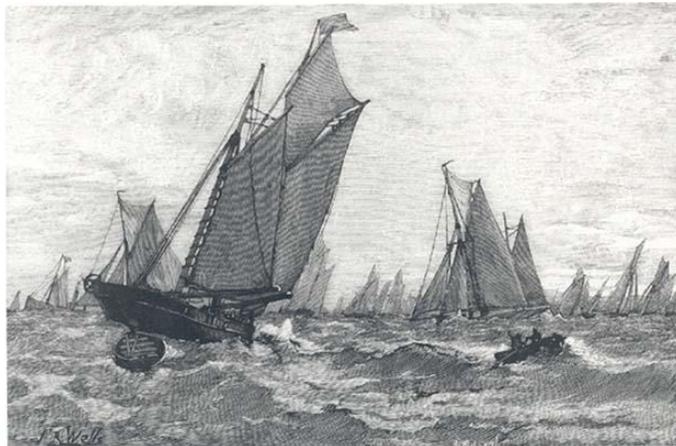


**London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Local Studies Information Sheet No. 33**

THE BARKING FISHING FLEET



Salt-water fishing from Barking was mentioned as early as 1320, when its fishermen were prosecuted for using nets with too small a mesh. The industry seems to have been at that time quite small-scale, as in other Thameside parishes. A list of the 1660s shows Barking had 14 fishing smacks, crewed by 70 men and boys. By 1814 the number had grown to 70 smacks, by 1833 there were 120, by 1845 approximately 150 and by 1850 at least 220.

This phenomenal growth was due to one family, the Hewetts. In the mid 1790s Scrymgeour Hewett (1765–1850) a Scotsman from Fifeshire, came to Barking to look after property owned by an aunt. In 1795 he married Sarah Whennel, daughter of James Whennel, and assisted his father-in-law manage his two fishing smacks. Scrymgeour's second son Samuel (1797-1871) was originally destined to be a banker, but ran away to sea whilst his father was absent during the Napoleonic Wars. At 14 he was apprenticed to a fisherman, and became captain of the Liberty's Increase in 1818.

By 1833 the Hewett fleet, called the Short Blue Fleet after its ensign, consisted of 10 vessels. The main type of fishing vessel used in Barking at that time was a well smack. Developed in the early 1700s, it included a large wooden 'well' of water within the body of the smack in which fish could be kept alive until market. In a typical voyage to Iceland the men would fish three times. The first and second catches would be gutted and wet-salted on board, then sold in the towns of Western Scotland or the Orkneys or Shetland Islands. The third catch would be tossed alive into the well. The usual fishing voyage out of Barking meant that the men were away for 14 weeks.

Samuel Hewett realised that the long voyage which the smacks made back to the London ports was uneconomic, and introduced a system known as fleeting. Smacks fished as before but instead of wet salting, the fish were killed and packed in boxes of ice. Fast boats, called carriers or cutters, regularly collected the fish and transported it to market in London. After selling the fish, the carriers returned to the fishing grounds stopping briefly to pick up stores, water and ice. In this way the smacks could stay at sea continuously for three to six months at a time. The new practice was extremely successful and the Hewett fleet had increased to approximately 50 in 1844, when Hewett's fishermen went on strike complaining about not seeing their families enough.

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The ice used to pack the fish was collected annually from marshes surrounding Barking in a great social occasion called the Ice Harvest. It was stored in ice houses built from 1847. Others followed Samuel's idea, either setting up their own fleets or paying the Hewetts to collect and deliver their fish. By the early 1860s almost every Barking family was involved in the industry, either as fishermen or as makers or suppliers of goods for the industry.

But Barking was losing trade to better-resourced ports such as Grimsby, which had opened its No.1 Fish Dock in 1856. The new railway system ensured that the catches could be transported quickly from the East Coast to the London market. The Great Storm of 1863 killed 60 Barking fishermen and boys, and shortly afterwards the Short Blue Fleet itself was transferred to Gorleston.

[Barking Fishing Industry information](#) on the Valence House web pages.
The [River Industries Gallery](#) at Valence House Museum.

Primary Sources held at LBBB Archives:

Barking Parish Apprenticeship registers 1818-1839, 1839-1844.

Lists those apprenticed through the Parish Overseers only.

Uphill Charity apprenticeship registers 1834-1858

This charity funded apprenticeships for Dagenham boys and girls into a variety of occupations. Several fishing apprentices and smack owners are named.

A handful of fishing apprenticeship indentures have been donated by descendants.

Primary Sources held elsewhere:

Hewett & Co. Ltd. 1683-1942: Ledgers, deeds, legal papers, apprentice books, minute book, family papers etc. (mainly 19th cent.) held at private repository. Contact National Archives: National Advisory Service and quote ref. NRA25222 Billingsgate
Hewett & Co. Ltd. 1847-1957: ledgers and account book, business diary, 'Otter' trial book, newspaper cuttings and misc. papers, held at the Essex Record Office – Record ref. D/F 13

Secondary Sources held at LBBB Archives & Local Studies Centre:

The Hewett saga – an outline of the development made within the Barking fishing industry from 1760 – 1860 TS

Hansard:, *House of Parliament select committee June – July 1833 Barking Fishing Industry.* (Retyped by Derek Simmans).

Fishing News and Fish Merchandiser and Processor: *The Short Blue Fleet 1764 - 1964* (supplement to the 3 April 1964 issue.)

Rhodes, Linda & Abnett, Kathryn: *Foul deeds and suspicious deaths in Barking, Dagenham & Chadwell Heath* (chapters on the Great Storm of 1863, the ill-treatment of fishing apprentices, and the Barking boiler explosion of 1899)

Olive, J: *The growth and decline of the Fishing Industry in Barking.* 1993 TS

Business Archives Council, 1981: *Hewett and Co Business Archives*, listing of (includes a company history)

Emsley, J: *A study of the decline of the Barking fishing Industry and its effects on the local population.*

Simmans D. M: *The History of the Barking Fishing Fleet volumes 1 and 2* (extracted from the Hewett Diary log 1856 – 1861, original held at the Essex Record Office).

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