

The Herring and History



Photo : Topical Press Agency

Herring boats at Lowestoft

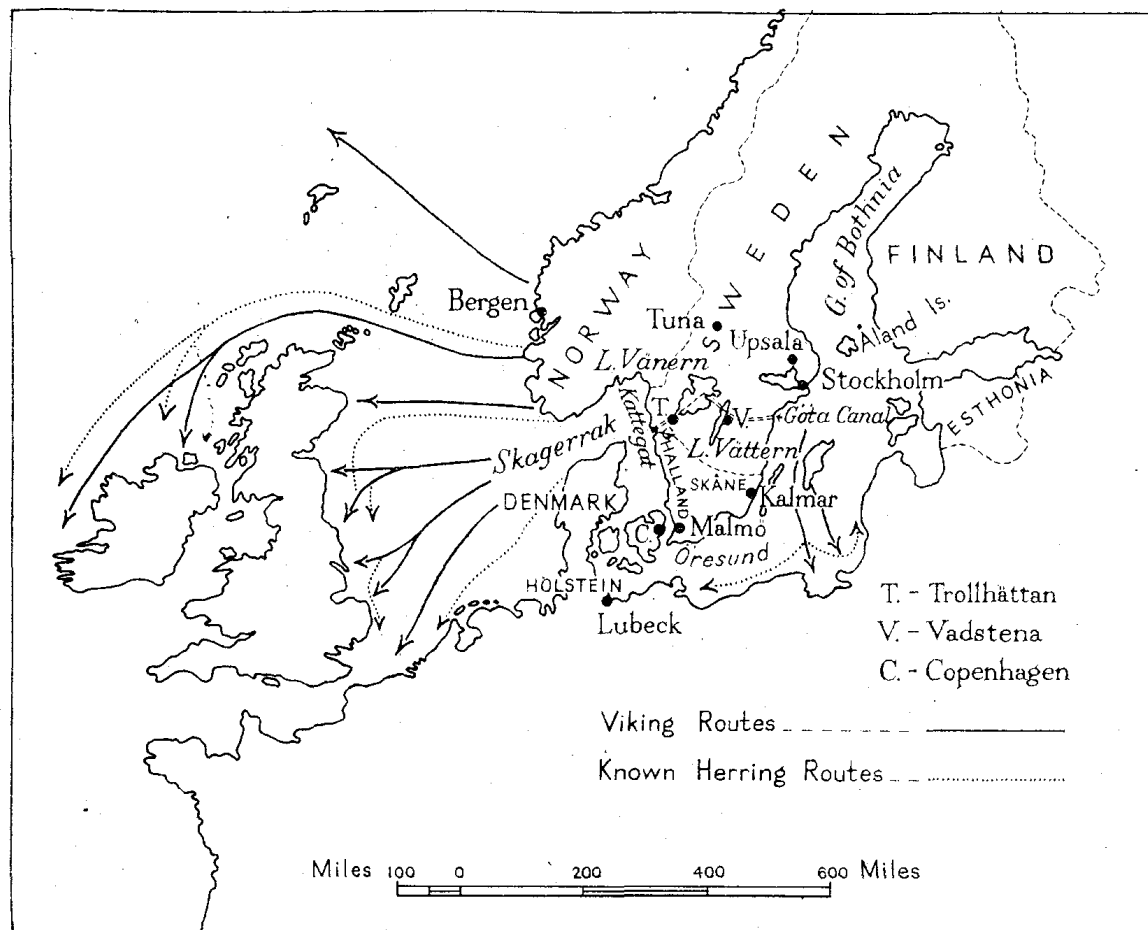
By S. M. TOYNE

From earliest times, the migration of the herring has exercised an important influence on the history of the peoples living around the North Sea and the Baltic.

THIS YEAR HAS SEEN the close of a dispute that originated some four hundred years ago. The International Court at The Hague has ruled that the territorial waters off the coast of Norway shall be defined by a three-mile limit, measured from promontory to promontory, instead of bending with each indentation of the coast. This means that foreign vessels will be deprived of fishing grounds they have long frequented, though not without lawsuits and many violent quarrels. For the pursuit of fish, and of the herring in particular, century after century has been a cause of international strife. Very early in history the herring

was recognized as a valuable food and, especially in periods of food shortage arising from war, from bad harvest, or, more rarely, atmospheric changes, it has become a prize capable of stirring up much mischief among the maritime countries.

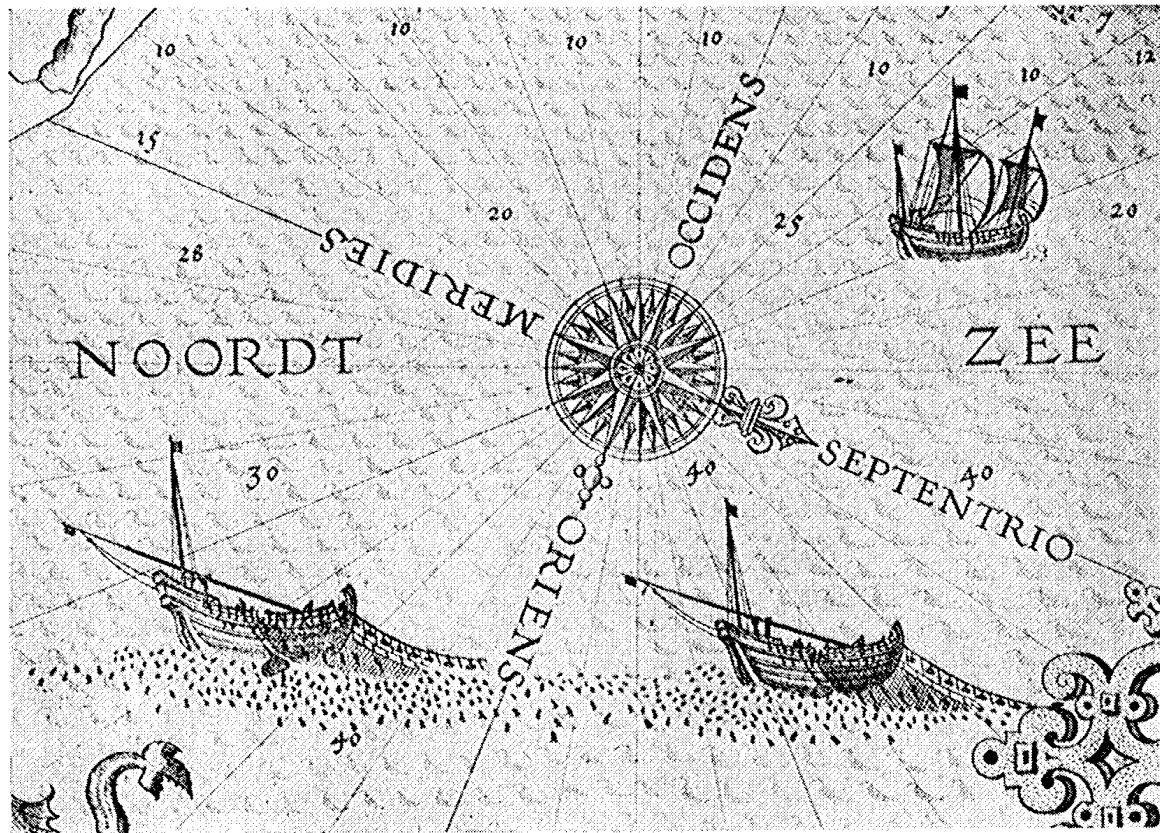
To illustrate the part played in history by the herring, one need only mark, on a map of North-Western Europe, all the places in which early references are found to it. From north to south, markings would be made at the Orkneys, Caithness, Isle of Man, Aberdeen, parts of Ireland, Whitby, Yarmouth, Dunwich, and the mouth of the Seine ; on the eastern side of



From "Scandinavians in History," Edward Arnold Ltd.
Viking and herring routes

the North Sea at Bergen, Oslo, Viken—the province of Norway running south as far as the modern Göteborg—and Skåne, the southern province of Sweden, which until the seventeenth century belonged to Denmark. Superimpose on this map a chart of the Viking routes of invasions from East to West, and one may well begin to doubt whether it was pure coincidence that directed the courses steered by the Vikings straight towards the herring. The Vikings were crèek dwellers, poor agriculturalists and still poorer breeders of cattle; their staple food was fish, and the chief fish in their diet herring. Food shortage and the capricious movements of the herring shoals were two of the main reasons for their hazardous trips across the North Sea. In the tenth century, however, England had a sudden respite from

Viking incursions. "During most of the tenth century," as Trevelyan remarks in his *History of England*, "the Viking movement was in abeyance. Emigration from the Baltic lands fell off and the Scandinavian Colonists spent their time in building up towns, farms, and institutions, which their forefathers had won with the battle axe." But why had the Viking emigration ceased? There is no proof that Scandinavia was any better organized to feed itself; but there is evidence that the herring, having helped to extend the Norse Empire, had now returned to its old haunts. The coasts of Norway were again alive with the fish; and, from Oslo southwards to the Öresund, the abundance was so great that larger nets had to be used. This state of things lasted nearly to the end of the tenth century, when once again the herring



Reproduced from "Herrings and the Herring Fisheries" by J. J. Jenkins, P. S. Smith & Son
Herring drifters on the Dogger Bank
 From Aurigarius Speculum Marini 1582

turned west. In these days, we might argue that the pink plankton, on which herring feed, must gradually have been shifted by the Eastern drift of the Gulf Stream. But then the catastrophe seemed to be due to the anger of the Gods.

So far I have suggested that, when the herring was on the move, the Vikings followed. Now I would like to draw attention to a second interesting point. Besides pursuing the herring, they usually settled in places where the native herring fisheries already flourished. It has often been said that East Anglia, where they made their principal landfalls, was the part of England nearest to their homelands. But this was not so. Their expeditions did not sail due west from the modern Esbjerg, but either from the Baltic through the Öresund, or Great Belt, or from Oslo and the little port of Viken, or from the coast between Stavanger and Bergen.

Almost certainly, the Greenland route towards the Orkneys would be followed for the start of their journey—the route that was employed for Ireland and the Isle of Man. Then the Vikings would turn southwest, striking the English coast between Berwick and the Tyne, having steered a course similar to that of the Bergen-Newcastle line today. From there to East Anglia, it was a matter of following the herring down the coast—and, for sailing vessels using sweeps, as I have been informed by a Norwegian skipper, this would have been the quickest route, during nine months of the year, from Norway to East Anglia. Thus it came about, whether by accident or by design, that the Vikings established themselves so firmly in the Danelaw, where the Anglo-Saxon fishermen had carried on their busiest trade, that they were able to maintain their hold during the tenth century despite the halt in immigration.

The story of the herring, as a maker of mischief and a builder of empires, might well have ended here, had the dream of the Swedish King Olaf Skötkönung been fulfilled. He envisaged a vast Nordic dominion, consisting of England, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, and including the coastline of France from Calais to the Seine. This kingdom would have embraced all the herring countries, though I do not suggest that the prevalence of herring materially influenced the dreams of the old King. His plan was a sound one, however, as we can see from the empire created by Knut, which was nearly as extensive as that imagined by Olaf. Had Knut lived longer and been able to establish his Empire firmly, the herring might have migrated from Skåne to Aberdeen, or from Yarmouth to Bergen, or from Oslo to the Frisian Island, without causing international complications. But it was not to be.

A few centuries later, we find the herring frequenting the southern shores of the Baltic, and once more affecting the destiny of peoples. The traders of the Hanseatic towns were attracted north; the rich sea-harvest fell to them; and their growing prosperity provoked the descendants of the old Vikings to attack them. A fleet had to be provided to protect this new breed of fishermen, who refused to yield without a fight; and henceforth, the Hanseatic League became essentially maritime—though the inland activities on which it had been founded were in no way diminished—and Lübeck acknowledged the importance of the new trade by incorporating three herrings into its coat of arms. In its origins, the Hanseatic League is generally held to have grown out of agreements between towns to defend their rights against the political tyranny of their noble neighbours. As power became less centralized in the north of the Holy Roman Empire, a league was formed, including towns in the south and west and east, but dominated by a “Big Five,” with a powerful northern “Inner Three”—Lübeck, Hamburg, Stralsund—which defined policy and laid down terms of admission, methods of administration and rights of trading abroad. The council of these Big Five, held in 1256, marks the beginning of the economic Hanseatic League, which strove to control the whole trade of the Baltic

and the North Seas, as well as that of Central Europe. Not until nearly two centuries later—and only after a bitter maritime war with the Dutch—did its power begin to wane. Even then, as a purely mercantile organization, it still flourished; its “counter” at Bergen, facing the present fish market, was not abolished till 1775, and its “counter” in London remained until the year after the Great Exhibition of 1851. The fish trade—especially in herrings—played an important part in the rise of the north German Hanseatic towns. The “Big Five,” or “Inner Three,” admitted to the League towns which acted as a market for them and, in turn, exchanged their produce either for home consumption or for export further afield. Cities so widely separated as Cologne, Bruges, Wisby, and Novgorod were among the seventy or eighty members that valued their Hanseatic privileges—and, at times, had to be disciplined for some attempt to overreach their rights or not pay their dues. The League’s “counters,” which combined the functions of office, warehouse and factory, were established in many foreign countries, where their special rights often led to violent disputes, since native merchants were apt to consider that their own interests were thus seriously threatened.

Meanwhile in England, during the centuries preceding the Tudors, a great change had taken place in the fishing industry. When the herring partially left our shores, Hanseatic and other foreign fishermen, competing with their English rivals, began to land their fish in this country. Herrings were much in demand, both by our armies and by our civil population, and our own fishermen, inclined to hug the coast and not “follow the fish,” were failing to supply the market. So much alarmed was the English Government about the inadequate catches of fish that, early in Edward III’s reign, a law was passed forbidding fishermen from giving up their trade and exempting them from military service. In 1338, as a result of this enactment, Yarmouth alone supplied 400,000 herring to the army of King Edward. During the next century, the herring achieved its highest distinction in English annals by giving its name to one of the battles of the Hundred Years War, the notorious “Battle of Herrings,” fought in 1429. Few text-books discuss the real import-

ance of this encounter. If the French attack on the Duke of Bedford's supply department had succeeded, the English army investing Rouen could hardly have held its position. As it was, the English beat back the French at Rouvray, the herrings were successfully conveyed to the Duke of Suffolk, and his army continued the siege of Rouen. Had the herrings been lost to the French, and the Duke of Suffolk's army starved into a retreat, Joan of Arc's "voices" might never have spoken, for the liberation of France would already have been accomplished.

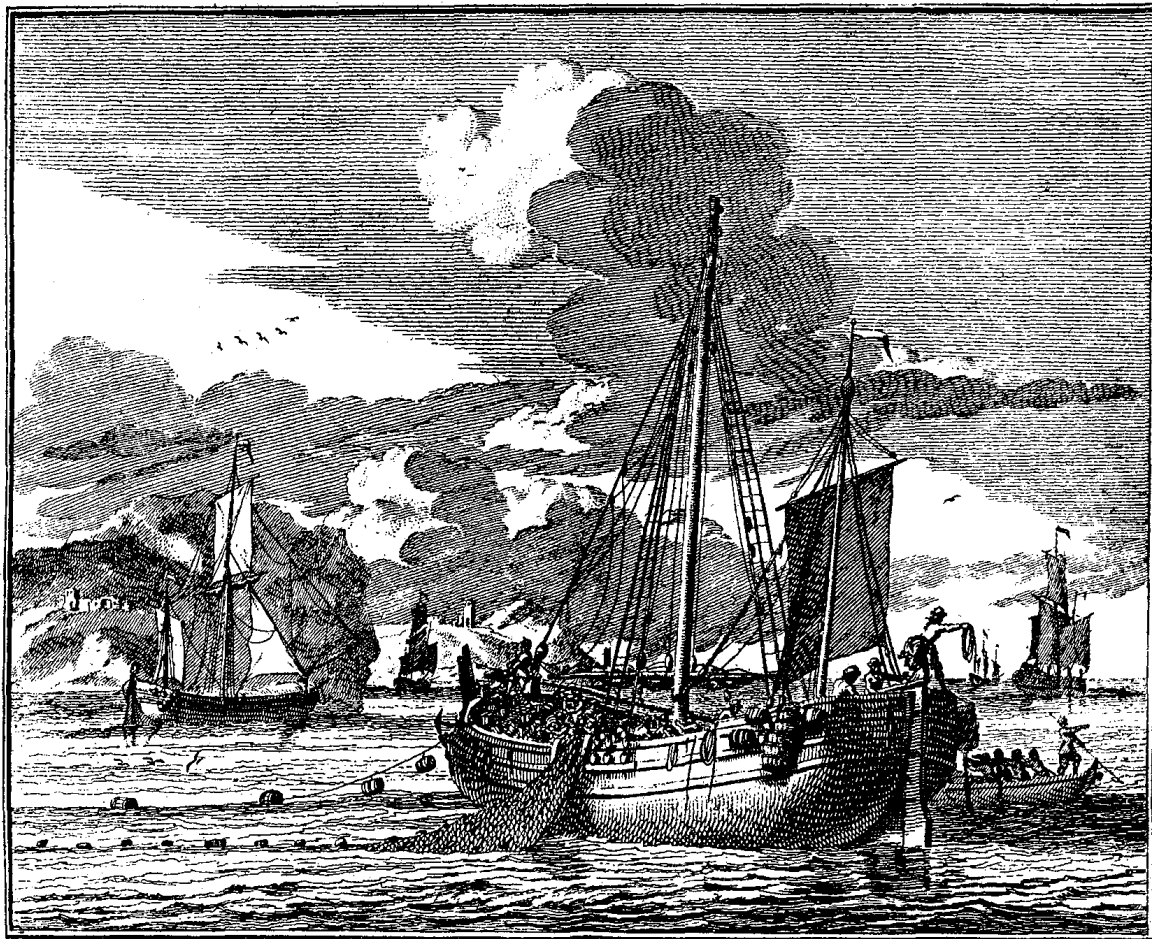
Perhaps the most striking tribute to the international importance of the herring is to be found in the terms of the Treaty of Calais in 1521. Francis I and the Emperor Charles V then agreed that the herring fishermen of both parties should be allowed to fish unmolested, and that no attacks should be made by either party during the season October to January. Cardinal Wolsey, in his position as mediator between the King and the Emperor, was principally responsible for this arrangement. England, and the East Coast fisheries in particular, greatly benefited: not only did foreign vessels victual in England, but the English fishermen could now export to both France and the Empire without fear of molestation. Many other instances could be given in these centuries of the sympathy shown for foreign fishermen by English rulers—entirely, of course, for practical reasons: it was largely a matter of obtaining supplies for the armed forces, though a useful profit also reached the exchequer, since a customs tax was imposed on every "last" or "cran" landed at Yarmouth, Hull, or London. A reaction came only when it appeared that this "open door" policy would diminish the strength of the English navy; but, subject to certain restrictions, it was continued till the seventeenth century. Disputes then reached a climax, as we shall see, because the herring had come back to England and brought with it a host of foreign fishermen who were "worse than pyrats." On balance, however, present-day opinion would probably support the view that England gained considerably from privileges accorded to the Baltic traders by the Plantagenet and Tudor Kings.

As a background to the seventeenth-century

dispute over fisheries, we must now examine the influence of the herring on the rise of Dutch sea-power and the resulting conflict of Dutch and Hanseatic interests. From the fourteenth century onwards, the peoples of Holland and Zeeland were distinct in character and temper from the citizens of Ghent, Brussels, and Bruges: they were sailors and dairy-farmers, not manufacturers and artisans. Herring-fishing, in particular, supplied a large part of the population of Holland and Zeeland with their chief livelihood. The herring had visited their shores, and their fishermen had ranged widely in English and Norwegian waters. It was the Dutch who initiated the scientific treatment of the fish-harvest;* and they also applied themselves to devising means by which the cost of reaping the harvest could be lessened. They invented the fast *yager*, a boat that enabled them to "catch the market" and yet keep some of their fleet at sea. From this trade sprang Amsterdam, a town "built upon herring bones," which soon rivalled Antwerp as a mercantile centre.

The clash with the Hansa came at the beginning of the fifteenth century. It began when the Danes, appreciating the increasing volume of Baltic trade, attempted to close the Sound and exact tolls on the narrow passage between Helsingborg in Skåne, and Helsingør on the Danish mainland. This move would have adversely affected both the German cities on the Baltic and the carrying trade of the Hollanders. As the towns of the North Netherlands were members of the Hanseatic League, enjoying equal rights with Lübeck and Hamburg, they made common cause with the Germans, and by a joint attack ultimately defeated the Danes. Four Hanseatic fortresses were then established to guard the Sound—it was to the League, incidentally, that Gustavus Adolphus had to pay dues in order to secure Swedish freedom of passage through the Sound. But the victors fell out and, after many unofficial engagements, provoked by the German ports' attempt to break the carrying trade of the Hollanders in the Baltic, war broke out in

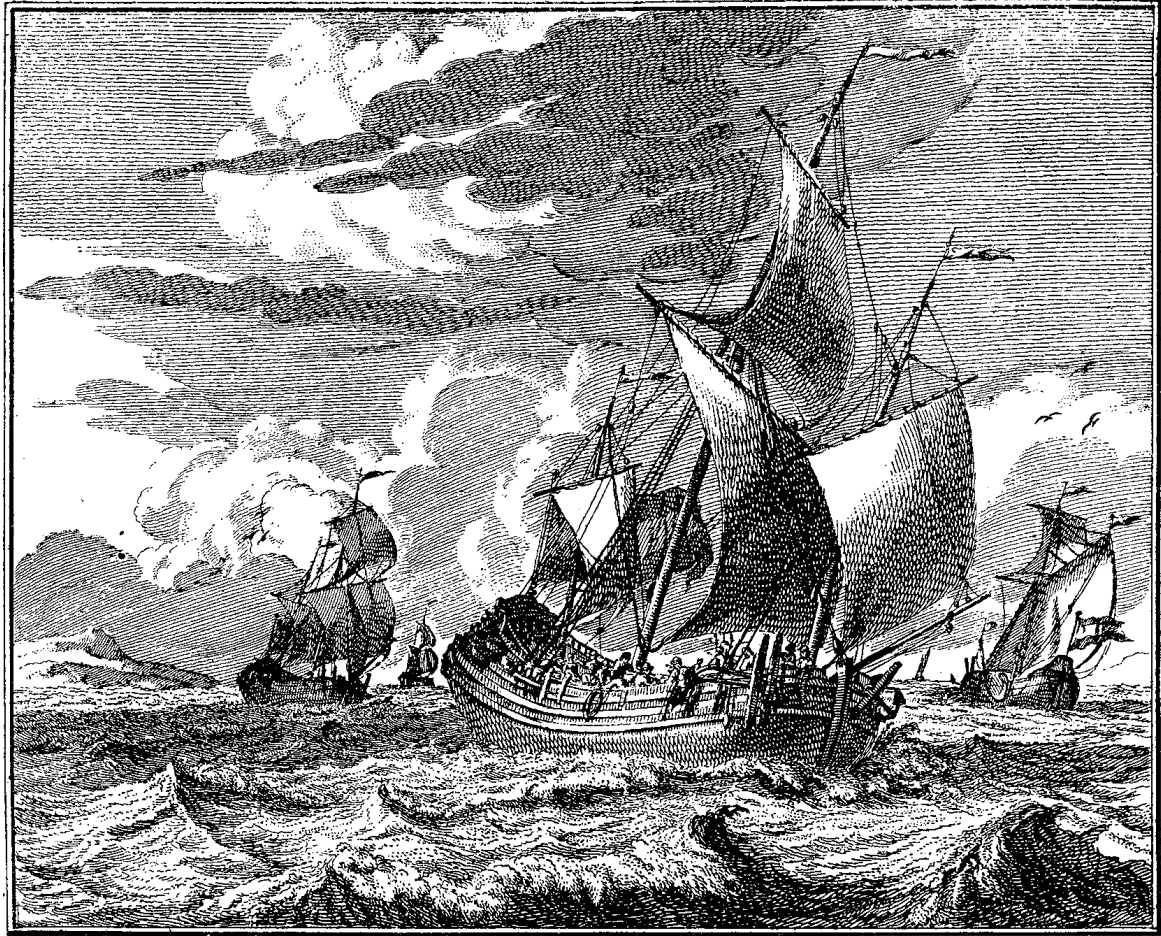
* It is almost certain that Beukelsz of Bieroliet (died 1447) invented a new process for gutting and pickle-curing the herring. It was kept a secret for nearly 100 years, till the higher prices obtained for the Dutch kipper led others to imitate his methods.



Reproduced from "The Herring" by A. M. Samuel, John Murray, by courtesy of Lord Mancroft.
Herring fishing, 1792

1438. Besides the usual freights of timber, grain, and "nautical stores," which were brought from the Baltic, the Dutch were bringing in herrings, cured in the Beukelsz way, and getting high prices for them at Danzig and Hamburg. The herring itself helped to embitter the struggle by beginning to return to the shores of Norway, East Anglia and Normandy in the latter part of 1438. This migration of the shoals was naturally spread over several years, since some of the fish continued to frequent the old grounds until all their food was used up ; but diminishing catches added to the fury of Dutch and German rivalry. For three years the war raged, till finally the German cities gave in, and at the Peace of Copenhagen, 1440-1, the Dutch became masters of the North Sea and Baltic.

Full advantage of their opportunity was taken by the North Netherlanders ; and, throughout the next two centuries, their mercantile marine steadily grew. During the long struggle against Spain under William the Silent, it was the two " fish " provinces of Holland and Zeeland that endured ; the power of resistance and the sinews of war depended on Amsterdam. By the end of the sixteenth century, Holland had built up one of the strongest combinations of ships of war and ships of commerce that Europe has known. In 1602 the Dutch East Indian Company was the acknowledged rival of the English company founded in the previous year ; and, in 1607, a Dutch Fleet, sailing to Gibraltar, destroyed the entire Spanish fleet, which included ten huge and heavily armed galleons, without losing a vessel. The stage



Reproduced from "The Herring" by A. M. Samuel, John Murray, by courtesy of Lord Mancroft
The Herring Barge sails into harbour, 1792

was set for the next big international clash over the fisheries.

Some Englishmen were already aware of the war that was to come for dominion over the sea. John Dee, Hitchcock, and Sir Walter Raleigh had raised their voices, but most contemporaries were deaf to the dangers threatening England from the Netherlands. At this moment the herring was haunting the coasts of England, and Dutch fishermen were fishing in our waters as they had done in the previous century, when English and Dutch were together fighting against Catholic Spain. After the Twelve Years Truce in 1609, by which the Netherlands were treated as Independent States and their vessels guaranteed access to the Indies by Spain, their fishing fleets continued to multiply, and, more

and more, came to be guarded against interference by accompanying ships of war. Disputes with the English, which were endless, often resulted in loss of life and vessels. Nominally a tribute should have been paid by the Dutch; but, whenever possible, it was evaded. To supervise these foreign fishermen, England would have needed a large fleet, which we did not possess on the death of James I; and there is no doubt that a desire to protect our herring fisheries from the Dutch was largely responsible for Charles I's hotly disputed naval programme.

But, to understand the main issues at stake between the English and the Dutch in the years from 1634 to 1666, we must first retrace our steps. The underlying cause of Anglo-Dutch disagreements dated back many centuries—



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The packing of herrings into barrels

the claim of England, contested by other nations, to hold the Dominion of the Narrow Seas. The claims of England's opponents were expounded by the great Dutch lawyer, Grotius; but they were put forward with equal strength by France and Spain. As late as 1639, four years after the English and Dutch controversy had begun to rage, we note a great Spanish effort to enforce the Freedom of the Seas and to regain their own supremacy. Paradoxically enough, this effort was frustrated by Van Tromp and Cornelius Witte, who destroyed the Spanish fleet in English waters, while Vice-Admiral Pennington's squadron watched the battle from its anchorage alongside the Spaniards. Charles I was so indignant at the "Scandal of the Downs" that negotiations for

the marriage of the Stadholder's son to the Princess Mary were on the point of being broken off. But matters were smoothed over; and Mary, married ten days before Strafford's execution, became the mother of William III. It may be remarked here that, when William was Stadholder in 1672, he refused to pay tribute for the privilege of fishing in English waters, as proposed in the treaty negotiations; but that, even when King of England, he was unable to persuade the English Parliament to abrogate the Navigation Act which bore heavily on Dutch trade and fishing.

From time to time, however, the English "dominion" of the Narrow Seas was admitted by other nations, and extended by consent to waters definitely "territorial"; and financial



*Medal issued by Charles I to commemorate
the herring fishing treaty with the Dutch in 1636*

agreements for rights to fish were made with foreign countries, sometimes in the form of leases for a specified number of years. Queen Mary, for instance, had granted a lease for twenty-one years of the North Irish coastal fisheries at an annual rent of £1,000. The Hanseatic League received a similar lease, and this form of agreement is believed to be the origin of the "three mile limit." In the case of the Dutch right to fish off the East Coast, there was a nominal arrangement by which they paid two shillings per last of all fish caught. This proposal was made by a Commission set up under James I, and in itself was an adaptation of the old right of taxing fish landed by foreigners in England. But it was obviously an extremely difficult tax to enforce; warships would have been needed and sea battles might have ensued, probably involving the nation in war. Temporarily, naval expansion was postponed and the Dutchmen continued to fish in our waters. Charles I, however, in 1628 began to put our fleet in order, initially to protect the shores of England from possible invasion by the French. This was the reason for the first issue of writs for the famous Ship Money. At that point, the herring swam in to

stir trouble. Intent on exacting his fishing tax, which, as "Sovereign of the Sea," he considered he had every right to do, Charles I supported the action of twelve British warships which had driven off a smaller Dutch fleet and mulcted their fishermen of two shillings a cran. This action raised a storm of protest; but Charles, so vacillating in most things, resolutely declined to give way. Next year the Dutch protecting fleet numbered no fewer than fifty-seven ships of war. The smaller English fleet gave fight, ultimately driving off the Dutch and exacting 20,000 florins. By 1636, as a result of levying Ship Money, we had a respectable fleet at sea, including the *Sovereign* of 1,740 tons mounting 96 guns, as well as the "County" and "City" classes ranging from 900 to 500 tons. By 1637-8, the fleet comprised nearly fifty warships. Unfortunately, the wisest act of Charles I was performed in the un-wisest of manners. If Parliament had been sitting, a sea battle off our own shores, involving 1,250 lives, must have stirred the members to action; but Parliament was in suspense, and Ship Money was levied on inland towns without due Parliamentary consent. Although, after their defeat, the Dutch paid Charles no less than

£30,000 for permission to finish the season's fishing, and English fishermen were selling their herring once more in the Baltic, the King was committed to the course of action which led to the Civil Wars. In face of great unpopularity, he had built up a powerful navy; which, in the Civil Wars, turned against him, thwarted his attempts to capture the great ports, and provided the foundation of the naval power of his opponents and successors. The value of his work was not recognized until after his execution, when the Commonwealth adopted and improved upon his programme.

Owing to the Civil War, the question of the herring fisheries fell into abeyance; but the Navigation Act of 1651 was the Parliamentary answer to the visits of foreign fishing boats to our coasts. This act, enforced by the strong hand of Cromwell, and often incorrectly ascribed to him, prohibited not only the landing of fish from foreign vessels in England, but also the export of English goods, including fish, in foreign bottoms, which were, furthermore, wholly excluded from the English coastal trade. The English Republican Government between 1649 and 1651 added over forty vessels to the navy of Charles I, improving the personnel and equipment, so that the Dutch were obliged to acquiesce in the extinction of their virtual monopoly of the carrying trade.

By now the English had become conscious of the importance of sea power, and the herring had come into its own; henceforth the fish was the acknowledged prize of those with the strongest navy. The less famous Navigation Act of June 24th, 1660, omitted two clauses previously aimed against the Dutch; for the year 1660 was one of appeasement, and Charles II owed something to Holland. By this Act, the import of herrings was allowed, though import duty was enforced on aliens; and the rates for summer and winter, for red, white, shotten and full, were clearly stated—for instance, £4 per last of 18 barrels for whole shotten and full,* were clearly stated—for to pay double rates; and, curiously enough, the herring is no longer classed with ling, pilchards, and stockfish, but has a separate

* "Shotten" applies to herring rid of spawn; "full" means with roes; "white" are uncured or slightly salt-cured; and "red" are heavily salted and smoked.

clause with whale oil and blubber, "made, or that shall be made." Were specially cured herrings competing dangerously with the cheaper English variety? It seems likely: for when English merchants regained access to Danzig and the Baltic, after the defeat of the Dutch in 1636-39, their herrings were found to be badly packed and badly cured. To remedy this, an Act was passed on December 25th, 1663, regulating the herring trade as a whole. The barrels had to be of good quality; the bailiff of Great Yarmouth had to see that "able and experienced packers were provided;" and that there should be no "stinking" fish "from any other port, haven, or creek, from which any vessels proceed to fish for herring." Altogether, no less than seven Statutes for the protection and regulation of the herring fisheries were passed in Charles II's reign.

Henceforward, disputes over the herring were sunk in the greater issues of British trade and sea power; and the fortunes of the trade were largely determined by the state of our sea power. Rivals sprang up and the Scottish fisheries in the eighteenth century, which drew much profit from export to the slave plantations, became a serious threat to East Anglia. The subsequent history of bounties, and the precarious existence of the herring trade after the repeal of the Navigation Act in 1849, are subjects outside the scope of this article. The First World War once again drew attention to the state of our fishing fleet, and to its value as a nursery of sailors. The Second War brought home the value of the herring as a food in times of scarcity. Today, the importance of the herring, both in peace and in war, is very widely recognized; and an article on the herring in history cannot end better than with words attributed to King James I. When witches were believed to have raised a storm to prevent his Danish bride from reaching Scotland, James went himself to fetch her from Oslo, and afterwards paid a visit to Copenhagen. There he gazed with wonder at the immense crowd of fishermen, curers and merchants, gathered on the narrow Öresund for the herring season. "Odsfish, my soul," he said, "it is a great trade, 'tis an honest trade, 'Twas the Apostles' own calling."