

From Cornish pilchards to Newfoundland cod (c.1550-1630)



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Faculty of History

Josh Ivinson, PhD Candidate

Part of the PhD project entitled:
Networks, institutions, and innovations in the English export trade of preserved fish, 1550-1630

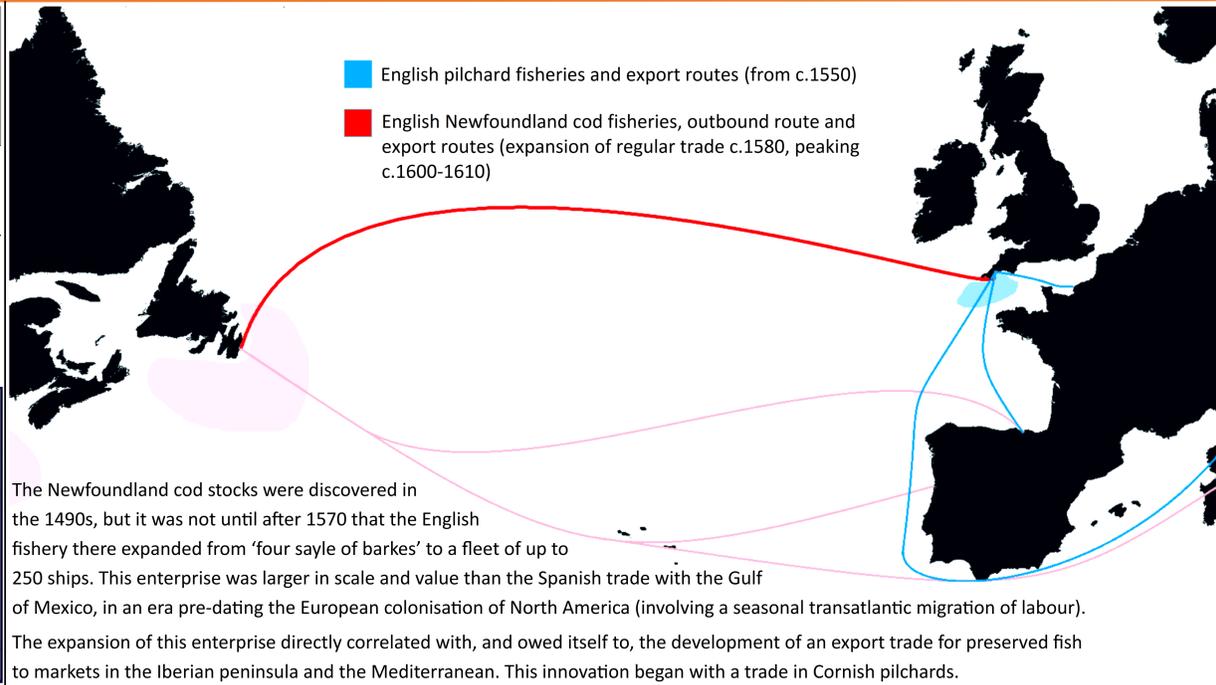
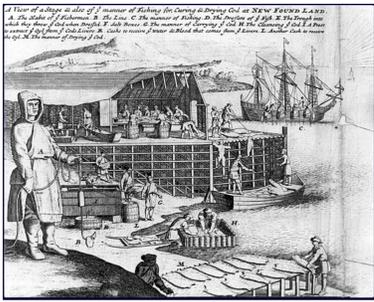
A case study of the proto-industrial growth of sea fisheries in the South West of England and their pioneering Atlantic-Mediterranean trade networks.



Seasonal infrastructure of the Newfoundland dry cod fishery.

Above: View of a 'flake' [for unloading and processing fish] from the diary of James Yonge, Plymouth surgeon (1667)

Below: Manner of the fisheries, Herman Moll, 1710 (original French woodcut, 1660)



Coastal pilchard fishing with seine nets in John Norden's 'Speculi Britanniae pars ... Cornwall' c.1597

"The comoditie that ariseth of this silly small fische is wouderfull; firste to the fishermen themselves in respecte of their sale, aswell to the Countrye people for their reliefe, as to the marchaunt, whose maketh againe great marte of them in kingdoms and Countries far remote. ... The dried ware they carrye into Spayne, Italie, Venice, and diuers places within the Straytes, wher they are very vendible"

The Newfoundland cod stocks were discovered in the 1490s, but it was not until after 1570 that the English fishery there expanded from 'four sayle of barkes' to a fleet of up to 250 ships. This enterprise was larger in scale and value than the Spanish trade with the Gulf of Mexico, in an era pre-dating the European colonisation of North America (involving a seasonal transatlantic migration of labour). The expansion of this enterprise directly correlated with, and owed itself to, the development of an export trade for preserved fish to markets in the Iberian peninsula and the Mediterranean. This innovation began with a trade in Cornish pilchards.

This project seeks to explore the development of this pioneering transnational trade in cheap, preferable foodstuffs by analysing:

1) The localised and 'vernacular' institutions which facilitated the rapid growth of this regional proto-industry, in lieu of major technological change.

Including: customary extra-legal forms of conflict resolution ; universally accepted forms of investment and profit sharing between ship-owners, merchant venturers and labourers ; the pre-contracting of transatlantic commerce before the fishing seasons began ; insurance and risk mediation; and developments in producer/freighter relations.

2) The regional and transnational networks which underpinned this growth, allowing a pioneering penetration of Mediterranean markets.

Notably: the networks between producers and re-exporters and their agents; the development of direct re-export and 'sack shipping' ; the amalgamation of these roles into a system of directed capitalism; and the rapid extension of these networks to encompass North American production, Mediterranean consumers, Northern European producers and freighters, and occasionally cheap salt from Cape Verde.

3) The pan-European market forces which motivated Englishmen divest from local fisheries and exploit New World resources in a pre-colonial era.

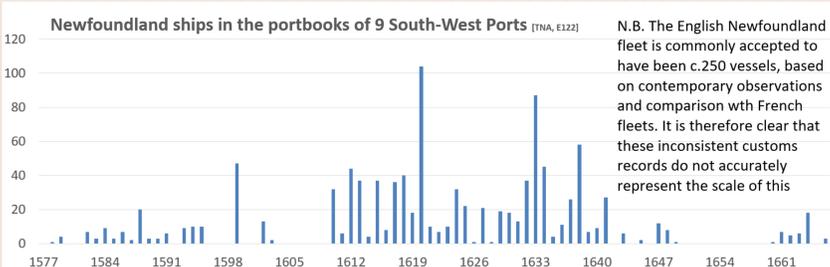
This aspect overlaps with, and aims to inform, the current 'North Atlantic Fishing Revolution 1400-1700' project (ERC Advanced Grant, 2016-2020, Trinity College Dublin) in asking how marginal maritime societies came to develop and exploit new circum-Atlantic patterns of resource exploitation in this era.

"It is impossible to be precise about the early fishing effort..."

In Early Modern England fish were tax-exempt and therefore absent from customs accounts, and no Board of Trade data was collected on fishing until the late 17th century.

Meanwhile, distant-water fishing records - which departed in ballast and returned directly to foreign ports - would not be visible in English records, and their charter contracts have not been preserved.

Therefore, much of my work focuses on untapped evidence from scattered court depositions (Admiralty, Chancery, Star Court, local municipal & vice-admiralty courts), state papers, contemporary literature and pamphlets & parliamentary records.



But mainly, I analyse underutilised mercantile accounts ((in the form of ledgers, letterbooks, and journals) of those who invested and diversified into these innovative new fishing trades.

The Corsini Letters (c.1570-1600) London Metropolitan Archives, c.3,500 letters (and several bills)

The London-based Florentine Corsini brothers (Philipe and Bartolomeo) were among "the greatest bringars of forren commodities into the realm" in the late sixteenth century. A collection of their inbound letters to their address in Gracious Street - photocopied before being sold at auction in the 1980s - offer an untapped insight into mercantile activities and networks in this era. Although primarily know as importers of Levantine luxuries, the Corsini letters highlight the brothers' role in pioneering the export of preserved fish from England to the Mediterranean - including herring, pilchards and eventually Newfoundland cod. Of the 359 English letters in the collection, roughly 1/3rd are from agents in the West Country, procuring mainly tin and fish, notably from James Bagg of Plymouth:

Feb 1590: James Bagg writes his first letter to Corsini, taking over from the ill 'Mr Glanderyll', and offering to procure pilchards for the Corsinis.

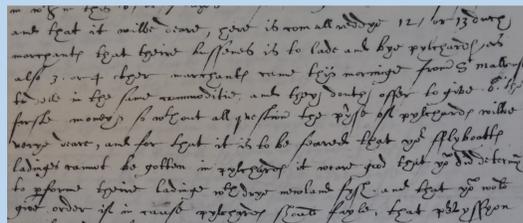
1591-2: Procures increasing amounts of pilchards and strives to be 'first to market' in Cadiz (despite wartime embargoes).

1593: Pilchards "are verie skant" and expensive.

1594: Offers Newfoundland fish as a substitute for scarce and expensive pilchards. Complains of unpredictable fishing seasons in England compared to Newfoundland, and demand for English fish from Dutch and French merchants.

1595-6: Advises dealing in larger and more predictable product of the Newfoundland fisheries.

1597-1600: Complains increasingly of Dutch competition, high price of salt, low yield of local fisheries, and the lack of available ships sailing his route from Plymouth to Italy.



The Ledger of John Rashleigh (1607-1620) Cornwall Record Office

The records of John Rashleigh, gentleman merchant and one-time MP for Fowey, offer an invaluable opportunity to analyse the activities of an English merchant-fisherman who invested in both local and transatlantic fisheries. Rashleigh's records - especially his personal ledger - contain details of his investments and political lobbying in the growing pilchard fisheries and export trade. But most significantly, Rashleigh operated two vessels sailing to Newfoundland fisheries and to Mediterranean markets: one to fish and the other (which he built himself) to freight half the catch.

Year	Voyage 1: Newfoundland for fishing		Voyage 2: To the Mediterranean (exporting pilchards or re-exporting Newfoundland cod)		Voyage 1: Newfoundland sack (freighting) voyage		Voyage 2	
	Depart to	Return to	Depart to	Return to	Depart to	Return to	Depart to	Return to
1607			Naples (Oct)	Fowey (March 1608)				
1608	Newfoundland (April)	Fowey (Sept)	Civitavecchia (28 Oct)		Newfoundland (May)	'Malaga or Alicante'	London (Nov)	
1609	Newfoundland (March)	Naples (Sept)	N/A	Fowey (March 1610)	Newfoundland (June) (2 nd voyage)	(Directly to Fowey)	La Rochelle (March) (1 st 'Straits' (Oct) (3 rd)	Fowey (March 1610)
1610	Newfoundland (April)	Fowey (Sept)	Naples (Oct)	Fowey (via Cadiz, May 1611)	Newfoundland (June)	La Rochelle (August)		
1611	No voyage		Naples (Sept)	?	?		Alicante (Aug), La Rochelle (Dec)	?
1612	Newfoundland (April)	?	?	?	?			
1613	Newfoundland (March)	?	?	Fowey (Jan 1614)			?	(Unsure of ship)
1614	?	Fowey (Oct)	?	Fowey (Jan 1615)	Newfoundland (May)	Mediterranean markets (Sept)		
1615	Newfoundland (April)	Fowey (Oct)		No voyage	?			
1616	No voyage		'Straits' (Jan)					
1617	No voyage		?	?				
1618	Newfoundland (March)	Fowey (Sept)	?	?	Newfoundland (May)	Mediterranean markets (Nov)		
1619	Newfoundland (March)	Fowey (Sept)	?	?	?			
1620	No voyage		Naples (Oct)	Fowey (April)	Newfoundland (June)	Bilbao (Nov)		



Other merchant accounts

- Accounts of William Blois (or Bloys), 1611-1621 (Suffolk Record Office, 122 folios): A well-connected wine merchant who chose to procure Newfoundland fish from his cousin in Plymouth for export to the Mediterranean, rather than herring from the more proximate East Coast fisheries.
- The Letters of Richard Newell, 1620s (Bodleian Library): A London shipping factor who recorded his voyage and dealings in Newfoundland in a set of detailed letters.
- The Accounts of Richard Trevill, 1590s (Royal Institution of Cornwall): A Cornish pilchard merchant who diversified into Newfoundland fish.
- The ledgers and journals of John Smyth of Bristol (1540s), John Paige of London (1650s), James Yonge of Plymouth (1660s), John Delbridge of Barnstaple (early 1600), and David Pietersz de Vries (Dutch freighter) (1590s) who all either traded English Newfoundland fish or visited the migratory fishing communities there; and the writings of numerous early Newfoundland colonists.