The Decline of British Whaling in Arctic Canada, 1820-1850: A Case Study of Newcastle upon Tyne

Tony Barrow

The rapid decline of the British whaling industry after 1820 has attracted the attention of a number of economic historians in recent years. The principal historian of British whaling, Gordon Jackson, remarked on the marginal character of the trade: "British whaling was not an economic imperative for most of its history," he wrote; "it was not essential to the health of the British economy in general or supplying whale products in particular."[1] In comparing British and American whaling competition in the North Atlantic between 1816 and 1842, American historians L.E. Davis, R.E. Gallman and T.D. Hutchins drew similar conclusions. The British trade declined, they argued, because American whalers were more productive at lower cost than their British rivals.[2] They were smaller, employed fewer men and spent more time at sea. Only the tariff protection policies of successive governments enabled British whaler owners to compete. Before 1840 British-caught whale oil was only liable to pay duty of one shilling per tun; by contrast foreign-caught oil paid a massive 532 shillings.[3]

National and international considerations such as these remain central to general explanations for the rapid decline of British whaling after 1820. However, local or regional considerations appear to have been just as important in governing the decisions of merchants who chose to employ their vessels in the whaling trade. Arctic whaling before 1820 had not been an exclusive activity but was instead integrated into the general shipping activity of the ports that engaged in it.[4] Moreover, Arctic whaling had always been a notoriously uncertain enterprise, "a species of gambling rather than any sort of regular trade," as William Wilberforce famously remarked in 1786.[5] Cycles of growth and decline were characteristic of the industry, and the number of vessels employed in the British whaling fleet fluctuated from one year to the next. Given the influence of local considerations on decisions, the experience of shipowners at individual ports provides an important perspective in which the decline of British whaling should be viewed.

The central importance of local and regional factors was first analysed by R.C. Michie over twenty years ago.[6] Michie demonstrated that the survival of whaling enterprise from the ports of northeast Scotland had more to do with the lack of alternative employment

The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord, VIII, No. 4 (October 1998), 35-54.

opportunities for local ships and the importance of income generation for the local economies of Aberdeen, Peterhead, and others than with the economics of competitive advantage in the North Atlantic. Scottish whalers continued to sail to the Arctic grounds after the bulk of English ports had withdrawn from the trade because they were able to sustain lower operating costs and tolerate marginal profits in the expectation of an occasional bumper year. The extent to which these considerations were important to the shipowners at English ports is less clear, not least because there were only two ports active in the Arctic fishery after 1836, Hull and Newcastle upon Tyne. Unlike many of their Scottish counterparts, both were substantial ports with large shipping stocks and extensive trading connections. Why did the shipowners of Hull and Newcastle persevere with whaling activity after 1820 when those of Liverpool and London did not? Certainly, evidence for the situation at Hull is better known and more frequently discussed.' By contrast the survival of a whaling trade at Newcastle is generally overlooked. This paper seeks to redress some of that neglect. It offers a case study of the economic and commercial circumstances which contributed to the gradual decline but longer survival of whaling at that port. It also offers a fresh perspective from which the social consequences of decline might be considered.

Newcastle upon Tyne was a focal point of whaling activity from the coast of northeast England for almost a century.' It rivalled Whitby in its commitment to Arctic enterprise and sustained the development of a whaling tradition among the merchant seamen of the region. Whalermen from Tyneside frequently found employment as officers on the vessels of other ports. This was especially important in the context of decline because the hard-nosed business decisions of numerous whaler owners had wider social consequences for the men they employed and contributed significantly to the Arctic tragedies of 1835-1836 and 1836-1837. Newcastle ships were involved in each of these tragedies and analysis of the experiences of their crews with the lessons learned from them constitutes a second aim of this paper. Hitherto the special circumstances of the whaling trade and the seamen engaged in it has encouraged a tendency to see those events in isolation but a case is made here for seeing them in a broader maritime context. The Arctic tragedies of 1835-1837 cost the lives of over two hundred seamen and came at the beginning of an age of reform when issues related to the desirability and extent of government interference in the field of social and economic reform became part of a wider political debate. For merchant seamen the emergence of free trade as the cornerstone of British commercial policy was a double-edged sword. Laissez-faire economics sometimes suited the needs of penny-pinching shipowners but it frequently had disastrous consequences for the seamen they employed.

The Context of Decline at Newcastle upon Tyne, 1820-1842

The reasons why British whaling declined after 1820 are well known to scholars. The crisis of that year and the scale of shipwreck, damage and unproductive voyages between 1819 and 1822 forced many shipowners to review their commitment to the trade. The markets for whale oil, particularly in its use as an illuminant, went into decline while the opportunities

to employ whaleships in general trade outside the whaling season were reduced. This was a crucial consideration for many whaler owners at a time of general depression within the shipping industry. The annual productivity of many Greenland ships went into decline after 1815 and its implications were not lost on the majority of shipowners. The disparity in whale size between those taken on the Greenland grounds compared to the larger whales then being killed in the Davis Straits carried a simple message: Greenland ships needed to procure more whales than the Davis Straits ships if they were to achieve a comparable cargo, yet few managed to do so on a regular basis.' Those that did were often obliged to remain on the grounds longer which in turn compromised their opportunities to undertake a voyage to Danzig or Riga before ice conditions put an end to the sailing season. The importance to a ship of combining coal, Baltic and whaling voyages **in** a single year can hardly be under-estimated. It was one of the principal attractions of the Greenland fishery for the shipowners of many ports and there were numerous contemporary references to it.10 As the events of 1820-1821 gradually unfolded whaler owners were faced with a dilemma. Some switched their ships to longer, more expensive and potentially more damaging voyages to the Davis Straits and Baffin Bay in a quest for greater productivity. Others, like the owners at Whitby for example, persevered with voyages to the Greenland grounds in the hope that fewer ships sailing there would increase the productivity of those which remained. Many shipowners left the trade altogether, recognising that whaling was increasingly becoming an exclusive trade which could only be successfully prosecuted by specialists.

The British whaling fleet declined by thirty percent between 1820 and 1825 and the proportion of ships sailing to the Greenland grounds declined by eighty percent (figure 1). The collapse of interest amongst London merchants was particularly significant. The number of ships sailing from the river Thames fell from seventeen in 1820 to four in 1825. The merchants of Liverpool and Kings Lynn abandoned the trade altogether during these years. At Newcastle a fleet of five to six ships in 1820-1821 was reduced to three by 1823, principally as the result of shipwreck. However, these vessels, or their replacements, continued to sail from the river Tyne for the next twenty years. It was a small fleet, insignificant by the standards of Hull or Aberdeen, but sufficient to meet the demands of a local market and productive enough to maintain the interest of specialist shipowners.

The importance of whaling to the economy of Tyneside was widely recognised by contemporary observers. Whale oil was a basic raw material of an industrialising economy, widely used as an illuminant and in processing cheap woollen cloth, sail-making, tanning, soap-making and marine metal-working. As an illuminant, whale oil consumption reached a peak about 1820 just before its widespread substitution by coal-gas. Many of the larger communities in the region used street lights that burned Greenland oil. There were over two hundred in Newcastle alone by 1817 and the Durham Paving Commissioners maintained about the same number. Most of the oil used in these street lamps was purchased locally. At Durham in 1816 and again in 1819 John Milburn and Co. of North Shields were the suppliers; in 1818 it was Batson and Co. of Newcastle and another Newcastle merchant, William Anderson, won the contract in 1821» The Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral

regularly purchased his supplies from Tyneside oil merchants and considerable quantities traditionally entered the coasting trade. As coal-gas replaced whale oil at North Shields in October 1820 the whaler owners there entreated local tradesmen to consider the wider consequences of their decisions: "it appears to be a difficult task to adduce any argument or reason why the public of North Shields should give their countenance and support to the introduction of a novelty, which, while it can yield them no advantage, has a direct tendency to stop the source from whence a great proportion of their prosperity flows.. .is not the light from the oil lamps sufficiently vivid for every purpose of the tradesman?'

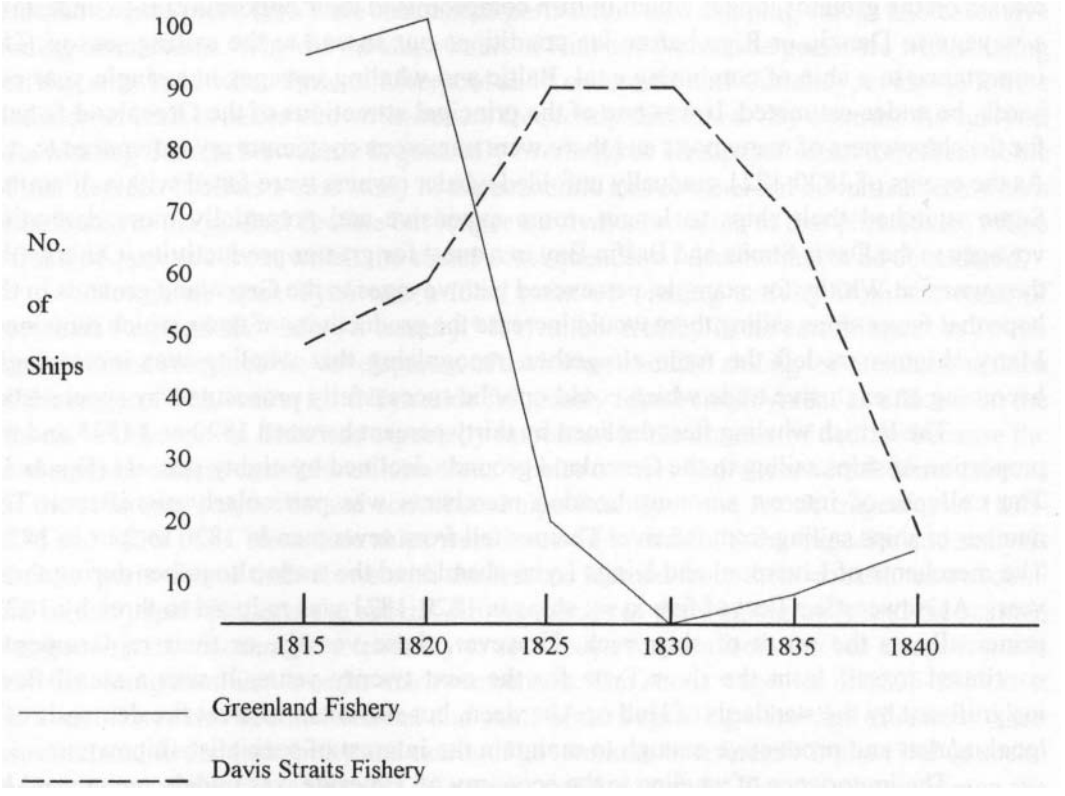

Figure 1: British ships sailing to the Greenland Fishery compared to those sailing to Davis Straits, 181521840.

Source: G. Jackson, *The British Whaling Trade* (London, 1978), appendix 9.

The appeal was unsuccessful; by 1826 most of the principal towns in north east England had made the transition to coal-gas for street lighting and many churches and institutional buildings quickly followed. These developments clearly reduced the demand for whale oil as an illuminant yet they did not destroy the market for it. This was because the quantity of oil actually purchased for street lamps had been relatively small." The single

most important source of demand, the coal mines of Northumberland and Durham, remained secure for any years to come and whale oil continued to be supplied to shop-keepers, tradesmen, farmers and proprietors of small industrial concerns throughout the region. Moreover, the continued use of whale oil in soap. paint and leather manufacture secured its survival as an industrial raw material.

Whaling also generated a number of service industries and distributed incomes within the maritime communities that sustained it. The same handbill addressed to the inhabitants of North Shields in 1820 estimated that the five ships then sailing from the river Tyne expended about £3000 per ship in wages and provisions and that four-fifths of this sum was expended locally. It considered that there were five hundred seamen employed in the ships of other ports earning £12,000 in wages that were subsequently spent in the community. Even allowing that some of these numbers were exaggerated, the fact remains that whaling had real value for the local economy of Tyneside. The five whalers sailing from the river Tyne in 1820 probably generated £15,000 to £20,000 of business over and above the value of the whale products they actually procured. These figures lend support to the analysis of Scottish whaling offered by Michie and reinforce the impression that whaling remained important to the local economy of the ports that persevered with it. Moreover, for the specialist whaler owners who came to dominate the trade after 1820, the financial rewards of a successful voyage to the Arctic grounds always seemed to outweigh the physical risks it involved. It even paid handsome dividends in the short term since fewer ships on the whaling grounds improved the productivity of those that remained. The period between 1825 and 1834 turned out to be the most successful phase of the Davis Straits whale fishery, yielding a total landed catch of 8510 whales. [14] Table 1 outlines the performance of each of the three whalers sailing from the river Tyne between 1823 and 1829 and demonstrates that some British whale ships continued to operate profitably at a time when the industry had gone into a general decline. The seasonal performance of the Newcastle ships does not appear to have been exceptional. Jackson has shown that Hull whalers were obtaining cargoes with an average value of £4244 per ship during the same period. [15] Few British whalers made a profit in 1830, another notorious year in the Arctic fishery, but even so, fleet numbers did not collapse as dramatically as they had after 1820. The real turning point came in 1835. The British whaling fleet declined by fifty-five percent between 1820 and 1835 from 159 to seventy-one ships. Between 1835 and 1840, fleet numbers declined by a further fifty-six percent from seventy-one to thirty-one ships. [16] The effects of the Arctic tragedies of 1835-1836 and 1836-1837 and the accumulated loss derived from a run of poor seasonal catches, forced many specialist whaler owners to abandon the trade altogether.

At Newcastle the experience of one of these shipowners, Thomas Richard Batson, was central to the decline of whaling from the port. Batson was a banker, shipowner and general merchant. He was a partner in the Tweed Bank at Berwick and later, in 1832, was elected as the managing director of the North of England Joint Stock Bank. He became an alderman of Newcastle in 1835. Batson was the only specialist whaler owner at Newcastle after 1820. He was the sole owner of two large whalers, *Grenville Bay* (340 tons) and *Lord*

Table 1
Performance and Profitability of the Whalers Sailing from Newcastle upon Tyne, 182321829

Name of Vessel:		Lady **Jane**			
Year	Catch	Oil	Catch Value	Expenses	Profit
1823	30	281	£7587	£3686	£3901
1824	10	130	£3510	£2780	£ 730
1825	15	190	£9120	£3140	£5980
1826	7	104	£3900	£2624	£1276
1827	14	210	£5670	£3260	£2410
1828	15	213	£6390	£3278	£3112
1829	13	139	£5212	£2834	£2378
Name of Vessel:		Cove			
Year	Catch	Oil	Catch Value	Expenses	Profit
1823	26	260	£7020	£3560	£3460
1824	5	85	£2295	£2510	-£215
1825	9	150	£7200	£2900	£4300
1826	9	124	£4650	£2744	£1906
1827	12	187	£5049	£3122	£1927
1828	12	205	£6150	£3230	£2920
1829	16	218	£8175	£3308	£4867
Name of Vessel:		**Grenville Bay**			
Year	Catch	Oil	Catch Value	Expenses	Profit
1823	12	192	£5184	£3152	£2032
1824	7	80	£2160	£2480	-£320
1825	9	160	£7680	£2960	£4720
1826	II	150	£5625	£2900	£2725
1827	14	209	£5643	£3254	£2389
1828	18	223	£6690	£3338	£3352
1829	16	184	£6900	£3104	£3796

Note: Catch (whales) oil in tuns; prices are those prevailing at Hull: £18/tun, 1823, 1824, and 1827; £20/tun, 1828; £25/tun, 1826 and 1829; and £32/tun, 1825. Catch value represents total earnings for each vessel and includes the value of whale bone. In the absence of reliable prices for the latter, they have been calculated as half the value of the oil; see Jackson, *Whaling Trade,* 125. Expenses are calculated on the basis of the formula in R.C. Michie, "North East Scotland and the Northern Whale Fishery 1752-1893," *Northern Scotland,* III (1977-1978), 71, i.e., £2000, fixed cost; £6 per tun of oil secured as a variable cost.

Source: Town Docks Museum, Coltish Manuscript.

Gambier (407 tons), had an eighth share in *Lady Jane,* also of Newcastle, and a similar interest in *Norfolk* of Berwick upon Tweed. Batson's commanding interest in these vessels represents another explanation for the continued survival of the whaling trade at Newcastle after 1820. Indeed, such was his commitment to whaling enterprise that Batson introduced

his newest and largest ship, *Lord Gambier,* to the whaling trade in 1831 after the disasters of the previous year. It was a brave commercial decision and Batson reaped the rewards in the short term. Both *Grenville Bay* and *Lord Gambier* remained profitable between 1831 and 1834 and his other ships were also successful. But then the rot set in. In six voyages between 1835 and 1840 *Grenville Bay* returned an average catch of 5.5 whales producing sixty-eight tuns of oil. Indeed, if the catch taken during 1838, the only successful voyage of these years, was removed from the equation, the average catch falls dramatically to 1.8 whales and thirty-three tuns of oil. These were not sustainable catches for they hardly covered the expenses of a normal voyage. Batson's flagship *Lord Gambier* was marginally more successful but the voyages of 1839, 1840 and 1841 were poor and unprofitable. Batson may have lost in excess of £8000 on the voyages of his whalers between 1835 and 1841. *Norfolk* was sold in 1838 and in December 1840, William Smith Batson, one of the remaining partners in the Tweed Bank, was declared bankrupt. The bank itself failed the following year. T.R. Batson was left owing the bank £36,000 and in October 1842 he compromised his debt for £12,000. In paying the settlement Batson sold all of his interests in *Lord Gambier, Grenville Bay* and *Lady Jane* to Matthew Plummer."

Batson had clearly been unwise to maintain such a singular financial interest in whaling ships during a run of poor seasons. But his experience was not unique as the rapid withdrawal of ships from other ports suggests. Specialist whaler owners had suffered poor and unprofitable seasons in the past but their perseverance, and in the case of the ports of north east Scotland, the lack of viable alternative sources of employment, had kept their ships in the trade. Before 1835 consecutive poor seasons in the Arctic had been rare; when they did occur they were usually followed by exceptionally productive years. In 1825 and 1826, for example, the British fleet captured 500 and 512 whales respectively at an average of 4.7 and 5.6 whales per ship. In both 1827 and 1828, more than a thousand whales were taken, at an average of thirteen whales per ship. Similarly, in 1830 and 1831, the total catch of 612 whales was dwarfed by the 3258 whales taken by fewer ships in 1832 and 1833.18 Batson and other whaler owners based their decisions in part on statistics such as these.

In July 1842, as the poor catches of another unsuccessful season became evident, the Newcastle newspapers carried reports that at Peterhead, "the Greenland Whale Fishery is no longer to be prosecuted and the owners of the whalers belonging to the port have determined upon sending their vessels on some different enterprise next season. "[19] While Peterhead owners did not, in the end, carry out their threat, owners elsewhere like Thomas Richard Batson succumbed to bankruptcy. Batson's withdrawal reduced the local "fleet" to a single ship, *Lady Jane,* by 1842. Uniquely perhaps, the collapse of whaling from the port of Newcastle was the product of the financial misfortunes of a single businessman.

Social Consequences of Decline at Newcastle, 1830-1849

Events in the Davis Straits after 1830 occurred during a period of intense political debate. The election of a Whig administration under the premiership of Charles, Earl Grey, ushered

in the so-called Age of Reform and for British merchant seamen it had mixed consequences. Over the course of the following years Royal Commissions and Select Committees investigated Shipwrecks (1836 and 1843), Deck Cargoes on Timber Ships (1839) and conditions on vessels engaged in the Emigrant Trade (1847 and 1853). But legislation derived from the evidence and recommendations of these enquiries often proved ineffectual and was easily evaded. The Merchant Shipping Act 1835 was a case in point. This was the latest of numerous attempts to register merchant seamen and impose a state supervised agreement between seaman and the merchants who employed them. But the act did nothing to protect merchant seamen from the decisions of unscrupulous shipowners who under-provisioned or overloaded their ships and sent them to sea in an unseaworthy condition. Surgeon Wanless of the whaler *Thomas* of Dundee put it plainly when he wrote that "poor sailors are imposed upon by every person in whatever line of business they deal almost."20

Remarkably, between 1729 and 1970 merchant seamen were the only major group of civil workers whose contracts of employment contained substantial penalty clauses under the criminal law for non-performance of duties.21 In the whaling trade this state of affairs had serious implications for the wages and well-being of the men. By the 1830s whaling ships usually provisioned for a six-month voyage and the owners obliged their crews to agree "That no officer or seamen shall demand or be entitled to his wages, or any part thereof, until the arrival of the ship at the port of discharge and her cargo delivered."[22] Such agreements were soon to have tragic consequences. Despite the warning signs of 1830 and 1831, British whaler owners persisted in the practice of under-provisioning their vessels and risking the lives of the seamen they employed. For the men themselves whose wages were fixed to the success of the voyage, the intense frustration and disappointment of a difficult and unproductive voyage to the Davis Straits can hardly be imagined. In 1830 after the magnitude of the losses sustained in that year became apparent, a public subscription for the relief of the whalemen and their families was opened at Newcastle:

> The situation of the seamen of the port of Newcastle-upon-Tyne is submitted to the consideration of the public; many of them who have been employed in the ships of other ports have suffered shipwreck and have returned home utterly destitute; whilst those who have been employed on the vessels belonging to their own port, though they have escaped the calamity of shipwreck, yet from the entire failure of the fishery on which their remuneration depends, are scarcely in a less necessitous condition.23

More than £500 was subsequently raised and distributed to Tyneside whalermen and their families. In the meantime the whaler owners looked for economies. Since the significant fixed capital costs of maintaining a ship in the whaling trade were difficult for shipowners to avoid they looked to reduce the variable costs of wages and provisions. With hindsight a combination of ignorance, complacency and economics made the tragedies of 1835-1836 and 1836-1837 predictable. As Gillies Ross has noted elsewhere: "those who placed full

confidence in the intrepidity, resolution and perseverance of British seamen had been mistaken; these qualities by themselves were not enough."24

In 1835-1837 the elements combined to produce the most notorious whaling seasons in the history of British whaling. By this date whalers were penetrating into the waters of Baffin's Bay, Lancaster Sound and Pond Inlet whenever ice conditions would allow. In these high northern latitudes the whalermen were pushing the boundaries of sailing ship technology and they were ill equipped to face the hazards that it involved. Seventy ships sailed to the Davis Straits in 1835, but ice conditions were unfavourable, and several were wrecked; only about twenty managed to penetrate to the "west water." By early October, eleven were locked in the pack ice near Home Bay and Cape Dyer, between latitudes 69° 20' N and **68°** 55' N. Among the trapped vessels were the *Lady Jane* and *Grenville Bay*, both of Newcastle. They had entered the ice late in September in search of a passage to the south. James Williamson (1814-1899) a young South Shields doctor who served as surgeon on the *Lady Jane,* subsequently recorded the experiences of the crew in his journal.25

The Ice-Drift Voyage of *Lady Jane,* 1835-1836

Lady Jane was the best known of all the Newcastle whalers (figure 2). The vessel had been built on the river Thames in 1772 and was originally introduced to the whale fishery at Hull in 1788. Transferred to Newcastle registry in 1804, it resumed its career as an Arctic whaler and spent the remainder of its working life in the trade. By 1835 its principal owner was Matthew Plummer and Co., one of Newcastle's leading merchant houses, with Thomas Richard Batson also owning one-eighth of the ship. The master of *Lady Jane* was James Leask, an Orkneyman from Stromness. Despite his relative inexperience as a captain (he had only been in command for two years), Leask had navigated *Lady Jane* as far as Sanderson's Hope on the western coast of Greenland by the beginning of July. Finding the pack ice impenetrable, he headed south in search of a passage to the "west water." He found it but by the beginning of August was again close beset in the land floe off Home Bay. Active whaling was no longer possible, though several whales were seen. *Lady Jane* together with the Hull whaler *Mary Frances* and several other ships edged a few miles further north on 16 August before they were forced to cut docks in the land floe. Williamson's journal recorded the loss of the Hull ship ten days later. The crew of *Mary Frances* — fifty-three men including the captain — came on board *Lady Jane* and remained for two weeks, after salvaging as many provisions from their own ship as possible; eventually they were redistributed around the other ships of the whaling fleet. Ten went on board each of *Swan* and *Abram* on September 11, nine more crossed to *Harmony* on the 13th, eight went to *Alfred* on September 21 and another six to *Duncombe* the following day. There was no indication at this stage of the complaints they subsequently made against the crew of *Lady Jane.*

By then it was late in the season. The ships therefore entered the icepack in an attempt to force a passage to the south. All of their efforts were fruitless and in early

October "it was judged necessary to place the ship's company on allowance of victuals."26 There were seven other ships in the vicinity of *Lady Jane* at this time.[27] When the *Dordon* was lost close by on 20 October, the crew of *Lady Jane* spent ten days procuring fuel and provisions from the wreck. The remaining ships were then in 67° 30' N. On 24 October, Thomas Taylor, master of the *Grenville Bay*, wrote to the owner Thomas Richard Batson, saying "I am sorry to have to write to you from this place. The winter has set in very soon and cold and we are frozen up in a floe drifting down the country...the ships are drifting down the straits about eight miles a day, and by the end of the month we will be clear of Cape Walsingham. I hope the ice will open south of that Cape. "[28]

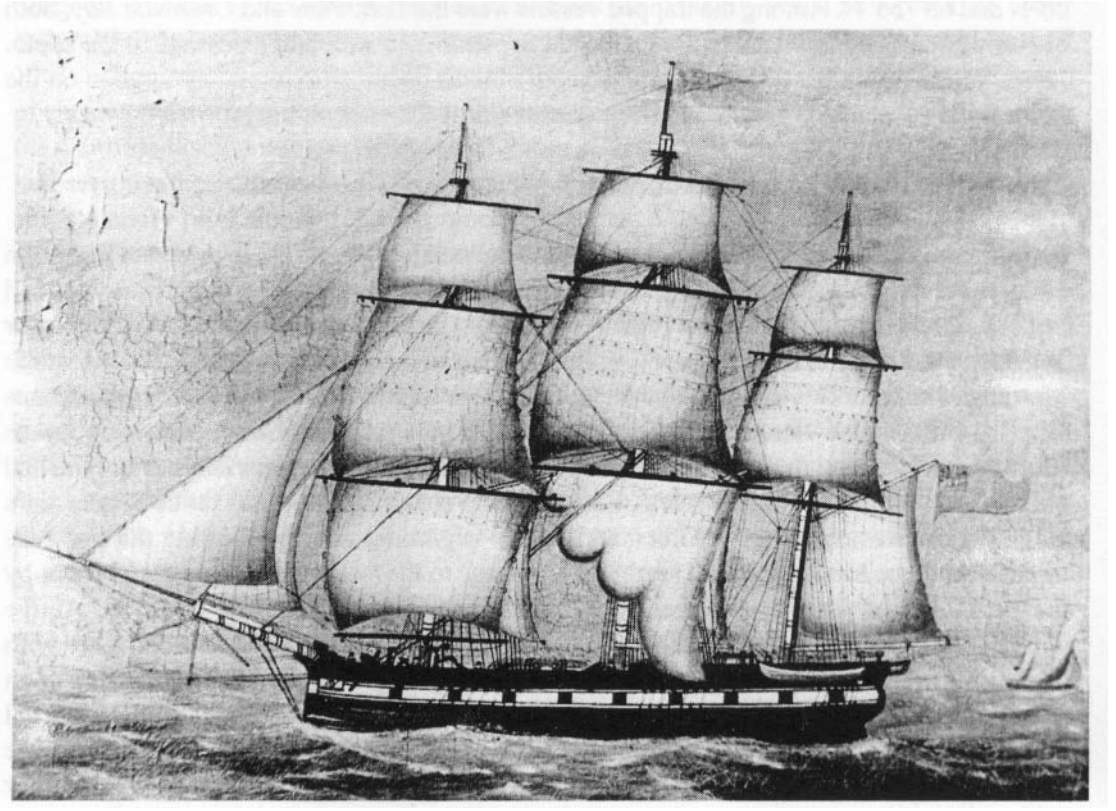

Figure 2: *Lady Jane* (390 tons), a veteran of the British whaling fleet, in the 1830s.

Source: Reproduced by kind permission of South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council.

Taylor's prediction proved correct, although his escape took somewhat longer than he had anticipated. On 20 November the ships were near 64°N where they observed land thirty miles to the west. But the ships were beginning to move apart by this time and *Lady Jane* gradually became separated from the others. By 8 December they were in the mouth

of Hudson Strait, within sight of Resolution Island, which was between fifteen and twenty miles to the east of their position. The account continued:

> they were then carried by the current to Green Island and proceeded a considerable way into Ungava Bay, where they were apprehensive that they would have to winter. In fact they bore up to endeavour to reach a settlement as a place of security and to obtain supplies. From the haziness of the weather they did not know with certainty where they were, but fortunately meeting with a strong current they were driven rapidly out of the strait, passing Button Island.29

Only two other ships remained in sight of *Lady Jane* by this date, *Norfolk* and *Grenville Bay*, both disappeared to the south soon afterwards. More ominously, Williamson recorded the first death among the crew of *Lady Jane* on 10 December when William Oliver died of consumption; he was buried through the ice on the following day. *Lady Jane* was then near 60° 29'N. *Norfolk* and *Grenville Bay* broke free of the ice on 16 December 1835 in latitude 58° 50'N, about thirty miles from the coast of Labrador. They had drifted almost six hundred miles since the beginning of October. The men were weak and a number of them exhibited signs of scurvy, but none died of the disease. There was only one fatality among the crews of the two whalers during their eventful voyages and they arrived at their home ports of Berwick and Newcastle in early January 1836.30

The crew of *Lady Jane* were not as fortunate. Drifting much closer to the coast than the other ships, *Lady Jane's* southward progress was much slower, even though its observed position was already less than the latitude at which the other ships had escaped. On 20 December, Cape Chugford was twelve miles to the west, but the ship was frozen solidly in the floe. The crew became extremely weak and several took to their beds, "being unprovided with sufficient clothing to defend against the severity of the weather which we thought daily becoming more intense."[31] Williamson recorded the appearance of scurvy on 22 December, and the first death occurred on 31 January 1836, when *Lady Jane* was in latitude 52° 50' N and under heavy pressure from the ice. Conditions on board were graphically described by a survivor, George Francis:

> The frost was that severe that it penetrated through the deck and the ships sides about two inches thick so that the bedclothes was froze [sic] fast to the sides of the ship and bed-cabin...when death had visited the poor souls their bodies were hailed [sic] out of the bed-cabins and thrown overboard directly without being sewed up or putting into any form whatever to commit to the deep.32

Ten men would succumb to scurvy before *Lady Jane* eventually reached open water on 19 February 1836. The vessel was then at latitude 52° 18' N, having drifted almost one

thousand miles since the beginning of October. The death toll had reached twenty-two by the time *Lady Jane* arrived at Stromness on 12 March. Another five seamen were beyond recovery and died within days of their arrival in the makeshift hospital established by Captain James Clark **Ross,** RN. "The appearance of the survivors and the distress of the friends of the dead," reported one newspaper account, "baffles all description. It drew tears from...many unconcerned spectators...such scenes Stromness never witnessed before."33 Twelve hands were engaged to sail the vessel to the Tyne, where it arrived on 26 March.

Recriminations soon followed the arrival of *Lady Jane.* A public inquiry was convened by Newcastle Trinity House to examine a series of accusations levelled at James Leask, the master, by six members of the crew. They challenged the substance of a number of reports that had circulated in local newspapers prior to their arrival from Stromness. These related to the destruction of the *Mary Frances* in August 1835 and the competence of their captain. The men emphatically denied any involvement in the destruction of the Hull ship. Williamson's evidence admitted to "a little bit of a scruffage," but the crew insisted that "the guilt must rest solely with that vessel's own crew." [34] As for the other charges, Captain Leask was accused of misrepresenting the crew, failure to distribute provisions fairly, cruelty and incompetence. The charge and the related evidence concerning provisions was probably the most controversial. "We think that Captain Leask is deserving of great blame for not distributing liberally the provisions which the ship afforded, such as raisins, currants, rice and wine. These could have been of great service to the whole crew, but were not given even to those who were labouring under the severest illness."35

Leask's principal accuser was Henry Jameson, a boat-steerer who understood the anti-scorbutic qualities of these foodstuffs though his information about the quantities on board was in error. Captain Leask denied that there had been any rice but admitted that he had taken out fifty-six pounds of raisins and the same quantity of currants; these "were for the use of the cabin and he considered it to be at the discretion of the master to give them out when he thought proper." Jameson claimed that the crew had only tasted them on Good Friday and Christmas Day and then only three quarts for sixty-five men. By contrast he frequently saw the captain, "with his pockets full eating them upon the deck."36

Williamson's evidence generally supported the captain's account and the Court of Inquiry subsequently exonerated Leask of all the charges brought against him. But the affair ended unsatisfactorily and with much bitterness. British whalers were obviously carrying anti-scorbutic foodstuffs as a luxury for the stern cabin rather than as a necessity for the men. It seems ironic that the Tyneside merchant community subsequently raised and distributed over £1000 to measures for the relief of the victims and their dependants when they might have provided anti-scorbutics to all of the men for a fraction of this amount.37

The provisioning of ships in the northern whale fishery became the subject of considerable debate in the spring of 1836. On Tyneside, there was some obvious concern:

> Now that the whalers are preparing to proceed on another voyage to the Davis Straits, we would beg to urge upon the...owners the necessity of well

provisioning their ships so as to guard against similar disasters to those which have so recently happened...and those who cannot afford a proper outfit should really not send their vessels to the Davis Straits. The custom at this port is to provision for nine months...a keel of coal is generally taken, but as fuel is of great importance and the expense not much, we would suggest that the quantity be increased to a keel and a half.38

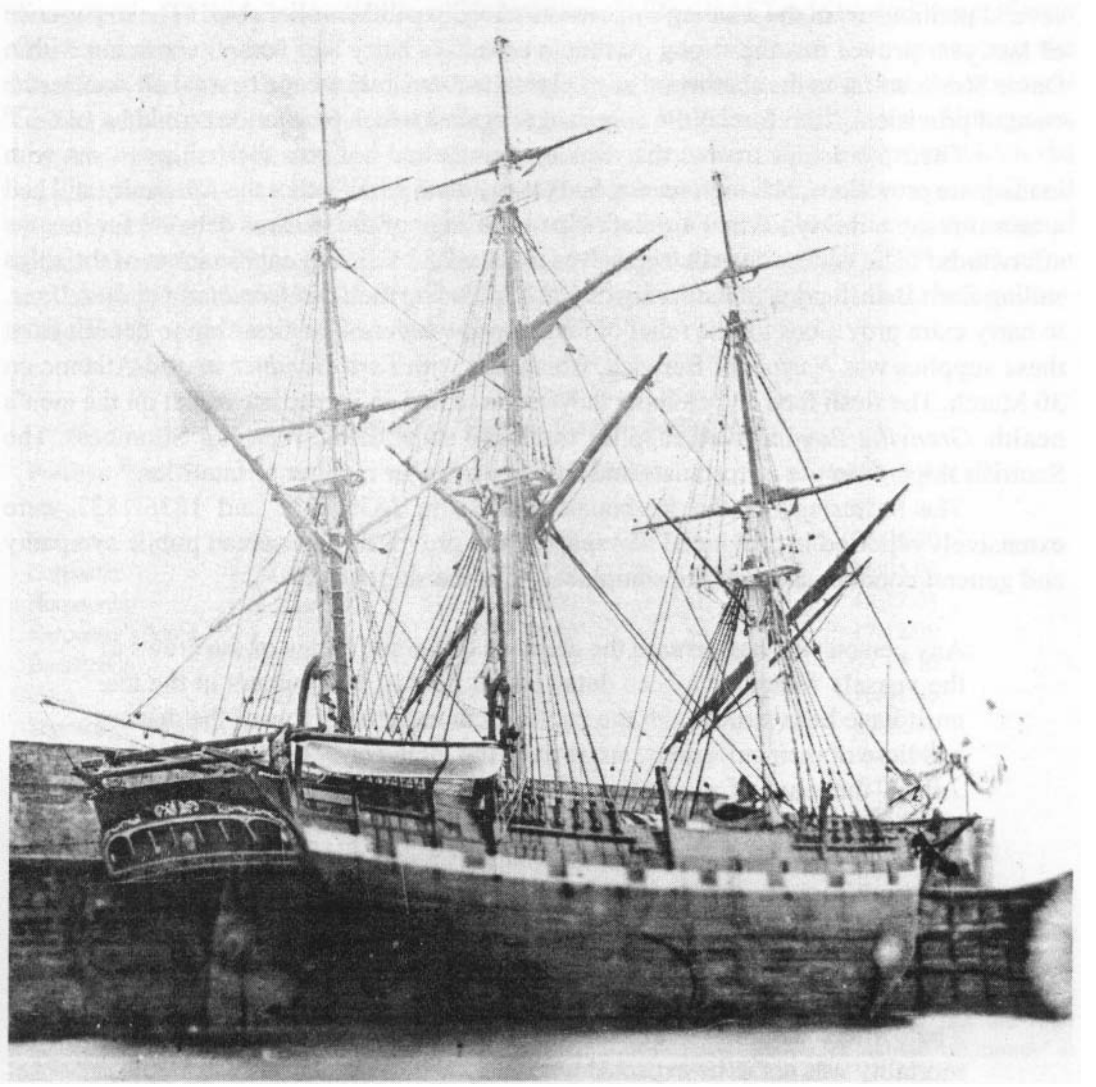

Figure 3: The whaler *Lord Gambier* pictured at Kirkaldy in 1860.

Source: Courtesy of Kirkaldy Museum and Art Galleries.

Although *Lady Jane* and *Grenville Bay* are said to have sailed with twelve months supplies, it is clear that, despite the experiences of the previous winter, few of the ships sent to the Arctic that year carried more than six months provisions and little in the way of anti-scorbutics.[39] Ice conditions during the 1836 season were little better than the year before so that six whalers, including Batson's *Grenville Bay* and *Norfolk,* were trapped near Pond Inlet by mid-September. Another Arctic tragedy unfolded over the course of the next few months. Given the problems associated with the previous year, the Admiralty refused several petitions from the whaling shipowners to equip another relief ship: "The experience of last year proves that the strong current is certain to carry any vessel remaining within Davis Straits so far to the southward as to place their eventual escape beyond all doubt...the want of provisions, therefore, is the only danger against which precautions could be taken."40

Their Lordships trusted that whaler owners had not sent their ships to sea with inadequate provisions, although several had clearly done so. Whether the Admiralty still had a moral responsibility to send a relief ship to the edge of the ice was debated for months afterwards.[41] The whaler owners themselves received subsidies to enable some of the ships sailing from British ports in the spring of 1837, including the *Lord Gambier* and *Lady Jane,* to carry extra provisions for the relief of the trapped whalers. The first ship to benefit from these supplies was *Norfolk* of Berwick, which met with *Lord Gambier* in mid-Atlantic on 30 March. The fresh food and clothing they acquired had an immediate effect on the men's health. *Grenville Bay* received supplies from five ships before reaching Stromness. The Scottish ships were not as fortunate and suffered a higher number of fatalities.42

The sufferings of the ice-bound whalers in 1835-1836 and 1836-1837 were extensively reported in provincial newspapers and provoked widespread public sympathy and general condemnation of the complacency of the shipowners:

> Any person who has perused the accounts of the sufferings of the crews of the vessels which have been detained for the last two winters in the ice, must have been struck with the fact that comparatively few of the deaths, and little of their sufferings, arose from the inclemency of the climate but ...from the want of provisions. That there exists a moral obligation on shipowners to have a sufficient quantity...in their vessels...there is no doubt. But so long as there is no legal responsibility I fear morality will go to the wall and interest will preponderate.43

A letter to the editor of a Scottish newspaper was much more specific in its criticisms.

> The owners...could not say that such a prevalence of disease and such a mortality was not to be expected when they had the melancholy example... of the fatal effects of scurvy during the preceding seasons....although they were conscious that every ship was liable to pass the winter among the ice, did they make any change in provisioning so as to endeavour to preserve

> health in the future? Did they use any precautions to prevent disease? Or did they send any better means to cure it when it did occur? No: These seem to have been matters of no moment with the gentleman dealers in oil in the enlightened year 1837.44

Demands for legislation that would oblige shipowners to provide anti-scorbutics and prevent them from sending vessels to sea with inadequate provision were soon being discussed in Parliament. As William Gladstone at the Board of Trade busied himself with "Parliamentary Trains" and other railway regulation, he also found time to support the Merchant Shipping Act 1844. The Act obliged shipowners to ensure that their vessels carried anti-scorbutics and merchant seamen became entitled to a daily issue of limejuice, a right that naval seamen had already enjoyed for fifty years. The extent to which the legislation of 1844 can be related directly to the experiences of the whalermen is difficult to ascertain but it undoubtedly contributed to the urgency and character of the general debate about "conditions" in the 1840s. The 1844 legislation, however, had no effect on another problem that ensued from whaling decline and which now beset the whalermen — reduced job opportunities and lower wage rates.

Table 2
Wages in the Whaling Trade — *Baffin,* **1820**

Position	**Wages per month** *(£)*	Total **Earnings** *(£)*
Mate	3.00.00	61.01.06
Surgeon	4.00.00	25.05.00
Carpenter	5.00.00	25.05.00
Harpooner	3.15.00	49.12.03
Carpenter's Mate	4.00.00	17.12.09
Boatsteerer	3.15.00	57.19.10
Cook	4.00.00	16.01.08
Steward	2.15.00	10.02.11
Armourer	3.00.00	2.1 1.00
Landsman	2.05.00	5.01.03
Able Seaman	3.10.00	12.10.00
Seaman	2.00.00	4.16.03

Note: There are a number of anomalies in Scoresby's account of wages. It is not clear how the low amounts recorded for the armourer, seaman and landsman were calculated or whether "hand-money" (payment in advance to the seaman's dependents) had been deducted. Harpooners were normally paid more than boatsteerers and a reversal of their respective earnings might seem more appropriate. A footnote to the original table indicates that harpooners were paid £11.11.00 "fish-striking money" for the 1820 voyage, indicating that the vessel had secured twenty-two whales. The wages include "oil money" at 1/6 per tun.

Source: Whitby Museum. Scoresby Archive, Ref. 1.

Table 3
Wages per Month and Bonus Payments Paid to the Crew of *Lady Jane*, 1846-1848

Position	Payments	1846 (£)	1847 (£)	1848 (£)
Mate	Sea pay	2.000.0	4.10.0	2.00.0
	"Fish" money	1.01.0	1.01.0	1.01.0
	"Oil" money	7.2	7.2	7.2
Surgeon	Sea Pay	3.03.0	3.03.0	3.03.0
	"Fish" money	1.01.0	1.01.0	1.01.0
Carpenter	Sea Pay	4.10.0	4.10.0	4.10.0
	"Fish" mone	2	-	1.01.0
	"Oil" money	1.9	1.9	1.9
Harpooner	Sea Pay	1.00.0	1.00.0	1.00.0
	"Fish" money	10.6	10.6	10.6
	"Oil" money	7.2	7.2	7.2
Boatsteerer	Sea pay	2.10.0	2.10.0	2.10.0
	"Oil" money	1.9	1.9	1.9
Cooper	Sea pay	3.10.0	4.10.0	3.10.0
	"Oil" money	3.0	3.0	3.0
Cook	Sea Pay	2.10.0	2.10.0	2.10.0
	"Oil" money	1.9	1.9	1.9
Seaman	Sea pay	2.00.0	2.00.0	2.00.0
	"Oil" money	1.3	1.3	1.3

Source: Great Britain, Public Record Office, Board of Trade 98/1041, 1364 and 1709.

As the number of ships sailing to the whale fishery fell, the competition among the men for berths increased, interrupting the promotional pattern of earlier years. Seamen with experience as harpooners and mates were often forced to accept positions as boatsteerers or line managers. Many seamen were forced out of the trade altogether and fewer young men were attracted to it. A combination of increased competition, especially from Scottish whalermen, and declining productivity also led to downward adjustments in wage rates. A comparison of the wage rates and bonus payments made to the crew of *Baffin* in 1820 (table 2) and those paid to the crew of *Lady Jane* between 1846 and 1848 (table 3) reveals significant differences. Monthly sea pay had fallen by twenty-five to thirty percent, although bonus payments remained about the same or even increased slightly. The "oil money" paid to harpooners, for example, increased from six shillings to just over seven shillings per tun, but monthly sea pay had fallen to £1 per month, the lowest rate paid to any member of the crew. The monthly rates for the mate, surgeon, carpenter and cook had also fallen. These

adjustments seem to have been made after 1830. The wages paid to the crew of *Phoenix* of Whitby for the voyage of 1833 bears closer comparison to those of the crew of *Lady Jane in* 1846. It also reveals that harpooners were no longer being paid a standard rate. Three of the harpooners of the *Phoenix* were paid a guinea per month in 1833, the mate received two guineas and the "loose" harpooners £3. Monthly wages had clearly become a matter of individual bargaining for each harpooner and the rates agreed differed between voyages according to their success.[45] Earnings in the whaling trade had always varied with the success of the voyage, but wage adjustments after 1830 sharpened these annual fluctuations. The average seasonal catch of *Lady Jane* during these years was ten whales and eighty-eight tuns of oil.[46] Table 4 computes the actual earnings of the crew between 1844 and 1848.

Table 4
Wages in the Whaling Trade, *Lady Jane,* **1844-1848**

Position	1844 (£)	1845 (£)	1846 (£)	1847 (£)	1848 (£)
Mate	33.10.0	72.18.4	55.00.0	54.03.9	33.10.0
Surgeon	23.02.0	55.13.0	27.06.0	21.10.0	25.04.0
Carpenter	36.09.0	78.12.6	45.18.0	31.05.9	36.09.0
Harpooner	27.10.0	66.18.4	49.00.0	14.19.2	27.10.0
Boatsteerer	20.05.0	29.17.6	25.10.0	17.03.9	20.05.0
Cooper	30.00.0	46.10.0	39.00.0	30.15.0	30.00.0
Cook	20.05.0	29.17.6	25.10.0	17.03.9	20.05.0
Seaman	15.15.0	22.02.6	19.10.0	13.11.3	15.15.0

Notes: Wages for 1844 and 1845 are calculated on 1846 wage rates. The success of the voyages was: 1844, four whales, sixty tuns of oil; 1845, thirty-five whales, 170 tuns of oil; 1846, eight whales, 120 tuns of oil; 1847, two whales, twenty-five tuns of oil; and 1848, four whales, sixty tuns of oil. "Fish money" was paid to individual harpooners who struck whales and is not included in the calculation of their wages. It may have added £5 to each harpooners' income in 1845, but less than £1 in the other years. It is not clear how the surgeon and the carpenter were paid their "fish money," but it has been assumed that they were paid according to the total number of whales secured by the voyage.

Source: See table 3.

Conclusion

Between 1845 and 1849 only one vessel was employed in the whaling trade from the river Tyne, the veteran *Lady Jane* owned by Matthew Plummer & Co. Plummer had extensive shipping, industrial and commercial interests but no special interest in the whaling industry. In 1844, *Lady Jane* had already spent forty years in the Arctic fishery and had earned substantial profits for its various owners. The vessel suffered with the rest between 1835 and

1841 but seems to have returned to profit for the remainder of its long career. With whale oil selling for £50 per tun and whalebone for £200 per tun, the profits of a single successful voyage were obviously attractive to Plummer. Based on these prices *Lady Jane* earned over £7000 in 1845 and more than £ 15,000 in total between 1842 and 1847.47

In June 1849, while attempting to penetrate the pack ice at the entrance to Melville Bay, *Lady Jane* and two other whalers were trapped and crushed by floating ice. In reporting the loss of the ship the Newcastle newspapers predicted that, "so far as this port is concerned, the whale fishing trade will be extinct." They then continued, "it is but due to the owners to add, that had it not been for their enterprising spirit, the vessel would not have continued so long pursuing a trade so hazardous and under such disadvantageous circumstances."48

This conclusion probably begs more questions than it answers. Matthew Plummer managed to withstand the risks associated with committing *Lady Jane* to the whaling trade while making substantial profits. His decision to continue the vessel in the whale fishery, despite the bankruptcy of Thomas Richard Batson, was clearly a conscious one. By the 1840s fully equipped whalers like *Lady Jane* were discreet units of shipping, employing local expertise and selling their produce into a local market. It seemed natural, therefore, that Plummer should continue to use it in the trade. Whether *Lady Jane* could have been so remuneratively employed in another trade is open to question and Plummer did not seem to concern himself much with the alternatives. He was rich enough to gamble and astute enough to read the signs. When *Lady Jane* was eventually lost he did not replace her, another demonstration, perhaps, that the survival of whaling at any port was always the product of local considerations on the decisions of individual shipowners.

NOTES

* The author is currently a Senior Lecturer it History at Newcastle College, where he has workec since 1979. His research and publication interest relate to the maritime history of northeast England. 1700-1914.

1. G. Jackson, "Why Did the British Not Catch Rorquals in the Nineteenth Century?" in B.L, Basberg, J.E. Ringstad and E. Wexelsen (eds.). *Whaling and History: Perspectives on the Evolution of the Industry* (Sandefjord, 1993), 111-119.

2. L.E. Davis, R.E. Gallman and T.D. Hutchins. "Technology, Productivity and Profits: British-American Whaling Competition in the North Atlantic 1816-1842," *Oxford Economic Papers.* XXIX (1987), 738-759.

3. Jackson, `Rorquals," 115.

4. *Ibid.,* 114.

5. William Wilberforce, speech in the bounty debate 12 April 1786, Hansard, Parliamentary History, Volume XXV, column 1379.

6. R. Michie, "North East Scotland and the Northern Whale Fishery 1752-1893," *Northern Scotland,* III (197721978), 67.

7. G. Jackson, *The British Whaling Trade* (London, 1978); and A. Credland, *The Hull Whaling Trade: An Arctic Enterprise* (Hull, 1996).

8. T. Barrow, "The Newcastle Whaling Trade 1752-1849," *Mariner's Mirror,* LXXV (1989), 231-240.

9. William Scoresby, a whaling captain and the

first historian of the Greenland fishery, reckoned that the blubber of a Greenland whale yielded about nine and one-half tuns of oil, while that of z Davis Straits' whale yielded fourteen tuns. W. Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions with c History and Description of the Northern Whale Fishery* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1820), II, 391.

10. See, for example, *Newcastle Chronicle,* 2E September 1816; and *Newcastle Courant,* 13 September 1817.

11. A. Barrow, "The North East Coast Whale Fishery 1750-1850" (Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Northumbria, 1989), 73.

12. *Ibid.,* 78.

13. The street lamps of large towns like Newcastle and Durham collectively consumed less than six tuns of oil per annum, an insignificant amount at a time when individual whaling ships were returning with cargoes of 150-200 tuns of oil. *Ibid.,* 73.

14. E. Mitchell and R. Reeves, "Catch History and Cumulative Catch Estimates of Initial Population Size of Cetaceans in the Eastern Canadian Arctic," *Report of the International Whaling Commission,* XXXI (1981), 650.

15. Jackson, *Whaling Trade,* 125.

16. *Ibid.,* appendix 9.

17. Barrow, "North East Coast Whale Fishery," 178.

18. Jackson, appendix 9.

19. *Newcastle Courant,* 29 July 1842.

20. J. Wanless, "Journal of a Voyage to Baffin Bay in the Ship *Thomas* of Dundee 1834," entry for 28 June 1834, quoted in *J.* Troup, *The Ice-Bound Whalers: The Story of the* Dee *and the* Greenville Bay, *1836-37* (Stromness, 1987), 31.

21. C. Dixon, "Legislation and the Sailors Lot 1660-1914," in P. Adam (ed.), *Seamen in Society* (3 vols., Bucharest, 1980).

22. Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society "Agreement between the Master, Seamen an(Mariners of the Ship *Phoenix* of Whitby," 1833.

23. .*Vewcastle Courant,* 20 November 1830.

24. W. Gillies Ross, *Arctic Whalers, Icy Seas .Narratives of the Davis Straits Whale Fisher* (Toronto, 1985), 89.

25. James Williamson was born in Lancashire ii 1814 and sailed as the surgeon of *Lady Jane* befor setting up practice as a doctor at South Shields After retirement he moved to London; he died a Cowes, Isle of Wight, in 1899. The journal of hi voyage in *Lady Jane,* now in the possession of Mr M. Williamson of Kings Lynn, Norfolk, provide a graphic account of the whaler's ice drift as wel as insight into the social consequences of *laissez faire* economics on the whaling grounds. The author is grateful to Mr. Williamson for allowing access to it. A xerox copy is now in the possession of A. Credland, Town Docks Museum, Hull.

26. "Williamson Journal," 5 October 1835.

27. Williamson listed these as *Abram, Harmony Alfred, Duncombe* and *Dordon* of Hull; *Bay* of Newcastle; and *Norfolk* of Berwick.

28. Taylor's letter, published in *Newcastle Jour nal,* 9 January 1836 was sent by *Harmony* of Hull which broke clear of the ice before *Grenville Bay*

29. *Ibid.*

30. The cook of *Grenville Bay* was lost overboard on the Atlantic passage.

31. "Williamson Journal," 17 December 1835.

32. George Francis wrote the letter, dated 18 Ma) 1836, to a relative after the arrival of *Lady Jane* a North Shields. Williamson included a copy of the letter in his journal.

33. *Newcastle Chronicle,* 2 April 1836. The loss of life fell particularly on the Orkneymen; thirteer of the twenty-three seamen who had mustered for *Lady Jane* at Stromness the year before perished.

34. Newcastle Chronicle, 23 April 1836.

35. Ibid., 16 April 1836.

36. Ibid., 23 April 1836.

37. The Trustees of the Greenland fund subse• quently identified over one hundred dependen relatives of local seamen from *Grenville Bay* ant *Lady Jane.* They also remitted funds for the wel• fare of dependents of the Orkneymen who lost their lives in *Lady Jane* in 183521836.

38. Newcastle Journal, 12 March 1836.

39. Ibid., 23 April 1836.

40. Newcastle Chronicle, 24 December 1836.

41. The editor of the *Newcastle Journal,* a Tor) newspaper, made several bi tter attacks on the Admiralty for failing to send a relief ship in 1837 See, for example, *Newcastle Journal,* 6 May 1837

42. Grenville Bay had twenty deaths and *Swan* of Hull twenty-five. The crews of the Scottish ships suffered dreadfully. *Dee* of Aberdeen was pickec up off the Hebrides with only fifteen men alive from a crew of sixty. *Advice* of Dundee was the last to arrive. It was found drifting off the west coast of Ireland and was towed into Sligo on 13 June. There were only seven men alive. For an account of the arrival of *Advice* see B. Lubbock, *The Arctic Whalers* (Glasgow, 1968), 332-334. A lesser-known account by Captain Reid of *Grace* of Liverpool appeared in *Newcastle Journal,* 25 June 1837. The surviving crew list of *Advice* is perhaps the most chilling testimony of all. See Great Britain, Public Record Office, Board of Trade 98/237.

43. Nautical Magazine, February 1838.

44. Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser, 20 June 1837, quoted in Troup, *Ice2Bound Whalers,* 35-36. A treatise on "Scurvy and its Antidotes" appeared in *Nautical Magazine,* August 1840.

45. Whitby Literary and Philosophical Socie ty, Crew List and Agreement of *Phoenix* of Whitby, 1833.

46. Barrow, "North East Coast Whale Fishery," 218.

47. Ibid., table 46.2.

48. Newcastle Courant, 6 October 1849.