the efforts of Burnard, Chanter and Yeo families, who were key players in ship-owning and ship-building in Bideford and Appledore, this aspect of the marine economy continued to prosper into the mid nineteenth century. In addition, it was the Canadian business interests and connections of these families that were to influence the migration patterns of many North Devonians. According to Greenhill and Nix, rural ship-owning and seafaring survived longer in North Devon than most other places.⁵ Although this provided a convenient means of transport, this business might be expected to have an impact on migration; the sustained trade providing less incentive to move away. There were however other aspects of the economy to be taken into consideration.

From Tudor times, natural resources and an ability to utilise the population rise to their advantage, had meant prosperity for Devon. By the late eighteenth century, the shores of Bideford Bay and the Torridge estuary were peppered with lime kilns, used principally for whitewash and manure. Reverend Thomas Moore felt that this had resulted in 'a rich increase of agricultural produce, and [was] consequently of general benefit'⁶. There were thriving potteries in Bideford and Barnstaple, which together with tin mining and the quarrying of building stone, supported the booming woollen cloth industry to make Devon one of England's most prosperous counties. Devon's economy was however, like that of

most counties, subject to the impact of industrialisation. In the case of Devon, it was a signal for economic decline.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the only Devon towns able to prosper were those who could benefit from the newly emerging tourist trade. The decay of the inland towns was, according to Hoskins⁷, mainly due to death of wool trade that had previously supported them. 'The Napoleonic Wars were the death-blow to the dwindling Devonshire woollen industry, though an artificial monopoly, exercised through the East India Company, kept the Chinese market open until the Company's monopoly of the trade ended in 1833.'⁸ Towns, such as Tavistock, suffered from the collapse of west country mining. The exhaustion of copper and tin lodes that could be mined economically and the upsurge of foreign competition meant that many west country mines closed and miners sought work elsewhere. Although the railway boom did see some revitalisation, especially whilst the railways were being constructed, the improvements in transport links that resulted meant that smaller Devon towns were neglected in favour of larger centres.



Bertie (left) and Albert Braund (branch 2) making Lobster Pots

1. Aflalo, Frederick G., *The sea fishing industry of England and Wales: a popular account of the sea fisheries and fishing ports of these countries* London: Stanford, (1904) p. 288.
2. Allington, Peter; Greenhill, Basil and Kennerley, Alston, 'Shiphandling and Hazards on the Devon Coast' in Duffy, Michael; Fisher, Stephen; Greenhill, Basil; Starkey, David J. and Youings, Joyce (eds.) *The New Maritime History of Devon Volume II: From the late eighteenth century to the present day* Conway Maritime Press, London (1994) p. 22.
3. Allington, Peter; Greenhill, Basil and Kennerley, Alston, 'Shiphandling and Hazards on the Devon Coast' in Duffy, Michael; Fisher, Stephen; Greenhill, Basil; Starkey, David J. and Youings, Joyce (eds.) *The New Maritime History of Devon Volume II: From the late eighteenth century to the present day* Conway Maritime Press, London (1994) p. 17.
4. Culm was a vital ingredient for the burning of limestone in the kilns which dotted the North Devon coast and estuary of the River Torridge.
5. Greenhill, Basil, and Nix, Michael, North Devon Shipping, Trade and ports, 1786-1939 in Duffy, Michael; Fisher, Stephen; Greenhill, Basil; Starkey, David J. and Youings, Joyce (eds.) *The New Maritime History of Devon Volume II: From the late eighteenth century to the present day* Conway Maritime Press, London (1994) p. 57.
6. Moore, Rev. Thomas, *The History of Devonshire* Robert Jennings, London (1829) pp. 538-9.
7. Hoskins W.G. Devon Devon Books, Tiverton commemorative edition (1992) p. 120.
8. Hoskins W.G. Devon Devon Books, Tiverton commemorative edition (1992) p. 66.