

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE RYE FISHING INDUSTRY

By A. J. F. DULLEY

INTRODUCTION

Historians of the Cinque Ports have in general been so fascinated by the complexities of their constitution, with its colourful survivals of 'Honours at Court' and the time-honoured ceremonial of the Court of Shepway, or else by their swashbuckling record as furnishers of the earliest Royal Navy, that the underlying economic factors that provided the prosperity on which both were based has not received much more than passing mention. More than anything else, that basis was the fishing industry. To further it the confederacy came into being, and its naval operations and peacetime commerce would have been impossible if it did not 'bringe up yongth to plye the taking of fish,' to quote an Elizabethan Portsman.¹

So far as Rye is concerned, the materials to write the early history of this industry exist sporadically in the Public Records Office, and more copiously for the years of the town's greatest prosperity, from about 1450 to 1620, in the papers of the Corporation, now preserved in the East Sussex Record Office. During this period the Corporation drew much of its income directly or indirectly from the fishery and was not unnaturally concerned over its success. Inevitably much remains obscure in the records that was clear to their compilers, though comparison with contemporary practice in neighbouring ports, particularly Brighton,² is often illuminating.

THE EARLIER MIDDLE AGES

Whatever the truth behind the legend that St. Wilfrid on his arrival among the South Saxons found them starving because they did not know how to fish, by the 11th century his lesson had been well learnt, at any rate in East Sussex. Domesday Book records herring rents paid by tenants in four vills in or near the Ouse estuary, and a contemporary deed conveys a similar rent at Hastings. The latter was a founder member of the Cinque Ports confederacy, which had gained, probably from Edward the Confessor, valuable privileges in return for providing a quota of ships for the royal service. Among these privileges was the right to land, dry nets and sell fish at Yarmouth. In time the five original ports shared their rights and burdens with neighbouring communities, so that by the 13th century nine Sussex towns and villages were within its

¹ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *13th Report, Appendix, Part 4* (1892) (subsequently referred to as 'H.M.C.'), p. 18.

² See Charles Webb and A. E. Wilson, *Elizabethan Brighton; The Ancient Customs* (1952), *passim* (subsequently referred to as 'Elizabethan Brighton').

membership: Hastings, Winchelsea, Rye, Pevensey, Bulverhythe, Iham, Northeye, Hydneye and Broomhill; while men from Shoreham and Preston were visiting Yarmouth Fair, even if they did not share the Portsmen's privileges there.¹

It is little surprise therefore that the Norman abbey of Fécamp should have encouraged maritime activities on the estate of Rameslie which they received from Canute. Rye was an ideal site for such development. Situated on an island at the confluence of the rivers Brede and Tillingham, it stood on the landward side of the tidal lagoon of the Camber. Of the other Cinque Ports members, Winchelsea originally grew up at the mouth of this landlocked harbour, and Broomhill and Iham on creeks that branched from it to east and west respectively.

Quite when the settlement at Rye came into existence and the extent to which it was a deliberate foundation are obscure questions, but by c.1140-89 the Abbey valued the fish tolls that it received from the township sufficiently highly to retain them in hand while farming its other dues to the townsfolk.² These dues were assessed on a basis of shares of the catch, which was the regular system of payment of owners and crews along this coast until quite recently. At the end of the voyage or fishing season the proceeds were divided, so many shares to each man, so many to the owners of boat and gear, and so many for incidental dues and expenses. The number of the Abbot's shares varied according to the type and size of boat, being on average about one for every ten members of the crew. Two classes of vessel are distinguished: 'ships' (*naves*) of up to 26 oars, and 'heccheres' of up to twelve. From the former, which were no doubt used for the Yarmouth voyage, were probably recruited the twenty-oared galleys that the Cinque Ports were obliged to provide in time of war. How the 'heccheres' were distinguished from them we are not told: not by size alone, since there were 'ships' of ten oars or less. Possibly they were employed in inshore fishing (the name has been connected with 'heaks,' the nets used by Brighton fishermen in the local herring fishery in 1580);³ possibly, since they are attributed with odd numbers of oars as well as even, unlike the 'ships,' they were in fact purely sailing vessels. At Sandwich in the early 14th century, when galleys were obsolete, the compiler of the *custumal* noted that the Bailiff to Yarmouth was entitled to one penny per oar from every Sandwich vessel going

¹ *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1253-4, p. 137; *Sussex Custumals*, ed. by W. D. Peckham (*Sussex Record Soc.*, vol. 31), p. 84. See also K. M. E. Murray, *Constitutional History of the Cinque Ports* (1935), pp. 9-27.

² J. H. Round, 'Some Early Sussex Charters,' in *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, vol. 42 (1899), pp. 73-86.

³ *Elizabethan Brighton*, pp. 16, 19.

there, explaining this as 'as many pence as sailors,' and it may be that the same method of reckoning was current at Rye.¹

Herring remained the dominant source of income for local fishermen throughout the 13th century, but other fish were becoming important. By the middle of the century Winchelsea was providing the royal household with plaice, whiting, soles, conger, dories, haddock and cod, as well as herring.² For flat fish it seems to have been the sole source of supply, though other fish were being obtained from various ports on the east and south coasts. The Rye men were also exploiting new methods and grounds, and by the 1280's they were paying their overlord (now the Crown) shares not only for herring but also for plaice, sprats and mackerel; the Yarmouth voyage produced about a third of the total share revenue in 1272-3, the only year to mention it specifically.³ Payments from twelve fishermen (i.e. masters of fishing boats) are listed under five headings. Three of these are for 'town shares' (*scar' ville*), paid at various dates and amounting to 64s. 10½d. Seven paid 39s. 0¼d. for Yarmouth shares, and the remainder, 4s. 3¼d., was paid by three men for 'shares at the feast of St. Peter's Chains' (August 1), which can probably be equated with what was known in contemporary Winchelsea as 'Saltfare,' though its exact nature is obscure. It was clearly a deep-sea voyage, for it and the Yarmouth voyage were paid for by lump sums from individual masters, whereas town shares were entered up as weekly totals. It may have been the ancestor to what was known in Elizabethan Brighton as 'Shotnett Fare,' viz. the Channel mackerel fishery that occupied them from April to June.⁴ This fishery was being exploited by Brighton men or their neighbours at least by the middle of the 14th century, though it is noteworthy that a century earlier the royal household bought mackerel at Southampton and Portsmouth, but not apparently at ports further east. Alternatively, Saltfare may have been the Brighton 'Scarborow Fare,' the annual voyage to Scarborough for herring and cod which followed the mackerel season in the fishing year.⁵ Scarborough was well established as a fishing port at least as early as 1252, when it received a grant of quayage on fishing boats and ships as well as merchantmen.⁶ Herring, cod and haddock were bought there for the King's Christmas in the previous year,⁷ and it is more than likely that the haddock

¹ W. Boys, *Collections for a History of Sandwich* (1792), p. 530.

² *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1234-7, p. 402; 1247-51, pp. 54, 430; 1251-3, p. 68; 1256-9, p. 153.

³ P.R.O., Min's Accts., SC6/1028/8.

⁴ *Elizabethan Brighton*, p. 15.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 35 Hen. III, p. 147.

⁷ *Cal. Liberate Rolls*, vol. 4, p. 10.

ordered from Winchelsea in 1257 came from there also; they are unlikely to have come from home waters.

Despite this diversification, herring was still the main catch. In five years between 1281 and 1288 when the Rye accounts give details, herring shares were always the largest single item and amounted in all to 55 *per cent.* of the total paid, as against 29 *per cent.* for plaice, ten for mackerel and six for sprats.¹ Mackerel and plaice occupied the summer, alone appearing in the half-year's accounts from Lady Day to Michaelmas 1284, and this is the first year in which mackerel are mentioned, though thereafter they appear regularly. Confirmation of the importance of the winter herring fishery as against the summer fisheries is to be found in the Winchelsea town shares, which show that, apart from a week or two of holiday after Christmas, there was intense activity during the winter months culminating in Lent when fish was in great demand and followed by a quiescence that can only partly be accounted for by the fact that some boats were away on Saltfare or preparing to go to Yarmouth for the October Herring Fair.

At this period Rye was overshadowed by Winchelsea as a fishing port. Between 1267 and 1275, Winchelsea sent on average fifteen ships to Yarmouth and five on Saltfare, roughly twice the Rye fleet in 1272-3, the only year for which comparable figures survive.² The sea was constantly eroding the old town of Winchelsea at the mouth of the Camber and finally consumed it in the great storm of 1288, when the Rother abandoned its old channel through Romney Marsh and cut a new outlet at Rye. In Elizabethan maps the traditional site of Old Winchelsea is marked in what was then open sea. Meanwhile, the inhabitants had transferred themselves to Edward I's new town adjoining the old fishing village of Iham, and for at least a generation after the move the fishermen enjoyed something like their old prosperity. The Crown's revenue from shares, which had averaged about £25 between 1267 and 1275, averaged £17 in the six years ending in 1305.³ Rye, though not ravaged by the sea to the same extent, seems to have shared in this decline, for the royal shares, which had amounted to £5 8s. 2d. in 1272-3, were worth on average just over £2 in the 1280's and about the same in the four years ending in 1304.⁴ However, in time the storm served Rye well. The additional water brought down by the Rother kept the harbour from silting, while New Winchelsea soon found itself, like so many ports on this coast, deserted by the sea and inaccessible to all but the smallest craft. By 1342, the next year for which there are accounts, it was reduced

¹ P.R.O., Min's Accts., SC6/1028/10.

² *ibid.*, SC6/1031/19-24.

³ *ibid.*, SC6/1031/26.

⁴ *ibid.*, SC6/1028/10, 14.

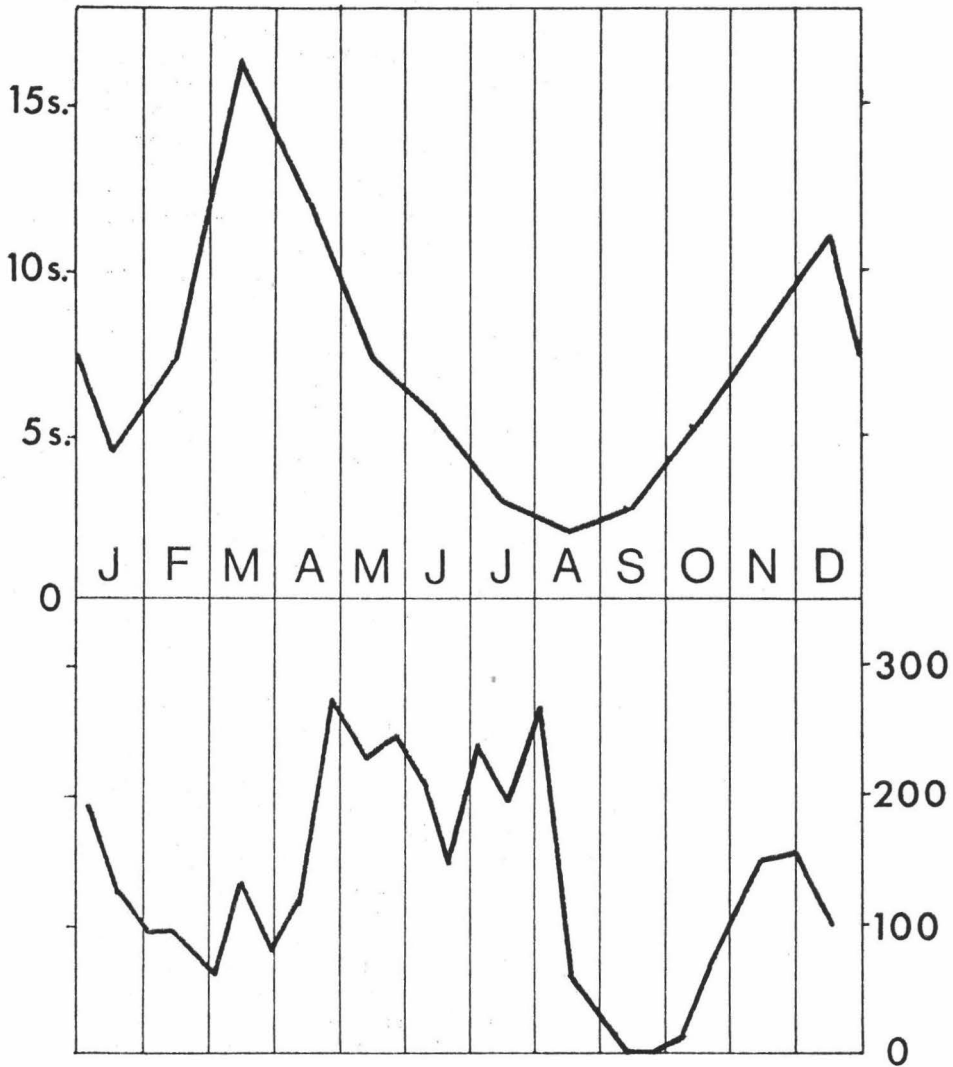


Fig. 1 Above: Month-by-month averages of weekly payments for Town Shares at Winchelsea, 1267-75.
 Below: Fortnightly totals of dossiers for which rippers paid Maltod at Rye, 1581.

to the state of Rye a generation or two earlier, while Rye had expanded rapidly.¹ The following year it had as many as 56 fishermen paying shares, and though this total was not maintained, the number seems not to have dropped below twenty over the next fifteen years, while at Winchelsea it fluctuated between fourteen and five, the trend being generally downward. Revenue showed a corresponding change, for whereas at Winchelsea shares were worth on average less than £2 to the Exchequer, at Rye they came to £5 13s. 8d. This was about the same as in 1272-3, but the average individual payment had declined. For the three years in the 13th century for which figures are given, the average Rye fisherman paid between seven and nine shillings per year. In six years between 1342 and 1357 he paid from 2s. 5d. to 4s. 10d., a decline of 50 per cent. or more at a time when he should have been benefiting from rising prices, which, for herring at least, had probably more than doubled over a corresponding period and had resulted in 1357 in an official inquiry into the state of the Yarmouth fishery.² Warfare with the French was probably a major cause of both these trends. Both Rye and Winchelsea, in common with most Channel ports, suffered severely at their hands, and though the damage done, at Rye at least, may have been repaired fairly quickly, the longer fishing voyages can only have been undertaken at considerable risk and were liable to interruption by the demands of naval service. A similar period of warfare in the 17th century, when the town was past its heyday, spelt the ruin of its fishery. This time Rye survived; it was Winchelsea that perished.

FISHING METHODS

Between 1364 and 1448 there is a period of nearly a century from which only scanty and passing references to the fishery survive, but in the latter year begins the long series of municipal accounts which, with a few gaps, of which the longest is from 1464 to 1479, continues until the early years of the 17th century. From them, in combination with other records of local and central government, it is possible to form a fairly detailed picture of the Rye fishery in what seems to have been its most flourishing period.

Broadly speaking, there were three main sources of income which the town derived from the fishery: the Mayor, Jurats and Commonalty (the civil administration) levied money dues ('maltod') on fishing boats at work, usually at a weekly rate of 2½d. per week, and also on fish leaving the town by land or sea; while the Vicar

¹ Rye: *ibid.*, SC6/1028/11-13 (1342-4); SC6/1032/6-10 (1350-57); Winchelsea: SC6/1032/2-5 (1342-6); SC6/1032/6-9 (1350-56).

² *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1354-60, p. 423. See also *Cal. Liberate Rolls*, vol. 5, p. 168 (11½ marks paid for 3 lasts of herring delivered to Westminster in 1265); *Cal. Inqu. Misc.*, vol. 3, No. 659 (4 lasts of herring lost on the high seas in 1357 valued at 40 marks).

and Churchwardens enjoyed the proceeds of 'St. Mary's share,' usually paid in money but sometimes in kind and in the case of the trammel season commuted for a weekly payment similar to the maltod.¹ Various accountants used differing systems in making up their books and some were plainly less efficient than others in securing payment, so that it is difficult to make statistical comparisons over the whole period, but the variety has preserved much information that a more systematic method of book-keeping would have suppressed. The worst effect of this lack of system is that, since neither town nor church levied dues on the whole range of fishing methods and seasons, some may be under-represented or omitted altogether. For example, sprats are mentioned only once in the accounts, in 1455-6; in the Elizabethan period, when they were being exported, there is no record of their being caught.

For a detailed account of fishing methods on the South Coast at this period it is necessary to move down-Channel to Brighton, where as a result of a dispute in 1580 local practice and the complicated customary rules that governed it were put down in writing.² Of the eight seasons or 'fares' into which the fishing year was divided at Brighton, five can be paralleled at Rye: Yarmouth Fare; Scarborough Fare; Shotnet Fare; Flew Fare (for local herring); and Harbour Fare (for conger). In addition Rye had the sprat fishery already mentioned, the very important trammel fishery for flat fish (caught at Brighton, but by other methods), at least an occasional voyage to Ireland,³ and finally a fishery at Saltcote, in Playden, outside the town, whose fishermen used the Rye fish-market to sell their catch.

This last had its most flourishing period during the 1450's, when between four and nine fishermen paid poundage each quarter on the fish that they sold, not far short of the number from the town itself paying maltod. Thereafter there was a steady decline until their final disappearance from the records after 1493. The entries for the most part give no details of how the fish were caught. Possibly some at least were using stake-nets in the tidal channel north of the town, in which case silting would account for their gradual extinction. Of the five who paid at Christmas 1460, four paid sums between 1s. 2d. and 1s. 3½d. for fishing with hooks, and the fifth 3s. 5d. for a beam (?—Latin 'trabienca') with nets at the Camber.

¹ Maltod payments are listed in the Chamberlains' Accounts (Rye MSS. 60/2-10; 62/1-9). Churchwardens' accounts are contained in Rye MSS. 147/1, 4, 5, 12. See *Records of Rye Corporation*, ed. by R. F. Dell (1962), (subsequently referred to as "*Records of Rye Corporation*"), pp. 63, 275.

² Printed in *Elizabethan Brighton*.

³ *Rye Shipping Records*, ed. by R. F. Dell (Sussex Record Soc., vol. 64) (subsequently referred to as *Rye Shipping Records*), p. xlv.

The other fisheries probably all endured through most of the period of the accounts. Of the two in distant waters, the Yarmouth voyage was the older and more important. It took place in the autumn, the boats leaving Rye in late September and returning in November. The boats used at Brighton were of between 15 and 40 tons burden, most being probably between 24 and 30 tons. A vessel of this size carried about a dozen men and a boy or two, who managed between them between 2,400 and 3,100 yards of drift nets ('flews' and 'norward nets': the precise difference is obscure, though flews were longer, at least 28 yards and normally 48-60 yards at Brighton (perhaps less elsewhere), while norward nets were between 20 and 30 yards long and sometimes deeper—4 or 5 ranns (c.8-10 yards) as against 4 ranns only for flews). The herrings caught were normally sold at the Herring Fair at Yarmouth, to which the Cinque Ports regularly sent two Bailiffs every year to maintain the Portsmen's privileges, the three western Ports of Hastings, Winchelsea and Rye taking turns to nominate one of them. Their surviving records show that they conducted vigorous diplomatic warfare with their opposite numbers of Yarmouth on a liberal expense account, but tell us little of the conduct of the fishery itself.

The other regular deep-sea voyage, Scarborough Fare, occupied many of the same boats in the early summer (June to September, according to the Brighton customal, but at Rye maltod payments for it were regularly made at Bartholomew-tide, August 24). Early references to the Scarborough fishery mention principally herring, but by the late 16th century it had become primarily a line fishery for cod and ling.¹ A few norward nets were carried, mainly no doubt to catch bait. During their stay the vessels remained most of the time on the fishing grounds, returning to their base at Scarborough only once or twice to unload their catch for salting and drying, unlike the Yarmouth and other voyages, when they seem never to have been at sea fishing for more than a day or two together. On these short trips the crew was expected to provide its own food and drink, and no allowance was made in the system of shares for victualling by the owner or master. But, at Brighton at least, victualling was allowed for on the Scarborough voyage; the owners or master might deduct its value in fish before the shares were divided at the end of the voyage. It is possible, however, that this was simply a concession to modernity, for Brighton men had not gone to Scarborough before c.1540, whereas the other Fares there dated from the time immemorial. The Cinque Ports had been sending ships to Scarborough well before this, possibly, as we have seen,

¹ P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz., vol. 38, Nos. 47-8 (1565)

as far back as the 13th century.¹ In 1528 they contributed 110 out of 222 vessels going to the 'North Seas,' of which Rye and Winchelsea sent 50.² They sent none, however, to the newer and more distant Scottish and Iceland fisheries, which were the monopoly of East Coast ports. This apparent lack of enterprise may partly be accounted for by the distances involved and the difficulty of adapting the traditional organisation to ventures that required more capital and management, but in any case the temptation to seek new grounds cannot have been strong when the local inshore fisheries were flourishing.

The oldest of these was probably the winter herring season, which presumably was being followed before the Yarmouth voyage was instituted. By the 15th and 16th centuries however it was not as important as it had been. At Brighton the corresponding 'Flew Fare' took up the months of November and December, the smaller boats beginning to fish while Yarmouth Fare was still in progress, though at Rye some fishermen took part in both. The boats employed were between eight and twenty tons at Brighton, with an average complement of nine and about 2,000 yards of net (only three ranns deep, compared with four or five at Yarmouth). The lower limit of size was somewhat larger at Rye, but the normal complement was the same.

The sprat season was probably more or less coextensive: the four recorded shipments of sprats out of the port were in November, December and January. There is no indication of how they were caught, and the Brighton customal is silent about them.

Partly overlapping the herring and sprat seasons were the activities of the "hookmen," who fished with long lines in probably much the same fashion as at Scarborough. The season lasted from Allhallows, November 1, until Easter. A separate line fishery, mainly for conger, was followed in summer. The hooks, known as 'herbews' or 'harbour hooks,' which gave their name to the season, were apparently larger than those used by the hookmen or participants in the Scarborough voyage, since these latter are sometimes distinguished as using 'small hooks,' but the earlier Rye records do not distinguish between them. Harbour Fare, but not the winter season, is described in the Brighton customal. The boats were small (about eight tons) but carried a crew of twelve, each man with four 50-fathom lines.

The other main Brighton fishery was Shotnet Fare, which consisted in drifting for mackerel in April and June. The boats used ranged between six and 26 tons, and those of middling size carried a crew of ten and some 80 nets, which might stretch 2½ miles in

¹ Brighton's neighbour Shoreham may have also been involved at an early date, being licensed to send boats to the fishery of "Doggedraggh" (the Dogger Bank?) in 1227 (*Rot. Lit. Claus.*, vol. 2, p.172).

² *C.S.P., Hen. VIII*, vol. 4, pt. 2, No. 5101.

length although, being only two ranns deep, they were much shallower than the ordinary herring nets. Mackerel were being caught at Rye in the 13th century and were one of the staples of the industry in all the Sussex and South Kent ports in the 18th and 19th centuries but, if the entries in the Rye records for the 15th and 16th centuries are at all representative, there was only sporadic fishing for them at this period. There is one entry for 1463-4, and small sums were paid by way of shares in 1514 and 1515. From 1554 to 1579 shotters were regularly at work, but there is no mention of them between the latter date and the end of the series of accounts. If local men were slow to exploit this fishery, there are indications that at least in the 1490's others were catching mackerel and selling it in the Rye fishmarket. In 1496-7 men of Hastings and Folkestone paid poundage on their mackerel, and similar payments of poundage for unspecified fish by 'Westmen,' one from Dittisham, in Devon, were made in this and the two previous years. At Lydd in 1462 the 'Westernmen' who encamped at Dungeness and dried their fish on the beach were made 'to be taxed . . . like as they use in Winchelsea and Rye,' though other references in the Lydd records show that they were catching whiting, cod, conger and 'langfish,' but mackerel are not mentioned.¹ Perhaps they were hookmen and harbourmen rather than shotters.

If the local men neglected the mackerel fishery, it was mainly because during the summer months most of them were busy catching plaice and other flat fish by means of trammel nets, which were not used along the coast to the west and seem in fact to have been a speciality of the fishermen of Rye and Hythe. The trammel was a triple wall of net suspended so as to rest on the bottom and entangle bottom-feeding fish, which by their efforts to escape made a bag for themselves by forcing the finer middle layer of net through the wider meshes of the outer layers. The trammers carried a crew of about seven and might shoot over two miles of net. They were in use at Rye before the end of the 13th century, but in the middle of the 15th century most fishermen seem to have used a related form of net called 'bosemeys' or 'bosennetts,' though the older trammel regained its popularity, aided perhaps by a town ordinance of 1483 which forbade various innovations such as 'dobill tramell withoute any senett by twene' and forbidding tramelling in the open sea.² However, estuary waters were not sufficient, and this regulation was repealed in 1508. The season ran from the beginning of Lent to the departure for Yarmouth, but was most active between Easter and St. Bartholomew's Day. By a byelaw of 1494 fishing on Mondays between these dates was forbidden unless the Tuesday following was a holy day or a fast.³

¹ *Records of Lydd*, ed. by Arthur Finn (1911), p.205. See also p.279.

² Rye MS. 60/3, f.122 v.

³ *ibid.*

BOATS AND GEAR

The varied nature of the fishery meant that the port held a considerable range of sizes and types of fishing boat, though there is little information about them until the late 16th century. As has been said, the earliest boats were oared galleys, similar to those depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, but by the 13th century they had become primarily sailing vessels. The hull of an ancient vessel found near Maytham Wharf in 1822, though not certainly medieval, gives an idea of what the typical late medieval coaster or large fishing boat must have been like. Clinker-built of oak, it was 64 feet long with a beam of 15 feet and a depth of four feet. It had deck beams but no permanent decking except at bow and stern; there had probably been a canvas tilt aft to shelter the crew. A single mast stepped about a third of the length from the bow most likely carried a single square sail.¹

Sixteenth-century shipping lists distinguish in the main three categories of vessel: barks, crayers and fishing boats; and it has been suggested that they can be identified among the careful drawings of local shipping with which John Prowze adorned his chart of Rye Harbour in 1572.² This shows three types of sailing vessel: fully rigged ships with raised fore-castle and quarter-deck ('barks'); smaller vessels with no fore-castle but some sort of deck or cabin aft, apparently clinker-built, with a sprit mainsail and, in one case, a small mizzen ('crayers'); and undecked boats with a square sail set on a mast that could be lowered when riding to nets ('fishing boats'). The distinction cannot be rigidly insisted on, for there is a reference to a crayer of Sandwich which had a normal ship rig.³ But whatever the name she was called by, there is a recognisable resemblance between the Maytham Wharf ship and the sprit-sailed boats on Prowze's plan. Barks and crayers were capable of being used interchangeably for trade and fishing, and a contract of 1609 gives detailed specifications of a 'shipp' to be built by a Rye shipwright for three local fishermen, perhaps for use at Yarmouth or Scarborough, which, when completed, must have looked very much like one of Prowze's largest class.⁴ Even so, she was only to be 33 feet long at the keel. There is nothing to indicate that she was designed for fishing, except perhaps the provision of two windlasses and a capstan, which would have been useful for hauling in the nets.

¹ W. McM. Rice, 'Account of an ancient vessel recently found under the old bed of the River Rother,' in *Archaeologia*, vol. 20 (1824), pp. 553-65.

² P.R.O., M.P.F. 212. Discussed by Capt. H. Lovegrove, R.N., in 'Shipping in a 16th-century plan of Winchelsea and Rye,' in *Mariners' Mirror*, vol. 33 (1947), pp. 187-98. See also *Rye Shipping Records*, p. xxxvii-viii.

³ 'The Admiral of Sluys broke both his topmasts' in 1537 (C.S.P., *Hen. VIII*, vol. 12, pt. 1, No. 718 (iii)).

⁴ Rye MS. 140/54.

As launched from the builder's yard, she cost her owners £100, and they would probably have had to spend as much again on fitting her out. Smaller boats would have cost proportionally less, but even so the average Rye fishing boat of 15-25 tons represented a substantial investment, and it is no surprise to find that ownership was commonly shared between two or three partners.¹ One of these was normally the master, and the other shares were held by working fishermen or their widows. Rarely, if ever, did outsiders have any stake in the ownership of fishing boats, although it was not uncommon for merchants to own barks or crayers engaged in trade. Fish merchants were in fact barred by a bylaw of 1479 from owning or managing fishing boats or gear,² but a more powerful deterrent was the fact that trading vessels seem to have earned considerably more for their owners, if we may judge from the Corporation's experience. Between 1588 and 1594 the Town Ship 'Blessing of God' made two or three voyages per year and earned an average gross profit of £29 per voyage (c.10s. per ton burden), of which about one third was needed for repairs and maintenance.³ If the Yarmouth fishery was organised at Rye in the same way as at Brighton, the owners would have received, between 4s. and 6s. per ton in an average year; the largest vessels, of 30-40 tons, earned proportionately least. It seems in fact unlikely that in terms of modern accounting, when maintenance and depreciation had been allowed for, the owners of fishing boats received any worthwhile profits at all. For, so far as one can tell, their vessels had a short life and needed frequent replacement. Out of 58 vessels belonging to the port in 1565, at most six were included among the 32 Ryers in Thomas Colshill's list of coasting traders in 1571-2 and nine among 51 merchantmen and fishing boats in a locally compiled list of 1580.⁴ Yet a 25-ton fishing boat, costing when new £100 and being employed for two fishing voyages a year, say to Yarmouth and Scarborough, and earning on average £7 for each Yarmouth voyage and the same at Scarborough, a third of which would be needed for repairs and maintenance, would need a life of more than ten years to repay the cost of her construction; and this assumes, what is unlikely, that the owner or owners could finance the building without having to borrow money. Shipwrights were quite humble men, craftsmen rather

¹ P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz., vol. 38, No. 28 (1565); *Rye Shipping Records*, pp. 8-10 (1580).

² Rye MS. 60/3, f. 122 v.

³ *Rye Shipping Records*, p. 42.

⁴ Op. cit. in note 32; also P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz., Addenda, No. 22 (Colshill's list). The 'Blessing of God,' bought for the town in 1587 for £200, was sold seven years later for only £108. The larger fishing boats were at least sometimes employed in the coasting trade: nine of Colshill's vessels were skippered by men who had owned or partly owned fishing boats in 1565.

than capitalists, and required payment by instalments while the vessel was being built and at the launch. They could not wait for her to be fitted out and begin to earn her keep.

The boats did not represent the fisherman's sole, or perhaps their most important, investment, for gear was also expensive and short-lived. At Brighton there was a regular schedule for compensation for the owner of lost gear, according to which a 25-ton vessel going to Yarmouth would have carried nets worth £20, and to Scarborough nets and lines worth over £14. These values accord substantially with those given in Elizabethan inventories of Folkestone fishermen¹ and also with the sole evidence from Rye itself, where in 1548 John Potten bequeathed as alternative legacies four angels in gold, i.e. 26s. 8d., or a 'mansfare of flews and a waroppe,'² Three nets seem to have made a 'mansfare' here as at Brighton; the 'waroppe' was probably the rope from which they were suspended and by which they were hauled in. The owner of a mansfare normally received the same share of the catch as a working member of the crew, hence no doubt the name. At one time, perhaps, the same contribution of nets was expected from every crew member, and at Brighton the regulations seem designed to encourage this ideal, but at Rye, as probably elsewhere, many fishermen possessed more than a single mansfare; on occasion they bequeathed as many as four, five or six fares of flews or Yarmouth nets, often in addition to other gear, and on average they left two or three. Of course, probably only the richer fishermen made wills—the poor had too little to bequeath—and this is reflected in the nature of their legacies. Out of a sample of 25 made between 1545 and 1581 and giving some details of boats and gear, ten possessed the whole or part of at least one boat, whereas in the population at large the proportion of boat-owners to other fishermen and mariners was about one to four if servants, boys and apprentices are left out of the reckoning.

Yarmouth nets were the most common item of gear bequeathed by this sample, and probably all had possessed them, though some simply spoke of 'nets' in distinction to shot-nets or tramels. Seven named them explicitly and another ten may be taken as having bequeathed them, as against six leaving tramels, three lines, two shot-nets and one a 'long net.' All of these last possessed Yarmouth or other unspecified nets in addition, so that it would appear that these were the basic equipment of a fisherman, to which he added others, and particularly the more complicated and costly trammel nets, as and when he could afford them. At Hythe, and probably at Rye also, herring nets were regarded as a suitable

¹ *Kentish Sources*, ed. by Elizabeth Melling, vol. 3 (1961), pp. 136-7.

² East Sussex Record Office, Lewes Archdeaconry, vol. A1, p. 168.

gift or legacy to a servant or apprentice to set him up as an independent fisherman.¹

THE LABOUR FORCE

It is impossible to calculate from the silence of wills the proportion of fishermen who possessed no gear of their own and worked as servants or apprentices of others. Boys were quite a large percentage of the work force, and each Yarmouth boat carried one or two as well as from ten to a dozen men. The return of 1565 already quoted gives details of vessels and seamen in the Rapes of Pevensey and Hastings. After naming 81 owners at Rye and 43 at Hastings, the only ports of any importance, it provides the following information about men:

	<i>Rye</i>	<i>Hastings</i>
Mariners	60	16
Fishermen: householders	225	146
young men	50	20
servants to fishermen	450 (<i>sic</i>)	57
Total households	530	280
Population	2468	not given

The figure for servants at Rye is improbably large and may be a scribal error,² since otherwise in this and other Elizabethan lists the figures for the two towns are very consistent, allowing for their difference in size, and it is difficult to see how a fleet of 58 boats, not all in use at the same time, can have given employment to a labour force of nearly 800 men at the rates that the list itself lays down, viz.:

<i>Type of vessel</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Boys</i>
Merchantman (bark)	over 40	10	1
" (crayer)	40	9	1
" (boat)	30	8	1
" " "	20	6	1
Boat fishing at home	30	12	1
" " " "	25	11	1
" " " "	20	10	1
" " " "	15	9	1

This gives a total in employment in winter, when the list was made, of 328 men and 34 boys. If one adds crews *pro rata* for the boats that were laid up until the plaice, conger and mackerel seasons, the grand total is still only 565 men and 58 boys as the maximum number that can have been at work if all the boats were working at any one time, which is most unlikely.

It is not clear what was the relationship between servants and their masters. At Hythe it was in many cases permanent enough for servants to merit legacies from their masters. At Brighton,

¹ A. J. F. Dulley, 'Four Kent towns at the end of the Middle Ages,' in *Archaeologia Cantiana*, vol. 81 (1966), p. 108.

² For 150?

on the other hand, local usage forbade the employment of wage labour except for the Scarborough voyage and laid down penalties for masters who attempted to make up their crews otherwise than with local men paid on the system of shares. These were free partners in the voyage and could not be described as 'servants.' The assumption of these regulations seems to have been that the use of wage labour would have been cheaper than payment by shares—although, if the Brighton system were applied at Rye, the ordinary fisherman who owned no nets and contributed nothing to the voyage but his labour would not have been conspicuously well rewarded. For the Yarmouth voyage, of about six to eight weeks' duration, he would have received on average about £1 during the Elizabethan period, and about 16s. for the shorter home herring season. This compares with wages of between 2s. 4½d. and 4s. 6d. per week paid to most of the crew of the 'William,' the town's contribution to the fleet which faced the Spanish Armada in 1588.¹ On land labourers might earn 1s. a day, and skilled craftsmen up to 2s. 6d. a day at this date.² Moreover, fishermen could not expect to be in continuous employment. Except in early summer, when the Scarborough voyage corresponded with the peak of the trammel season, and again in the autumn, during the Yarmouth season, there must always have been a substantial number out of work or casually employed on land.

How high the proportion was is difficult to estimate. The only direct evidence comes from a shipping return of 1587, which lists 33 masters and 202 able mariners 'beshipped' and another three and 47 respectively 'not beshipped.'³ The local authorities are unlikely to have exaggerated the number without work for fear of inviting the attentions of the pressgang. Maltod payments suggest that it was rarely indeed that eleven out of every dozen masters were actively fishing in any one season. In most years the average number of seasons for which each man paid was only between one half and one third of the maximum number possible. Those who owned boats or nets—and all the masters must be included among them—will have needed a good deal of time to overhaul their boats and make or repair their nets. The life of a net was short, perhaps two years on the analogy of 19th-century Hastings,⁴ and fishermen or their families made their own, buying their material from hempdressers in the town or the villages round about. Ship-building, rope-making, sail-making, hook-making, were all recognised trades, but there seem to have been

¹ *Rye Shipping Records*, p. 48.

² *ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 47.

³ P.R.O., S.P.D., *Eliz.*, vol. 198, No. 29.

⁴ W. G. Moss, *History and Antiquities of the Town and Port of Hastings* (1824), p. 163.

no regular net-makers; at any rate nobody goes under this denomination in contemporary documents.¹ But it is noteworthy that even so a higher proportion of mariners, many of whom can have had no gear to look after, were on land in 1587: 19 per cent., as opposed to only 8 per cent. of masters.

THE MARKET

The seamen's quarter of the town lay outside the Strand Gate along the east bank of the River Tillingham. Here, on the marshes above the town the shipwrights built their boats, while lower down, under the shelter of the town walls, the fishermen unloaded their catch, sold it in the fishmarket and stored their gear in rows of 'shops' built on land reclaimed from the river. The Corporation records include numerous conveyances of building plots, usually arranged in narrow rows with cobbled alleys and gutters between.² Two such rows had been built by the town. Each contained five shops, let mainly to merchants, with two lofts and sometimes garrets also over each, tenanted by fishermen. Buying and selling, however, took place, at least in theory, not in the shops but in open market. Samuel Jeake's plan of the town, made in 1667 when the port was in decline, shows the market as a large open square, handily placed for the quayside and the branch of the town conduit which provided an abundant supply of fresh water for cleaning fish, but strategically cut off from the now gap-toothed rows of fishermen's shops by a line of buildings labelled 'The King's Shop'—strategically, because the Crown in the person of the Purveyor to the Household or his local representative, exercised the right of pre-emption in the market and was one of its best customers.³

Relations between the King's Purveyor and the local fishermen were never good. Traditionally the market was in the hands of local middlemen called 'osts'. No stranger might buy fish of anyone else, while at the same time the osts and the 'feeters,' who made the baskets in which the fish were measured and transported, were forbidden to have any direct or indirect stake in the actual fishing. Apart from them, only the King's Purveyor could deal directly with the fishermen, and his wants had to be supplied first. The Purveyor was normally a London fishmonger and, not unnaturally, tended to use his position to exploit the market for his fellow Londoners. The London market had long been important for the town, and London fishmongers had owned property at Rye at least as early as 1452, when William Stoughton bought the Ypres Tower.⁴

¹ They may have been too poor to gain a mention. In Hastings paupers were set to work making nets (J. M. Baines, *Historic Hastings* (1955), p. 128.)

² *Records of Rye Corporation*, pp. 166-75.

³ Rye MS. 132/15, reproduced in *Records of Rye Corporation*, Plate XIII.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 139.

Matters between the Londoners and the townsfolk seem to have come to a head with the appointment of William Wulnerston as Purveyor in 1523.¹ The Corporation took exception to the terms of his appointment and even more so to the regulations which the Wardens of the London Fishmongers' Company proceeded to lay down for the conduct of the Rye market. These claimed a right of pre-emption for themselves, once the Crown and other magnates had been provided for, established maximum prices, arranged for a regular representative to be put in Rye to look after their interests, and threatened offenders with imprisonment in Newgate. Not surprisingly, there were violent protests from Rye, and the matter was put to arbitration. Fortunately for the Ryers, the commission was weighted in their favour, consisting, apart from the Comptroller of the Royal Household, of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, their own Mayor and a local landowner. The fishermen 'by their owne agrements' accepted regulations that guaranteed the Purveyor's rights but contained no mention of the privileges claimed by the Londoners.

Even so, and notwithstanding the recognition of the Lord Warden as an umpire in any future disputes if the Mayor connived at breaches of the rules, feeling between the Purveyor and the fishermen frequently ran high. The Crown was a tardy payer, and the fishermen were loth to sell their best fish to the Purveyor in the hope of payment several months hence, if they could dispose of it elsewhere for ready cash. The way in which osts and fishermen had their shops jumbled together made surreptitious bargaining easy, and much of the best fish never came to open market.² The local authorities, always on their guard against renewed attempts by the Londoners to assert their claims, were at best apathetic to the Purveyor's complaints, though eventually in 1608 they were forced to agree that the shops of fishermen and merchants should be separated.³ But by this stage the town was suffering severely from the effects of silting in its harbour and encroachments on its fishing grounds and was no doubt willing to waive some of its cherished independence in the hope of gaining support.

Even if they had been willing, it is unlikely that the Mayor and Jurats would have had much success in imposing their will on the fishermen, who were at best of an individualistic spirit. Two attempts were made during the reign of Elizabeth I to organise them into a guild or company to regulate their own affairs. The first, in 1567, lasted for a few years but foundered when a later generation refused to abide by its articles of incorporation. Around 1581 an attempt was made to revive it, and a draft for a royal charter of

¹ Rye MS. 60/6, ff. 2-6.

² *Rye Shipping Records*, p. 54.

³ *H.M.C.*, p. 140.

incorporation survives among the town archives.¹ Its constitution seems largely modelled on that of Trinity House, and its four Wardens, with the Elder Brethren and Assistants, were to regulate the fishery jointly with the Mayor and a panel of Jurats, to maintain lights to guide vessels into the harbour and levy tolls for this purpose, and to have the power to imprison offenders in the town gaol. The scheme ran into difficulties because it encroached on the jurisdiction of the Water Bailiffs of Rye and Winchelsea, royal appointments outside the Corporation's hands, so that nothing more was done to implement it.

DISTRIBUTION

When the fish had been caught, landed and sold, legally or illegally, it still had to reach the consumer. A good deal, probably, was eaten locally. Parry records that in the Hastings of his day the poor lived through the winter largely on dried herring, and the same, no doubt, was true of Rye in earlier centuries.² Some, but not very much, was exported by sea. In the eleven years between 1573 and 1590 for which reasonably detailed customs accounts are available, there were 35 outward shipments of fish, 28 being herring, four sprats and the rest unspecified.³ Almost all were made during the autumn and winter months. In seventeen cases the destination is given: eight went overseas, five to London and four up-river in lighters. In 1594 Francis Bolton, a local merchant, could sell herring in Bordeaux for three times what they would cost him to buy from the fishermen, but either the transport costs were too great or the supply too limited to encourage this trade.⁴ The latter is more likely: the local herring fishery, as opposed to the Yarmouth voyage, was in decline at this period, and some herring was even being imported.⁵

Herring and sprats, which could be salted or dried, were capable of standing the uncertainties of a sea voyage, but most of the catch landed at the Strand was composed of flat fish and other species that had to reach the consumer quickly if he was to consume them at all. These travelled by road, mostly to London, on the backs of pack-horses in baskets called 'dossers'. Making the dossers was a specialised local trade, but only a few of the rippers, who led the strings of pack-horses, were local men. They seem to have lived mostly in the villages along the road to London. One Rye ripper succeeded in rising to be an Alderman of the City of London,⁶ but most were in a humble way of business, paying maltod on from two to four dossers a time. The same names recur in the lists at

¹ *Records of Rye Corporation*, pp. 93-4.

² J. D. Parry, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Coast of Sussex*, (1833), p. 232.

³ *Rye Shipping Records*, pp. 66-143.

⁴ Rye MS. 145/3. See also 145/6, 8.

⁵ There were six inward cargoes of herring in the same eleven years.

⁶ James Wilford, d.1526 (*Records of Rye Corporation*, p.110).

roughly weekly intervals, though in the busier months they are supplemented by others for whom this was a seasonal occupation only.

The London road, running as it did mainly along ridges and crossing the heavy Weald Clay at Tonbridge, where it was at its narrowest, was a good one by Sussex standards, even before the days of turnpikes. Defoe, who comments most unfavourably on the state of the roads elsewhere in the Weald, remarks that in season Hastings mackerel might be sold in Tunbridge Wells, nearly 30 miles away over the same or similar roads, within three hours of being landed.¹ Fish clearly made the London journey at a comparable speed, for the Regulations made by the London fish-mongers in 1523 fixing maximum prices at Rye envisaged a peak demand on Fridays and on Saturdays in Lent, when 8s. a seam could be charged, and lesser peaks on Saturdays in the rest of the year, Wednesdays, Vigils and Ember Days, when the maximum was 6s.² There was no limit, and presumably less demand, on other days. This system only makes sense if fish bought in the Rye market in the early morning could be expected to reach the London housewife the same day. No doubt part of the reason for the development of the Cinque Ports as fishing towns was the fact that they were connected to the metropolis by reasonable all-weather roads for pack-horse traffic, whereas ports like Shoreham or Brighton further west, though no further from London, were divided from it by wide stretches of clay lowland with no good roads across them.

CHANGE, GROWTH AND DECAY

So far, the picture presented has been essentially a static one, but this is due more to the imperfections of the source materials than to the actualities of the situation, and even with the records as they are it is possible to trace trends of prosperity and decline and account in some measure for their causes.

The month-by-month distribution of rippers' payments provides a useful index of comparison between the industry as it was in Elizabethan times and what it had been three centuries earlier, as reflected in the sums paid for 'town shares' at Winchelsea.³ In the 13th century herring and other winter-caught fish dominated the market, with the maximum of activity, as might be expected, in Lent. In the 16th century, however, the trend had been reversed. Lent was still a lively season for the market, but it was at its busiest after Easter and in early summer, during the tramel season.

The nature of the records makes it impossible to chart the course of this trend in detail, particularly in its earlier stages. Clearly the

¹ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through England and Wales* (1724), Everyman Edition, vol. 1, p.127.

² Rye MS. 60/6, f.4. The size of a seam is uncertain.

³ See fig 1.

14th century was a period of overall decline in the fishery, from which it was beginning to recover in 1448, when maltod accounts commence just after the last of a series of French raids had devastated the town. At this period, tramels and more particularly the related 'bosemeys' were already the most popular gear, and flews occupied a very minor position in the local fishery (there are no statistics for the Yarmouth voyage). Hooks were also being used, and their more extensive use in the later part of the century, when a distinct hook season in the winter developed to complement the summer tramel season, is accompanied by a rapid increase in the receipts of the Rippiers' Box with no corresponding rise in the number of boats at work in the year as a whole.¹

The population of the town at this time seems to have been about 1,000.² At a reasonable estimate of seven men per boat, it would have taken 175 men to crew the 25 boats working in 1492, over half the working population. They were definitely the poorer half. Only masters of fishing boats can be identified in the tax list of that year,³ and they might be expected to be better off than their crews. They form in all 15 *per cent.* of the total, paying 7 *per cent.* of the whole assessment and mostly being of middling wealth. None was included among the eight really wealthy men who owned half the property, but only a few paid the minimum 4d. that was all that over a third of those assessed could pay.

The industry continued to grow until the second decade of the 16th century. In the 1520's there was a sharp set-back, accompanied by a rise in prices—herrings rose from 5*d.* a hundred in 1524 to 8*d.* in 1530⁴—which is probably not unconnected with the concern shown by the London fishmongers over the state of the market. Within ten or fifteen years the old prosperity had returned, though the Christmas (hook) season was less in favour and the Yarmouth voyage was recovering its medieval importance. The 1560's saw the fishery at its height. The town had more than doubled in size in the past two generations, but fishermen still formed nearly half its population—225 households out of 530 in 1565. Socially they were still the lower half, though some of the more well-to-do had the wealth and standing to become jurats as the century wore on. The population continued to grow for another fifteen years, for there were about 3,000 inhabitants in 1580, but by then the fishing fleet was less active, and there was a slow but continuous decline in the number of maltod payments until records cease in the 1620's, when there were only about half as many boats at work as there had been fifty years previously. Thereafter there are no statistics of boats at work. The town, however, was shrinking.

¹ See Fig 2.

² See Appendix, p. 63.

³ Rye MS. 77/3.

⁴ Rye MS. 147/1, ff. 48 v, 63 v.

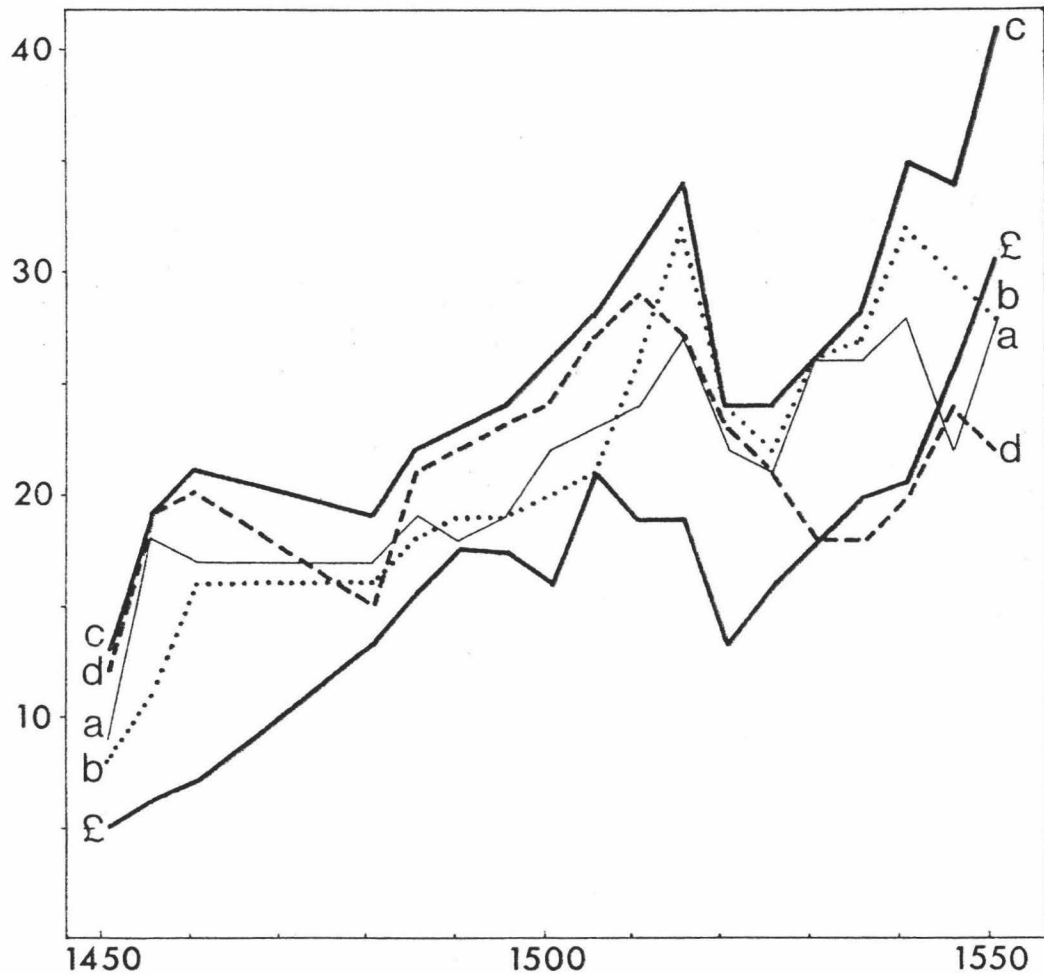


Fig. 2. Five-yearly averages of receipts of Rippers' Box (£) and boats at work at Rye and Saltcote in the

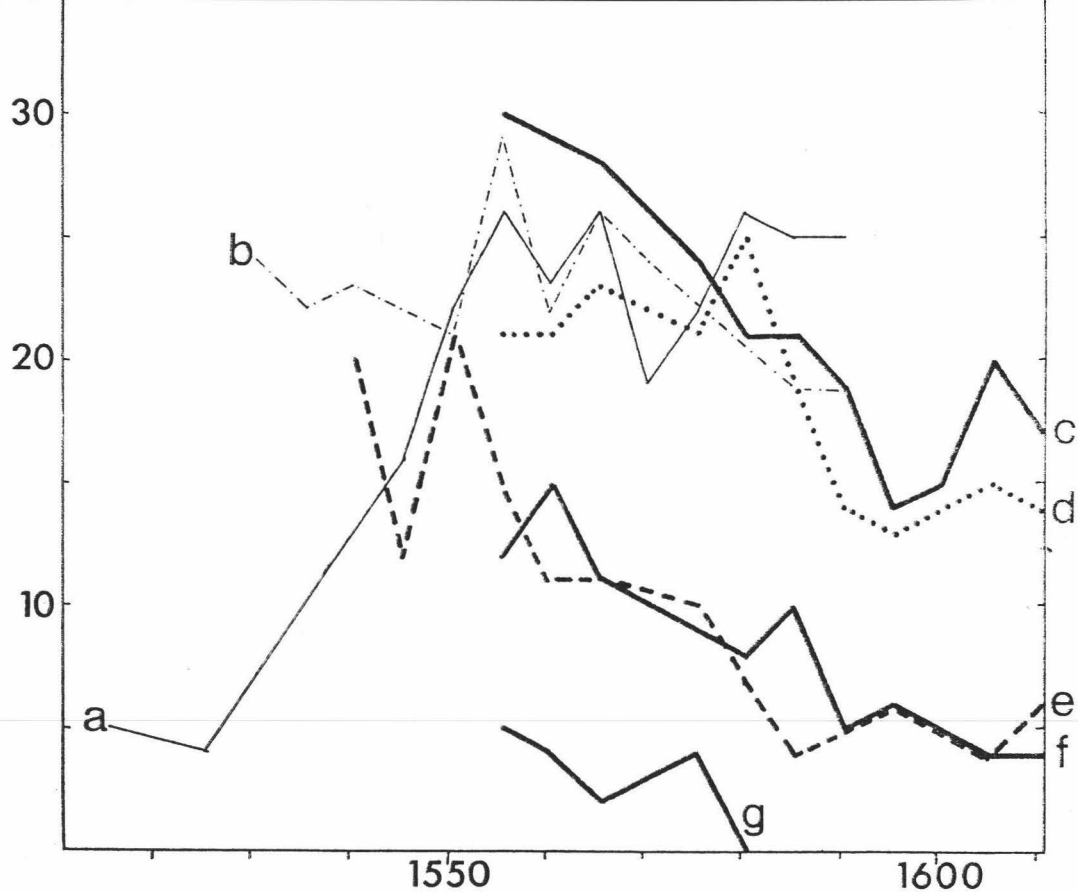


Fig. 3 Five-yearly averages of payers of St. Mary's Share (a, b) and Maltod (c-g): (a) Yarmouth voyage; (b, c) tramellers; (d) hookmen; (e) Scarborough voyage; (f) harbourmen; (g) shotters. Between 1550 and 1570 an average of 17 flowers paid St. Mary's Share (not shown on graph).

In 1619 the Mayor and Jurats wrote to the Lord Warden that 100 fishermen were on the verge of starvation, while many had left the town;¹ and five years later 100 houses were reported empty.² By 1660 there were fewer people in the town than at any time since 1500. The sea was still important in its economy, providing a living for 109 out of 329 males over the age of 16.³ Of these, only sixteen were described as 'fishermen,' though deep-sea fishermen may have been listed as 'mariners' or 'seamen.' Duties on wholesale sales of fish and fruit were still worth enough to be farmed for £20 a year in 1689, rising to £24 in 1723, and Defoe mentions Rye fishermen working at Yarmouth as well as fishing along the South Coast for mackerel, but ten years later, the last year that the duties were farmed, they were only worth £7.⁴

The causes of this decline are various, some peculiar to Rye and others affecting neighbouring ports as well. To begin with, local factors must have been the more important, for a study of wills proved in the Archdeaconry Court at Lewes down to 1650 suggests that while Rye declined, Hastings and Brighton were growing; and both these towns were more dependent on fishing than Rye, which had a sea-borne commerce and a wider variety of trades serving the local market.⁵ From testators' surnames one may guess that many of the fishermen who left Rye in the first quarter of the 17th century moved to Brighton or Hastings.

The principal reason why they moved was the deterioration of the harbour. This is at first sight paradoxical, since neither Brighton nor Hastings possessed a harbour of any sort and the latter town spent a great deal of time and money in Elizabeth I's reign trying to make an artificial one. Fishing boats were launched from the open beach and hauled up above high water mark by horse capstans when not in use. Rye by contrast continued to offer a sheltered anchorage of some sort. Henry VIII had regarded it as important enough to warrant building Camber Castle at its mouth. When it was built, the castle stood at the tip of a shingle ridge running south-eastwards from the cliffs at Fairlight and acting as a natural breakwater to the lagoon and saltmarsh within.⁶ East of the harbour mouth a similar ridge linked up with the shingle promontory of Dungeness. The lagoon filled and emptied at each tide, and the resulting current was enough to maintain a clear channel for shipping—or would have been, if the balance of forces had remained unchanged. But the later 16th and 17th centuries saw much reclamation of the saltmarshes, and every acre of marsh inned meant a reduction in the

¹ *H.M.C.*, p. 54.

² *ibid.*, p. 166.

³ Rye MS. 82/82.

⁴ *Records of Rye Corporation*, pp. 164-6. Daniel Defoe, *op. cit.*, pp. 66n., 123.

⁵ See Appendix, p. 63.

⁶ J. A. Steers, *The Sea Coast* (1953), pp. 162-6.

tidal flow, increased silting, shoaling of the channel and narrowing of the harbour mouth. Furthermore, additional shingle ridges built up seaward of Camber Castle. They were not easily accessible from the town and were liable to be swept away by the next gale, so that there was no temptation for the fishermen to use them as a landing place, while at the same time Elizabethan maps show the old harbour as a tortuous maze of creeks, separated by shifting sandbanks and sheltered only by the doubtful protection of the new storm beaches. Access to the quays must have been difficult, even to local men, except on the top of a flood tide.

The local men were not indifferent to the situation. The only recorded act of Fishermen's Company was to petition the Corporation about erosion of the beach and to request the building of a breakwater.¹ Late 16th-century maps show the mouth of the River Tillingham thus protected immediately below the quay, though this may not be what the seamen wanted, viz. a timber jetty 'on the west side of the haven, near the boom at the creek's mouth.' In any case, whatever action was taken was insufficient, and plans by the Italian, Gedeviso Giemily, and the Kentish mapmaker, Philip Symonson, show more drastic measures proposed, namely an artificial cut through the shingle to make a more direct way for the water.² No work seems to have been undertaken, however, nor is it likely that it would have met with any more success than Smeaton's scheme in the 18th century.

Decay of the harbour was only one of the causes to which the Ryers ascribed their distress. Allegations of unfair foreign competition are to be expected from a declining industry anxious for protection. In 1572 the fishermen urged their M.P.s to promote a bill against fish imports, complaining that their cod, ling and herring fisheries were being ruined by competition from Scots, Frenchmen and Flemings and imports from Baltic ports, while nearer home fishermen from Flanders and Calais were doing a thriving trade with English merchants to the detriment of English fishermen.³ What they do not explain is how it was that foreigners could succeed in undercutting them in their own home market.

A later complaint, however, deserves to be taken more seriously, because it is more specific. From 1607 to 1610 the town records contain several references to Frenchmen poaching on herring and cod grounds that the Ryers traditionally regarded as their own preserve. The dispute, which was carried to the Privy Council, was complicated by lack of agreement about the location of the Sow and the Broad Smooth, the grounds in question, which appear to

¹ *Records of Rye Corporation*, p. 93 (n.d., c. 1567-71).

² *L. A. Vidler, New History of Rye* (1934), p. 66; Rye MSS. 132/4-6 (1591 and 1594 respectively).

³ *H.M.C.*, p. 18.

have been somewhere in mid-Channel.¹ Eventually a system of licensing French vessels to fish on the English coast was introduced, though it proved difficult to enforce effectively.²

At the same time as they were seeking to curb the French, the Ryers were carrying on a dispute with their neighbours which in some ways heralds the end of the time-honoured medieval way of doing things, so far as the fishing industry was concerned. Trawl nets had been in use in the creeks of Essex as early as the 14th century. In 1377 they were banned for the damage that they did to young fry and the oyster beds.³ The ban seems to have been effective, so far as the Channel ports are concerned, at any rate, until the end of the 16th century. Then we find the Admiralty Court of the Cinque ports forbidding their use in 1602 and again in 1604, singling out particularly the fishermen of Hastings for using them.⁴ It would appear that by this time trawling was well established in the Thames estuary, and within a few years Barking, Rochester and Strood trawlers were to be found at work on the grounds where Ryers had been accustomed for generations to trammel for plaice and other bottom-feeding fish.⁵ Possibly the Hastings men had learnt to use the new gear from them. Unlike the Ryers, they had never used trammel nets—or so they claimed; and this they had in common with the fishermen of Brighton, where the only fishery for plaice was with tuck nets close inshore.⁶

Hastings protested against the Court's ban, and eventually it was agreed to abide by the results of an experimental season of tramelling from Hastings. If it proved possible to trammel successfully in their home waters, the Hastings men agreed to give up trawling. The boat was to be provided by Hastings, the nets and men by Rye and Hythe, and the trial was to last the whole of the plaice season of 1608.⁷ As might be expected, the results were disputed. The Court repeated its ban on the strength of them, but Hastings petitioned the Privy Council, claiming that the trial had been unfairly conducted, the boat having fished only on three occasions in the whole summer and then being compelled to run for safety even in fair weather, while the Hythe members of the crew had been bribed to support the Rye case. More generally, they claimed that, while tramelling was feasible in Hythe Bay, which is sheltered from south-west gales by Dungeness, the coast further west was too exposed for boats to ride to their nets. Trawls of the regulation five-inch mesh did no more harm to the fry than did tramels dragging on the

¹ *ibid.*, p. 143.

² S.P.D., Jas. I, vol. 119, No. 86 (8 February, 1621).

³ *Cal. Inq. Misc.*, vol. 3, No. 1057.

⁴ *H.M.C.*, pp. 124, 133.

⁵ S.P.D., Jas. I, vol. 91, Nos. 4 and 4(i) (Barking, 1617); *ibid.* vol. 128, No. 22 (Rochester and Strood).

⁶ *Elizabethan Brighton*, p. 15.

⁷ *H.M.C.*, pp. 136, 139.

bottom with the tide, and needed smaller boats and fewer men, an important consideration to Hastings, which had no harbour, so important indeed that its seafaring population had increased in the six years that they had been trawling.¹ Much of this was undoubtedly true: Hythe and Rye seem to have been the only ports to use the trammel; the difference in size of boat was negligible, for in 1565 Hythe's eighteen tramellers were of only five tons apiece against her seven shotters of fifteen tons,² but the tramelling trial required seven men, while 19th-century Hastings trawlers were managed by a crew of only three. This difference may in part be accounted for by a change in rig, since lug sails had replaced the older square or sprit rig by this date. There can be no doubt about the growth of Hastings, however. From having about 1,250 inhabitants in 1565, it had increased to 1,400 in 1603 and around 2,000 in 1619.³

Against these arguments Rye and Hythe reiterated their previous complaints: trawls destroyed the fry and drove fish from their feeding and breeding grounds; they were illegal and had only been in use for the past thirty years, in which time the fishery had decayed and prices had risen six or eight-fold.⁴ They won the day, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Despite regulations, trawlers reappeared. In 1631 the matter was referred to the Lords of the Admiralty, with the result that in the following year the latter banned trawling east of Beachy Head and ordered Captain Penington, then on patrol in the Channel, to enforce the order and keep a watch for French poachers.⁵ It is, however, symptomatic of the changing situation that Penington in his reply includes Ryers themselves among the law-breakers, and in fact six of them had been arrested the previous year.⁶ The old order was moribund, the old methods were acknowledged as outdated even at Rye itself, and the authority of the Cinque Ports had been replaced by that of the Royal Navy. Rye had neither the strength nor the self-confidence to maintain itself in the face of a further challenge, and when, in the anarchy of the Civil War, Royalist men-of-war and Dunkirk privateers virtually put an end to the distant fisheries, there was nothing to arrest the final decline into obscurity.⁷ There was, it is true, something of a revival after peace was restored, but only a shadow remained of the prosperity that the town had enjoyed under the Tudors. Defoe dismisses Rye and her neighbours as having 'little in them to deserve more than a bare mention.'⁸ and all that deserved mentioning was their past.

¹ S.P.D., Jas. I, vol. 91, No. 12 (1617).

² E. Hasted, *History of Kent* (Folio edn.), vol. 3 (1798), p. 413.

³ See below, p. 63.

⁴ S.P.D., Jas. I, vol. 91, No. 13.

⁵ *ibid.*, vol. 187, No. 63; *ibid.*, vol. 215, No. 15.

⁶ *ibid.*, vol. 215, No. 79; *ibid.*, vol. 194, No. 6.

⁷ *H.M.C.*, pp. 215, 233.

⁸ Daniel Defoe, *Tour through England and Wales* (1724), Everyman Edn., vol. 1, p. 124.

APPENDIX

AVERAGES:	Boats at work using:			Weekly receipts of Rippiers' Box
	tramels and bosemeys	hooks	unknown or other gear	
1448-1464				
Season ending Christmas	5.4	1.6	0.9	2s. 3d.
Easter	4.6	1.3	0	10d.
24 June	9.1	0.6	0.6	3s. 7d.
24 August	9.4	0.9	0.5	3s. 10d.
1479-1499				
Season ending Christmas	4.7	12.6	1.7	5s. 5d.
Easter	2.9	12.8	1.8	6s. 6d.
24 June	16.5	3.1	1.6	7s. 0d.
24 August	12.6	2.5	3.9	4s. 7d.

ELIZABETHAN SHIPPING LISTS

Date and Description	Tonnage										Total
	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	over 50	
1565 (P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz. I, vol. 38, No. 28)											
Barks and crayers	—	—	1	—	6	1	3	—	2	—	13
Fishing boats working	—	3	10	5	3	—	—	—	—	—	21
Fishing boats on land	4	8	6	3	3	—	—	—	—	—	24
Cockboats (no tonnage given)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	8
	4	11	17	8	12	1	3	—	2	—	66
1572 (ibid., Addenda, No. 22)											
Coasting traders	2	2	3	6	5	3	7	—	2	2	32
1580 (Rye Shipping Records, pp. 8-10)											
Merchantmen	—	—	2	1	6	4	2	1	3	1	20
Fishing Boats	3	13	12	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	31
	3	13	14	4	6	4	2	1	3	1	51
1587 (P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz. I, vol. 198, No. 29)											
Merchantmen	—	—	5	1	5	2	2	—	1	2	18
Fishing boats working	—	1	11	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	15
Fishing boats on land	—	5	7	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	12
	—	6	23	3	6	2	2	—	1	2	45
1596 (Rye Shipping Records, p. 12)											
Merchantmen	—	—	—	—	4	—	2	—	1	3	10
Fishing boats	1	1	4	9	10	—	—	—	—	—	25
	1	1	4	9	14	—	2	—	1	3	35

Note: The figures for 1565-1587 are tons burden, but those for 1596 are probably measured tons and should be scaled down by $\frac{1}{4}$.

RYE FISHING INDUSTRY

63

ANALYSIS OF MEN'S WILLS PROVED AT LEWES

<i>Date</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Rye</i>	<i>Hastings</i>	<i>Brighton</i>	
1541-69	Fishermen	20	36	19	
	Seamen	2	—	2	
	<hr/>				
	All seafarers	22	36	21	
	Other urban occupations	20	13	3	
	Farmers	3	3	2	
	<hr/>				
	Occupation not stated	45	52	26	
		151	104	62	
		<hr/>			
Total	196	156	88		
<hr/>					
1570-1609	Fishermen	23	15	32	
	Seamen	12	1	1	
	<hr/>				
	All seafarers	35	16	33	
	Other urban occupations	47	20	9	
	Farmers	5	14	6	
	<hr/>				
	Occupation not stated	87	50	48	
		34	38	19	
		<hr/>			
Total	121	88	67		
<hr/>					
1610-59	Fishermen	6	23	36	
	Seamen	4	—	2	
	<hr/>				
	All seafarers	10	23	38	
	Other urban occupations	39	31	12	
	Farmers	7	27	9	
	<hr/>				
	Occupation not stated	56	81	59	
		2	14	6	
		<hr/>			
Total	58	95	65		

POPULATION

<i>RYE</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Data given</i>	<i>Est. total</i>
	1491/2	Rye MS. 77/3	178 pay cess (probably householders)	} —1150-1350
	1491/2	Rye MS. 85/1	192 names on muster list	
	1565	S.P.D., Eliz., 38/28	530 households 2468 inhabitants	} 2468
	1579/80	H.M.C., p. 67	1800-1900 communicants	
	1619	S.P.D., Jas. I, 107/11	307 names on muster list	c. 3000
	1660	Rye MS. 82/82	672 taxpayers over 16	c. 1100
	1676	Sussex Arch. Coll., vol. 45 (1902), pp. 142-8.	600 communicants	c. 1000
	1724	ibid, vol. 35 (1887), p. 192	200 families	c. 900(?)

HASTINGS			
1544	<i>Sussex Arch. Coll.</i> , vol. 14 (1862), p. 82	48 pay benevolence, 11 names recurring among:	} 1300-1400
1547	<i>Sussex Chantry Rec's</i> , (Sussex Rec. Soc., vol. 36), pp. 32-5.	74 chantry tenants	
1565	as Rye	280 households	c. 1250
1603	<i>Ecclesiastical Returns</i> (Sussex Record Soc., vol. 4), p. 10	847 communicants	c. 1400
1614	S.P.D., Jas. I, 77/91	301 names on muster list	1800-2100
1619	ibid., 107/11	315 names on muster list	1800-2100
1676	as Rye	1073 communicants	c. 1800
1724	as Rye	500 families	c. 2200 (?)
1731	op. cit. under 1544, p. 191	1636 inhabitants after 97 had died in an epidemic	1636-1739

Note

In computing the total population, the multipliers used are those recommended by Professor W. G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (1959), pp. 142-7, viz. $\times \frac{6}{10}$ for persons over the age of 15 or 18; $\times 6$ or $\times 7$ for names on muster lists.

The Rye return for 1565 gives a ratio of 4.7 persons per household, which tallies well with Gregory King's calculations for the country as a whole in the 1680's, see C. A. F. Meekings, *Dorset Hearth Tax Assessments, 1662-1664* (1951), pp. xxxiv-xxxvi, but comparison of the figures for Hastings in 1724 and 1731 suggests that at this date families were smaller, averaging 3.8 members each. All such calculations, however, are inevitably only rough approximations.