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**The Great Days of Sail**

**The Greenlanders:**

**Arctic whaleships and whalers**

Dr Bernard Stonehouse

Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge,

And Maritime Historical Studies Centre, University of Hull.

This presentation:

1. Tells of the ships involved in British Arctic whaling from 1750 to the mid 19th century, and
2. Outlines how whalers worked, and how whaling contributed to the ports and communities involved.

We start with artwork in the collection of the Hull Maritime Museum, showing whaling ships at work in Arctic ice. British Arctic whaling began on a small scale in the mid-17th century. From 1749 it became a major industry, stimulated by government bounty of 40/- per ship ton. At its peak in the 1780s over 200 ships and 10,000 men were sailing annually to the Arctic from many ports, notably London and Hull: but Liverpool, Newcastle, Whitby, Yarmouth, Kings Lynn, Exeter, Ipswich, Aberdeen, Dundee and many other ports were also involved. Both men and ships were called ‘Greenlanders’ because they operated in Arctic seas immediately north and north-west of Britain, west and east of Greenland.

Greenland whaleships were generally ships of 250-380 tons burthen, typically ‘cats’. ‘Burthen’ was a measure of capacity derived from the length and beam (breadth) of the ship: ‘cats’ were strongly built sailing ships with round bow and square stern, produced mainly in Northumbria and Yorkshire, and capable of carrying up to 600 tons of coal or general stores. They were about 30-35m long, 9-10m wide, three-masted and ship-rigged (square sails on all masts) or bark-rigged (square sails on fore and main masts, fore-and-aft sails on the mizzen mast. Among the ice floes, with most of the crew off hunting in the whale-boats, they could be managed by two or three hands. HM Bark *Endeavour*, which took Capt. James Cook around the world in the first of his three voyages, was a Whitby-built cat – now to be seen as an Australian-built replica.

To convert a cat or similar vessel to a whaleship required doubling the planking on bow and waterline, fortifying the ship internally against pressure with 12” square-section oak beams, adding one or more crows’ nests (shelters for spotting from the main mast), and adding davits for slinging the six or seven whaleboats. A ship that cost £7500 in the late 18th century might cost about £700 to strengthen: it could still be used as a cargo or passenger carrier between whaling voyages. (£1 in 1800 would equal c. £80 today.)

The industry was for many years sustained by a government bounty, awarded to ships that met particular requirements. The bounty was intended to encourage an industry that would provide skilled deep-water seamen for the Royal Navy in wartime. To qualify, the ship, crew (including a surgeon), stores and equipment had to be passed as satisfactory by customs officers before sailing, to depart and return between prescribed dates, and to maintain a detailed log showing day-to-day positions, weather, activities including whales taken, and keeping a record of other ships encountered. The bounty scheme generated logs, muster rolls and other records that now – when we can find them – provide material for much of our research into the industry.

The bounty was first offered in 1733 at a rate of 20/- per ton, encouraging only a few London ship owners who were already involved. Raising it to 40/- in 1749 tipped the balance: a bounty of £700 on a ship of 350 tons would pay for converting a cat or similar vessel for whaling, or meet the fitting-out costs of a 3-6 months’ whaling voyage. Paid irrespective of success, essentially underwriting the voyage, the 40/- bounty attracted ship-owners at many other ports. Though introduced as a temporary measure, the bounty persisted, varied by Acts of Parliament between 40/- and 20/- from time to time. It was finally discontinued in 1824.

Overall some 37 British ports were involved in Arctic whaling, most of them east coast ports with facilities for handling ships in the right size range. Some that started in the 1750s gave up during the Seven-years’ War (1756-63) when government contracts offered more certain profits, but returned to whaling afterwards. Total numbers of ships sailing to the Arctic fluctuated violently between years (e.g. fewer than 50 in 1780, more than 200 in 1784), due to recurring wars, bounty changes and other causes.

Whalers were hunting Greenland Black or Bowhead whales *Balaena mysticetus*, following them north in their annual migration through slowly-melting sea ice toward Svalbard east of Greenland, and to Davis Strait in the west. In the west some of the whalers eventually penetrated to Baffin Bay, where the whales had found the best feeding grounds and were fattest. The whalers pressed north through the pack ice, often in company with each other, putting their boats down when they encountered whales. The boats were manned by crews of six or seven, each including a harpooner, boat steerer, line coiler and oarsmen. The whales were harpooned, lanced, towed to the ships, and stripped of their blubber and baleen (whalebone). Blubber was stowed in barrels for processing in boiling yards back home. An average-sized whale yielded products worth c. £440, a large whale twice as much: 5-10 such whales made a good season’s catch, 15-20 made small fortunes for all involved.

For Whitby, a small northern town with fishing and boat-building trades, sending 10-20 ships to the Arctic each year involved well over half the workforce of the town, afloat and ashore. As in many other small towns, whaling offered an alternative to the intense rural poverty of the surrounding countryside, employing four times as many men per ship and paying more than freighting voyages. It helped to keep rope-makers, carpenters, chandlers, butchers, bakers, farmers and other local tradesmen in business, and brought home much-needed development capital that helped to shape the town and add value to its environs.

**Further reading:**

Scoresby, William, Jr. 1820. *An account of the Arctic regions, with a history and description of the northern whale fishery*. 2 vols. Edinburgh, Constable. Reprinted 1969 by David & Charles Reprints. [A contemporary survey by an unusually well-informed whaler and scholar.]

Jackson, Gordon. 1978. *The British whaling trade*. London, A. & C. Black. [A precise and readable general introduction, putting Arctic whaling into context with world-wide whaling.]

Lubbock, B. 1937. *The Arctic whalers.* Glasgow, Brown, Son & Ferguson. [A journalist’s approach to whaling – very readable, packed with information and anecdote, not always entirely reliable.]

Further information on Greenlanders and Arctic whaling can be found on the British Arctic Whaling website http://www.hull.ac.uk/baw/bibliography.htm.

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