

British Arctic whaling: an overview

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Note. * marks a term that is defined or described more fully in the *Encyclopaedia of British Arctic Whaling*. References to books and research papers (e.g. Scoresby 1820) are listed in the *Bibliography of British Arctic whaling*.

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Arctic and subarctic

'Arctic' and 'subarctic' – though referring always to the northern end of the world – hold slightly different meanings for ecologists, geologists, lawyers, politicians, administrators and climatologists. For alternative definitions and discussion see the *Arctic and subarctic encyclopaedia entry. Here 'Arctic' means the area within the *Arctic Circle, the parallel of latitude (66°32'N) north of which the sun remains above the horizon for 24 hours on midsummer day, and below the horizon on midwinter day. 'Subarctic' describes a narrow geographical band immediately south of the Circle, climatically and ecologically transitional between Arctic and temperate zones.

Both lie north of the temperate and tropical zones of the world where man originated and civilizations have developed. Both are cold, though curiously not the coldest regions of the hemisphere – central Canada and Siberia are far colder than the Arctic basin in winter. Both include areas of land and ocean, dominated by snow and ice for much of the year. Arctic and subarctic lands are in general semi-deserts, with a brief spell of summer productivity that brings in myriads of ducks, geese, swans and shorebirds from the south. Arctic and subarctic surface waters are either frozen year-round, or freeze over in winter, but on melting in spring and summer may be remarkably fertile – sufficiently so to attract huge stocks of migrant fish, seabirds and mammals to a mid-year bonanza.

The Arctic Ocean

The *Arctic Ocean occupies a deep, complex basin of about 10 million km², linked to the northern Pacific Ocean through Bering Strait and to the northern Atlantic by channels on either side of *Greenland. Its centre has a permanent cover of slowly circulating, interlocking *ice floes, most of them several years old and 3-4 m thick. Surrounding the core is a zone of seasonal *pack ice, and surrounding that a zone of *fast ice, so-called because it is fast to the land. Fast ice and seasonal pack ice grow to 1-2 m thick and disperse annually. Some of the floes are recruited into the central pack, but most are dispersed by melting and by centrifugal currents that carry them south into the Atlantic Ocean. Surface waters in summer are of low salinity, especially along the Eurasian coast where Siberian rivers contribute huge masses of relatively warm fresh water.

*Sea ice is important ecologically, providing a substrate for algae (minute green plants) to grow and for seals to breed on. However, sea surface temperatures in its presence seldom rise above -1°C, sunlight cannot penetrate the water, and gaseous exchanges between surface and atmosphere are inhibited. In the central Arctic Ocean, covered with a shifting but permanent cover of pack ice, productivity is accordingly low. The zone around its edges, where in summer the sea ice melts and disperses, is in contrast a zone of high seasonal productivity. Algal cells that are always present in surface waters proliferate, responding to the long hours of daylight and release of nutrients from the melting sea ice. Collectively they form masses of *phytoplankton – myriads of cells in huge surface concentrations that turn the sea from sterile blue to rich green. Phytoplankton provides food for *zooplankton – the small floating animals that live by filtering plant cells from water. These minute

animals too proliferate, in turn to be fed on by fish, seabirds, seals and whales, many of which have migrated north in spring to catch the summer abundance.

Some of the richest Arctic and subarctic feeding grounds occur in the Bering Sea north of the Pacific Ocean, the Labrador Sea, Baffin Bay, and the Norwegian and Barents seas north of the Atlantic Ocean. The fish, seals and whales that feed along the coasts of these seas have for thousands of years helped to support small indigenous human populations who live nomadically or in small settlements along the coasts. For hundreds of years they have supported hunters from much further afield, notably commercial fishermen, sealers and whalers from temperate lands as far south as Spain, France and New England.

British sealing and whaling

This website and database concerns especially one group of hunters from the south – the whalers who, from the late 16th to the early 20th centuries, made annual voyages from Britain to the Arctic ice, founding, maintaining and finally ending the British Arctic whaling industry. Extending well over 300 years, British whaling began as a hunt for walruses (valued especially for their ivory tusks), developing to include other species of seals and whales, and eventually concentrating almost exclusively on one species of right whale – the *Greenland or bowhead whale *Balaena mysticetus*.

In the 18th century, encouraged by a government bonus, British whaling became a major industry involving some 35 ports, and sending hundreds of sailing ships and thousands of men to the Arctic seas each year. Their business – to hunt whales in circumstances that demanded remarkable skills of navigation, knowledge, and experience. Their objective – to bring back cargoes of oil and whalebone, both highly-valued industrial commodities of the time.

British whaling formed part of a much bigger and more diffuse European industry, in which French, Spanish, Danish, Dutch and German ships were involved, sometimes in co-operation, but mostly in competition that during the early days became warfare. Whaling indeed played its part in the various wars of the 17th to 19th centuries. The trade continued because the products were valued as much in wartime as in peacetime. British whaling ships in times of war sailed under *letters of marque, fully armed against capture by Dutch, French and American *privateers. Several were captured by enemy privateers, to be ransomed, sold or destroyed. No less a danger in wartime was *impressment – naval press gangs afloat and ashore were empowered to impress seamen from merchant ships for service in the Royal Navy. Though masters and officers were exempted, 'Greenlander' seamen were particularly valued for their skills and fortitude.

That the industry provided a substantial naval reserve was one of the strongest arguments for 'the bounty' – financial support by successive governments, based on tonnage of ship, that helped to maintain whaling for almost a century. That whaling gave hundreds of mariners, from captains to cabin-boys, regularly seagoing employment, was a further incentive. No less valuable were the raw materials brought home by whaling, to support shoreside industries that gave employment to thousands – from shipbuilders to cordwainers, from lamplighters to manufacturers of soap, paints, woollen cloths, leather, brooms and corsets.

Few today regret the end of British whaling; fewer still would want to see it revived or encouraged in any form. For all its products there are now reasonable alternatives, and most nations agree that whaling is no longer needed. This was not the case in the 16th to mid-19th centuries, or even in the early 20th century when British whaling finally ceased. To judge whalers of those times by standards of today makes no sense at all. If we seek to judge, we must in fairness know more of the circumstances in which they worked. 'Knowing the circumstances' is a prime purpose of this website, not necessarily for judgment alone, but to provide information on a once-important industry that helped to shape the economy of many British ports.

How whaling began

'In the early ages of the world, when beasts of prey began to multiply and annoy the vocations of man, the personal danger to which he must have been occasionally exposed, would oblige him to contrive some means of defence. For this end he would naturally be induced, both to prepare weapons, and also to preconceive plans for resisting the disturbers of his peace ... his general success would beget confidence, and that confidence at length would lead him to pursue in his turn the former objects of his dread, and thus change his primitive defensive act of self-preservation into an offensive operation, forming a novel, interesting and noble recreation.'

So wrote William Scoresby Jr, one of whaling's most thoughtful, erudite and successful captains, in his two-volume *Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale Fishery* (Scoresby 1820). The whale he regarded as a powerful and ferocious animal – one at least six hundred times the bulk of a man, that could toss a heavy boat into the air with a flick of its tail, yet one that man was gifted to subdue. A remarkably skilled whaling master, writing at the peak of a successful career in a flourish industry, Scoresby was also a gifted scientist and observer. But whaling was only his first career. Two years after completing his *Account of the Arctic Regions*, he gave up the sea altogether to take holy orders and become a clergyman in the Church of England, ultimately a Doctor of Divinity. As a parish priest he continued spare-time research into terrestrial magnetism and other natural phenomena that had puzzled him as a seaman. However, Scoresby's early writings, including his *Account*, remain the clearest exposition both of the history of the industry, and of how whaling was conducted in his time. This overview, like most other writing on early whaling, draws heavily on Scoresby's research and insights.

Current wisdom in the 1820s held that inhabitants of the Bay of Biscay around 1575 were the first to catch whales on the high seas. Scoresby drew attention to an earlier history, reported in a manuscript by the Saxon King Alfred (translated and published by historian Daines Barrington in 1773, and several other authors), describing a late 9th century voyage by the Norwegian traveller Ohthere. In conversation with Alfred, Ohthere had reported an adventurous voyage along the coast of Norway to the White Sea, as far towards the north, he said, '... as commonly the whale-hunters used to travel'. Who were the whale-hunters of that time? They were probably Norwegian fishermen who headed north each summer to catch walrus, a prey already in demand for its blubber, tough hides and ivory tusks. Scoresby argues convincingly that the walrus hunters also tackled large whales. He quotes also from the Danish 'King's Mirror', written about the mid 12th century, which reported that Icelanders of that time hunted whales, mostly by driving them ashore. There were French accounts too that reported harpooning off the French coast during the 11th century.

Biscayans of the 16th century, then, may not have been the first to catch whales at sea – merely the first to make of whaling a recognizable industry. Reports wrote of combined Biscayan and Icelandic fleets pursuing the whales to Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland with fleets of 50 to 60 whaling ships. Students of early whaling, familiar with the methods of later generations, immediately want answers to many questions. How big were these ships? Did they carry boats from which the whales were actually hunted? What species of whales were they hunting? Did they process the carcasses ashore or afloat? What products were they seeking? If meat, how did they preserve it? If oil, how did they extract it and carry it home? If whalebone, what was it used for? What was the market – the industrial demand – that required the efforts of 50 to 60 ships each season?

British Arctic whaling

Scoresby (*ibid.*: ii: 18) reports that the first bid by the English to catch whales was made in the year 1594:

'Different ships were fitted out for Cape Breton, at the entrance of the Gulf of St Lawrence, part of which were destined for the walrus-fishery, and the remainder for the whale-fishery. The *Grace* of Bristol, one of these vessels, took on board 700 or 800 whale-fins or laminae of whalebone, which they found in the Bay of St. George, where two large Biscayan fishermen had been wrecked three years before.'

Reported in the classic Hakluyt's *Voyages* (iii: 241), this was evidence not only of the start of English commercial whaling (it was the first account that Scoresby could find of whale-bone being imported into Britain), but also of an already well-established Biscayan interest.

This, however, was not Arctic whaling: the hunting grounds were the cold temperate waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, laced no doubt with late winter coastal ice, but as yet far from the Arctic waters and pack ice fields of the north. The true Arctic whaling grounds were discovered, not by whalers, but by adventurers of the same period – the last decades of the 16th century – who were searching for northeastern and northwestern passages from the European seaboard via the Arctic to China and the Indies. Of the many voyages made, especially by Dutch and British entrepreneurs, several were successful in discovering, not the passages themselves, but far northern islands, coasts and waterways including Svalbard, Bear Island to the east of Greenland, and the maze of islands and waterways of eastern Canada to the west. Though icebound even at the height of summer, these teemed with seabirds, seals, walruses, and a particular species of large, fat whale – now identified as the Greenland or Bowhead whale – that swam slowly enough to be readily harpooned from open boats. Here, then, was the true beginning of whaling in the high Arctic.

'The discovery of the Greenland whale-fishery' commented Scoresby (1820, ii: 19-20)

'... was not a circumstance that immediately resulted from the prior discovery of Spitzbergen, but it arose out of the enterprising character of the adventurers, employed in commercial speculations at this period; which character would, most undoubtedly, have led them to follow the object of pursuit, when they retreated to the northward, independent of the existence of these islands. Hence, whatever importance is attached to the discovery of these barren lands, the value of the discovery is eclipsed by that of the whale-fishery in the prolific seas adjacent; as it in a short time proved the most lucrative, and the most important branch of national commerce, which had ever been offered to the industry of man.'

Scoresby's phrase 'Greenland whale-fishery' was based on the current misconception that *Spitzbergen [now *Svalbard] formed an eastward extension of Greenland: indeed whaling was known as 'the Greenland trade' and whalers remained 'Greenlanders' long after the mistake was rectified. His comment that this was '... the most lucrative, and the most important branch of national commerce ... ever ... offered to the industry of man' might reflect pardonable enthusiasm of a whaler for a trade in which he excelled. But Scoresby was writing during the infancy of Britain's industrial revolution, when the sudden abundance of any natural resource, put to industrial use, provided relief for thousands from the grinding, universal poverty of agriculture.

An industry growing: Spitsbergen whaling

Merchants of Hull were in 1598 among the first to fit out ships from Britain, to points as diverse as the coast of Iceland and northern Norway. After the re-discovery (see below) of Spitsbergen in 1607, this too became an important whaling ground. In 1611 The 'Company for the Discovery of Unknown Countries', later known as the '*Muscovy' or 'Russian' Company, sent north two ships, *Marie Margaret* of 160 tons and *Elizabeth* of 60 tons. Their first objective was to take 'sea horses' or 'morses' (the current names for *walruses), but they carried on board half a dozen Biscayan whalers who knew how to catch large whales with harpoon and lance.

This was an adventurous voyage, providing a steep learning curve for all its participants. Both ships were lost, but the crews, together with a cargo of oil and bone were returned safely to England in a Hull whaler. Overall the voyage showed that, even for the uninitiated, whaling at Spitsbergen could yield profit. In the following year the Muscovy Company sent north two more ships, *Sea-horse* of 180 tons and *Whale* of 160 tons, which returned safely and successfully with cargoes of oil and bone.

However, they had not hunted alone. In the same season came two ships from the Netherlands and one from the Basque coast of Spain. The Muscovy Company, which regarded itself as having a monopoly in Svalbard waters, would not allow these interlopers to fish, but, in Scoresby's words (1820 ii: 24):

'... obliged them to return home, threatening to make prizes of their ships and cargoes if ever they had the presumption to appear again on the fishery. They conceived themselves to be justifiable in this conduct, from the supposition that the discoverers of Spitzbergen, as they considered themselves, and its whale-fisheries, were entitled to all the emoluments to be derived from them.'

In this supposition the Company was mistaken: neither they nor their countrymen could claim discovery of Spitsbergen. The islands had reputedly been sighted by Norse voyagers in 1194, and were re-discovered by the Dutch navigator Willem Barents 1596, in a voyage that placed on the map both Bear Island and much of Spitsbergen's west coast. A counter-claim by England that Spitsbergen had been discovered by Sir Hugh Willoughby in 1553 was probably false: that it had been sighted again by the English explorer Henry *Hudson in June 1607 provided little support for a territorial claim.

Adverse facts did not, however, inhibit the Company: in 1613 they secured from King James I a Royal Charter that excluded all others, English or foreign, from whaling in Spitsbergen waters. This was a timely development, for word had spread that there were whales for the taking off Spitsbergen, and more ships were already preparing to head north from Spain, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, and from other English ports. Empowered by its new charter, the Company in the same year sent out a fleet of seven armed ships to scare off rivals and continue whaling. It succeeded in its first objective, but spent so much time and effort in policing that little remained for whaling.

The following season saw the Dutch organizing a company (Dutch Noordsche Compagnie) and an exclusive charter of their own. In the same year the joint Danish-Norwegian monarchy asserting a claim – backed by three warships – that Spitsbergen was part of Greenland, and thus

lay within its own sovereignty. Open warfare developed, to which ancient graves in Magdalena Bay, on the northwest coast, still testify. The problem was not that whales were in short supply: there were clearly plenty for all. It was that whaling at this stage required both space at sea for catching the prey, and more critically space on land for processing them.

The industry involved mostly small ships of less than 200 tons, with crews of 20-30 who harpooned the whales close to land, often within the sheltered bays that lined the coast. The carcasses were processed by methods developed by the Basques, who were at that time the mentors in all whaling matters. The dead whales were towed into shallow water, to be stripped of their *blubber and *baleen in small factories of *trypots, set up singly or in groups on red-brick hearths. The blubber was boiled to yield a clear oil, that was poured into barrels, floated out to the ships and stowed in the holds. The baleen, rough-cleaned, was bundled in on top. Thus processing required a favourable combination of sea-room, safe anchorage and beach, in bays that would with some certainty open early in the season and remain ice-free throughout the summer.

Remnants of these 17th century hearths, now frost-shattered and half-buried in sand, together with the foundations of rough shelters and huts, are still to be seen on Svalbard beaches, often with graves of the same period among the dunes nearby. Returns from such whaling were small and uncertain, and could not support warfare or even rivalries in so dangerous and hostile an environment. From 1614 Dutch and English whalers reached a degree of accord that others agreed to follow. Pitched battles and mutual bullying gave way to geographical demarcation: the harbours of northwestern Spitsbergen were divided among the rival nations, reducing friction and encouraging mutual help. Scoresby (*ibid.*, ii: 36-38) described it thus:

‘The English had such influence as to obtain, not only the first choice, but the privilege of occupying a greater number of bays and harbours than any of the rest. After the English, the Dutch, Danes, Hamburgers and Biscayans, each in succession, made a selection, in the order of their arrival on, or their supposed claim to the fishery.

The English chose for themselves some of the principal southern bays, most free from ice, consisting of Bell Sound, Preservation or Safe Harbour in Ice Sound, and Horizon Bay, the whole situated on the south of the Foreland; together with a small bay behind the northern part of the Foreland, which they called English Harbour, and another more remote which still bears the name of English or Magdalena Bay.

The Hollanders, obliged to take up their quarters farther to the northward, chose the island of Amsterdam, with two bays adjoining, one on each side; and a third, which they call Hollander’s Bay, formed between the island and the main.

The Danes, who followed next after the Hollanders, contenting themselves with more circumscribed possessions, established themselves between the English and the Dutch. Their principal place of resort they called Danes Island and Danes Bay.

When the Hamburgers resorted to the fishery, they discovered a small bay to the northward of the Foreland, situated near the Seven Ice Bergs, which being less encumbered with ice than many others, they took possession of for their fishing station, and named it after their native city.

Lastly, the Spanish and French, though among the earliest visitors to Spitzbergen, found, on their arrival, in the year when the division was made, all the bays on the coast already disposed of and occupied; they therefore fixed themselves in an unclaimed situation, on the northern face of Spitzbergen.’

Charts of Svalbard still record Engelsbukta, Danskøya, Amsterdamøya, Hamburgbukta and other names arising from this early partitioning.

The Spitsbergen industry: growth and decline

Division did not entirely secure peace: it did, however, stabilize the trade, allowing the development of shore settlements that were manned summer after summer for many years. *Smeerenburg, one of the largest, developed on Amsterdamøya by the Dutch Noordsche Compagnie, during the 1630s was a village possessing eight tryworks and some 16-17 substantial buildings, that provided workspace and lodgings for a summer population of about 200. The Danish-Norwegian ‘Royal Greenland Company’ organized a similar settlement on neighbouring Danskøya: the English, Germans and French too established depots, some attempting to leave overwintering parties with varying degrees of success.

Control of Spitsbergen whaling by rival companies had constantly been challenged by ‘interlopers’ – independent operators from the whaling nations whose ships worked from the less-

favoured bays, or even from the pack ice that lay each season some miles off the Spitsbergen shore. Some, for example a Friesland company in 1634, were persistent enough to secure a charter from the province's own States-General. Merchants of Hull, among the most avid and persistent of English whalers, gained a charter from King Charles II granting them exclusive rights to hunt off Jan Mayen, an isolated island south of Svalbard. In the 1640s so many Dutch merchants wished to become involved in whaling that the States-General of the United Provinces declined to renew its charters that favoured individual companies, and declared whaling open to all. In consequence Dutch whale fishing increased tenfold from some thirty ships to 300 per year, growing still further after the mid-century.

During the same period the English whalers almost entirely disappeared. As Scoresby reported (*ibid.*, ii; 56):

'Between the years 1660 and 1670, four or five hundred sail of Dutch and Hamburg ships were yearly visitants to the coast of Spitzbergen, while the English sometimes did not send a single ship.'

The most probable reason was a gradual decline in the inshore stocks of whales, due to over-fishing. This required whalers to travel further in search of their prey, into the open sea, and more dangerously among the offshore pack ice. Profits became less certain, and the English, less heavily committed than the Dutch both to ships and to shoreside investment, found safer and more profitable uses for their own ships.

As the trend from inshore hunting continued, it became practical to process the whales at sea, stripping the carcasses of baleen and blubber alongside the mother-ship, cutting the blubber into small pieces and packing it into barrels for boiling-up in the home port. Shore installations became redundant and were abandoned. So evolved the practices that from the late 18th century onward came to dominate the industry, intensifying the skills required to ensure success. Whales were hunted from small boats (appropriately enough called '*whalers'), paddled by crews of five or six highly skilled and specialized seamen, and brought alongside for flensing. The three or four whalers needed as a minimum to operate efficiently demanded larger mother-ships, with crews skilled both in seamanship and boat-handling, and in harpooning, lancing, managing harpoon lines and overhauling the prey. Operations close to and within the ice edge required ships ideally to be fortified (i.e. strengthened internally against pressure from pack ice, adding to the costs of fitting-out). Above all it required a cadre of ship's officers skilled not only in ice navigation, but in knowing where, in a broad swathe of ocean, to seek out and kill their prey.

The revival of British whaling

The virtual withdrawal of British ships from whaling was to last for several generations. Such oil and whalebone as Britain needed was bought from the American colonies or from continental suppliers – the former rivals who now dominated the market. That '... such a profitable and valuable speculation' was entirely laid aside was noted with regret by the government of Charles II, who according to Scoresby (*ibid.*, ii: 56):

'... saw its importance as a nursery for hardy seamen, as offering employment for a great number of ships, while the requisite equipments would require the co-operation of a number of artisans, tradesmen and labourers; and, above all, they saw its importance in a national point of view, where valuable cargoes might be procured without *first cost*, excepting the expenses of the voyage, while, on the contrary, great sums of money were annually sent out of the country and paid to foreign nations, for the purchase of these very articles which might be had out of the sea.'

To encourage the renewal of the whale fishery, Parliament in 1672 passed an act (25th Charles II., c.7) whereby, again in Scoresby's words (*ibid.*, ii: 57-58):

'... the rigours of the navigation act were dispensed with, and its essential properties so modified for the ten following years, that a vessel for the whale-fishery, being British built, and having a master and one-half of the crew British subjects, might carry natives of Holland or other expert fishers, to the amount of the other half. As a further encouragement, the oil and whalebone imported were exempted from all duties, though the colonies were to pay 6s. per ton for oil, and 50s per ton for such whalebone as should be imported in their own shipping, and half that duty, if taken thither by English shipping. But the oil imported by foreign ships, was to be charged with 9l Sterling per ton, and the whalebone with 18l per ton of duty.'

Exempting from duty oil and bone caught from predominantly British ships, and imposing heavy taxes on imports from the colonies and continent, failed completely to encourage the trade. Though the Act was renewed in 1690 for a further four years (2nd William and Mary, c4) not a single ship took advantage of its terms.

In 1693 Sir William Scaven and 41 others subscribed a joint capital of £41,000 to be incorporated by new parliamentary Act (4th and 5th William and Mary. C17) under the imposing title 'The Company of Merchants of London Trading to Greenland'. Operating off Spitsbergen from 1697, this particular company managed in five years to spend all of its considerable capital, but failed miserably to catch whales. The Company's failure was later ascribed to a number of causes – to ships commanded by persons 'unacquainted with their business', to captains on fixed pay who amused themselves by hunting deer instead of accumulating bonus, to 'slovenly and wasteful' management of blubber boiling, to spoiling and embezzlement of whaling equipment, to extravagant fitting-out of ships, boats and fishing apparatus. These were all indications that whatever skills had previously been acquired by English whalers had now long been lost: this was not an industry that could safely be left to adventurers.

Scoresby (*ibid.*, ii: 61) found their failure the more surprising in that, in the year 1697 when the British operations began, everyone else in Spitsbergen was enjoying huge success. One bay alone contained :

'a richly laden fleet ... comprising 121 Hollanders, whose cargoes consisted of 1252 whales; 54 Hamburgers with 515 whales, 15 Bremeners with 119 whales, and 2 Embdeners with 2 whales: in all which fleet there was not one *clean* ship [i.e. without a catch].'

Clearly there was no shortage of whales in Spitsbergen waters. Clearly too it would take more than ambition, capital and tax concessions to get Britain back into whaling.

Such rewards were still tempting, and some years later a further attempt was made to start a British enterprise, this time by the renowned *South Sea Company. Henry *Elking, an entrepreneur who credited himself with 'long experience in the trade', in 1721 lay before the company's Court of Directors a proposal entitled '*A View of the Greenland Trade and Whale-fishery, with the National and Private Advantages thereof, etc.*' (Elking 1722). This document, essentially a well-informed review of the industry's history and prospects, included a '...full proof that England may retrieve the Trade, and are able to carry it on to the greater advantage than any other Nation', with '... all the known Objections to the contrary, answered and removed.'

Today Elking's *View of the Greenland Trade* (see Key References for the text) is an interesting comment on how whaling was perceived over a decade after the Company of Merchants' disaster. At the time it was sufficiently persuasive to encourage another prosperous company, equally lacking in experience of whaling, to embark on a similar venture. Judicious lobbying induced Parliament to offer exemptions from duties similar to those enjoyed by the Company of Merchants. In 1724 The Court of Directors of the South Sea Company commissioned a fleet of 12 ships, each of over 300 tons, to be built in the Thames, equipped them fully, provided dock space at Deptford, and sent them off in the following spring to catch whales.

In the first season the fleet returned with a 25 ½ whales (the half being shared with a ship of another fleet). Though poor success, barely covering the costs of the voyage and none of the accumulated debts, it was never exceeded in seven subsequent years. In 1730 two more ships were added to the fleet, but that season saw only a dozen whales caught, and an overall loss approaching £9000. Despite Elking's enthusiasm, these results were perhaps predictable. First 12 and then 14 captains were sent north to an undertaking of which few had the slightest experience. The harpooners, linesmen and other skilled boat-crews, recruited largely from the continent at massive cost, had little time to adjust to working with inexperienced masters, and would not have relished losing the additional payments yielded by successful voyages. Again at a time when continental whalers were returning fully loaded, British whalers came home clean or with half-filled holds. After eight years of disastrous losses the Court of Directors had had enough; the whole enterprise was abandoned in 1732.

Introduction of the bounty

In the previous year the South Sea Company had petitioned Parliament for a whaling *bounty to support them in an industry that, with all its manifest failings, was giving employment to hundreds of workers afloat and ashore. Parliament agreed, and in 1732 introduced an Act (6th Geo. II. C.33) which provided for payment of 20/- per ship ton on British whaling ships of 200 tons and upwards. To qualify

for the bounty, ship's masters and crews had to meet a number of requirements, to the satisfaction of officers of Customs and Excise who administered the Act. Thus a ship of 300 tons that met those requirements, irrespective of the success of the voyage, attracted a payment of £300 – a small proportion of the total costs, but one that provided an element of insurance.

The bounty came too late to help the South Sea Company. While it no doubt helped a small number of other ship-owners who were whaling at the time, it did not encourage an expansion of the industry. In 1740 the Act was extended for a further ten years, the bounty was increased to 30/-, and officers (i.e. those holding responsible positions in the whalers) were exempted from the attentions of the press-gangs. Again there was little response, but in 1749, shortly before the provisions of the 1740 Act expired, a further Act increased the bounty to 40/- per ton. The resulting sum virtually underwrote the basic costs of a whaling voyage. Ship-owners in ports up and down Great Britain, hitherto unwilling to enter an industry with occasionally rich, but always uncertain pickings, took the plunge and became whalers. In Scoresby's words (*ibid.*, ii: 75):

'The effect of the bounty of 40s. per ton, together with other inducements held out to speculators in the whale-fishery, was such, that immediately after the passing of this last act of Parliament, the British whale-fishery began to assume a respectable and hopeful appearance. The merchants of Scotland began to participate with the English, in the year 1750.'

The bounty indeed provided an incentive that no previous attractions had approached. On the same page Scoresby records that in 1752 the combined whaling fleets of England and Scotland amounted to 40 sail. In 1753 the total had increased to 49, in 1754 to 67, in 1755 to 82, and in 1756 to 83. The 67 British ships whaling in 1754 competed with 132 Dutch, 17 Hamburgers, six Danes, two Bremeners, two French and a single Emdener. Though heavily outnumbered by the Dutch, Britain was already contributing almost one third to the total European fleet.

The enthusiastic response of British ship owners to provision of a workable whaling bounty may well have been tempered by the bureaucratic requirements that accompanied it, increasingly in successive years. The paperwork provided one consequence of importance to historians: from about 1750 the industry became very fully documented. Ships were measured to estimate the amount of bounty-earning tonnage. Dates of departure and return were recorded, to ensure that the voyages were of satisfactory length. There were statements sworn by owners and masters, Customs' returns recording not only catches, but confirming that all requirements of the Bounty Acts had been met. There were muster lists recording names ages and home towns of officers and seamen (regrettably for modern genealogists, not always completed in full), and logbooks that were required to report each day the ships' noon positions, weather and ice conditions, names of other ships present, whale sightings and catches, and other significant details.

Records of an industry

Thus, though records of British Arctic whaling are sketchy up to the mid 18th century, from then onward the industry is far better documented. It may indeed be possible, from one source and another, to substantiate almost every one of an estimated 6000 or more voyages from British ports that occurred between 1750 and 1918, when the last British whaler made its final voyage to the ice. Meanwhile there remain practical problems. This industry operating from 35 independent ports, reporting to local customs officers and harbour officials only tenuously connected to central authorities, has had no single collecting ground or archive, and its records are as widely scattered up and down the British Isles – a fact thoroughly deplored by many who have sought to study British Arctic whaling in the past. The BAW website and database may to some degree help, by collecting together as much information as possible into a single site accessible to scholars throughout the world.