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David J Starkey (2017) Distant-Water Trawlerman: William Oliver, 1884-1959. In D. J. Starkey, D. Atkinson, B. McDonagh, S. McKeon, & E. Salter (Eds.), Hull: Culture, History, Place (pages). Liverpool University Press.

<https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/book/10.3828/9781781384190>

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NINE

Distant-Water Trawlerman: William Oliver, 1884-1959

David J Starkey

The last few hours of the 1930s were unremarkable in William Oliver's household. 'Wife and I', ran his diary entry for 31 December 1939, 'sat by the fire waiting for the year to expire and at 12 o'clock wished each other luck for the coming year. Nobody came to let our New Year in, so I went outside and let it in myself'. Reflecting on the year just ending, he noted that there had been 'several removals and changes in our life', which he listed as follows:

Removed to Ryehill bungalow from Pickering Road, September 6th
Let our Pickering Road house, December 1st
Lorrie [his son] took over White Swan Inn, January 25th
War declared against Germany, September 3rd

In conflating global and personal events in this loose chronology, William Oliver might also have noted that on 3 August 1939 his career as a skipper in Hull's distant-water trawl fishery had come to an end when his vessel, the *Runswick Bay*, returned from Icelandic waters to land a catch of cod, haddocks and flatfish at his home port. This was almost 33 years since he had had been awarded his skipper's certificate and taken command of the *Lord Salisbury*, a steam trawler that departed St Andrew's Dock, Hull, bound for the fishing grounds off Iceland, on 26 September 1906.¹ During that third of a century, Skipper Oliver commanded trawling voyages to fishing grounds in the North Sea, the White Sea (Murmansk Coast), and off the coasts of Norway and West Scotland, as well as serving in the minesweeping branch of the Royal Naval Reserve, largely in Malta, for most of the First World War (see Figure 9.1). By far the greatest part of his seagoing effort, however, was expended in removing cod, haddocks, plaice and other species from the waters covering the continental shelves that lie to the south and west of Iceland.

In commanding these voyages, Skipper Oliver maintained a personal daily log of his vessel's course and bearings, descriptions of weather conditions, comments about catches and fishing grounds, and details of any extraordinary events. These personal logs appear to have been kept for two main reasons: first, they constituted a record that could be called upon to answer enquiries should the voyage prove to be unsuccessful or contentious; and, second, there was a business rationale, for the logs provided their author with a guide as to what had been caught in which location, and how much fish and money had been generated in each trip. Although no trace has been found of pre-1914 logs, eight volumes have survived to provide a virtually complete set of logs relating to the days he spent at sea from 8 October 1919 to 3 August 1939. Not content with compiling his logs, Skipper Oliver copied his shipboard record into diaries, augmenting his seagoing narrative with a daily account of his activities ashore between voyages. Twenty annual diaries contain entries for each day from 1 January 1920 to 31 December 1939, offering glimpses of the very full social, cultural and domestic life of a man who spent over 75 per cent of the period at sea, and had a spouse, Betsy Oliver, ten children and a home in Hull. Despite her significant role in his life—they were married for over 55 years—Betsy is not identified by name in Skipper Oliver's personal record. Rather, apart from a single entry for 31 May 1921 in which he referred to her as 'the Missus', and two references to 'wife Betsy' in 1935, she is known as 'wife' throughout the logs and diaries.²

¹ William Oliver, 'A Trawlerman's Reminiscences', *World Fishing*, 3, no. 1 (1954), 20, 28.

² Unless otherwise stated, the evidence used in this chapter has been drawn from two parallel and overlapping sources: William Oliver's Logs, 1919-1939; and William Oliver's Diaries, 1920-1939. Both sets of records are housed at the Maritime Historical Studies Centre, Blaydes House, University of Hull.

Skipper Oliver drew upon his own handwritten testimony to write an autobiographical account for publication as 'A Trawlerman's Reminiscences' in eleven monthly instalments in *World Fishing* during 1953 and 1954.³ These printed recollections enhance the logs and diaries by taking their author's story back to his boyhood, and by providing detail that is lacking in his often stark and formulaic daily entries. Taken together, William Oliver's logs, diaries and 'Reminiscences' offer valuable personal insights into Hull's highly significant trawl fishery, how it changed during one practitioner's lifetime, and what it was like working aboard a trawler in distant waters, as well as living ashore with 'wife'.

Hull, Steam Trawling and Distant Waters

A quest for food has largely motivated people to remove fish from marine habitats. This has given rise to subsistence fishing, with coastal dwellers hunting sea fish to sate their own nutritional needs since the earliest times. A commercial motive, however, has accounted for the bulk of the fish extracted from the seas over the long term. In this regard, the food requirements of human societies have persuaded some people to make it their business to capture, transport and process sea fish, thereby transforming a natural living resource into a commodity that is sold to supply the feasts and fodder of consumers from all ranks of society. Such transactions have generated personal income and profit for those engaged in catching, curing and marketing fish, an incentive that encouraged many thousands of Hull people, including William Oliver, to engage in commercial fishing activity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The extent to which Hull people engaged in fishing activity, and the form that this engagement took, was largely shaped by the interplay of environmental, economic and political factors.⁴ In the late eighteenth century, stocks of cod, plaice, haddock, herring and other commercially viable species were abundant in the waters that surrounded the British Isles. Ashore, the size and distribution of Britain's population was undergoing significant change. With the absolute number of people rising rapidly, and a growing proportion dwelling in urban settings, fish suppliers, like other food merchants, faced generally buoyant demand conditions. But they were also faced with the difficulty of supplying the right product at an affordable price in areas where demand was high. In England, this essentially meant providing fresh, white fish to low-income consumers congregated in towns and cities distant from the sea, a goal that was rendered largely unattainable by constraints in the catching and transport technologies before the mid-nineteenth century.

Overcoming these obstacles entailed technological developments at sea, where the introduction and diffusion into the North Sea of trawl nets towed by relatively small wooden sailing vessels, known as smacks, enabled an increase in catches of white fish.⁵ On land, delivering these catches in a fresh condition to urban working-class consumers was not economically feasible until the railways connected ports with inland cities during the 1840s and 1850s. At this point, Hull emerged as one of the foci in the dynamic expansion of the trawl fishery due principally to its proximity to key North Sea fishing grounds, especially the Dogger Bank, its port facilities and its rail links with Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and other rapidly growing towns and cities. For the next

³ William Oliver, 'A Trawlerman's Reminiscences', *World Fishing*, 2, nos. 10-12 (1953), 401-03, 447-8, 473-5; *World Fishing*, 3, nos. 1-8 (1954), 19-20, 28, 69, 78, 112-4, 139-40, 188-9, 229-30, 271-4, 303-05.

⁴ David J. Starkey, 'The North Atlantic Fisheries: Bearings, Currents and Grounds', and 'Fish: A Removable Feast', in David J. Starkey, Jón Thór and Ingo Heidbrink (eds.), *A History of the North Atlantic Fisheries: Volume 2, From the 1850s to the Early Twenty-First Century* (Bremen: Hauschild, 2012) 13-26, 327-35.

⁵ Margaret Gerrish, 'Following the Fish: Nineteenth-century Migration and the Diffusion of Trawling' in David J. Starkey, Chris Reid and Neil R. Ashcroft (eds.), *England's Sea Fisheries: The Commercial Sea Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300* (London: Chatham, 2000).

30 to 40 years, Hull—like Grimsby, North Shields and Aberdeen—remained home to a burgeoning trawl fishery undertaken by a fleet of over 420 sailing smacks that extracted substantial and growing quantities of cod, plaice, sole and other species of white fish from large areas of the North Sea.

A highly significant sea change in the development of this industry occurred in the late 1880s and 1890s when the sail-driven, wooden-hulled smacks were swiftly supplanted by steam-powered, steel-hulled trawlers. This transition was driven by changes in the marine environment triggered by fishing activity and signalled by smackmen, whose reports of declining yields became louder and more convincing as the 1870s and 1880s progressed. While stock depletion was seemingly occurring in the North Sea, the growth in demand for fresh, white fish continued apace in Britain and was now exacerbated by the introduction of new retail outlets in the form of fried fish shops.⁶ The rapid adoption of these 'modern' vessels was facilitated by improvements in shipbuilding materials and marine engine construction, which allowed entrepreneurial smackmen and new investors to risk their capital in steel-hulled trawlers propelled by triple expansion marine engines—innovations that were also transforming the merchant shipping industry. Such economic and technological changes were encouraged, moreover, by a political situation in which Britain could exert diplomatic pressure and, if needed, naval force to ensure the rights of its citizens and vessels to extract fish from the inshore waters of Norway, Russia, Denmark and the Danish North Atlantic dominions. The net result of this process of investment, replacement and renewal—which was one of the most rapid and comprehensive transitions in British industrial history—was that British trawlers could now fish beyond the North Sea in the so-called 'distant waters' off the Faroes, Iceland, Norway and Russia. These waters remained the main fishing grounds for the trawling industry for the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, for it was not until 1976 that British trawlers were prohibited from fishing within the newly extended territorial waters of Iceland and other so-called 'coastal states'.⁷

Born in Hull on 1 June 1884, William Oliver witnessed at first hand the transition from wooden sailing smacks to steel steam trawlers. As a small boy he was an avid observer of the fishing smacks and early steam trawlers—some of which, like the one skippered by his father, were converted smacks—entering and clearing St Andrew's Dock. Having completed a few voyages in his father's vessels during holidays from school, young Oliver determined to escape the tedium of his first paid employment, as a clerical worker in the North East Railway Fish Office, by enlisting as cook aboard a fishing smack, the *Emperor*, in January 1898. Although he had claimed to be 16 when signing on, he was actually just 13½ years of age as the *Emperor* set forth on a fishing trip in the North Sea that was to last for over ten weeks. Oliver was retained for the *Emperor's* next voyage, before transferring to another smack, the *Queensland*. By 1898, the *Emperor* and the *Queensland* were amongst the very few smacks still operating, both being deployed in one of Hull's two 'box fleets', so called because the catch was gutted, cleaned and packed in boxes for daily delivery in fast steam cutters to Billingsgate in London. This assignment did not last long, for Oliver's second trip in the *Emperor* changed course rather abruptly when the skipper was instructed after five weeks on the grounds with the 'Great Northern' boxing fleet that the smacks were to be replaced by steam trawlers. Although the *Emperor* sailed across the North Sea to join Hull's other boxing fleet, the 'Red Cross', off the Danish coast, the end was nigh for Hull's fishing smacks.⁸

In marked contrast, the port's complement of steam trawlers was increasing swiftly. Some of these vessels worked five-week stints in the box fleets according to the directions of an 'admiral', who decided where the fleet would fish and for how long. Many other steam trawlers worked as 'single boaters', their skippers deciding which grounds to fish, with the catch retained on board, where it was packed in ice in the fish hold for landing at market in Hull at the end of the voyage.

⁶ John K. Walton, *Fish and Chips and the British Working Class, 1870-1940* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992).

⁷ For a definitive study of trawling, see Robb Robinson, *Trawling: The Rise and Fall of the British Trawl Fishery* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996).

⁸ Oliver, 'Reminiscences', *World Fishing*, 2, no. 10, 401-03.

Although the steam boxing fleets continued to fish the North Sea until 1936, the single boating mode of operation was largely deployed in more distant waters from the late 1890s. William Oliver swam with this tide. His trip as cook in the *Queensland* was his last box fleet venture, for he then enlisted as deck hand ('decky') in the *Duke of Wellington* for a trip to Faroe that yielded a very good landing of plaice in November 1898. According to his published recollections, Oliver decided in 1899 'to concentrate on the Iceland trips, and at 15 years of age [I] was decky of the *Sylvia*, a fine type of vessel commanded by Tom Clarkson, one of the foremost skippers of the day'.⁹

Hindsight indicates that this was a wise decision. After less than two decades in which technical, managerial and operational changes had transformed the industry, British trawl fishing entered a longer phase in which the structure, *modus operandi* and working practices of the business altered little in nearly 80 years. Indeed, it was contended in the 1960s and 1970s that this was an 'antiquated industry' which had barely moved on since the climacteric of 1890s and early twentieth century.¹⁰ Oliver engaged in steam trawling for much of this period, his career progressing quickly from deck hand to mate to skipper, a status he held for over 33 years until he retired from the sea on the eve of the Second World War. His long engagement in distant-water steam trawling—which continued ashore from 1945 to 1954, when he served as secretary of the Hull Trawler Officer's Guild—as charted in his logs, diaries and 'reminiscences', reveals how this business was conducted and how it shaped the lives of large numbers of Hull people.

Skipper Oliver's Sea Time

Learning the ropes: Setting forth in 1899 to exploit new fishing grounds in a modern trawler commanded by a skipper with a reputation for landing large catches, William Oliver was presented with an exceptional opportunity to engage in a business that appeared to be on the brink of taking off. He succeeded in grasping this opportunity by enhancing his knowledge and understanding of the trawling business in three principal ways. First, he listened to, and heeded, the advice offered to him by experienced, effective skippers. Presumably he learned something from his father, who took him out on North Sea fishing voyages during school holidays. But William Oliver certainly gained much from the sage counsel of seasoned exponents of the craft of fishing, notably Tom Clarkson and John (Tommy) Gant, to whom he acknowledged an enormous debt for passing on hard-won information and insight regarding the fishing grounds, weather patterns, sea conditions and shiphandling techniques. Acquiring qualifications through training programmes was the second means through which William Oliver sought to develop his expertise. Having accumulated the necessary four years sea service, in 1904 he emerged from a week-long training course, delivered by a retired skipper and a Customs official, with a mate's certificate issued under the auspices of the Board of Trade. Two years later, in July 1906, he undertook more training and was rewarded with a skipper's certificate, after an examination that he completed just in time to embark as mate aboard the *Ocean Queen*, which was bound on an Iceland fishing trip. In 1911, while his trawler was undergoing its summer refit, Skipper Oliver became the first Hull seafarer to become a Royal Naval Reservist after completing a training course and examination administered by the Royal Navy.¹¹

Such qualifications contributed to the attainment of the third element of William Oliver's personal development plan, the assembly of a range of intangible assets that generally underpin progression in any career. In this respect, like masters of merchant vessels and captains of naval ships, trawling skippers required the trust, confidence and support of employers ashore and employees at sea. That William Oliver built up such reputational qualities is inferred in his rapid rise from decky learner to skipper between 1899 and 1906. Such progression entailed promotion to mate in 1904, and then appointments successively as relief skipper, continuing skipper and leading

⁹ Oliver, 'Reminiscences', *World Fishing*, 2, no. 11, 447.

¹⁰ Jeremy Tunstall, *Fish: An Antiquated Industry* (London: Fabian Tract 380, 1968).

¹¹ The National Archives, Kew, London, BT 377/7, William Oliver, Royal Naval Reserve Service Record.

skipper, a status he retained until the mid-1930s. Much of this was achieved over a period of 24 years in conjunction with Mr McCann, who managed both Pickering & Haldane Ltd and the Yorkshire Steam Fishing Company. Indeed, such was the strength of this working relationship, and such was the esteem in which Skipper Oliver was held by the trawler owners, that in 1926 he was invited to become a shareholder and co-owner of Yorkshire Steam Fishing, an invitation that he duly accepted. These shareholding and working ties were cut after a row in August 1933, which the skipper-shareholder later described as a ‘demented’ decision on his part.¹²

Skipper Oliver’s reputation was an important professional attribute, especially in a relatively isolated, compact place like the Hessle Road fishing district of West Hull. Here, as in many business contexts, but especially in ports, reputations, inter-personal relations and social connections underpinned the networks that, in turn, were vital to the conduct of a comparatively high-risk business. Nevertheless, like his fellow skippers, William Oliver’s credibility in the highly competitive arena of the trawl fishery was largely based on his ability to manage a vessel, and her crew, so that sufficient fish were caught and landed to generate earnings that exceeded the costs incurred in the catching operation—in other words, his ability to make a profit. That Skipper Oliver did so by engaging in ‘Iceland fishing trips’ over a prolonged period is evident in his logs and diaries.

The trawling routine: Skipper Oliver commanded 274 fishing voyages between 9 October 1919 and 3 August 1939, as Table 9.1 indicates. As a consequence, he was at sea for approximately 76.7 per cent of the 7,239 consecutive days covered by his logs and diaries during this period. This sea time comprised, as Table 9.2 infers, 1,445 ‘travel to work’ days, 2,882 days spent fishing on the grounds, and 1,222 days steaming for home.

The objective of 246 of the 274 trips, 89.8% of the total, was to catch fish off the southern and western coasts of Iceland. In charting the course of up to fifteen Iceland voyages per year, the logs exude an impression of routine and regularity—perhaps even a sense of the mundane—in their cursory daily reports of the progress of what were reckoned to be 2,074-mile round trips (see Figure 9.2). Leaving St Andrew’s Dock at high tide, Skipper Oliver’s vessel would proceed out of the Humber to test the compass and set the log at the Outer Bank buoy, take bearings at Flamborough Head and Rattray Light before steaming through Pentland Firth and across the North Atlantic to the Westman Isles, off the south-western coast of Iceland, where the fishing gear would be readied. According to the Skipper’s judgement of conditions, the trawl would be shot in the inner, middle or outer Westman grounds, or further to the north west, which entailed steaming across Faxe and Brede bays to the western fjords that lie north of Stallberg Huk. Having taken between four and six days to reach the grounds, a further eight to twelve days were spent fishing, often for sustained periods at night—especially in the summer months when nights were light in northern waters—when the prey was deemed to be particularly amenable to capture.

Equally, there were sustained periods when working on the grounds largely involved sheltering from the weather in Dyra Fjord or the main harbour of the Westman Isles, or resorting to such places to repair damaged trawl nets or, on a few logged occasions, land a crew member for medical treatment (see Figure 9.3). Such eventualities meant, of course, that fish were not being caught and therefore money was not being made, sometimes causing Skipper Oliver’s generally matter-of-fact tone to give way to frustrated exclamation: ‘I am fed up’, ‘FED UP’, ‘Disgusted’, ‘worst trip I have ever known’. Often such angst was followed by a decision to ‘pack up and head for home’. Following a SSE (south south-east) course from the west or south coast of Iceland, a return voyage of four or five days duration ensued, with bearings generally taken at Skule Skerries, Duncansby Head, Rattray Light and Flamborough Head, before Skipper Oliver steered his vessel into the Humber and alighted for home, leaving the mate to take the trawler into dock and supervise the landing of the catch, which usually took place at around 5am, ahead of the morning auction.

¹² Oliver, ‘Reminiscences’, *World Fishing*, 3, no. 7, 273.

The Iceland routine was interrupted by 28 voyages to other grounds during the inter-war period. A single trip was undertaken to the fishing grounds off the West of Scotland in the midst of the 1921 coal strike, presumably because limited coal supplies restricted the *Lord Minto's* operational range. Eleven voyages to the northern North Sea, where herring was the target species, took place during the summer of 1930, with two more 'herring voyages' completed in late July and early August 1931. These trips lasted from two to nine days and were executed in the *Waveflower*, a distant-water trawler equipped with specialist herring nets that Skipper Oliver and crew members had tested in a field near Hessle during the planning stage of these North Sea ventures (see Figure 9.4). There was a further single voyage in December 1931, when the *Waveflower* fished off the Norwegian coast in what might have been—like the herring voyages of the two previous summers, and the Bear Island voyage that departed on 16 December 1932 under the command of A. Smith while Oliver had a trip ashore—an exploratory attempt to diversify into different products, source areas and markets.

Another eleven of Skipper Oliver's fishing trips were conducted on what were termed the White Sea grounds, which were actually located off the Murmansk coast rather than in the White Sea itself. Such voyages were not favoured by Skipper Oliver, who concluded the log entry for one such trip—which yielded 870 kits worth £722—by stating: 'So ends the White Sea trip. Never again if I can help it'. Such negativity was perhaps rooted in the memory of his mentor, Tommy Gant, enduring a difficult and unproductive trip to the Murmansk coast back in 1906. It was possibly due to the logistics of a White Sea voyage, which was some 1,200 miles longer than an Iceland trip, and required a pilot to steer trawlers northwards 'through the fjords' from Londingen to Honningsvaag, pick up approximately 60 tons of ice at Tromso and then steam east around Finnmark and south into the Barents Sea (see Figure 9.5). The most likely explanation, however, is that he had much less experience of White Sea voyages and therefore preferred to fish the Iceland grounds, where his accumulated expertise translated into a telling comparative advantage. Notwithstanding his reservations, Skipper Oliver steamed to Russian waters on ten further occasions between 1929 and 1938, with two such trips occurring in both 1929 and 1934.

It was not always plain sailing during these 274 voyages. After an Iceland trip in January 1928, chillingly logged as 'The Trip of Troubles', Skipper Oliver was obliged to attend a 'trial' in the Insurance Offices in Hull 'for being alongside and going ashore'. As a consequence, he 'got suspended for 2 months', though he did not appear to dwell on the verdict, for he 'was home at 1pm [and] in the afternoon went in company with Mr & Mrs Battersby for a motor run to Beverley'. 'The Trip of Storms' was perhaps more challenging for the Skipper, who noted that gales, snowstorms and heavy seas led to a protracted 28-day Iceland trip, which had commenced on 14 December 1921 and ended on 10 January 1922. Two of the voyages enumerated in Table 9.1 were not completed. One was aborted due to the poor quality of the coal that was taken aboard the *Waveflower* at Hamburg in September 1926. With no coal available in Hull due to the miner's strike, Skipper Oliver had been obliged to cross the North Sea to seek fuel at the start of an Icelandic fishing voyage, a diversion he had had to make during the 1921 coal strike and more recently in the general strike of May 1926. However, whereas previous supplies of coal loaded at the 'near continent' ports of Schiedam, Ostend and Antwerp had been fit for purpose, the Hamburg consignment was poor in quality and therefore the *Waveflower* was unable to generate enough steam to make adequate headway or tow a trawl. She struggled to reach Scottish waters, where it was decided to terminate the voyage and return to Hull to land the fish—which fetched £9 8s—that had been taken during a trial tow. Ill health was responsible for the second 'broken' trip, as Skipper Oliver decided to turn back to Hull two days into an Iceland voyage on account of an outbreak of influenza that afflicted nearly all of the crew of the *Brimness*, including the skipper himself, who remained indoors for five days after he got home on 27 January 1937.

The intensity of particular phases of the work process is evident in the logs. At sea, Skipper Oliver sometimes felt it necessary to lay his vessel up to allow the crew to sleep, while he noted in one entry that he had not slept for 18 hours, and later reminisced that on difficult voyages he had

not rested for up to 60 hours. But the rarity of references to excessively long working hours perhaps infers that such occurrences were either infrequent or part of a regime that was accepted and not worthy of comment. Ashore, Skipper Oliver's logs indicate that turnaround times in Hull were generally short, with trawlers frequently entering port during the evening or early hours of the morning, landing their catch at dawn on the next morning and then being ready to depart on the morning after—a turnaround that might be achieved in under 36 hours. Such swift arrivals and departures sometimes took place sequentially; for instance, in the five months (153 days) from 1 August to 31 December 1923 the *Lord Talbot* was only in port for ten days, while there was a similarly intensive seagoing phase during the equivalent five months of 1929, when only eleven days were spent in Hull landing fish taken in six Iceland trips.

Making a decent living: Although Skipper Oliver's personal logs and diaries do not include financial statements, profit and loss accounts or balance sheets, they provide a number of indicators relating to various aspects of his performance. For example, he won a number of awards during his career, which suggests that he was well regarded by his employers and his peers. In 1924, for instance, he received a £200 prize for returning the second highest annual return in Hull, a reward he also earned in 1925, after which the port's trawler owners abandoned this particular incentive scheme. Ten years later, on 31 May 1935, he was one of three Hull skippers whose long service and outstanding performance were recognised in the presentation of a King's Silver Jubilee Medal at 'a very pleasant ceremony [at which] our wives were a great deal more excited than the men'. Unfortunately, just over a month later, the King's Silver Jubilee Medal was stolen from the Olivers' car when they stopped for lunch at the Green Man Hotel in Edgware during a motoring holiday. This loss 'completely spoiled what was a splendid run and wife and I are very much upset about it'. In 1955, Skipper Oliver was further honoured by the award of an OBE for services to the fishing industry after retiring as secretary of Hull Trawler Officer's Guild on health grounds. He received the award in person at Buckingham Palace, which prompted the *Yorkshire Post* to print a photograph of Skipper & Mrs Oliver under the heading: 'Northerners at the Palace'.¹³

Key to such accolades was Skipper Oliver's performance on the fishing grounds. Here, in contrast to the regularity of the sailing schedule, the catching effort was marked by the variability and uncertainty of the outcome of individual hauls (see Figure 9.6), as the following sample entries from the logs suggest:

made a decent living last night ...
shot off Dyra Fjord Bank and made a good living ...
heaving in as many haddocks as we can take ...
cod end split and lost a full bag of fish ...
poor night's work ...
steaming around looking for fish ...

Luck, stamina and perseverance appear to have been as important as judgement in the operational sphere, while competition with other trawlers for sea space and catches was invariably a feature of the business. Although it is never overtly stated in the logs and diaries, there are signs that Skipper Oliver kept a watchful, and sometimes jealous, eye on his rivals, noting wistfully that the '*Woolborough* [is] going home with 900 kits & has only been out 11 days', 'the *Foamflower* is outfishing us', and, on anchoring at Dyra Fjord, that 'several trawlers are coming in. All seem to have been fishing much better than we have'.

The products of Skipper Oliver's labours are outlined in Table 9.3. A total of 232,158 kits of fish was taken during the 274 fishing trips he commanded during the 1919-1939 period.¹⁴ Cod

¹³ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 9 March 1955.

¹⁴ A kit weighs 10 stone of gutted fish.

constituted 75.7% of the aggregate catch, with the remainder comprising plaice and flatfish, haddocks and herring. On an annual basis, catches ranged from 8,940 kits taken in 1928 to a high point of 17,857 kits reached in 1930, when 5,518 kits of North Sea herring were landed as well as white fish from the distant grounds. The variability of returns was much pronounced at the voyage level, with a personal peak of 1,980 kits being landed by Skipper Oliver on 5 March 1936 contrasting with landings of 410 kits on 12 November 1923, and 412 kits on 2 November 1931, at the other end of the scale.

The amount of fish landed did not necessarily correlate with the value of the catch. For instance, as Table 9.3 shows, the 12,645 kits landed in 1920 fetched £21,435, whereas approximately 600 more kits were landed in 1932, but realised just £12,809 on the market. Presented in another way, the data indicate that the average value of landings ranged from £1.70 per kit in 1920 to £0.97 per kit in 1937. Such single-year comparisons form part of a long-term pattern, for the annual price per kit comfortably exceeded £1 during the 1920s, while the equivalent figure dropped beneath £1 in 1930 when 17,857 kits generated a gross of £16,293, and remained at that comparatively low level for much of the 1930s. Such divergence was even more pronounced at the voyage level; accordingly, at one extreme, the 801 kits landed on 3 January 1920 yielded £3,020, while at the other end of the spectrum, a mere £755 was generated by the 1,234 kits landed on 13 May 1930.

Various reasons for this price volatility can be discerned in the logs. There were short-term, local factors such as the market gluts precipitated by the arrival and landing of numerous trawlers on the same tide. On 29 August 1921, for instance, Skipper Oliver 'went down dock & saw Mr McCann. 9 Iceland ships landing & markets very bad. A lot of fish going to manure yard' (see Figure 9.7). Conversely, if his vessel arrived and landed alone then an excellent return might ensue, as occurred on Maundy Thursday in 1913 when demand and prices increased dramatically ahead of Good Friday,¹⁵ which was traditionally a fish-eating day for many English people. The poor quality of the product could also depress prices, as occurred on 22 May 1939 when a low return was blamed on the inadequate cleaning and gutting of the fish by crew members, who were summarily dismissed. Broader, less visible factors relating to the amount of fish available, and the demand for fish in relation to other foodstuffs, had a significant bearing on the income and profits of those engaged in the trawl fishery. This is apparent in Skipper Oliver's terse references to 'markets dropped 50%' in the log entries for 14 December 1928, 15 July 1932 and numerous other landing days.

Skipper Oliver was keenly interested in the catch and financial returns of his fishing trips because he had a significant stake in the gross worth of each voyage he commanded. According to his own rough calculations, which he entered as handwritten notes in his personal logs, this stake amounted to 10 per cent of the net earnings of each voyage. Such performance-related payments were described as bonuses and were normally paid in the autumn. In October 1923, for instance, Skipper Oliver wrote in his log that he had received a bonus of £455 in respect of the fourteen voyages he completed in the *Lord Minto* during that year, while in 1924, his bonus amounted to £645. Although he is somewhat coy in the logs and diaries about how much he earned, there can be no doubt that Skipper Oliver's income was relatively high in the context of a port-city that was struggling to come to terms with a business environment that had altered significantly in the wake of the First World War. His earnings underpinned a lifestyle that hinted at relative affluence in the diary entries relating to the days he spent ashore during the 1920s and 1930s.

Skipper Oliver's Trips Ashore

Skipper Oliver's logs and diaries indicate that he was ashore on 1,690 days between 8 October 1919 and 3 August 1939, which amounted to roughly 23.3% of that period (see Table 9.4). In twelve of these 21 years, he was ashore for fewer than one in five days, or less than 20 per cent, of the year. He tended to spend more time home from the sea as the period progressed, with six of the nine

¹⁵ Oliver, 'Reminiscences', *World Fishing*, 3, no. 3, 114.

years in which he was ashore for more than 20 per cent of the year falling after 1933; indeed, the leap year of 1936, during which Skipper Oliver spent only 65 days on land, stands out as the only year after 1931 in which he spent more than 300 days at sea.

The logic of distant-water trawling dictated that Skipper Oliver would spend a relatively small proportion of his time ashore. This was a business of margins. Fish consumers perceived it as an activity based on the remote margins of the English east coast and prosecuted in the cold, distant and alien margins of the North Atlantic. But to those directly engaged in the business, it was the financial margins that mattered most. As it was by no means guaranteed that a voyage would return a catch or a profit, investors of money and effort in distant-water trawling were obliged to work their resources intensively so that the rewards of good trips would provide a surplus to cover losses incurred in past or future voyages. Moreover, fishing in general, and trawling in particular, is invariably conducted on the environmental margins, for successful catching activity soon translates into overfishing and the depletion of formerly abundant fish stocks. Adding to these economic and environmental pressures, skippers faced competition from mates, relief officers and unemployed skippers eager to share in the profits of fishing trips. It was therefore in no-one's interest for trawlers and trawlermen to be laid up in port for any longer than absolutely necessary—meaning that Skipper Oliver often spent less than 48 hours ashore between voyages.

Such shoreside interludes were generally very busy for Skipper Oliver, who had a large family, a keen interest in socialising and a range of leisure pursuits. His diaries describe days ashore full of seemingly frenetic activity—pitched in an unassuming, understated style—including family events, visits to the cinema, motor car rides to the coast, meals at Powolny's and other high-end restaurants and hotels, yarning in pubs, attendance at soccer and rugby league matches (see Figure 9.8), and, invariably, a call at the Dock to check the size and value of the catch. One eventful turnround in November 1930 illustrates how 'brisk' these 'pit stops' could be:

- 5 November 1930: anchored at midnight
- 6 November 1930, 1pm: Left Dock with wife in car and called at Dr Jackson's solicitors to make out a statement regarding disturbances by Norske Gunboat off Pes Fd last trip. Then to Rippons for bonded stores and called at Blue Bell until 3pm. Afterwards was very busy calling at various houses arranging for my daughter's (Elsie) wedding at 10.30am tomorrow [ed: delete words in yellow??]
- 7 November 1930, 10.30am: Attended my daughter's wedding at Hessle Parish Church. I would just as soon attend her funeral for all the happiness she will get out of it. I hope I am wrong but that is my opinion. Arranged a reception at Powolny's but Bride arrived alone the groom having gone home to his mother's to change. Everyone disgusted. Had a lie down in the afternoon and in the evening gave a dinner at Powolny's Restaurant with a dance afterwards. Some of the young people enjoyed themselves but I didn't. Glad when it was all over.
- 8 November 1930, 2am: Arrived home after dance very tired, very bitter
- 7.0am: Ship left St Andrew's Dock and I joined her on the River at 10.30am.

Breaks between voyages were not always so disappointing. On 2 March 1922, Skipper Oliver returned from Iceland to discover that there had been an 'increase in family (son)', which persuaded him to spend a few extra weeks ashore, 'staying indoors' on most days, but going for the doctor on 17 March when 'wife suddenly taken very ill'. A further 'increase in family (girl)—the Oliver's tenth child—greeted him when he docked in Hull on 23 October 1924, and again he stayed at home to assist his 'very ill' wife. Skipper Oliver was obliged to remain in Hull for various other reasons during the course of the inter-war period. Labour shortages and disputes delayed sailing by a few days on a

number of occasions, while the bureaucracy and fitting out entailed in transfers from one vessel to another generally took a week or so to complete. Ill health sometimes caused Skipper Oliver to remain ashore. In 1927, for example, he contracted bronchitis, and then pneumonia, which confined him to bed in a delirious state for much of January and February. Although this illness meant that he only missed two fishing trips, it left him with a permanent respiratory weakness that rendered him susceptible to bronchial coughs for the rest of his life, and caused him to be rejected when he volunteered for military service in 1940. Skipper Oliver missed a further voyage due to influenza in 1932, but there were times when he stoically proceeded to sea despite suffering from gastritis, neuralgia, lumbago or, more often, a hangover. He also had extensive dental treatment, which he managed to incorporate into his working routine. In 1923, for instance, he dashed from ship to surgery to have four teeth extracted, while in 1938, having made a number of visits to the dentist in the interim, Skipper Oliver reported to the surgery to have 'all my remaining teeth drawn', two days before he departed for Iceland.

Longer breaks from work at sea—described as 'trips ashore' in the logs and diaries—were taken by skippers when their vessels were in dock for their annual re-fit during the summer. In Skipper Oliver's case, this generally occurred in July and was cast as a 're-fit and holiday' period in his log entry. He could also elect to take a trip or trips ashore, presumably with the agreement of the trawler owners and the assurance that he would resume his command after a relief skipper or mate had 'taken the ship out' during these sojourns. Skipper Oliver chose to remain ashore in 12 of the 21 years covered by the diaries and logs, with most of these leave periods embracing Christmas and New Year. Such trips ashore became more frequent during the late 1920s and through the 1930s, reflecting Oliver's seniority within the ranks of Hull skippers, and also his health problems and advancing years. In 1935, for instance, Skipper Oliver wrote that he 'didn't fancy' returning to sea and remained ashore for over three months. It is clear from his 'Reminiscences' that he had decided to retire from the sea at that point, as he was disappointed by a sustained fall in his earnings compared to those of other, younger skippers who were seemingly driving their vessels and their crews harder than he preferred to do. His diary entries reveal that during this prolonged trip ashore he held negotiations with Hull Brewery about taking up the tenancy of a country pub. He also inferred that this prospect was proving troublesome at home, as he confided in his diary on 10 May 1935 that he 'cannot exactly understand wife lately. She seems as though she would like to have me at home but afraid to take the risk'. He was therefore a little disingenuous when he reminisced eighteen years later that in 1935 his wife had 'dropped a bombshell' by declaring at a meeting with Hull Brewery that she had no intention whatsoever of running a pub. As a consequence, Skipper Oliver returned to sea and in 1936 spent only 17.8% of 366 days ashore.

Whatever the reasoning behind her decisive intervention in these pub tenancy discussions, there can be no doubt that Betsy Oliver contributed strongly to her husband's professional success by managing the domestic base and providing the majority of the child care during his absences at work. This gendered division of labour is implicit in Skipper Oliver's logs and diaries, chiefly, and ironically, through his reticence on matters relating to their house and the ten children they reared. He was unequivocally the breadwinner, a role reflected in diary entries concerning the commodities he provided, and the events he funded, for his family. On 22 March 1929, for example, he 'inspected & tested a car & decided to purchase same. Wife & family very pleased. [At] 7.0pm Took a party to Powolny's & had a good dinner there & home 10.30pm', before leaving St Andrew's Dock for Iceland at 5.15am on the next day (see Figure 9.9). There is a detached anonymity, moreover, in his descriptions of family events—'took youngest two children to Hull Fair', 'went with wife & four children to see pantomime (painful)', 'took wife & some of the children for a motor drive'—although this altered as the children grew up, particularly when his sons followed in his wake and entered the trawling business. Skipper Oliver elaborated a little on Betsy's place in his world in his 'Reminiscences'. As well as taking a lead on life-changing decisions, she initiated house moves, sold cars, organised the children's schooling and, remarkably, travelled from Hull—where her house had suffered damage in a Zeppelin raid—across war-torn Europe with their eight children to join her

husband in Malta. Perhaps even more remarkably, after spending two happy years in Floriana, just outside Valletta, in September 1918 she travelled with the children back to Hull, via Taranto, Rome, Paris, Le Havre and Southampton; as Skipper Oliver observed: ‘Whatever war medals I afterwards received for my services were better earned by Mrs Oliver than I’.¹⁶

Respect bordering on affection is evident in log and diary entries that acknowledged on 28 January each year that it was ‘Wife’s birthday today’ with a note of her age, and references to wedding anniversaries such as that of 30 July 1935: ‘My wedding day today 32 years. Sent wire home and also received one from home’. It would seem, moreover, that William and Betsy enjoyed each other’s company, for they invariably spent most of his time ashore together. During the holidays and prolonged ‘trips ashore’, for example, Skipper Oliver and his wife took vacations in Ostend, London, Edinburgh, Blackpool, Brighton, Scarborough, Bridlington and Hornsea, generally staying in the more expensive hotels and dining in the more up-market restaurants and tea rooms, in these places. Some of these were motoring holidays, with the Olivers touring south-west and south-east England during three weeks in the summer of 1931, which included a remarkable drive of 310 miles from Lowestoft to Blackpool in ten hours (see Figure 9.10). When holidaying in London they generally took the train and stayed in the Regent Palace or Imperial hotels, with visits to Kew Gardens and Hampton Court interspersed with shopping in Oxford Street and meals in central London restaurants. Visiting West End theatres was a feature of these breaks in the capital, though not all of the shows appealed to Skipper Oliver, who felt obliged to leave the Prince of Wales Theatre in mild disgust on 5 July 1938 because he considered the ‘Folies Bergere’ review to be a ‘leg show’, in which ‘the only attraction seemed to be the showing off of nearly naked women’.

Time ashore in Hull not only witnessed the couple socialising together, but also suggested that the Olivers were comparatively well-to-do. Powolny’s in King Edward Street—Hull’s high-class restaurant—was their eating house of choice (see Figure 9.11), both between voyages and during longer breaks.¹⁷ In a clear sign of affluence, they owned a car from 1920 onwards, even though Skipper Oliver was still being taught to drive by Lawrie, his second eldest son, in 1935—implying that Betsy was at the wheel during their motoring holidays. Some socio-spatial progression can be discerned in their housing, as they moved from the Boulevard (on the fringes of the Hessle Road district) to ‘Floriana’ on Tranby Lane, Anlaby (one of Hull’s ‘much sought after’ west villages), to the Sutton Park estate (in the new suburbs) and then on to Pickering Road (in west Hull). To Skipper Oliver, home was a place for dinners and bedtime, for entertaining friends in sometimes ‘brisk’ evenings, and more frequently for ‘down time’, denoted in his economical style by a simple statement: ‘Stayed indoors all day’. There was probably more scope for such gentle recreation from September 1939, as he and his wife moved to a bungalow in Ryehill, a hamlet to the east of Hull. This downsizing was seemingly a rational response to children growing up and the significant reduction in earnings that came with retirement. William Oliver was now permanently home from the sea for the first time since he married Betsy Andrews on 30 July 1903, a ‘change in our lives’ that must have fundamentally altered the dynamics of the family at a time when total war had just commenced.

An Extraordinary Typical Career

When William Oliver died on 14 February 1959 the *Hull Daily Mail* commented that ‘no British trawler skipper was better known or held in higher regard than Mr William Oliver ... whose death this weekend leaves the fishing industry bereft of one of its most colourful characters’. A funeral service was held at Hull Fishermen’s Bethel in the heart of the port’s fishing community, with his widow—to whom he willed an estate worth £1,343 13s 11d¹⁸—ten children, five grandchildren and

¹⁶ Oliver, ‘Reminiscences’, *World Fishing*, 3, no. 5, 189.

¹⁷ Robin Dermond Horspool, *The House of Powolny; Life and Death of a Hull Restaurant* (Beverley: Highgate, 2000).

¹⁸ National Probate Calendar, England & Wales, ‘Index of Wills & Administrations’, 1858-1956.

representatives of Hull trawling firms, trade unions and the Ministry of Transport among the mourners. This large gathering was addressed by Pastor T. Chappell, who remembered Skipper Oliver as a man who 'gave cheerfully, readily and quietly from his wonderful store of knowledge' in his work for the Hull Trawler Officers' Guild, and in the valuable services he rendered as a trustee of the Fishermen's Widows' and Orphans' Fund. The Pastor also mentioned the presence at the funeral of trawler skippers from the deceased's generation: 'I believe he and they and their kind laid the foundations of the great industry we have in the port today'. In essence, while Skipper Oliver's career may have been extraordinary in terms of length, commitment, performance and service, it was typical of the contributions made by many of his contemporaries over the preceding six decades—a point that is confirmed in the striking similarity between the picture painted in this chapter and the portrait of the archetypal Hull skipper drawn by Jeremy Tunstall in 1962.¹⁹

The context in which 'he and they and their kind' operated was extraordinary in various respects. Although much of their working lives was spent in vessels steaming to and from, and fishing in, distant waters, these skippers were based in Hull, which was the only major commercial port in the United Kingdom that had a significant fishing industry in the twentieth century. In 1911, for instance, Hull was not only the third largest port in the British Empire in terms of traffic handled, but also the home of the Wilson Line, the world's largest privately-owned shipping firm, and the place of registration of 411 steam-propelled first-class fishing vessels of 50 or more tons—amounting to 30,362 tons, 33.5% of the total for England and Wales.²⁰ It was also remarkable that Hull's trawling interests continued to grow during the 1920s and 1930s in terms of fleet size, catches and market share. Alone in the nation's fishing industry in this respect, Hull's trawlers fed a buoyant market for cheap food in the midst of domestic depression, operated without the environmental pressures of stock depletion, and largely unfettered by political constraints concerning access to the fishing grounds.²¹ Given that these economic, environmental and political factors turned sharply against British distant-water trawling in the wake of the Second World War (giving Skipper Oliver 'more sleepless nights than he had ever had at sea'), it is extraordinary that it was not until 1976 that these distant waters were closed to trawlers from Hull and other UK ports. This durability was due in no small measure to the extraordinary efforts of trawler skippers, as typified by Skipper William Oliver, and illuminated by the 'wonderful store of knowledge' evident in his memorialisation of 7,390 days of his career in the diaries, logs and reminiscences that underpin this chapter.

¹⁹ Jeremy Tunstall, *The Fishermen* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962), 176-224.

²⁰ British Parliamentary Papers (cd. 6398, 1912), *Annual Statements of the Navigation and Shipping of the United Kingdom for 1911*, Table 14.

²¹ Robinson, *Trawling*, 144-61.

Table 9.1: William Oliver's Voyages by Fishing Ground, 1919-1939							
Year	Trips	Iceland	White Sea	Norwegian Coast	North Sea (Herring)	West Scotland	'Broken' Trips
1919	2	2					
1920	14	14					
1921	12	10				1	1
1922	13	13					
1923	14	14					
1924	15	14	1				
1925	13	13					
1926	14	14					
1927	14	14					
1928	12	12					
1929	15	13	2				
1930	23	11	1		11		
1931	16	12	1	1	2		
1932	15	15					
1933	14	14					
1934	14	12	2				
1935	10	9	1				
1936	15	14	1				
1937	12	10	1				1
1938	11	10	1				
1939	6	6					
	274	246	11	1	13	1	2

Source: University of Hull, Blaydes House, William Oliver's Logs, 1919-1939

Table 9.2: William Oliver's Sea Time, 1919-1939

Year	Voyage Out (days)	On Fishing Grounds (days)	Return Voyage (days)	Total Days at Sea	% Days at Sea
1919	21	37	13	71	83.5
1920	84	148	70	302	82.5
1921	79	161	53	293	80.3
1922	71	157	63	291	79.7
1923	85	157	68	310	84.9
1924	77	150	70	297	81.1
1925	77	144	60	281	77
1926	103	140	64	307	84.1
1927	65	124	71	260	71.2
1928	71	144	54	269	73.5
1929	74	157	70	301	82.5
1930	68	182	57	307	84.1
1931	79	166	60	305	83.6
1932	82	143	73	298	81.4
1933	69	156	59	284	77.8
1934	72	142	66	280	76.7
1935	51	112	45	208	57.0
1936	69	166	66	301	82.2
1937	67	120	55	242	66.3
1938	53	121	55	229	62.7
1939	28	55	30	113	52.8
	1445	2882	1222	5549	

Source: University of Hull, Blaydes House, William Oliver's Logs, 1919-1939

Table 9.3: Quantity & Value of Fish Landed by William Oliver's Trawlers, 1919-1939

Year	Total (kits)	Cod (kits)	Plaice (kits)	Haddock (kits)	Herring (kits)	Value (£)
1919	1550	1250	300	0	0	4752
1920	12,645	10,111	2534	0	0	21,435
1921	9020	7548	1472	0	0	16,404
1922	10,785	8369	2416	0	0	16,079
1923	10,076	8618	1458	0	0	15,318
1924	11,312	9579	1733	0	0	15,842
1925	10,260	8772	1488	0	0	15,475
1926	10,826	9546	1280	0	0	14,048
1927	11,314	10,227	1087	0	0	13,252
1928	8940	7946	994	0	0	11,531
1929	13,056	10,396	1464	1196	0	19,009
1930	17,857	4410	6532	1397	5518	16,378
1931	14,163	9209	2144	1644	1166	11,746
1932	13,217	10,012	1240	1965	0	12,809
1933	12,886	10,302	1005	1579	0	10,616
1934	13,691	10,849	967	1875	0	13,483
1935	10,236	7,940	814	1482	0	8872
1936	14,517	11,683	1002	1832	0	13,364
1937	9389	6,798	1090	1501	0	9640
1938	10,480	7756	797	1927	0	10,815
1939	5938	4427	425	1086	0	5353
	232,158	175,748	32,242	17,484	6684	276,221

Source: University of Hull, Blaydes House, William Oliver's Logs, 1919-1939

Table 9.4: William Oliver's Time at Sea and Ashore, 1919-1939					
	At Sea (days)	% Days at Sea		Ashore (days)	% Days Ashore
1919	71	83.5		14	16.5
1920	302	82.5		64	17.5
1921	293	80.3		72	19.7
1922	291	79.7		74	20.3
1923	310	84.9		55	15.1
1924	297	81.1		69	18.9
1925	281	77		84	23
1926	307	84.1		58	15.9
1927	260	71.2		105	28.8
1928	269	73.5		97	26.5
1929	301	82.5		64	17.5
1930	307	84.1		58	15.9
1931	305	83.6		60	16.4
1932	298	81.4		68	18.6
1933	284	77.8		81	22.2
1934	280	76.7		85	23.3
1935	208	57		157	43
1936	301	82.2		65	17.8
1937	242	66.3		123	33.7
1938	229	62.7		136	37.3
1939	113	52.8		101	47.2
	5549			1690	
Source: University of Hull, Blaydes House, William Oliver's Logs, 1919-1939					