

# COASTAL FISHING OFF SOUTH EAST SUFFOLK IN THE CENTURY AFTER THE BLACK DEATH

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THE IMPORTANCE OF sea-fishing to the medieval economy has long been recognised, as, indeed, has the importance of herring to the medieval diet. Yet despite this, historians know surprisingly little about the medieval fishing industry. There has been no comprehensive survey of sea-fishing in the Middle Ages, and hardly any studies of the major fishing ports have been attempted. As Heath emphasized in his work on 15th-century Scarborough (1968, 53), this rather alarming gap in our knowledge owes much to the paucity of evidence left by medieval fishermen. Extant documentation is neither abundant nor informative, even from the larger ports and towns, and consequently it is difficult to answer the most basic questions about the industry's fortunes and organisation. As one observer has commented succinctly, 'there is little material evidence for sea-fishing, and studies of medieval ports have tended to concentrate on the wider aspects of their trading links' rather than their fishing industry (Taylor 1988, 468).

If the major fishing centres – those with good harbour facilities and trading privileges – left scant documentation, then historians might justifiably despair of discovering anything about fishermen in small coastal villages. In places such as these, with shallow havens or merely an accessible beach, fishing has obviously provided a vital source of employment for centuries, but as an activity it passes largely unrecorded in medieval documents (see Bolton 1980, 275). Consequently, our understanding of coastal communities and their economies remains incomplete. To what extent did villagers from the smaller coastal settlements depend upon fishing for their livelihood, and how far did they combine fishing with other pursuits? What type of fish did they seek, what equipment did they use, and in what ways did their activities differ from those of fishermen in the larger ports? And how did their fortunes fare in the economic upheaval of the post-Black Death era?

Fortunately, the chance survival of some rare material from Suffolk permits an examination of these issues. Perhaps the most valuable group of documents relate to Leiston Abbey's right to all wrecked goods washed up along the Suffolk coast between the Minsmere and Hundred rivers (north of Aldeburgh). The abbey monitored this potentially lucrative right through a special court, which was held each year on 6 December. The proceedings of this court are extant from 1378 to 1481 (although those from 1409 are in a poor state and await repair), and are catalogued in the Ipswich Branch of the Suffolk Record Office as 'wreck rolls'. The court was known locally as the Hethewarmoot, and both its administration and jurisdiction were kept separate and distinct from the normal manor court. Two bailiffs were appointed each year, one each from the coastal hamlets of Sizewell and Thorpe(ness), the business of each village being always recorded separately. The bailiffs would swear in a jury from each village to deal with the year's business, and it is the composition of these juries that is most significant. Every ship's master who was operating from the beaches of Sizewell and Thorpe was compelled to serve as a juror in that year's court. Consequently, we have a reliable record of the number of masters operating from these hamlets between 1378 and 1409. In addition to dealing with wrecks, some courts resolved individual disputes over fishing rights and contracts, whilst others even record the exact fishing season being worked by each master. In sum, the Hethewarmoot produced more than just wreck details: it was also Leiston Abbey's court for the fishermen of two small and – significantly – harbourless villages.

The Hethewarmoot rolls are complemented by material from the more substantial fishing ports of Walberswick and Dunwich. Dunwich had suffered grievously from sea inundation since the late 13th century, and shared a shifting and shallow harbour with Walberswick. By the late 14th century neither could rival Scarborough or Yarmouth in size or importance, although both maintained active fishing fleets. Evidence from the Walberswick churchwardens', and Dunwich town, accounts provide not only a useful insight into the scale and organisation of the fishing industry in these ports, but also an excellent comparison with Sizewell and Thorpe. Wherever possible, this core material is complemented by evidence from other Suffolk fishing communities.

## I

The main types of fish sought by east coast fishermen were pelagic, those which returned in large shoals each year to established spawning grounds. The most important of these were herring, which arrived off the north-east of England in June, and then gradually moved southwards until they could be found off the Suffolk coast between September and December (Pawley 1984, 180). This season was known as the 'flue' *fare* in the Hethewarmoot rolls (so-called after the flew – drift – nets used to catch herring), or simply as the fishing *fare* at Dunwich and Walberswick. It is generally assumed that fishermen in this trade followed the shoals down the eastern seaboard, and were consequently away from their home village for long periods. This explains why up to thirty Suffolk fishermen were temporarily resident in Great Yarmouth in the 1340s (Pawley 1984, 186), and why William Gosse of Dunwich came to be forestalling herring off Whitby in 1367.<sup>1</sup> Herring were sufficiently profitable to attract all types of fishermen, but the migratory nature of the *fare* meant that it tended to be in the hands of regular specialists rather than casual operators. There must have been large numbers of specialists in the larger ports, because the herring so dominated their economies. For example, many rent payments for lands and tenements in Southwold and Dunwich were still rendered in herring in the 14th century. In 1407 around 17,000 herring were paid as rents to the Clare manor at Southwold, and were promptly sold for £9 8s. 2d.

The variety of other fish sought by specialists from the larger ports and the distances which they were prepared to travel is impressive. Scarborough fishermen sailed far into the North Sea for herring during the winter months (known as the 'Winter' *fare*), and during the spring ventured north for deep-sea species such as haddock and cod (the 'Northsea' or 'Lent' *fare*, Heath 1968, 56). The same was true of fishermen from the larger Suffolk ports, who were responsible for opening up the Icelandic fishing grounds in the early 15th century (V.C.H. *Suffolk*, II, 208). Dunwich fishermen are recorded as working various seasons, such as the 'Lentyn' and 'Northland' *fares* (deep-sea spring fishing, as at Scarborough); the 'Makerell' *fare* (probably in the summer); the 'Tramely' *fare* (offshore fishing); and the unidentified 'Cotylday' and 'Deyse' *fares* (presumably deep-sea fishing).

In contrast, fishermen from smaller villages concentrated on a much narrower range of fishing seasons. For instance, the 'Northsea' *fare* (for deep-sea fishing) was listed in the Hethewarmoot rolls of Leiston Abbey, but, in contrast to Scarborough and Dunwich, there were rarely any boats working it. On the contrary, it appears to have been somewhat unpopular, as a number of disputes concern the failure of certain contracted masters to work the 'north' *fare* or the 'wynter' *fare*.<sup>2</sup> However, the rolls do confirm the importance of the herring to the fishermen of Sizewell and Thorpe. Between 1381 and 1388, an annual average of over 17.25 masters were working the herring *fare*, making this numerically the largest *fare* in the fishing year.<sup>3</sup>

Yet it is also clear that, even in their search for herring, fishermen from Sizewell and Thorpe were much less adventurous than their counterparts from the larger ports. Few boats were likely to have followed the herring shoals either down the east coast or out into the North Sea. Instead, the shoals were intercepted when they reached the Suffolk coast between September and Christmas. For the remainder of the year, the local fishermen sought sprats (*sprattus sprattus*), which are similar but distinct from herring. The sprat is pelagic in coastal waters and river estuaries, and spawns off East Anglia between January and July. Many of the Sizewell and Thorpe skippers who worked the herring *fare* in the autumn would then work the 'sparling' – or sprat – *fare* until the end of the year. For instance, of twenty masters fishing in the herring *fare* in 1381, fifteen also worked the sprat *fare*. The importance of the sprat to fishermen in smaller coastal villages should not be underestimated. At Aldeburgh, sprats were regarded as superior to herring, and by the mid-16th century its fishermen annually caught three times more sprats than herring (Arnott 1952, 48, 55). At Sizewell and Thorpe, the number of masters working the sprat *fare* fell only marginally below the number working the herring *fare*.<sup>4</sup>

Sprats were also sought by fishermen from Dunwich and Walberswick, but in these larger ports the sprat *fare* was but one of several lucrative fishing seasons. The popularity of the sprat at Sizewell, Thorpe and Aldeburgh indicates the overwhelming preference for local, coastal fishing among the fishermen of smaller villages. In part, this was simply because these smaller settlements often lacked a safe anchorage large enough to accommodate the vessels used in deep-sea operations. Yet this preference also owed much to financial constraints: deep-sea fishing was a risky business, requiring capital and wealthy backers to underwrite the venture, and such people were unlikely to be found outside the bigger ports.

The types of boat used along the Suffolk coast varied in size and value, but most were small and versatile. This is partly reflected in the level of salvage fines paid for boats wrecked upon the shore at Walton (Felixstowe), which varied from 20d. to four pounds.<sup>5</sup> The boats went under a variety of names, although the *batella* occurs most frequently. This generic name covered a variety of boat types, although the repeated references to the *batella* in the Hethewarmoot rolls implies a boat which was small enough to be dragged on to the beaches of Sizewell and Thorpe after each trip. Indeed, *batelle* at Scarborough were seldom more than twenty feet long, carrying a crew of three to five men (Heath 1968, 59). Although popular, the *batella* was less dominant at Dunwich where many of the specialist herring fishermen used a slightly larger vessel, the *farkost*, which was better suited to longer voyages and deep-sea operations.<sup>6</sup> The harbour facilities at Walberswick and Dunwich enabled the use of even larger boats, such as 'coks' and 'gret bots' (Lewis 1947, 91, 94): these were probably two-masted vessels of up to eighty tons, well suited for voyages to Icelandic waters (Heath 1968, 60), and which could also double as traders when not engaged in fishing. However, even in substantial ports such as Yarmouth, few fishing boats ever rivalled the large capacity of the 15th-century Dutch herring ships, the forerunners of the famous busses (Saul 1975, 184).

The total number of boats, and by extension the number of fishermen, operating from any one fishing centre is very difficult to establish due to lack of evidence. At Walberswick in 1451, there were twenty-two small boats 'for full and shotten herring, sperling or sprats', and a century later around forty similar vessels were working out of the river Alde (*V.C.H. Suffolk*, II, 290; Arncott 1952, 55). At Thorpe between 1377 and 1409, the number of masters ranged from seven to fifteen each year, and at Sizewell between five and thirteen. These figures provide a good indication of the number of boats operating each year, although it is impossible to know the exact size of a boat's crew. The number of masters at Sizewell and

Thorpe could represent anything from thirty to 150 fishermen, but there is no exact information: at best, the court rolls might refer to a master *'et socii sui'*. However, it is clear that crew members at Sizewell and Thorpe were also drawn from inland villages, such as Friston, Leiston and Theberton.

Local regulations concerning the sale of fish appear to have varied. The Leiston Abbey Hethewarmoot rolls remain silent about how the daily catch was sold and to whom. At Walton, however, fishermen had to follow strict guidelines. In 1387 four were amerced because 'they did not come to sell their fish at Collehou, as they should do through ancient custom, but they went elsewhere and sold the fish in other places'. Then, in 1411, the masters of two fishing boats were fined for failing to appear at 'Colishouston' to sell their fish. This arrangement was probably designed to stop forestalling of fish, a common practice in this period, and it also enabled the Dukes of Norfolk to charge a small 'tax' on all catches made by boats operating from Goseford haven. It was probably a fairly profitable tax, too, because in 1400 Collehou was leased for 12s. 6d. per annum.<sup>7</sup> Close regulation of fish sales was commonplace in the larger ports, and was designed to prevent merchants from cornering the market and forcing up prices (Britnell 1986, 40-41). Unfortunately, the documents themselves give no indication as to the markets for Suffolk fish, although from other records we know that smoked and salted herring featured prominently in local, national and international trade (see Waites 1977, 144; Bond 1988, 76-8; Bailey 1989, 151). The absence of any local sales regulations in smaller villages such as Sizewell and Thorpe might suggest that their catches were sold at sea, or taken directly to the larger ports and distributed from there. Alternatively, the catch was cured locally and then distributed into the regional network of towns and markets by 'peddars': if this was the case, the absence of local sales regulations indicates that the hauls of small, individual villages were too insignificant to affect the overall price of fish in the larger markets.

## II

It is impossible to make accurate estimates of the financial gains from fishing, because information about the size of crews, catches, share-systems and so on is extremely sparse. Indeed, precise details about the volume and value of the herring and sprat industry will always remain elusive. However, it has been estimated that a larger 14th-century Yarmouth herring boat could make between ten and fourteen trips during the autumn season, netting perhaps five to ten thousand fish per trip: in total, around 50,000 to 140,000 herring valued at anything from £10 to £35 (calculations based on Saul 1981, 34). At Scarborough, masters operating in *batelle* are assumed to have grossed around £7 per annum (Heath 1968, 57). How much of this income accrued to the crewmen themselves, and how much was kept by either masters or owners, is extremely difficult to establish. Traditionally, the season's catch would be divided between owner, master and crew according to a time-honoured share system. In reality, however, the arrangements for its distribution were varied and complex, although it seems likely that only a relatively small proportion was paid to the fishermen themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the available evidence suggests that the rewards from coastal fishing accrued largely to the boat-owners, but only after they had fulfilled a variety of regular financial obligations. Most port or urban authorities demanded a fixed share of the season's catch (the 'dole'), together with a contribution to the local church, or Christ's dole as it was known (Salzman 1964, 274-75). Hence much of the information relating to fishing in

Walberswick and Dunwich derives from extant records of dole payments: thus the Walberswick churchwardens' accounts record boats paying to the church dole, and the Dunwich town book records payments to the town dole. Unlike tithes, though, the exact size of these doles varied according to local custom and to the profitability of each voyage, and so it is impossible to convert them into aggregate annual hauls (Heath 1968, 56). However, officials did take steps to ensure that every boat in each *fare* rendered its dole, and so the documents do at least provide an accurate record of the number of boats operating each year.<sup>9</sup>

Other major financial outgoings were the capital investment in boats and equipment, including repairs, which were by no means negligible for the larger boats. Owners also had to reckon with sporadic losses through storms, war and piracy (Bailey 1990). Further costs were incurred when authorities levied mooring fees, or groundage dues when ships were laid up or under repair. Boatmen at Aldeburgh had to pay ten shillings to Snape Priory to keep one spratting boat for a year (Arnott 1952, 47), and at Easton Bavents ships paid to stop over in the lord's tidal marsh.<sup>10</sup> In the tidal rivers, owners might pay anchorage fees to haul their boats on to the land of the manorial lord, or they could seek proper wharf facilities. Quays were eagerly sought after, for in 1365 nine boat owners were fined a total of 19s. 8d. for illegally occupying quays belonging to the Duke of Norfolk in Woodbridge.<sup>11</sup> Other manors were likely to charge fishermen for a licence to dry nets on the foreshore.

The Scarborough fishing industry was controlled and financed by a minority of boat owners and owner/masters (Heath 1968, 58), and the same seems to have applied to Suffolk fishing. Some owners just provided capital and equipment and took no active part in the season's fishing, such as Margaret Fuller of Walberswick. Others, such as Edmund Wolnard, owned perhaps two or three small boats, skippered by himself and a couple of hired masters (Lewis 1947, 85, 91). John Moreff of Dunwich owned at least four boats, and his high tax assessment of 5s. 6d. in 1422 is a fair indication of his wealth and standing.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to stress that the concentration of boat ownership into the hands of a relatively small élite was not just a feature of larger ports such as Dunwich and Scarborough. John Pakke of Thorpe fished for at least eight years before 1385, after which his son took over his father's boat until 1405. They fished continuously during this period, working both the herring and sprat *fares* each year. Yet he also provided boats for other fishermen during the same period. For instance, whilst working the sprat *fare* as a master in 1378, he was accused of failing to provide five other men with another boat for the same *fare*.<sup>13</sup> Peter Aldred of Sizewell first appears as a master in 1380, and worked both the herring and sprat seasons in 1381. Between 1380 and 1399, he missed only one year as a master (1385), but then appeared just once more before the records cease in 1409 (1402). A freeman, his outside interests appear to have been limited: he held a few small parcels of land on leasehold between 1377 and 1382, and kept some animals in Theberton, but was otherwise inactive in the land market.<sup>14</sup> Prominent local owner/fishermen such as these would have made a comfortable living from the sea.

In contrast, the majority of fishermen were simply hired as masters or crewmen on a seasonal basis for a fixed wage. Yarmouth skippers, for example, were accustomed to earning one pound per season (Saul 1981, 34). Even many of these 'professional' masters did not possess a boat. For instance, in the 1452 sprat season at Walberswick, only 28 per cent of recorded masters were working in their own boats, and the figure had dropped to 19 per cent in 1454 (Lewis 1947, 85, 91). Many of these skippers were not consistently employed from year to year, and at Yarmouth few of them remained with the same employer for more than a couple of seasons (Saul 1975, 185). At Walberswick, too, masters were accustomed to changing employers with bewildering regularity. John Fynes and John

Wolnard skippered boats belonging to Richard Cook in the sprat *fare* of 1452, but neither was working at all in 1454 (Lewis 1947, 85, 91).

Many crewmen and masters plainly earned rather low incomes from the sea. Peter Odham, a 'professional' Dunwich master in the early 15th century, may serve as an example. Although he had owned a small *batella* since 1406, he could often be found working for other owners; for instance, he skippered a *farkost* belonging to John Moreff in the herring *fare* of 1422, and in the same year skippered another man's boat in the sprat *fare*. Despite this he was still a poor man, assessed at merely 9d. tax in 1422.<sup>15</sup> Besides men like Odham, there was a sizeable minority of skippers who appeared but briefly in the records, and whose income from fishing was even more limited. These men probably emerged from the ranks of crewmen to skipper boats as their personal circumstances dictated. Hugo Ode of Thorpe was married late in 1397, and became a master in 1400, a position he held for five consecutive years before disappearing from the records.<sup>16</sup> Our general impression confirms Heath's observation that the 'average' fisherman's rewards were hardly above subsistence level (Heath 1968, 60).

The majority of crewmen – as distinct from masters – were almost certainly men like Hugo Ode, using fishing to provide an occasional though somewhat risky source of supplementary income. In the larger ports, processing fish was a specialist task and another important spin-off from the fishing industry (Saul 1975, 186–8). Unfortunately, there is no manorial evidence that fishermen in smaller villages such as Sizewell and Thorpe salted or smoked their own fish, although a thorough study of probate records may prove more rewarding. However, there can be little doubt that the preparation of fish did provide some seasonal employment locally, because herring and sprats were highly perishable and had to be cured quickly. In one intriguing court roll reference, two Leiston women illegally 'carried away Sperling Spetes from the lord's wood' – presumably the slender wooden rods used to suspend fish in the smokehouse.<sup>17</sup> Neither of these women was related to known skippers, which suggests they may have been sub-contracted to process the fish.

It is clear that many fishermen along the Suffolk coast also looked to wrecks and piracy to supplement their incomes. In theory a wreck only existed when all living souls had died, but in practice locals claimed any flotsam as wreck. Manorial lords who held the right of sea-wreck along a stretch of shore invariably accepted this liberal interpretation of the law, as long as all wrecks were declared and valued. To facilitate this process the Leiston Hethewarmoot annually appointed two fishermen as *vagantes*, whose job it was to record and assess the value of all goods claimed as wreck during the year. Those claiming wreck were compelled to present their goods to these officials for valuation, after which they would pay the court exactly half the assessed value. Hence when Walter Cook picked up 'driftwood from a certain boat' off Sizewell in 1389, it was valued at 12d. and he paid 6d. to the Hethewarmoot. However, the same court noted that Robert Potter had claimed a plank as wreck, but had sold it without first presenting it for valuation.<sup>18</sup> The only goods that manorial lords claimed as right were 'royal' fish such as porpoise and conger eel, both regarded as delicacies for the seigneurial table. Even then, lords customarily recompensed fishermen for their efforts: hence John Manning and his crew were given four bushels of wheat by Leiston Abbey after they had caught – and handed over – a porpoise in 1382.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to stress that the majority of wreck claims were made by known fishermen, indicating that the goods were most often claimed whilst floating on the sea, rather than from the beach. For instance, Stephen Drenge and his crew picked up wood '*super mare in Fischynfar*' in 1378. Wreck found along the shoreline was often explicitly designated as such, as for instance when Henry Hudde paid 10d. for clothes stripped from

a corpse lying 'on the shingle' at Sizewell in 1385.<sup>20</sup> Wood from sunken boats and fishing equipment, such as nets, oars, and anchors, comprised the bulk of wrecked material. Personal belongings, such as boots, cloaks, swords, and even 'the armour on a dead man' were also claimed.<sup>21</sup> Barrels of herring, mackerel, sturgeon, and butter were occasionally hauled from the sea. The value of wrecked goods should not be underestimated: in one year at Sizewell, for example, they were assessed at 33s. 1d. Ships' cargoes could be especially valuable. In 1383 three Sizewell men claimed seven barrels of beer, valued at 19s. 6d. At Walton on various occasions, 'archers' cloths', a pipe of wine, and iron known as 'Spaynyssh Staves', each worth 20s., were claimed by local men.<sup>22</sup> If fishermen were consistently prepared to buy up all kinds of wrecked goods, then the clear assumption is that there was a ready 'second-hand' market for their disposal.

Wrecked goods patently constituted an important and semi-regular source of income to fishermen. A less regular activity was piracy, although there is clear evidence that many fishermen from our area of investigation were involved in piracy on a grand scale. On 17 May 1404, two ships from Kampen and Lubeck were seized by force off the Suffolk coast and taken to Bawdsey haven. The merchandise was valued at over £300, and belonged to a consortium of Hamburg merchants who subsequently complained to the English Crown. An inquiry was immediately launched, and established that the Kampen ship, with its consignment of beer, had been sold by the pirates to a London man but was still moored in Bawdsey harbour: the inquisition ordered that the ship's captain be compensated. However, the spoils of the Lubeck ship – beer, copper, ham and tar – had been split up among the pirates themselves, and an appended list to the inquiry reveals their exact identity. It was clearly a well-organised operation, revolving around several prominent fishermen from Goseford and Orwell havens. Seven Sizewell men were named, four of whom – Richard Cook, Robert Kelling, Simon Hardy, and Robert Barker – were registered as masters of fishing boats in that decade.<sup>23</sup> Each had claimed 7s. as their share of the spoils. One particularly surprising aspect of this operation is the involvement of twenty-one men from Ipswich, and many others from inland villages, such as the five from Earl Soham, two from Framsdon, two from Wickham Market, and one from Debenham. This information could be interpreted in two ways. It might reflect that the fishermen operating off Suffolk's coast were drawn from villages throughout east Suffolk; and/or it could indicate the geographical range of marketing and distributional contacts employed by the coastal fishermen.

### III

At the present state of knowledge, it is difficult to establish the precise fortunes of the fishing industry in the seventy-five years after the Black Death. There is evidence to suggest that expeditions from eastern ports to the Icelandic fishing grounds became more frequent in the early 15th century, reflecting a growth in deep-sea fishing. However, this has to be weighed against a probable decline in the herring industry, where English fishermen were apparently struggling to compete with the better-equipped Dutch fleets (Bolton 1980, 275–76). Of these two developments, the contraction of the more important herring industry was the most serious, a fact reflected in evidence for severe economic decline at both Scarborough and Yarmouth after the late 14th century (Heath 1968, 65–66; Saul 1975, 261–62). Scarborough and Yarmouth had been major centres of the herring trade before the Black Death, and their experience is consequently regarded as representative of the fishing industry as a whole. Yet there were undoubtedly other factors which

exacerbated the plight of these towns. Both were losing trade to other ports, and both suffered grievously from successive plague epidemics (Heath 1968, 65–66; Saul 1975, 259–61). Furthermore, Scarborough was afflicted by a series of destructive storms in the 1360s and 1370s, and rapid silting choked the harbour at Yarmouth in the 1370s (Bailey 1990; Saul 1975, 162).

Given the existence of local difficulties at Scarborough and Yarmouth, there might be grounds for supposing that more fortunately disposed fishing centres enjoyed greater opportunities. Table I provides evidence for the number of masters operating from Sizewell and Thorpe in the late 14th century, and reveals a remarkable rise in numbers from the late 1370s. The peak reached in the late 1380s was largely sustained at Thorpe until the late 1390s, after which numbers dropped. Unfortunately, our knowledge of local fish prices and haul-sizes is too fragmentary to explain this increase with precision. However, it does coincide almost exactly with the decline of Yarmouth's herring trade (Saul 1975, 176). Yarmouth was certainly suffering the depredations of war, storms and piracy at this time, which may well have disrupted its supply of herring (Saul 1975, 261; *V.C.H. Suffolk*, II, 294). As a consequence of Yarmouth's peculiar problems, smaller villages such as Sizewell and Thorpe might have succeeded in increasing their share of the herring trade. Whatever the reason, the boom could not be sustained, and the number of fishing boats had clearly declined by 1400.

TABLE I: MEAN NUMBER OF MASTERS OPERATING EACH YEAR FROM SIZEWELL AND THORPE, 1375–1409

<i>Period</i>	<i>Mean No. of Masters</i>			<i>Index*</i>
	<i>Sizewell</i>	<i>Thorpe</i>	<i>Both</i>	
1375–79 (3)	5.3	8.0	13.3	74
1380–84 (5)	6.8	9.6	16.4	91
1385–89 (5)	11.4	12.8	24.2	134
1390–94 (5)	9.8	12.2	22.0	122
1395–99 (5)	6.8	11.0	17.8	99
1400–04 (5)	6.6	8.4	15.0	83
1405–09 (3)	7.3	10.0	17.3	96

Source: S.R.O.I., HD371/1, 2.

( ) = number of years for which records survive.

\* 1375–1409 = 100.

If there was scope for some localised expansion in coastal herring fishing in the last decades of the 14th century, there was certainly scope for those fishermen seeking a wider variety of fish in tidal estuaries. Fishermen as 'trappers' could be found working countless rivers throughout medieval England, using either large V-shaped weirs with wattle fences,

or kiddles set in mill races, and evidence for this type of activity in the Orwell and Goseford (Deben) havens is reasonably abundant. In 1396, officials of the Duchess of Norfolk drew up a list of fishing weirs (*gurgites*) pertaining to the manor of Walton. In this year, three tenants were granted the use of eight and a half sea-weirs in Bawdsey, for which they paid the enormous sum of £15 in entry fines. In addition, there appear to have been a further sixteen, smaller, weirs aligned on the Felixstowe side of the haven: from other references, we know that similar weirs could be found in the river Orwell.<sup>24</sup> These high entry fines indicate buoyancy in estuarine fishing in this period, a popularity confirmed by other evidence. Between 1386 and 1401, at least five new weirs were constructed within the Walton court's jurisdiction, and there was an active transfer market in weirs of all kinds.<sup>25</sup> Nor were fish the only object of attention in these tidal rivers. In 1367 an Ufford boatowner was found guilty of failing to deliver a large consignment (32,600) of local oysters to Yarmouth.<sup>26</sup>

One reason for the interest in tidal-river fishing after the Black Death was improved technology. From the early 1370s, the trawling net – or wuderthonne – became more widely used, and greatly increased the size of hauls which could be taken in tidal rivers and shallow coasts (Salzman 1964, 272). These were small-meshed nets, up to thirty feet long and ten feet wide, and heavily weighted at the bottom with stones or iron. They were immediately successful in the Colne and Blackwater rivers (near Colchester), for in 1377 it was reported that 'a great quantity of labourers have withdrawn from the business of agriculture . . . plying these nets because of the gain and excessive wages they receive'. However, in the shallow estuaries of the east coast, trawling nets disturbed valuable spawning grounds. The same Colchester inquisition noted that 'where the fish used to rest and feed, [they] are now all consumed by the said instruments'. Greedy for quick profits, fishermen had also damaged the famous local oyster beds by these means: the nets trawled up oysters a paltry one inch wide, which – had they been left for a longer period and protected by more discerning catching methods – 'would be more than a palm in width'.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of complaints such as these, Parliament passed a Statute in 1389 which forbade the use of any net 'which might destroy the fry of fish' (*Statutes* ii, 67). Manorial authorities in Suffolk were already responding to this general problem. When three men used nets to catch mullet in a fleet off Walton in 1386, they were amerced a punitive thirty shillings; similarly, William Day was fined for using nets in Alston fleet in 1393.<sup>28</sup> Yet the effectiveness of trawling nets guaranteed that unscrupulous fishermen would continue to employ them. As late as 1489, it was reported that Orford haven was crowded with 'Stallebotes festened . . . with unresonable nettes and engynes that all maner frye and broode of fysshe . . . is taken and distroied'. They were promptly banned, with a £10 penalty for any contravention of the regulations (*Statutes* ii, 544).

In general, there were clearly some opportunities for expanding fishing activities along the Suffolk coast in the late 14th century. However, the surviving evidence from Scarborough and Yarmouth, and even from Sizewell/Thorpe, indicates strongly that the east coast herring industry was in decline by the turn of the century. How far can these trends be explained in terms of changes in the market for herring after the Black Death? Prices for smoked herring (sold at Yarmouth) rose sharply in the last quarter of the 14th century, a trend which is all the more surprising when compared to the prices for other basic foodstuffs, which fell in the same period (Saul 1975, 324). It seems unlikely that this price rise was caused by excess demand, since Dyer has detected a growing preference for fresh fish, rather than salted or cured fish, among the peasantry in this period (1988, 28; 1989, 159). A rise in herring prices at a time when demand for the herring was stable or even declining would suggest that supply factors were more influential in determining its

price. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know whether east coast herring shoals suddenly became depleted after the 1370s, resulting in smaller hauls, although it seems unlikely. Perhaps the problems posed by war, silting and piracy, noted above, disrupted supply at Yarmouth and therefore raised local prices.

None of these explanations is as convincing as we would like, and it is possible that Yarmouth herring were simply more expensive than those sold elsewhere. Indeed, there is evidence that the price of Yarmouth herring was being pinned at artificially high levels by local merchants. The English Crown became increasingly concerned about the high price of herring in the late 14th century, and after 1372 there was a flurry of royal legislation relating to Yarmouth's right to monopolistic control over both the autumn herring fair and the trade in local waters. It is significant that Yarmouth's enemies, and particularly Lowestoft, claimed repeatedly that the town's monopoly raised herring prices (Saul 1975, 162-67). In such circumstances, those Suffolk fishermen who were relatively free from Yarmouth's influence could undercut Yarmouth's prices and enjoy a temporary boom.

Until the 15th-century Hethewarmoot rolls are repaired, we cannot be certain whether the number of fishermen at Sizewell and Thorpe continued to decline after the 1400s. However, the number of boats working the herring *fare* from Dunwich shows a clear tendency to decline between 1400 and 1424, which is highly suggestive corroborative evidence. It might be argued that this fall merely reflects a streamlining of the herring industry, with fewer fishermen now undertaking larger operations, rather than an overall decline in the quantity of fish caught. In fact, whilst the number of herring boats declined, the average dole payment rendered by them remained more-or-less constant. The figure stood at nearly eight shillings per boat in 1405-09 and in 1420-24, and rose slightly to over nine shillings in 1425-29, indicating an absolute decline in the industry.

TABLE II: MEAN NUMBER OF BOATS OPERATING IN THE HERRING AND SPRAT FARES AT DUNWICH, 1405-1429

<i>Period</i>	<i>Herring Boats</i>	<i>Sprat Boats</i>
1405-09	16.8 (4)	16.8 (4)
1410-14	16.0 (4)	18.0 (5)
1415-19	9.3 (4)	17.0 (3)
1420-24	9.6 (5)	16.3 (4)
1425-29	10.8 (5)	17.0 (4)

SOURCE: Dunwich Town Book.

() = number of years for which records survive.

From Table II it appears that there was little change in the number of sprat boats fishing from Dunwich between 1400 and 1429, in direct contrast to the herring industry. However, these figures conceal a fall in the amount of dole paid by each boat to the town authorities each year. The 16.8 boats in the period 1405-09 paid an average of 8.6 shillings, whereas the 16.3 boats in 1425-29 averaged at just over three shillings, a fall of over 60 per cent.

This drastic decline probably indicates that coastal fishermen were now struggling to maintain a livelihood in a depressed market. Indeed, it complements evidence dating from 1448, which complains of poverty and a diminished number of sprat fishermen in Aldeburgh (Clodd 1959, 17–18).

The decline in the herring and the sprat industries in the early 15th century is reflected in the falling sale price of both fish. In the period 1375–99, cured herring were selling at an average of 16s. 9d. per thousand on the Yarmouth market (Saul 1975, 324). However, in 1426 fresh herring were priced at 5s. 4d. per thousand in Dunwich, and an average of 4s. 10d. at Walberswick between 1475–99; in this same period, Walberswick sprats fetched a meagre 8d. per thousand (calculated from Lewis 1947).<sup>29</sup> Of course, the *severity* of this fall owes much to the artificially high Yarmouth prices during the late 14th century, and to the higher price fetched by cured fish. Yet the underlying economic trends are obvious: demand for the herring – like most other goods – declined in the 15th century, whilst, simultaneously, Dutch fishermen undercut English producers. Faced with a greatly over-supplied market, the opportunities for East Anglian coastal fishermen were severely curtailed.

#### IV

The overwhelming paucity of the evidence relating to medieval sea fishing militates against drawing any firm conclusions. Further detailed research on churchwardens' accounts and town books will throw some light on the fortunes and organisation of the later 15th-century fishing industry, but our knowledge of the 14th century may always remain fragmentary. There is certainly some scope for future research: a few manorial and Water Leet records survive for the Lowestoft–Kessingland–Pakefield area, and careful scrutiny of wills and probate inventories will enhance our knowledge of coastal fishing significantly. The aim of this study has been merely to identify certain tendencies and characteristics of south-east Suffolk coastal fishing in the hundred years after the Black Death.

Not all English coastal villages were able to exploit fully the natural resources of the sea. The rocky shoreline of north Yorkshire, for instance, provided little shelter for mariners and hence limited opportunities for fishermen (Waites 1977, 138). Suffolk coastal communities were, however, more fortunately disposed, for even those which lacked a sheltered haven or tidal river still enjoyed the use of an accessible shingle beach from which to launch small boats: as a consequence, the sea – principally through fishing and trading – provided an important source of supplementary income to many Suffolk coastal villages in the later Middle Ages. Indeed, the lure of the sea extended to residents of inland villages, and was another important factor in diversifying the medieval Suffolk economy.

Fishermen from small villages, such as Sizewell and Thorpe, operated almost exclusively in coastal waters, which explains the local importance of the sprat. Deep-sea fishing tended to be the preserve of specialists from the largest ports and havens. Yet in common with the large ports, only a minority of fishermen owned their boats, and only a minority of skippers were regularly and consistently working the herring and sprat fishing grounds. The great majority of fishermen clearly looked to the sea to provide employment seasonally and sporadically. At Benacre, a substantial fragment of the 1381 Poll Tax return describes one quarter of all listed adults as *piscatores* (Powell 1896, 116). Hence fishing was important to the economies of small villages on and around the Suffolk coast, but it did not totally dominate them. Many fishermen maintained diverse occupational interests, and those around Leiston kept arable holdings, raised some stock, dug turves and so on. The classic,

specialist fishing village of the early 20th century is more a product of the industrial revolution than a feature of the Middle Ages (Pawley 1984, 270).

The widespread and prolonged depression in grain farming after the mid-1370s may well have forced some farmers to seek extra income elsewhere, and the Colchester inquisition of 1377 clearly illustrates the attractiveness of fishing to such men. This best explains the fishing boom in Suffolk's tidal estuaries and coastal waters in the 1370s and 1380s, although it also owed something to Yarmouth's decline and political feuding. Historians often overlook the fact that the drop in grain prices from the mid-1370s affected peasant producers as well as the seigneurial demesnes. Consequently, the peasantry were forced to seek alternative employment – such as fishing and textile manufacturing – to compensate for the decline in income from their arable holdings. Fishing, which had always offered an important source of alternative income to the residents of Suffolk coastal communities, attracted a greater number of speculative and seasonal workers from the 1370s. In common with many such industries, however, it was probably suffering from over-supply by the early 15th century (Bailey 1988, 13).

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#### NOTES

- 1 P.R.O., C145. 192/3.
- 2 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, mm. 2–4.
- 3 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, mm. 4–8.
- 4 For instance, there were on average 17.12 masters working on the sprat *fare* each year between 1381 and 1388.
- 5 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17, mm. 3, 12.
- 6 See, for instance, Dunwich Town Book, S.R.O.I., HD 1001/1, pp. 107–08.
- 7 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17, mm. 24, 77, 115.
- 8 At Lowestoft during the early modern period, fishing boats laid at 75 shares: around 40% went to the owner, 24% to the master and mate, 11% to the maintenance of the gear, and 25% to the remaining eight or nine crew members. I am grateful to Mr David Butcher for this information.
- 9 Dunwich Town Book, p. 90.
- 10 S.R.O.I., V5/19/1.6.
- 11 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17, m. 24; HD 1538/394.
- 12 Dunwich Town Book, pp. 107–08.
- 13 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, m. 1.
- 14 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1; C.U.L., Vanneck MSS (Leiston).
- 15 Dunwich Town Book, pp. 12, 107–10.
- 16 S.R.O.I., HD 371/2; C.U.L., Vanneck MSS (Leiston), court held December 1397.
- 17 C.U.L., Vanneck MSS (Leiston), court held December 1397.
- 18 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, m. 9.
- 19 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, m. 4a.
- 20 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, mm. 1, 6.
- 21 P.R.O., SC2. 203/107.
- 22 S.R.O.I., HD 371/1, m. 5; HA 119: 50/3/17, mm. 24, 27, 37.
- 23 *C.I.M.*, 1399–1422, pp. 146–48; S.R.O.I., HD 371/2.
- 24 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17, mm. 76, 93.
- 25 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17, mm. 19, 45, 54, 69, 81.
- 26 S.R.O.I., HD 1538/394; see also Salzman 1964, 283.
- 27 *C.I.M.*, 1348–77, pp. 406–07.
- 28 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17, mm. 18, 48.
- 29 Dunwich Town Book.

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*Printed works: abbreviations*

- C.I.M.*            *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous.*  
*Statutes*        *Statutes of the Realm.*

*Abbreviations for MSS*

- C.U.L.            Cambridge University Library.  
P.R.O.            Public Record Office (Chancery Lane).  
S.R.O.I.          Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.