

The Living Conditions Onboard UK Distant-Water Trawlers, 1945-1970

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This article examines accommodation and dietary conditions on British trawlers during the quarter-century after the end of World War II. In order to understand how these evolved, however, it is important to examine their origins. When sailing smacks from the 1850s pushed further north in search of new grounds, they encountered colder and rougher weather. As a result, they were away for much longer periods, with the average trip lasting about fourteen days. Unfortunately, the vessels had the same crew facilities as traditional inshore vessels, which were away only overnight. This meant that the crew of a smack had cramped and poorly ventilated quarters heated only by small coal stoves. Moreover, the cooking was done in the same area, which was lit simply by candles and oil lamps. There was no wash place or sanitary provision, and the bunks were simple planks of wood.'

Since the steam trawlers that came into service in the 1890s had more space, conditions should have improved. But since their design allowed for a large fish hold and an engine room, the only space available for crew accommodation was the foc'sle at the stem (front); this was unsuitable because it was awkwardly shaped and separated from the rest of the vessel by the open deck. It was made even more uncomfortable because in rough weather the bow would rise and fall alarmingly, forcing the men to wedge themselves in their bunks, especially the top ones, for fear of being thrown onto the steel floor as much as seven feet below. This area was also damp and cold because the added weight of the materials needed to fix this would have affected the vessel's stability and trim in bad weather.'

The poor living conditions and the higher fatality rates in trawling soon attracted attention. By 1883, the Primitive Methodists and the Duke of Edinburgh were actively advocating change. The subsequent agitation led to the incorporation of rules for trawler accommodation in the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act. While the requirements were very limited, they were also the only ones ever enacted. Section 210 mandated that each crewman must have twelve feet of "superficial space," which Schedule VI required "be properly constructed as to light and ventilation as well as being protected from the weather and sea." The accommodation was also to be protected from any effluvia which might emanate from the cargo and provided with minimum standards of galley and sanitary facilities.'

Trawler owners responded to the Act by providing only the minima. This was exacerbated by the poor level of maintenance of even these basic facilities. For example, in 1935 Aberdeen distant-water crews complained bitterly about the condition of the living

quarters, which they described as primitive in the extreme, obsolescent and filthy. Twelve years later, the crews in Aberdeen went on strike when things had not improved. A local union official characterised conditions as "disgraceful...rat infested and insanitary." One of the reasons for this state of affairs was that the trawlers had been exempted from the increased accommodation requirements laid down in Section 64 of the Merchant Shipping Act of 1906. Trawler owners were not even called upon to supply the bedding and personal lockers that the Act mandated for the merchant navy.⁴

The dispute in Aberdeen, and similar problems in Fleetwood and Grimsby, led in 1949 to representations on behalf of all trawlermen by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which submitted a document to the Labour government detailing the appalling accommodation and noting that the crew had to live and sleep in the foc'sle and endure poor sanitation, heating, washing and drying facilities, and ventilation. The TUC also claimed that there was neither proper medical provision nor adequate cleaning between trips. Although questions were raised both on the floor of the House of Commons and in the committee examining the Fishing Industry Bill then before Parliament, the only result was that a section was incorporated allowing the Minister of Transport to issue regulations about accommodations in new trawlers. This did not satisfy the TUC because nothing was said about existing trawlers. To make matters worse, the change of government in 1951 and worsening finances in the industry rendered even the weak plank on accommodation in the Sea Fishing Industry Act of 1951 ineffective for the rest of the decade.⁵

The quality of provisions was also contentious. Section 400 of the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act specified a minimum food requirement, which was defined in the 1906 Act (the first Merchant Shipping Act to address the trawling industry) as the equivalent of three cooked meals per day. But neither act required certification of cooks or adequate food storage facilities. The outcome was that even after eighteen hours on deck crews were not guaranteed a decent cooked meal, since the cook might well be incompetent or the food inedible. Moreover, the stores provided by the owners consisted of only basics (bread, flour, jam, meat and potatoes); anything else had to be provided by the men themselves. Even as late as the 1960s, crewmen had to provide their own "luxuries," such as tinned or fresh fruit. Many men brought oranges wrapped in tissue paper so that after consuming the fruit they could use the wrapping as toilet paper, as none was ever supplied as standard issue by the trawler owners. A further anomaly was that the skippers and mates received no food allowance: as "co-adventurers," they either had to bring their own food or have its cost deducted from their shares at the end of the voyage.⁶

Table 1
The Comparative Age Of UK Trawler Fleet, 1962

Age	Hull	Grimsby	Fleetwood
1931-1940	27	20	18
1941-1950	53	19	6
1950-1955	20	8	-
1956-1962	38	17	3

Source: SHARO, Grimsby Fishing Vessel Owners Association, J.R. Copley Papers, Evidence to White Fish Authority, Mss. 362/22/4.

Thus, at the end of the war living conditions remained inadequate and the diet was high in fat and low in vitamin C due to the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables. But the twenty-five years after 1945 were marked by significant change in the trawling fleets. Coal-fired vessels were superseded by oil-fired boats, which in turn were replaced by diesels from the mid-1960s. While the majority of the coal- and oil-fired boats had the same limited crew accommodation as prewar vessels, the diesels did have better facilities, although they were a minority until at least 1964 (see table 1). The preponderance of older vessels in Fleetwood is explained by the fact that many of the older trawlers from Grimsby and Hull were simply renamed and transferred to that port as newer vessels came on line in the Humber ports.⁷

How little the accommodation on these old-style vessels had changed since the 1890s is best illustrated by a reminiscence from an ex-trawlerman who sailed out of Grimsby after the war:

The foc'sle started at the stem of the vessel to about 20ft aft, it was about 20ft in beam. This was the living quarters for sixteen men. There were no lockers for your gear, you simply kept three weeks change of clothing in your kit bag, this you used mainly as a pillow. In the fo'castle would be an iron stove with an asbestos lagged flue running across the ceiling and out the aft end. This was the only means of heating and of drying your wet gear. These would be only one or two light bulbs for illumination, no bunk lights...In this small space you kept your seaboots, guernseys, oilskins etc. The only ventilation was from the entrance to the deck. This was reached by a steep metal ladder which was very tricky to use in heavy weather...The food on board was very basic, flour, potatoes, fish, plus one joint of meat a day. If you had a good cook, you could eat fairly well, but breakfast and tea was always fish.'

The other facilities were also inadequate. The mess room, for example, was not big enough for the entire crew to sit down for their meals. The sanitary arrangements were even more primitive, as this 1950 account illustrates:

When I was a young decky ships didn't have toilets on board. You can imagine what we had to do, how many men did we lose at sea through having no toilets. The Board of Trade then ruled all boats had to have a toilet on board, so what did the owners do? Cut a hole right through the boat put a hood over it and that was your toilet. Mean? And still very dangerous, you had to be there at the right time, when the ship was dipping its head you'd get out like hell because when the ship came down a great spout of water shot out the hole.⁹

During the 1950s trawler owners were gradually forced to provide flush toilets and baths in their vessels by the bad publicity engendered when questions by Grimsby Councillor F. Chapple about trawlers with no sanitary provisions were published in the national press. It would seem, however, that only the minimum was done, for many of the newly fitted baths had no running water, which instead had to be pumped in and heated by means of a steam hose. In bad weather the water often froze, rendering the bath and toilet inoperable. As one

trawlerman remembered, "[t]he slightest bit of frost would put the toilet out of action. Then it was down to the stoke hold, on to a shovel cover with a bit of fine coal dust and into the furnace. If the chief was in a good mood, he would give you some cotton waste, otherwise it was newspaper or orange wrappings."¹⁰

The amount and type of food supplied to the trawler crews was a serious problem during the entire period. Again, it was the crews in Aberdeen who initially raised the issue. In April 1953 they demanded both a greater variety and quantity of food, but this was emphatically rejected by an owner's association under no legal obligation to do more. For the same reason Grimsby owners rejected a request by the Trawler Officers' Guild that their members be allowed the same food allowance as the men. The problem was compounded by the fact that every trawling firm had individual service departments that were expected to make good profits supplying their vessels. This system was crucial in the owners' financial calculations, although as early as 1936 it had been criticised as "exploitive" by the Sea Fish Commission. Supply departments thus tended to buy poor quality items and to resist attempts to increase their amount or range, since to do so would have lowered not only their profits but also those of the parent companies."

The food was put in the charge of one of the least qualified and lowest paid members of the crew, the cook, who was usually an ex-trawlerman grown too old for deck work. Training was simply making a few trips as an assistant to someone who had learned by the same method. The dangers of this method were apparent, since the cook had to provide meals for twenty men, three times a day for an average of twenty-one days. The supplies would improve when the vessel reached the fishing grounds, for the cook could then have as much fish as he wanted. Indeed, this tradition allowed the owners to provide even less food; the crew was expected to catch much of its own food.¹² There were also constant problems over bread: only two days supply was put aboard when trawlers sailed; after this had been consumed, it was up to the cook to bake the daily requirement.

A cook who could bake good bread and make a decent steam pudding was much appreciated and often followed a successful skipper from boat to boat. Such a skipper was only too aware that a well-fed crew would work harder and cause less trouble. Cooks of this calibre would seem to have been fairly scarce, for there are many accounts in the trade journals of trouble erupting over bad food. For example, in February 1967 three deckhands were fined a total of £32, with £18 costs, for refusing to work when mouldy flour prevented the baking of bread. The fact that until the mid-1960s no real training was given to cooks meant that crews had to suffer the consequences of incompetent and often slovenly cooks."

Some of the oil-burning ships built during the 1950s, such as *S.T. Laforey*, were equipped with adequate refrigeration and food storage facilities." But the majority of trawlers continued to have extremely basic facilities, as this account of how meat was preserved in the early 1960s illustrates:

The meat was put on top of the ice that filled up one of the fish holds on the way to the grounds. This had to be ventilated every other day as it was topped off with "Dry Ice." Then it was the job of the galley-boy to retrieve some of the meat. Then just before fishing commenced, the rest of the meat would be brought out and salted down for the homeward journey.¹⁵

As a result of pressure brought by employees on the National Joint Industrial Council (NJIC), the Ministry of Transport in 1959 began to exercise its powers to regulate accommodation under the 1951 Act: all new trawlers were to be built with crew accommodation in the aft section. Other facilities were also improved, as members of the British Trawler Federation (BTF) began for the first time to feel the effects of a labour shortage that was to last throughout the 1960s. The next configuration for accommodation specified cabins for the engineers, bosun and cook on the starboard side, and the skipper, mate and wireless officer amidships. The deck crew were housed four to a cabin in four cabins in the stern. Separate mess rooms were to be provided for officers and crew with adequate food storage space and refrigeration. Heating was to be by a centralised system, which the more powerful diesel engines could provide. The provision of separate toilets, wash basins, baths and showers with hot and cold water, as well as adequate drying rooms for sea gear, contributed to a major change in the standard of accommodation for crew on the new boats built in the 1960s.¹⁶

In April 1959 the Board of Trade also called a meeting of interested parties to discuss ways to improve accommodation in the existing fleet. Representatives from the Transport and General Workers Union, trawler building firms, and Lloyds Insurance attended, although only one owner, Basil Parkes of the Boston Deep Sea Fishing Company, turned up. The builders' representatives believed that the older ships could not be adapted without weakening their structure, a view supported by Lloyds. This seeming consensus effectively ended the meeting."

The matter might have ended there except for a fortuitous occurrence when Parkes took one of his periodic working trips to sea. He was one of the very few owners who did this, a fact appreciated by trawlermen, for his company was virtually the only one to have a reputation as a fair employer. During his voyage the *ST Bartholomew* encountered heavy weather. After watching the crew try to negotiate their way from the foc'sle to the galley across the open deck, he discussed the matter with the skipper who, it turned out, had trained as a marine architect before entering the trawling industry. When the skipper showed him that the older vessels could be adapted to fit cabins on the starboard side without upsetting the trim, Parkes immediately ordered the conversion of his existing fleet. The simple method entailed removing the starboard fishing equipment and replacing it with cabins of a similar displacement. This dramatically improved conditions on the older boats, and other owners had to follow Parkes' lead or risk losing their men. Still, the rate of conversion never matched the need, so there were trawlers with foc'sle accommodation until the late 1960s. Another improvement that came out of the same trip was the introduction of catering size refrigerators because Parkes saw what could happen if a vessel were at sea for a prolonged period (the *Bartholomew's* voyage took twenty-six days instead of the usual twenty-one).¹⁸

While the addition of new trawlers and the conversion of older vessels did make a difference, conditions were still not as good as many within the industry contended.¹⁹ This account by a young deckhand on one of the new trawlers puts the improvements in context:

The decky-learner cabin was right over the engine and it always took two or three nights of broken sleep before you could settle into a routine. The conditions were basic, two toilets on the starboard side and two on the port often with no doors on...There was one shower and one bath on either side ...for sixteen men. The walls of the crew's quarters were simply painted

metal unlike the officers which were often wood panelled. There was little in the way of proper ventilation so there was always this smell about which was a mixture of fish, oil and vomit.²⁰

The facilities radically deteriorated in these vessels because the trawling companies never hired stewards. Instead, the task of checking that the men kept their accommodation clean was given to the mate who, given his other responsibilities, had little time for this duty. Regardless, it would have been difficult to enforce the rules since the only domestic cleaner ever carried was carbolic soap; combined with a lack of equipment, this made cleaning almost impossible. Moreover, the location of the accommodation was sometimes due to expediency rather than comfort or privacy. A radio officer of the same period remembers that in some of the new vessels his bunk was actually in the radio cabin so that he could be readily available twenty-four hours a day. This was akin to living and working in a small office for three weeks at a time, without a weekend break.²¹

During the summer of 1962 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) turned its attention to the question of accommodation for trawler crews. It found that the UK, US, Greece and South Africa, among others, had minimal legislation on the topic. In contrast, countries such as Germany, Japan and Chile had strict rules governing all facilities relating to crew comfort. They conformed, for instance, to the international standard of 9 1/2 square feet as the minimum space for each crew member. Four years later, the ILO put all its resources into the Accommodation of Crews (Fishing Vessels) Convention No. 86. Although Britain ratified this convention in 1967, the UK was again examined by the ILO in 1968, this time because of a lack of recreational and medical facilities. The British government's answer to a 1952 ILO questionnaire on recreational facilities was still the official line in 1968: "A fishing vessel with its variety of gear does not permit much in the way of recreation aboard. The members of the crew usually take cards, dominoes, and books, etc." Yet as one UK trawlerman put it, "[w]e had to take cards, dominoes, or read, there was nothing else, and these we had to supply ourselves." How far the UK lagged behind other countries can be seen from German and French legislation, which stipulated that distant-water trawlers must provide libraries, films and game rooms for the men.²² Of 106 Hull trawlers, most did not conform to some ILO rule (see table 2).

Table 2
Number Of Hull Trawlers Not Meeting ILO Accommodation Standards, January 1967

Accommodation	Trawlers Not Up to Standard
Quarters not amidships or aft	30
Cabins less than 14ft square	71
Cabins sleeping more than four	77
Clothes lockers less than 5ft high	32
Insufficient baths/showers	36
No sick berth	100
No drying room	11

Source: S. Moore, "The Occupation of Trawl Fishing and Medical Aid Available to Grimsby Deep Sea Fishermen," *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, XXVI (1969), 19.

The area in which the UK lagged furthest behind its European contemporaries was in medical facilities. There was no legal requirement that any crew be trained in first aid, let alone that a vessel must carry a trained medical attendant or have a sick-bay, despite the fact that the industry had the highest morbidity and mortality rates in Britain. The only legal requirement was a 1927 Board of Trade order requiring all vessels to carry medical stores and a copy of *The Ship Captain's Medical Guide*, a complex 356-page tome about which even the skipper and the mate would only have had the most cursory knowledge.²³

During the 1960s, of course, helicopter rescue was available, but prevailing weather conditions often made this so hazardous that it was reserved only for those in extreme need. After the 1968 disasters when three Hull trawlers were lost with all hands, the Holland-Martin Report recommended that a "mother ship" should be stationed on the distant-water grounds to provide comprehensive support facilities. In contrast to the British, the German trawling fleet enjoyed not only far superior medical facilities on individual boats but also had since 1952 two fully-equipped hospital ships to serve them on the Icelandic fishing grounds.²⁴

The lack of adequate medical facilities on British trawlers meant that their crews never received satisfactory medical help, a condition that in many cases could have been a factor in a crew member's death. Vibration and constant noise not only helped make living conditions uncomfortable but also led to crew members making mistakes because they became disoriented. This was often worse in the new vessels because diesel engines seem to have caused more vibration than steam.²⁵

The sustained bad publicity the trawling companies received as a result of the 1968 tragedies slowly forced them to make concessions on some of the previously unmet crew demands. In 1970, the British Trawler Federation (BTF) agreed with the officers' guilds in all the main ports to provide their members with the same food allowance as the rest of the crew. No concession was made, however, on the overall range or amount of provisions.²⁶ BTF members again showed how adept they were at conceding only as much as was necessary.

This attitude was exemplified by the manner in which the owners finally agreed to supply the men with bedding. What they eventually provided was one flock bed, one pillow and two blankets, but no sheets. Further, these were only given to men who had filled out an application, backed up by a fully up-to-date log book covering the previous three years, and a medical certificate. The form had to be in twenty-four hours before sailing, and the bedding had to be picked up from the local fishing vessel owners' association between 10.30am and 2.30pm on the day of sailing. The meagreness was underlined by the fact that only one set of bedding was allowed per year, and it had to be taken home to be cleaned. A similar concession was the belated supply of some articles of protective clothing, which had to be applied for and collected in the same manner as the bedding. One of the documents the owners made obligatory for receiving these things was a medical certificate stating that a fisherman was fit for sea duty. This was actually another policy they had been forced to implement as a result of the Holland-Martin Report. The fact that they quickly utilised a measure they had bitterly opposed for many years is another example of their adaptability. Moreover, the trade press actually herald these changes to be major improvements to the already "luxurious" conditions UK trawlermen enjoyed.²⁷

The supply and use of alcohol on trawlers is a complex issue involving tradition, boredom, and sheer necessity. Men would often report back for duty at sailing time so

inebriated that they were unfit for duty, a point rightly raised in the Holland-Martin Report as a danger. The reasons for this, however, were not simply that trawlermen were heavy drinkers. Instead, in many cases it had to do with acquiring enough courage to face another trip to sea. Once on board, the ambiguous attitude the industry had to drink became clear. On the one hand, drink was institutionalised; on the other, it was seen as an industrial menace. For example, in line with naval tradition all trawlers carried a good supply of rum to act as a stimulant or a reward. As one man put it, "[y]ou would look forward to you tot of rum in the morning or at the end of a stint on deck, it kept you going. It was put on board in two-gallon jars by the company as part of the bond and was doled out by the skipper." In short, alcohol was used deliberately by trawler owners to bolster the crew's performance; indeed, it was a necessity in some of the weather conditions trawlermen endured. On the other hand, trawlermen were often portrayed in the local press as being of a "low drunken character."²⁸

Rum came out of the "bond" which, as the name suggests, was a store of duty-free liquor and tobacco a trawler was allowed to carry if it left British territorial waters. The bond was the sole responsibility of the skipper, who would sell tobacco as soon as the vessel was in international waters, but would only sell drink on the homeward voyage. This culture of ingrained drinking did not cause problems unless a member of the crew had a drinking problem. Unfortunately, due to the stress involved in trawling, many men did, especially during the 1960s when the labour gap led to the hiring of men who might have been rejected in earlier years. Another reason to drink at sea was of course boredom. Men would smuggle drink on board to help pass the long evenings on both the outward and homeward passages. Many ex-trawlermen attributed this to the total lack of recreational facilities on board. There would seem to have been a lack of understanding of this among members of the Holland-Martin Commission, since their solution was to tighten discipline and provide a properly run bar.²⁹ Although its report denied that trawlermen were a "drunken lot," this view undoubtedly affected their reasoning, for while a bar may have a beneficial effect, it would only have done so as part of package designed to relieve the boredom.

There can be no doubt that accommodation standards for British trawlermen improved during the 1960s. It is equally true, however, that because they had been so bad between 1945 and 1960 they never approached the standards in the other major trawling countries. The fact that many of these changes were forced upon the trawler owners, and that many facilities, like medical care, were no better in 1970 than they had been in 1945, would seem to vindicate the view of many ex-trawlermen that their living conditions were the owners' last priority.

NOTES

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9. D. Lister to Author, February 1993.

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18. J. Goddard and R. Spalding, *Fish 'n' Ships* (Beverly, 1987), 54; Parkes, *Trawlings*, 191-193; and SHARO, MSS/387/7/99, Hodgson and Harris Accountants Report for WFA, 27 January 1964.

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28. Committee of Inquiry into Trawler Safety, *Final Report*, 105; D. Lister to Author, February 1993; and Woodhouse to Author, June 1993.

29. Senior to Author, March 1993; and Committee of Inquiry into Trawler Safety, *Final Report*, 105.