

## **Railways, Roads and the British White Fish Industry, 1920-1970**

### **Abstract**

It is well known that the railways facilitated the development of the British fishing industry in the nineteenth century. Using sources only recently made available for research, this article explores the relationship between the fish trade and railways in the twentieth century. It concludes that the eventual withdrawal of British Railways from fish traffic was occasioned by the fact supply chains for many foodstuffs were revolutionised in the post-war period by the rise of large-scale processing industries and then multiple retailers, which mainly used road distribution. It was also, however, a product of the fish trades' fragmentation and divisions, and of failures of negotiation on both sides.

### **Key words**

Foodstuffs, supply chains, nationalisation, fish, transport, railways, British Transport Commission

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Food supply in Britain underwent a series of far-reaching changes in the twentieth century, starting in the interwar period and gathering pace in the decades after World War II. Among these was the development of effective quick-freezing technology, which facilitated the expansion of trade in frozen produce of various kinds. Later, the increasing power of the supermarket chains which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s saw supply chains becoming ever more geared to their needs. Indeed, from the 1960s onwards they began to exert more direct control over distribution, finding that retailer-owned distribution networks yielded lower costs and increased flexibility.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the rise of road haulage and improvements to the road network provided the railways with serious competition, not least in food trades where the inherent flexibility of the road vehicle showed to best advantage. Therefore, although this paper looks specifically at the fish trade, the developments it examines were paralleled in many other areas. Moreover, many of the same issues are relevant, among them questions over the effectiveness of the nationalised railway in maintaining market share; the rise of large-scale, vertically-integrated food processing firms and their impact upon smaller enterprises; the role and effectiveness of trade associations; the effects of technological change, and the shift in consumer preference towards processed foods supplied increasingly by supermarkets. One good example of all of these changes is the fish trades.

For well over a century it has been a truism that the railways were central to the development of the white fish industry.<sup>2</sup> By hastening and cheapening inland transport, the railways widened the market for fresh fish, and thus made possible the expansion of the catching sector and the establishment of a comprehensive inland distribution system for its products. Little work has been done, however, on the relationship between the fishing and transport industries in the subsequent century, or on how the distributive structure established in the nineteenth century coped with the changing conditions. This article goes some way towards filling this gap, by examining the interaction of the fish trades and transport industries between 1920 and 1970, a period which saw profound changes in both industries. The railway-based, fragmented distribution system for fish which had taken shape in the nineteenth century had by 1970 been partially replaced by a system dominated by large, vertically-integrated concerns supplying their products through non-specialist retailers, and fish was almost entirely moved by road.

The main focus of this paper is the port of Hull, for much of this period the largest white fish port in the country, but reference is made to developments at a national level. The principal evidential base is the minute books and other papers of the Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association, which incorporate some papers from the British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Association and other national bodies. At present they are held in the Maritime Historical Studies Centre at the University of Hull, but will be placed in public archives in due course.<sup>3</sup> They are corroborated and balanced by reference to the records of the British Transport Commission and British Railways Board, held at The National Archives.

The paper is organised in five sections. Part One sets out the context, outlining the evolution of the fishing industry, including its distributive side, before the 1920s. Part Two examines the rise of the road haulage industry between the wars and its effect on the fish trade, looking especially at a dispute in the 1930s which prefigured much of what was to happen after World War II. Part Three looks first at the rise of the vertically-integrated processing firm in the post-war period, and examines the interaction of the fisheries and railways in the 1950s, a time of considerable debate and concern over future transport arrangements, but when very little was resolved. Part Four extends the analysis into the era of the Beeching report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, and its aftermath. Conclusions are drawn in the final section.

## I

Between 1840 and 1914 the British white fish industry expanded rapidly. In 1871, the first year for which reliable figures exist, there were 4,926 registered first-class fishing vessels totalling 132,360 tons: by 1911 there were 6,913, with a total tonnage of 278,285.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, approximately 3,000 were steam-powered, with an estimated catching power between four and eight times greater than the sailing trawlers they had replaced.<sup>5</sup> Trawling for white fish had been developed in the south-west of England and around the Thames in the late eighteenth century, but between the 1840s and 1860s new ports were established at Scarborough, Hull, Grimsby, Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. Later, Aberdeen, Fleetwood and Milford Haven also emerged as major trawling ports.<sup>6</sup> The growth of the Humber ports, especially, was remarkable. Hull had only about twenty fishing vessels in 1840, but by 1910 there were 456, most of them steam trawlers of the most modern type.<sup>7</sup> Nationally, landings expanded

from 320,600 tons in 1886, the first year in which national figures were collected, albeit of a very approximate nature, to 720,950 in 1911.<sup>8</sup>

Such an expansion of the industry was made possible by the railways, which widened the market for fresh fish, and facilitated and conditioned the development of the distribution system. Fish markets had long existed in settlements where fish was landed, of which the largest by far was Billingsgate in London. From the 1850s, wholesale markets supplied by rail were established in major towns inland. Typically, fish was auctioned at the quayside on the day of landing. Some was bought for curing, but the bulk was purchased by port wholesale merchants. These were the linchpin of the distribution system, linking the ports with inland outlets. After buying the fish, many did some basic processing and then despatched it either directly to customers from whom they had received orders, or more commonly to an inland wholesale market, where it was purchased by retailers.<sup>9</sup> The number of specialist fish retailers jumped from an estimated 3,394 in 1831 to nearly 15,000 in 1871, and by the 1930s, there were between 8,500 and 16,000 fishmongers and 20-30,000 fried fish and chip shops.<sup>10</sup>

The distribution system for fish was thereby vertically disintegrated and fragmented. This was the case with many fresh foodstuffs, but perhaps especially so with fish, for two main reasons. Firstly, fish was heterogeneous, highly perishable and subject to sharp fluctuations in supply, and large markets were often supplied with different species from different ports. Matching up probable supplies from each port with demand at each market on a daily basis presented formidable problems, which is probably why there was only one serious attempt at managing the supply chain 'from ship to shop' in the 1930s, in the form of Unilever's Mac Fisheries chain of fishmongers. Even this venture could not bypass the established supply chain altogether, and some supplies came from the wholesale markets. Secondly, as Casson notes, when the minimum efficient scales of different stages of production and distribution differ, integrating operations is difficult, for 'a fully integrated firm must either operate several of the smaller plants in parallel, or sacrifice economies of scale.'<sup>11</sup> Although some trawler firms were large operations very little capital was required to enter the fish merchanting business, in which small firms accordingly predominated. Trawler owners, who until the 1890s frequently had had interests in

wholesaling, had largely withdrawn from the distributive side of the industry, finding the difficulties of managing both too great. This trend only started to be reversed after 1945.<sup>12</sup> Retailers too, both fishmongers and fish and chip shops, were generally small enterprises. Neither group could exert much control over the supply of fish from catchers, and in the era before the motor lorry nor could they control transport. With the exception of local deliveries by horse and cart, transport was in the hands of specialist concerns, in the form of the railway companies.

The white fish industry was a highly competitive business, and often marked by internal divisions and discord. Ports jockeyed for position against one another; catchers, processors and merchants disagreed often over matters of quality, prices, timing of landings, and so on. From outside the industry there were frequent allegations of corruption and sharp practice of various kinds, which were not wholly unfounded. Pilferage, ‘topping’ of inferior fish with a layer of prime to boost the price, and new firms founded by former employees of others ‘cutting in’ on their erstwhile employers’ business were far from unknown.<sup>13</sup> The merchanting business was dominated by small, often one-man, firms, many of which were short-lived and some definitely crooked. In 1934 it was estimated that there were 319 wholesalers at Hull and no fewer than 729 at Grimsby.<sup>14</sup> Most had stands in the markets on the docks, although these were too cramped for some, and in the major ports there were clusters of merchants’ premises in the nearby streets. The fish curing business, too, was dominated by small operators, often working from cramped and sometimes insanitary premises.<sup>15</sup> Under such circumstances, as an enquiry in 1936 remarked, ‘unity of outlook and loyalty to an agreed course of action’ were difficult to achieve.<sup>16</sup> This applied both within individual ports, and to the trade as a whole.

Although firms which act as intermediaries in a supply chain may compete vigorously with one another they also share common interests, often given institutional form via the development of trade associations.<sup>17</sup> The fish trade was no exception, and at all of the major ports fish merchants’ associations sought to impose some order on the business, and to protect its interests vis-à-vis the trawler owners, the railway companies, government and the labour force. Among them was the Hull Fish Merchants’ Protection Association, which was founded in January 1890.<sup>18</sup> Not all of the port’s merchants were members but before 1939 it represented the overwhelming

majority although, as discussed below, in later years it came to speak primarily for the middle and lower strata of the trade; some quite substantial businesses, but also a great many very small enterprises. The port wholesale merchants' associations were represented nationally by the British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Association. Similarly, the British Trawler Federation represented the interests of the catching sector, whilst retailers also had their own trade associations.

Transport was obviously a major concern for merchants, and also their largest cost, accounting for ten per cent of their turnover in 1934, compared to 8.5% spent on wages and 3.6% on rent and sundry expenses.<sup>19</sup> Prior to 1914, with the exceptions of local deliveries by road and the declining 'boxing fleets' whose catch was taken direct to Billingsgate by cutter, transport was entirely in the hands of the railway companies. Three railway companies served Hull. The North Eastern Railway, which had absorbed the Hull Dock Company in 1893 and therefore owned most of the city's docks, including the fish dock, St Andrew's Dock, had by far the largest share of the fish traffic. It conveyed 40,371 tons from the port in 1900, compared to 2,490 tons carried by the Great Central Railway, and 20,419 by the Hull, Barnsley and West Riding Junction Railway & Dock Company.<sup>20</sup> This latter company had opened in 1885 to break the North Eastern's perceived monopoly in Hull, in which aim it succeeded, although it was not an immediate financial success. The two companies amalgamated in 1922, essentially as an administrative convenience preceding the absorption of both into the London and North Eastern Railway in 1923.<sup>21</sup>

Fish, being heterogeneous, highly perishable and in need of rapid despatch to a multiplicity of destinations, often in small consignments, was an awkward commodity for the railways to handle. Moreover, rail distribution was inherently rather inflexible and imposed precise, often tight, time schedules on merchants, whilst the railway companies were sometimes perceived as distant, and indifferent to the needs of small consignors such as the fish merchants. Despite the fish trades' dependence on the railways, complaints about high charges and poor service were commonplace in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, when road transport began to emerge as a viable alternative, many in the fish trade were not slow to take an interest.

## II

Road transport developed rapidly in the interwar period. Motor vans and lorries came into use in the early twentieth century, but most haulage was horse-drawn until after World War I and long-distance overland transport was still a matter for the railways.<sup>23</sup> The war gave a great boost to the road haulage industry, however, since at demobilisation large numbers of ex-army vehicles were sold off, many to ex-servicemen who had learned to drive during the war. Many small haulage businesses were thus established.<sup>24</sup> During the 1920s road haulage expanded quickly, as lorries became faster, larger, more reliable and more efficient, and many major roads were upgraded and reconstructed with sealed surfaces.<sup>25</sup> To impose some order on the business, the Road and Rail Traffic Act of 1933, among other measures, introduced different categories of commercial vehicle licences. 'A' licences were required for public carriers, 'B' licences for firms whose vehicles carried their own and others' goods, and 'C' licences for firms operating vehicles exclusively for their own use.<sup>26</sup> Even so, road transport remained lightly regulated. Expansion continued through the 1930s, and by 1938 the railways had been deprived of much of their merchandise traffic over distances of sixty miles or less.<sup>27</sup> Aside from replacing horse-drawn vehicles for local deliveries, road transport offered to small distributors in many trades the opportunity to control their own transport arrangements, to break free at least partially from dependence on the railways, and to open up new areas of business which the cost or slowness of rail services had previously rendered inaccessible. Among these were the fish trades.

As road transport became an increasingly viable option during the 1920s, growing numbers of fish merchants began to take advantage of its inherent flexibility and use motor lorries, both to move fish to premises off the docks and for onward delivery to customers. Initially this was confined to local deliveries, but by 1930 vehicles were regularly running over longer distances. Hull merchants claimed in that year that their extensive traffic to York, forty miles inland, 'had been built up by the motor transport system' rather than by rail.<sup>28</sup> However, St Andrew's Dock, which had opened in 1883, was not equipped to handle road vehicles in large numbers and congestion began to mount. Moreover, as traffic was diverted away from the railways, the LNER's local officers became concerned about the loss of revenue and resolved to take action. It is perhaps an indication of how seriously the railway company took the

situation that within a few months its chairman, Sir Ralph Wedgewood, had become directly involved.<sup>29</sup>

The first attempt to resolve the issue was made in May 1930, when the LNER proposed that fish merchants should be prohibited by their tenancy agreements from using road transport outside a radius of twelve miles from Hull. This tacitly acknowledged the advantage that roads had over short distances, but even so it was not acceptable to the fish trade. The Association's directors, backed by a referendum among members, countered with a resolution that they would co-operate in easing dockside congestion, but the 'scientific advancements which are taking place in connection with the internal combustion engine, which is cheapening road transport,' meant that they could not 'for a moment' agree to the twelve-mile restriction.<sup>30</sup> The LNER responded with an attempt to restrict entry to the docks, leading merchants to complain that they risked losing traffic, not least to York.<sup>31</sup> The railway company stuck to its guns, however, and early the following year threatened legal action against merchants bringing lorries onto the docks, on the grounds that it breached their tenancy agreements.<sup>32</sup> The Association was initially divided over whether it should actively support road transport users if it came to legal action, but in August 1931 the directors decided that a fighting fund should be established and the 'motor unions' and other interested bodies invited to contribute. By the end of October, £50-60 had been raised. They also resolved to use the 'motor question' as a lever to demand reduced rates and faster services.<sup>33</sup>

The LNER duly issued writs against five merchants' firms in September 1931, arguing that, as owner of the docks, it was entitled to impose whatever conditions it saw fit on vehicles entering them. It sought an injunction preventing the defendants from bringing vehicles onto the docks without permission.<sup>34</sup> The case, heard in May 1932, was won by the LNER, which promptly capitalised on its victory by giving notice that it would cancel existing merchants' tenancy agreements and replace them with new ones which would expressly preclude tenants from using vehicles to convey fish more than twelve miles from Hull, and give the company sole discretion over what vehicles could be brought onto the docks.<sup>35</sup> Initially the Association intended to fight on and refuse to sign the new agreements, but the trawler owners refused to support them and, after seeking assurance from Thomas Hornsby, the District Traffic



Superintendent, that the railway company would assist in developing the trade and not victimise those firms which had fought it, the merchants conceded defeat.<sup>36</sup>

Matters might have rested there were it not for the actions of W.B. Willey & Sons Ltd, one of the erstwhile defendants, which serve to illustrate the difficulties the trade association faced in co-ordinating the actions of a great many small and individualistic enterprises. Willey & Sons had invested heavily in road transport and their tenancy agreement did not expire until November 1933, so they refused to sign the new agreement and continued using road vehicles.<sup>37</sup> Hornsby demanded that the Association compel them to fall into line with the others, but the directors had no power to do so and refused to try, so the railway changed tactics and offered a £5,000 goodwill payment to the merchants, on condition that Willey and another intransigent firm, F. Cook & Sons, comply with their demands. Under pressure from the Association, and with assurances that they would not be victimised, both firms gave in.<sup>38</sup> Even then the matter was not over, however, for in an illustration of the trade's ability to fall out with itself, Albert and James Willey promptly resigned from the family firm and set up their own concern, Willey Bros. They then circulated the confidential minutes of the meeting at which their father had agreed to the LNER's terms, along with allegations that the Association's President, Stephen Nowell, had pressured Willey senior not to attend. This was almost certainly untrue, and under threats of a libel action they withdrew the allegation.<sup>39</sup> However, they did well out of the incident, for they had acquired five lorries and two trailers previously run by the family firm and managed to broker a deal whereby the LNER would buy them in return for their compliance, which it duly did the following April for £4,000. The LNER subsequently concluded that the vehicles were unsuitable for short-distance railhead work and sold them to a Newcastle haulage firm for £2,000.<sup>40</sup>

Why the LNER decided to force the issue when it did is unclear. Congestion was a real and growing problem but the loss of revenue was probably more significant, especially during an economic depression which had hit the LNER hard. It was always more dependent on freight traffic than the other railway companies, and much of it originated in the areas worst affected by the slump.<sup>41</sup> Total freight carried had fallen from twenty-eight million tons in 1923 to 19.7 in 1932, with revenue falling from £36 million to £26.5.<sup>42</sup> Freight traffic in 1932 alone was 9.8% down on the

previous year, which the Area Goods Manager put down not only to the depression but also the ‘virulence’ of road competition.<sup>43</sup> Under the circumstances it was natural that the hard-pressed railway would seek to protect its revenues where it could. The fish traffic, which could not readily be diverted to other ports, still depended in large measure on the railway, and was mainly in the hands of small firms who were relatively easy to coerce into line, was an easy target. The LNER thus won the dispute, although no figures exist to show how much traffic it regained by so doing, but it did make concessions in the form of improved services, along the lines of fast block goods trains being introduced elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to traffic losses occurring elsewhere, the LNER kept most of the Hull fish traffic, and thus benefited from the port’s success in the 1930s. Hull’s fishing industry was more concentrated than at other major ports, which made reform easier to carry through.<sup>45</sup> Larger and more efficient trawlers were built to exploit prolific new grounds in the Arctic, catching low-value fish in very large quantities. Much of this was intended for sale through the fish and chip trade, an expanding market which by the 1930s consumed about half of white fish landings.<sup>46</sup> After the last of the North Sea ‘boxing fleets’ was wound up in 1936, Hull was exclusively a distant-water port, in contrast to other major ports which deployed a proportion of their vessels in nearer waters. Ashore, minimum quayside auction prices were set to prevent market crashes, and the port’s merchants began to undertake a greater degree of processing, heading and filleting fish before it was despatched inland. This reduced transport costs, and allowed fish to arrive at inland markets in better condition and thus realise higher prices. The offal thus produced was processed in mutually owned fishmeal and oil factories. The average merchant at Hull was handling 15,102cwt of fish worth £15,102 in 1934, as opposed to 8,167cwt worth £10,328 a decade previously, and making a 2.3% profit on turnover. At all of the other major ports, the average merchant’s turnover across the same period had dropped, and profits were far lower, ranging from a 0.9% average profit at Fleetwood, to a 0.2% loss at Grimsby.<sup>47</sup> A similar story was evident in the catching sector. Alone among the major fishing ports, Hull remained profitable throughout the 1930s, and its share of white fish landings jumped from twenty per cent to forty-five by 1937.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, being tied to rail distribution was not at that time a major hindrance to growth.

### III

World War II caused severe losses in the catching sector and great disruption to the fish trades, and afterwards the business struggled to return to normality. Large catches were made as trawlers were released from war service, and fish prices collapsed in 1949, leading to a temporary reintroduction of wartime price controls.<sup>49</sup> Amid discussion of prices, fish merchants' licences, demobilisation of staff and vessels, and general post-war reconstruction, transport arrangements seem to have been given little consideration. This is perhaps surprising, given that the nationalisation of transport and the creation of a co-ordinated national transport infrastructure was a key policy of the 1945-51 Labour government, put into effect by the Transport Act of 1947. This Act created the British Transport Commission to co-ordinate its various activities, which were controlled by its subordinate Executives. Thus did the docks pass into the control of the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive, and the railways to the Railway Executive.<sup>50</sup> The railways were also divided into six geographical regions, with Hull falling under the control of the North Eastern region, based at York, until it was merged with the Eastern Region in 1967. In the case of road transport 'C' licence holders were largely left alone, but 'A' and 'B' licence holders were restricted to a radius of forty miles from their base, and long-distance road transport was supposed to become the preserve of the Road Haulage Executive of the BTC. This lasted only until 1953, however, when road haulage was denationalised and most vehicles sold back into private hands, with the exception of the fleets operated by British Road Services, which the Commission continued to control.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to these far-reaching organisational changes in the transport industries, the decade after World War II ended also saw the beginnings of a revolution in fish distribution. The catalyst for this was a key technological change, the development of viable quick-freezing equipment, which began to be introduced at the ports in the late 1930s and then expanded quickly in the post-war years.<sup>52</sup> Quick-freezing effected a revolution in the means by which many perishable foods were consumed. In Britain its effects were first felt in the supply of vegetables, frozen peas, for example, quickly becoming a 'mainstay' of the frozen food industry.<sup>53</sup> In the case of fish it was slightly slower to make an impact, but in the longer run its effects were profound. Quick-freezing allowed the supply of fish to become more regular, since stocks of frozen

fish acted as a buffer against market fluctuations, and evened out spikes in its price. It also allowed fish to be sold as a processed, homogenised, branded product, overcoming long-standing perceptions that it was expensive, often poor quality, and difficult to prepare.<sup>54</sup> However, it also changed the balance of power in the industry. To develop a mass market in frozen food required the establishment of large-scale freezing plants and cold storage capacity. Moreover, no general hauliers offered transport for frozen produce, so specialist lorry fleets needed to be established, and a national distribution infrastructure established. All of this required huge capital investment.<sup>55</sup> In the post-war decade, one firm emerged as the market leader: Bird's Eye, which had been a subsidiary of Unilever since 1943.<sup>56</sup> During the 1930s Unilever had already begun to acquire interests in fishing, setting up the Mac Fisheries chain. It had also acquired a small fleet of trawlers to supply them, although this had not been a success and the vessels were sold after only a year.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, Unilever already had a substantial presence in the fish trade, and it was only logical that its rapidly developing interests in frozen food would include fish. However, it was not the only one, and other significant players in the burgeoning frozen fish business came from within the industry. Ross Group had started as a fish merchanting firm in Grimsby before buying interests in trawlers between the wars, whilst Associated Fisheries Ltd had been formed in 1929. By the 1960s both had substantial trawler fleets, and also extensive interests in, among other things, quick-freezing, transport and distribution of fish, as well as other frozen foods.<sup>58</sup> Neither of these firms had anything like the resources that Bird's Eye had at its disposal, and they came to the market too late to prevent the Unilever-backed firm from carving out a dominant position which it held for the next fifteen years, until the rise of the supermarkets saw power in the supply chain shift decisively towards the retailer.<sup>59</sup>

Even then, however, the major processing firms were in a much stronger position than the specialist fish merchants, whose operations were fundamentally geared towards supplying wholesale markets, which in turn supplied small retailers whose numbers were starting to decline. Nor was there any way in which small merchanting concerns could invest in freezing plant, cold storage and specialist distribution arrangements. They were tied firmly to the fresh fish trade, and their numbers began to dwindle, from about 1,200 nationally in the mid-1950s to about 750 two decades later.<sup>60</sup> They remained an important component of the industry, but their ability to influence events

weakened as the supply chain in which they featured so prominently was increasingly bypassed by the rise of the large processing firms. Nor did these firms join their trade associations. As early as 1953 Ian Class, recently elected President of the Association, had estimated that he represented ninety per cent of the merchants at Hull, but that the remaining ten per cent controlled about half the fish forwarded from the port.<sup>61</sup> The balance of power would only tip further away from the small merchant as time went on, and essentially they found themselves fighting a rearguard action, a key part of which was the attempt to retain railway services upon which many of their businesses depended. That said, despite the fact that establishing their own comprehensive distribution systems was impossible, many could and did begin to use their own vans for some deliveries, and to contract with haulage firms to deliver fish to a limited range of destinations. Despite, or perhaps partly because of, the common problems facing the trade, it remained fractious and internally divided, and discord began to grow between firms that did use road transport, and those which remained dependent on the railways.

In the immediate post-war years, there is little in the Association minutes to hint at merchants' attitudes to the new nationalised transport organisation with which they had to deal. Transport resurfaced as an issue in autumn 1949, though, as complaints began to mount about the railways' services, charges sixty per cent above their pre-war level, and rising rents on market tenancies.<sup>62</sup> The removal of wartime price controls sharpened the issue, but more significant was the end of fuel rationing in 1950, after which the number of 'C' licence vehicles expanded quickly.<sup>63</sup> Three years later, the denationalisation of long-distance road haulage allowed the large processing firms to contemplate operating vehicles for long-distance bulk hauls.<sup>64</sup> Pressure for change was building up. Discussions in 1950-1 produced little except some modifications to the rates charged for fish carried on passenger trains.<sup>65</sup> They did, however, alert the British Transport Commission to the seriousness of the threat from road transport, and open up a process of negotiation that continued until a settlement was reached in autumn 1953.

The Association, in line with the wishes expressed by a referendum of its members, favoured staying with rail transport.<sup>66</sup> However, there were three main issues which needed resolution. Firstly, there were the perennial questions of carriage rates and

service quality. Merchants wanted later acceptance times, giving them more preparation time, and some also argued that fish carried by road was handled less and arrived in better condition.<sup>67</sup> Secondly, although anxious to reach a settlement, the Association's directors argued that 'we could not consent to any settlement which would leave us at a disadvantage with Grimsby.'<sup>68</sup> Finally, there was the question of the tenancy agreements and vehicle permits dating from 1932, which the BTC had inherited and which many merchants were openly breaching. The Association expressed frustration with the BTC's apparent indecisiveness over whether to enforce the agreements, as it had done at Fleetwood, or to withdraw the clauses relating to road vehicles.<sup>69</sup> As things stood, road transport was available only to some merchants, those with premises off the docks or those prepared to breach their tenancy agreements. The Association argued that this was unfair and that road transport should either be made available to all or suppressed altogether.<sup>70</sup>

The negotiations were hampered, as ever, by the fact that the fish trades did not speak with one voice. Aside from the Association's concern to protect Hull's position vis-à-vis other ports, there was the conflict of interest between those who did use road transport and those who did not. Moreover, the trawler owners regarded the Association's suggestion that road transport should be stopped as 'appalling.'<sup>71</sup> A BTC memorandum on fish traffic highlighted the lack of a 'national representative body capable of negotiating on a national basis.'<sup>72</sup> The White Fish Authority, created in 1951, could perhaps have played this role but declined to intervene as it was in the process of preparing a scheme to equalise transport charges from all ports. This was eventually abandoned because of opposition from the trade.<sup>73</sup> The White Fish Authority played little further role in the transport question beyond chairing a few inconclusive meetings in London, and was in general regarded by the Association as an unwanted interference in its business.<sup>74</sup> Therefore the BTC usually had to negotiate separately with each port, and with different sections of the trade. At Hull, whilst it could reach a settlement with the Association, there was no guarantee that this would not be undermined by other merchants or the trawler owners. Nor could the Association's directors force members to abide by any agreement they made. This lack of unity was held to be the main reason why negotiations on rates in 1950-1 failed to produce any real results.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile, the BTC grew 'alarmed' as traffic was lost to the roads. In August 1952 a report to David Blee of the Railway Executive pointed out that the situation was 'rapidly worsening and that twenty per cent of fish was now leaving [Hull] by road,' entailing a loss of revenue 'up to £250,000.'<sup>76</sup> Moreover, congestion was again rising on the docks. Two courses of action were open to the BTC. Firstly, it could try to enforce the letter of the tenancy agreements and in effect ban tenants from using road transport outside the twelve-mile radius. Serious consideration was given to this in 1952-3, but the idea was eventually rejected. Although the BTC's solicitor felt that the judgement obtained by the LNER in 1932 still held good at Hull, it did not apply to Grimsby, and the clauses of the nineteenth-century Acts of Parliament governing access to the docks there were vague. The solicitor felt that Grimsby merchants might well defeat any attempted legal action against them. Moreover, at a time when 'attempts are being made to break up the British Transport Commission's alleged transport monopoly,' it was felt that legal action could result in unfavourable publicity, which 'might seriously embarrass the BTC Interests.'<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the merchants were mindful of the possibility, and in October 1952 Ian Class proposed to force the issue with a plan to use British Road Services vehicles to distribute his fish from the market. He asked if the Association would be prepared to back him in any ensuing test case. The directors' decision is not recorded, but by then denationalisation of road transport was imminent and it is probable that they decided to await developments, as there is no further mention of the idea.<sup>78</sup> It is possible that Class's proposed actions, which amounted to a direct challenge to the BTC, might have provoked a legal response, but the situation never arose. Legal action was occasionally threatened during negotiations with the Hull merchants, but there was evidently little serious intent to pursue it. Instead a policy of negotiation and compromise was decided upon.<sup>79</sup>

Two agreements were reached during 1953. In March a series of experimental service improvements were introduced. These included later deadlines for delivery of fish for transport from the docks, an improved mechanism for returning empty boxes, new rates for three- and five-ton consignments to Nottingham, Manchester, Birmingham and Coventry and an extension of the 'bulking' scheme whereby the Association acted as consignor of all fish to given destinations, allowing merchants to take advantage of the discount given for bulk consignments. A committee was also to be

set up to 'lay down principles' for road transport, reflecting an offer the BTC had made to run a road service to plug the gaps in rail provision. The arrangements were trialled for six months.<sup>80</sup> They were not a success. Ian Class said that the scheme was 'well meant but had proved to be a failure,' whilst Blee expressed disappointment at the 'limited response' from the trade.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the BTC insinuated that the Association's directors had 'made promises' to bring traffic back to the railways, a suggestion they angrily denied.<sup>82</sup>

In July, with recriminations breaking out, Class wrote to the Chairman of the BTC, Lord Hurcomb, arguing that 'certain viewpoints ... have not been put before you with sufficient force,' and requesting a meeting to settle the question.<sup>83</sup> Hurcomb agreed, and there followed a series of meetings in Hull and London. They were overshadowed by the first of a series of disputes with Iceland over access to the fishing grounds, as a result of which many merchants were refusing to handle fish imported from Iceland.<sup>84</sup> They also faced a threat by members of the National Union of Railwaymen to place an embargo on firms using road transport unless its cessation was agreed. The Association directors ignored the threat and pressed ahead with their plan to make the BTC either abolish road transport or make it available to all.<sup>85</sup> The discussions were convoluted but did eventually result in an agreement, made on 24 August. The BTC agreed to provide road services to complement existing rail provision, and tenancy agreements were modified to exclude mention of the railways and instead confine tenants to consigning goods via services offered by the BTC.<sup>86</sup> Two months later the BTC also made major changes to the charging system, designed to win back lost traffic. Merchants were given a forty percent rebate on carriage to twenty-eight named stations, on condition that they used the BTC only for deliveries outside the twelve-mile radius. The rebate was also applied to existing bulking arrangements.<sup>87</sup> These concessions won the support of 'a large number of merchants' and came into force on 16 November.<sup>88</sup>

The 1953 settlement, which in its essentials remained in force for a decade, temporarily quelled discord between the BTC and the fish trade, but did not address two underlying issues. Firstly, it had little or no effect on the large firms that were setting up road distribution arrangements of their own. Secondly, although the rebate scheme did temporarily slow the diversion of traffic away from the railways on the



part of other merchants, it did nothing to improve the efficiency of rail services.<sup>89</sup> Rather, it served to entrench a distribution system that was fast becoming outmoded. A report by A.J. White, Assistant General Manager of the Eastern Region, pointed out in 1958 that bulk hauls on the main trunk routes were profitable, but 'the distribution of small lots of wet fish to a multiplicity of destinations is, and will remain, an extremely expensive operation.'<sup>90</sup> R.A. Taylor's investigation two years later found that a quarter of the 320 7.5-ton vans despatched from Grimsby on a busy sample day contained less than a ton of fish, and ten per cent less than half a ton.<sup>91</sup> Such low load factors were hopelessly uneconomic. However, because the larger distributors were employing lorries for the bulk hauls, the railways were increasingly left with only the unprofitable parts of the business. 'In fact,' noted White, 'each form of transport is providing the function for which it is least suited.'<sup>92</sup> White's recommendation that the railway concentrate on trunk routes and raise charges to discourage the unprofitable branch traffic prefigured what was to become explicit policy in the following decade. His report reflected growing concern about the railways' deteriorating finances. In particular, losses on freight traffic mounted quickly in the late 1950s.<sup>93</sup> One reason for this, not least in connection with fish traffic, was the two-week railwaymen's strike of 1955.

During the early 1950s, although everyone acknowledged that roads were going to play some role in future distribution, there is no indication that anyone involved seriously envisaged the railways losing the fish traffic altogether. The strike changed that. As industrial action loomed, the Association wrote to 140 haulage firms and managed to arrange a schedule of thirty-eight routes, radiating from Hull to cover most towns served by the railways. The arrangements worked well, and despite heavy landings the Association reckoned that they had been able to distribute as much fish as they usually would. The implications were obvious. Class called an extraordinary general meeting to discuss the question of transport in future, for which no minutes survive but from which no significant action resulted.<sup>94</sup> Similar debates happened in the other major ports, and it showed at a meeting of the Federation of British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Associations and David Blee that October. The Federation favoured rail distribution but demanded a string of concessions, including the extension of the rebate scheme to all destinations and modifications to the conditions of carriage. Blee promised nothing, but pledged co-operation from

regional officers.<sup>95</sup> He evidently knew he was negotiating from a weak position and was concerned mainly with limiting the damage that the strike had done.

There, again, the issue rested. Railway managers spoke of bringing traffic back on to rail, but there were no fundamental modifications to transport arrangements or the settlement reached in 1953, and the decline in fish traffic on rail continued. Table 1, showing landings and rail forwardings from Hull, serves to illustrate the point.

**Table 1**  
**Landings and Forwardings of Fish from Hull by Rail, 1948-62**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Fish Landed (tons)</b>	<b>Fish Forwarded by Rail (tons)</b>	<b>Percentage on Rail</b>
1948	248,178	247,182	99.5
1949	256,497	233,052	90.8
1950	216,129	182,445	84.4
1951	284,247	214,497	74.9
1952	279,868	179,565	64.1
1953	247,791	136,317	55.0
1954	245,752	130,790	53.2
1955	264,297	116,687	44.1
1956	265,920	117,692	44.2
1957	236,279	102,278	43.2
1958	224,912	93,859	41.7
1959	221,888	84,949	38.3
1960	228,372	76,786	33.7
1961	227,508	70,866	31.1
1962	232,773	66,720	28.6

Source: TNA, MAF 209/2137, Draft report on Hull, as part of the Enquiry into the Major Fishing Ports, 1963.

As the table shows, the overwhelming bulk of fish that left Hull in the late 1940s did so by rail, which reflects partly the LNER's success in holding onto the traffic in the 1930s, and partly the curtailment of road transport by fuel rationing. From there, however, the railway's fish traffic declined in both relative and absolute terms. The rise in rail traffic in 1951 was a product of heavy landings in that year, but thereafter it declined in every year, with the exception of a slight upturn in 1956. Landings at the port remained high, but as road transport expanded, it absorbed an ever-increasing proportion of the traffic. Moreover, it did so despite the fact that Hull was poorly

served by road, which played a part in its general lack of economic dynamism.<sup>96</sup> The city lies fifty miles east of the main north-south transport arteries, and until the completion of the M62 motorway between Hull and Liverpool during the 1970s, most of the roads leading to the port were narrow and winding, and passed through several town centres. Traffic also had to negotiate the narrow swing bridge over the River Ouse, with frequent delays, until the motorway bridge opened in 1976.<sup>97</sup> It is telling that, even under these conditions, long-distance road haulage from the port expanded so quickly.

In truth, the ongoing decline in the railways' share of the fish traffic represented both their failings and those of the fish trade. Back in 1953, an associate of Ross Group had pointed out that, once some of the trade had switched to road distribution, others would follow out of self-protection, and that as investment in road transport facilities grew, reversing the trend would become more difficult. He suggested that, had the BTC quickly moved to assert its legal rights regarding road users, the movement to road would have been 'nipped in the bud.'<sup>98</sup> He had been proved right, for by the late 1950s the shift was clearly irreversible. Ross had moved to set up a nationwide series of distribution depots in 1954-6 and other major firms had followed suit, with the partial exception of Mac Fisheries, which retained rail deliveries to its depot at Finsbury Park in North London, from where fish was distributed to its own retail chain by road.<sup>99</sup> The smaller merchants, supplying wholesale markets and sometimes directly to retailers, could not establish their own delivery networks in this way. Moreover, the rebate scheme locked many of them into rail transport, where there was an impasse between them, who regarded it as too expensive, and the railways, which were increasingly aware that much of it was uneconomic.<sup>100</sup> The fish trades were hamstrung by fragmentation and lack of ability to act in concert, and the railways by the bureaucracy imposed by the BTC, by long-established but inefficient working practices and services that proved resistant to reform, by accounting deficiencies which made costing a given service difficult, and by conservative and sometimes ineffective management.<sup>101</sup> As a result, with the increasingly large exception of the major chains, the fish traffic in the late 1950s represented a modified version of the arrangements which had obtained before 1939, except that now they were increasingly unsustainable and living on borrowed time.

#### IV

During the 1960s, the major processing firms expanded their operations, largely on the basis of road transport, and established an ever greater presence in the supply chain. Decline in older forms of fish processing, such as smoking and drying, was more than counterbalanced by the rise of frozen fish products, and employment in fish processing expanded from 5,718 in 1951 to 22,851 in 1974. The rise of frozen fish is even more significant, given that fish consumption overall declined by an average of 0.4% per annum in the 1960s, and more quickly in the following decade.<sup>102</sup> The tide was running in the large firms' direction, as consumers displayed a strong preference for pre-packaged and frozen fish products such as the ubiquitous Fish Finger, launched by Bird's Eye in 1955. All of this was encouraged by the general increase in consumption of convenience foods, and the growing popularity of the domestic freezer.<sup>103</sup> Coupled with the fact that by the early 1960s initial problems with the freezer trawler had been resolved and that more and more fish would be landed frozen in the future, the future of the fresh fish trade looked uncertain. Moreover, the catching sector was stagnating. Landings peaked in 1956 and fell slowly thereafter, profits were declining even in the previously lucrative distant-water sector in which Hull specialised, and access to fishing grounds, especially around Iceland, was increasingly circumscribed.<sup>104</sup> By the mid-60s Hull's long-term future as a fishing port was in some doubt, and the fish merchants noted that, caught between declining landings and the rise of the processing firms, they were at risk of becoming a 'dying trade' if they did not fight their corner.<sup>105</sup> Maintaining cost-effective transport arrangements was crucial for their survival. Nevertheless, as late as 1966 around 80% of fish landed was still sold unfrozen and, although their numbers were dwindling, fresh fish merchants were not at immediate risk of extinction.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, traffic in fresh fish was still substantial and British Rail believed that at least some of it could be made profitable. There were, however, to be fundamental changes on the railways too, and relations between them and the fish trade took a turn for the worse in the early 1960s.

Dr Richard Beeching's report on the future of the railways, published in March 1963, came as little surprise to the Association. Although the White report and the more ruthless attitude to unprofitable traffic it advocated were confidential, and in 1960 the Association had claimed to be satisfied with rail services, by early 1961 its directors

were well aware that future service cuts were likely. Moreover, Ian Class protested in a letter that there had been 'a certain lack of candour on the railway side of the table' in recent discussions. He remarked on the railways' 'lack of enthusiasm' for the fish traffic, and shortly afterwards a circular to members confirmed that the Association was 'exploring the possibilities of transferring traffic from rail to road.'<sup>107</sup> However, mindful that the railway could retaliate by withdrawing services, the Association proceeded cautiously and awaited Dr Beeching's report.<sup>108</sup> Its appearance was initially greeted with something like relief. After discussions with the District Superintendent the Association concluded that eighty-two per cent of traffic would be unaffected, and only between two and five per cent would require alternative means of transport. Moreover, Hull, whose supply patterns were more concentrated and required fewer small consignments to isolated destinations, would be less affected than Grimsby. The optimism did not last, however. Saturday fish trains were withdrawn completely in September due to falling traffic.<sup>109</sup> This can only have served as another indication that the railways could no longer provide the comprehensive service to which the merchants were accustomed and that, for at least part of their business, road transport represented the future.

Dr Beeching had become the final Chairman of the British Transport Commission in June 1962. The Transport Act of that year, which came into force in January 1963, 'swept away the remaining traces' of the integrated transport system established at nationalisation.<sup>110</sup> The BTC was abolished, and management of the railways was entrusted to the newly created British Railways Board, commonly known as British Rail, of which Beeching became the first Chairman. His plan was to return the railways to profit by disposing of unprofitable traffic, closing underused routes and investing in the parts of the system that did or could be expected to pay their way. The 1962 Act gave BR far more freedom to accept or reject traffic on a purely commercial basis than it had previously enjoyed.<sup>111</sup> Although Beeching's report did not mention fish traffic it was well known that much of it was uneconomic, as Geoffrey Freeman Allen argued forcibly in his 1965 defence of Beeching. He pointed to the overall decline in fish traffic and the unprofitability of what remained, and suggested that the average load of fish trains running from Hull, Grimsby, Aberdeen and Fleetwood was a 'beggarly' 35½ tons. Despite this, he argued, block trains running to major railheads could be made to pay.<sup>112</sup> British Rail had come to much

the same conclusions four years previously. Accordingly, a plan was drawn up whereby the railway would confine itself to bulk deliveries to railheads, which fish merchants could then arrange to have delivered to customers by road. Existing rebate schemes were to be withdrawn, and charges raised overall. This was announced to a meeting with the port wholesalers' federation in October 1963.<sup>113</sup>

Although some in the fish trade had realised that rail service cuts were likely, others had not, which became apparent at meetings of the national federation of wholesale merchants in October 1963 and January 1964. The wholesalers' associations at all of the main ports increasingly represented the small merchants who were most dependent on rail, and would be worst affected. From their point of view, as a Grimsby merchant argued, if the railways would not provide a full service, they may as well provide none at all. At the meeting in January 1964, Fleetwood merchants stated that they had negotiated new rates and were remaining with rail services.<sup>114</sup> They were alone. The Grimsby merchants were seriously considering moving entirely to road distribution, Lowestoft merchants stated that most of their fish was already conveyed by road, and those from Aberdeen were unsure of their position. In Hull, a further meeting with regional railway officers revealed that rates would rise by as much as half, which a new loyalty discount would not offset, and that there would be no onward deliveries from railheads.<sup>115</sup> The directors thereafter proceeded on the assumption that they would have to oversee a move away from the railways, and that the Association would have to take on the task that individual merchants could not, of establishing a comprehensive road distribution scheme.

The directors therefore returned to the idea of establishing their road service, and successfully opened talks with Hull-based hauliers in late 1963.<sup>116</sup> The following January, Lep Transport and Kingston Haulage presented proposals for a comprehensive road delivery scheme, using purpose-built insulated vehicles. They proposed to divide the country into 'grids,' each of which would carry a standard charge. Fish would be distributed to customers from thirty-six distribution centres. The hauliers would offer bulk discounts of up to eighty per cent to wholesale markets. Deliveries would be daily, except to remote areas of Wales and the West Country, which would be twice weekly, and Scotland would not be covered. The scheme could be operational within six months of 'A' licenses being granted. Suitably encouraged,

the directors stated that a 'first class' service could be established, and planning thus continued through the first half of the year, a few modifications being made to the scheme in terms of charges, loyalty discounts and rebates.<sup>117</sup> Members expressed no opposition to the scheme, but an Extraordinary General Meeting in March was 'unduly quiet' and the directors, who by now were proceeding with 'great urgency,' went on the offensive to garner support.<sup>118</sup> They succeeded, and in May members voted unanimously to transfer their business to the road hauliers. It was projected that 876 tons a week would be carried, possibly rising to over 1,000 if merchants using private transport transferred to the Association scheme, which a representative from Lep Transport said could be up and running by October. A limited company owned by the Association and the hauliers, known as Hull Fish Transport Ltd, was established to run the service.<sup>119</sup>

Meanwhile, British Rail had not given up on the fish traffic, and trains were still running between Hull and most major cities inland. At a series of meetings in the spring and summer of 1964 BR representatives, mainly officers of the North Eastern region, expressed concern that traffic was falling to unsustainable levels and made clear that BR was no longer interested in handling small consignments, but they also emphasised their desire to retain the bulk hauls. They argued, perhaps complacently and almost certainly wrongly, that the roads could not handle all the traffic currently moving by rail. Behind the scenes there was a drive to cut the cost of running the fish trains, led by a member of the British Railways Board itself, Philip Shirley, formerly of Bachelor's Foods, whom Beeching had recruited to handle the railways' finances.<sup>120</sup> One way of achieving this was to concentrate the traffic on a few key services. Therefore, BR proposed a scheme to serve sixteen railheads with three trains a day from Hull, with onward delivery the customer's responsibility. The exception was London, where Tooley's Transport had been engaged to provide road delivery from a depot at King's Cross. Proposals were also advanced for a similar scheme in the south-west of England.<sup>121</sup> The Association responded impatiently that serving the whole country from sixteen railheads was impossible. The directors argued that too many vehicles would be needed, that consignors would lose control over deliveries, that hauliers involved in branch deliveries would soon take over the bulk loads too, and that, all in all, the proposals were 'absolutely ludicrous.' However, they played for time and did not reject the scheme out of hand.<sup>122</sup>

At this point, another interest group intervened to complicate the situation further. The Billingsgate fish market porters were unhappy about handling fish brought in by road, arguing that road operators were less efficient and created more work.<sup>123</sup> The Association believed in May that the porters had conceded, but in July their representatives flatly refused to deal with road hauliers, which BR used as a lever in negotiations to retain the London traffic.<sup>124</sup> Meanwhile, the London Fish Merchants' Association expressed unhappiness about being caught up in an increasingly acrimonious battle between BR and the Association. BR stated that the Association needed the London rail service, in response to which the directors retorted that London took only eighteen per cent of Hull landings, and they would not jeopardise the bulk of their business for it. Nevertheless, the National Union of Railwaymen, whose Hull members had long been unhappy about the loss of traffic to road and periodically threatened embargoes on road users, would probably back a porters' strike, which would create serious difficulties.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, BR had offered a three-month trial period on a new nightly service to London with onward distribution by Tooley, but could also withdraw all services at short notice. During some decidedly stormy meetings that September the Association's directors, caught between a desire to press ahead with their road scheme and fear of the potential consequences, first told BR that they would no longer require its services, but then backtracked when BR demanded formal notification and decided instead to accept the London service on a trial basis.<sup>126</sup> This seemed like a fair compromise, but in fact it was a serious misjudgement.

The Association's plans quickly unravelled. Accepting the London rail service meant revising the road scheme to exclude the 'Tooley area.' This was possible, but it took time and prolonged the uncertainty about future transport provision. Many merchants, needing some stability, began making private road haulage arrangements. The Association's directors fulminated about this but were powerless to prevent it.<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile, the hauliers became increasingly concerned as support for the road scheme ebbed away. Initially they had been promised custom from 172 merchants despatching around 1,050 tons a week, but by late October forty-three had withdrawn and the projected tonnage was down to 580. Recriminations began to break out in Hull between the Association and the transport companies.<sup>128</sup> Two weeks later the



hauliers lost confidence and pulled out, stating that support had fallen too far for the scheme to be viable. All that the Association's directors could now do was negotiate the best possible terms with BR.<sup>129</sup> A few days later they admitted that the road scheme had 'collapsed' and that Hull would require rail services after all. It was an embarrassing climb-down for a group who had been so vocal about the railways' shortcomings, but they were able to secure a promise that the existing fish trains would run at least until the end of the year.<sup>130</sup> They were withdrawn on 1 February 1965, leaving only the London train. Plans for another service to the south-west were abandoned due to lack of support.<sup>131</sup>

With its own scheme abandoned, the Association now set about contracting with hauliers on a route by route basis to cover the rest of the country. Lep Transport had evidently washed their hands of the fish business, but Kingston Haulage were among six firms which offered services. By the time the trains were withdrawn, daily services had been arranged for much of the country.<sup>132</sup> Road transport was not unproblematic. Pilferage was a persistent problem, and some of the haulage firms proved unreliable. For instance, Haltemprice Transport was the subject of frequent complaints, and in January 1966 the decision was taken to withdraw its contract and give it to S.R. Crack instead. Crack in turn ran into difficulties two years later and was relieved of his contracts.<sup>133</sup> There were also periodic drivers' strikes.<sup>134</sup> Road transport arrangements were formally turned over to the separate Fish Merchants' Company in June 1966, and appear to have proceeded smoothly.<sup>135</sup>

The London rail service had proved successful after a few early operating difficulties caused by incorrect loading of the wagons by railway workers, a problem more serious and persistent in Hull than at the other ports.<sup>136</sup> Planning was also advancing to include the fish traffic in a nightly Freightliner service between Hull and London, for which 'very competitive' rates had been quoted.<sup>137</sup> However, in June 1967 there was a strike at King's Cross. Emergency road delivery arrangements were put in hand and proved a success. Accordingly, it was decided the following month to abandon the Freightliner service and maintain the London traffic on road.<sup>138</sup> This time there was no opposition from the London merchants or Billingsgate porters. Ross Group and Bird's Eye continued to negotiate with BR over a possible Freightliner service, but both eventually pulled out. Ross Group argued that BR

sought to impose unreasonable conditions; Freightliner's marketing division blamed the Eastern Region's management for not taking the initiative.<sup>139</sup> A few years later, the remaining fish trains to London from Aberdeen, which was always more rail-dependant than other ports because of its remoteness from major population centres, from Grimsby and from Fleetwood also ceased. The role of the railways in fish distribution was over.<sup>140</sup>

## V

The transfer of fish traffic from rail to road was a protracted and uneven process, which started shortly after World War I, gathered pace during the 1950s, and was finally completed in the late 1960s. It was a product partly of general changes in food supply in twentieth-century Britain, but also of specific circumstances within the fish trades.

The production and distribution of food changed fundamentally in the twentieth century, and the fish trades were very much a part of this pattern. Among the key developments, especially in the post-war years, was the rise of frozen and highly processed foodstuffs. Fish was always a likely candidate for freezing, since frozen fish was not only much more durable than fresh, but also less variable in quality, price and availability. Consumers, with more cash to spend on frozen food and freezers to keep it in, unsurprisingly came to prefer it. The rise of frozen food, as with frozen vegetables and pre-prepared meals, was principally driven by large-scale enterprises. Their growing influence began to squeeze the existing fish trade which, being fragmented, vertically disintegrated and dominated by small enterprises, had limited ability to respond. Finally, the rise of chain retailers and the major supermarket chains began to squeeze out the small businesses which had dominated fish retailing since the nineteenth century, and who were among the main consumers of the established fish trade's products. All of these factors encouraged the diversion of fish traffic onto the roads, since the large processors and retailers could operate their own lorry fleets, which enabled them simply to bypass the established supply chain. As the wholesale markets they supplied contracted, so the number of existing fish merchants declined, but for those remaining in the business transport remained as pressing an issue as ever, and the relationship between the fish trade and the transport

industries crucial. As we have seen, however, this was far from untroubled. Its eventual collapse, however, was a result of failings on both sides.

The railways had since the nineteenth century provided a comprehensive distribution service for fish, but much of this consisted of small consignments which were in all probability never very profitable, and by the 1950s had become clearly unviable.

British Rail, as we have seen, had no desire to lose the fish traffic entirely, and well into the 1960s it fought to retain the bulk hauls to major destinations, believing, not implausibly, that these could be made to pay their way. However, during the 1950s it managed to retain the least profitable parts of the fish traffic whilst letting the bulk hauls go. Subsequently, its intransigence was partly the cause of the ill-feeling between the railway and the fish trade so evident in the summer of 1964. Certainly, the case of Hull contradicts Jack Simmons's suggestion that the shift from rail to road 'was managed so as to reduce possible antagonism and avoid dispute.'<sup>141</sup> Nor, evidently, were plans to establish a Freightliner service for fish in the late 1960s well handled. To some extent the diversion of fish traffic to the roads was probably inevitable, given its greater flexibility and unquestioned advantage over shorter distances, which the LNER had tacitly acknowledged as early as 1930. Even so, it is hard to escape the conclusion that British Rail was not a particularly adept negotiator in this case.

However, the fish trade was not easy to negotiate with, primarily because it was fragmented, small-scale, and the structure which had emerged in the nineteenth century tended to set parts of the industry against one another. As the British Transport Commission complained in the early 1950s, it possessed no body capable of negotiating on a national basis. It was divided between several ports, all of them to an extent in competition with one another, and even within each port a mass of conflicting interests made negotiations difficult. In Hull, the fish merchants' Association, which provided the nearest thing to a port-wide body for the railway to negotiate with, noted with regret that the industry 'spoke with far too many separate voices.'<sup>142</sup> It faced problems on two key fronts. Firstly, there was the increasing prominence of larger business interests that stood apart from it, which served to reduce its influence. Secondly there was the indiscipline of its own members, not least in pledging support to the Association road scheme and then withdrawing,

undermining the venture. However, failings on the part of the Association's directors also played a part. Their attempt to maintain branch-line rail services along established lines was unrealistic, although understandable in view of many members' dependence upon them. Moreover, when the transport issue assumed crisis proportions in the mid-1960s, they dithered over introducing their road scheme. Had they taken the risk early in 1964 it might have worked, but in playing for time they lost the support of many of their members, and by the time a decision was forced upon them the scheme was unviable.

The diversion of fish traffic from rail to road, then, was the product of three linked factors. Food supply and distribution as a whole was changing in ways that did not favour the fish trade as it stood in the mid-twentieth century. The transport situation was changing as road haulage became cheaper and faster and the railways lost traffic, leading British Rail to adopt a more businesslike attitude to what remained and a greater willingness to shed that which could not be made to pay. Finally, the fishing industry was stagnating, clinging to technologies and marketing methods that were fast becoming outmoded. Something of this conservatism and resistance to change can be seen in the Association's attempts to retain transport arrangements that were clearly unsustainable. In this respect, Jeremy Tunstall's scathing 1968 critique of the 'antiquated' fishing industry does not seem unjustified.<sup>143</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Quarmby, D.A., 'Developments in the Retail Market,' 75-87.
- <sup>2</sup> See for example Holdsworth, *Deep-Sea Fishing and Fishing Boats*, 12; Aflalo, *The Sea Fishing Industry of England and Wales*, 83; Robinson, 'Evolution of Railway Fish Traffic Policies,' Robinson, *Trawling*, Chapter 3.
- <sup>3</sup> At present, the records are uncatalogued. Individual entries will therefore be referenced as Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association (hereafter HFMPA), organisation (if other than the Association directors' minutes), and date.
- <sup>4</sup> *Annual Statements of Navigation and Shipping*. These figures include first-class vessels of all types, not just trawlers.
- <sup>5</sup> Garstang, 'The Impoverishment of the Sea.'
- <sup>6</sup> See Gerrish, 'Following the Fish,' 112-8.
- <sup>7</sup> *Annual Statements of Navigation and Shipping*; Bellamy, 'Pioneers of the Hull Trawl Fishing Industry,' 186-7.
- <sup>8</sup> Calculated from *Sea Fisheries Statistics of the United Kingdom*.
- <sup>9</sup> Taylor, R.A, *Economics of White Fish Distribution*, 63.
- <sup>10</sup> Robinson, 'Evolution of Railway Fish Traffic Policies,' 41; Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 47-52.
- <sup>11</sup> Casson, 'The Theory of Vertical Integration,' 32.
- <sup>12</sup> Kelsall *et al*, 'The White Fish Industry,' 138.
- <sup>13</sup> Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 37.
- <sup>14</sup> Wilcox, 'Concentration or Disintegration?' 62; Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 36-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Kelsall *et al*, 'The White Fish Industry,' 123.
- <sup>16</sup> Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 38 & 44.
- <sup>17</sup> Casson, 'Institutional Economics and Business History,' 162; Lanzalaco, 'Business Interest Associations,' 295.
- <sup>18</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 24 Jan 1890.
- <sup>19</sup> Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 40.
- <sup>20</sup> *Sea Fisheries Statistics of the United Kingdom*, 1900.
- <sup>21</sup> Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country*, 205-6; Hoole, 'Introduction,' vii.
- <sup>22</sup> HFMPA Minutes, see 8 Jul 1891, 4 May 1892, 19 Apr 1893.
- <sup>23</sup> Barker and Gerhold, *Rise and Rise of Road Transport*, 81; Armstrong and Bagwell, 'Coastal Shipping,' 174.
- <sup>24</sup> Barker and Gerhold, *Rise and Rise of Road Transport*, 85.
- <sup>25</sup> Dyos and Aldcroft, *British Transport*, 396-7; Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770*, 219-20.
- <sup>26</sup> Bagwell, *Transport Revolution*, 223 & 267; Bonavia, *Four Great Railways*, 126-7.
- <sup>27</sup> Barker and Gerhold, *Rise and Rise of Road Transport*, 92.
- <sup>28</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 7 Nov 1930.
- <sup>29</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 14, 21 May 1931.
- <sup>30</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 27 May, 6 Jun 1930.
- <sup>31</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 7 Nov 1930.
- <sup>32</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 27 Feb 1931.
- <sup>33</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 20, 21 Aug, 4 Sept, 30 Oct 1931.
- <sup>34</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 25 Sept 1931.
- <sup>35</sup> The National Archives (TNA), RAIL 390/1757, Purchase of Motor Vehicles from Willey Bros, 1933; HFMPA Minutes, 1 Jul 1932.
- <sup>36</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 27 Jul 1932.
- <sup>37</sup> TNA, RAIL 390/1757, Purchase of Motor Vehicles from Willey Bros, 1933.
- <sup>38</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 10 Nov 1932.
- <sup>39</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 21 Dec 1932.
- <sup>40</sup> TNA, RAIL 390/1757, Purchase of Motor Vehicles from Willey Bros, 1933.
- <sup>41</sup> Bonavia, *History of the LNER*, vol. 2, 91.
- <sup>42</sup> Bonavia, *History of the LNER*, vol. 1, 49.
- <sup>43</sup> TNA, RAIL 390/2013. LNER North-East Area Goods Manager's Annual Report, 1932.
- <sup>44</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Jul 1932; Bonavia, *History of the LNER*, vol. 1, 48.
- <sup>45</sup> Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 14-20.
- <sup>46</sup> Robinson, *Trawling*, 151.
- <sup>47</sup> Sea Fish Commission, *White Fish Industry*, 38-40.
- <sup>48</sup> Robinson, *Trawling*, 150-5; Wilcox, 'Concentration or Disintegration?' 65-6; Cutting, *Fish Saving*, 266.

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- <sup>49</sup> Robinson, *Trawling*, 186-8; HFMPA Directors' Annual Report 1949.
- <sup>50</sup> See Gourvish, T.R., *British Railways 1948-73*, Chapter 2; Bonavia, *Nationalisation of British Transport*.
- <sup>51</sup> Bagwell, *Transport Revolution*, 306, 331-3.
- <sup>52</sup> Cutting, *Fish Saving*, 309.
- <sup>53</sup> Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food*, 174.
- <sup>54</sup> Imperial Economic Committee, *Marketing and Processing*, 36.
- <sup>55</sup> Geroski and Vlassopoulos, 'Rise and Fall of a Market Leader,' 468-71.
- <sup>56</sup> Reader, *Fifty years of Unilever*, 52.
- <sup>57</sup> Glasfurd, 'The "Northern Fleet" at Fleetwood,' 119-39.
- <sup>58</sup> Monopolies Commission, *Ross Group Limited and Associated Fisheries Limited*, see chapters 3-4.
- <sup>59</sup> Geroski and Vlassopoulos, 'Rise and Fall of a Market Leader,' 472-4.
- <sup>60</sup> Reid, 'From Trawler to Table,' 158-9.
- <sup>61</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of meeting between the British Transport Commission and Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association, 28 Jul 1953.
- <sup>62</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Memorandum on Transport of Fish by Road.
- <sup>63</sup> Savage, *An Economic History of Transport*, 177-9; Bagwell and Lyth, *Transport in Britain 1750-2000*, 133.
- <sup>64</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association and representatives of the British Transport Commission, 28 Jul 1953.
- <sup>65</sup> HFMPA Statement of Agreed Charges for Fish by Passenger Train, 21 Aug 1950.
- <sup>66</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Jun 1953.
- <sup>67</sup> Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 188-9; TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Report on Transport of Fish by Road, August 1952.
- <sup>68</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 19 Aug 1953.
- <sup>69</sup> Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 79; HFMPA Minutes, 24 Jul, 19, 24 Aug 1953; TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association and representatives of the British Transport Commission, 28 Jul 1953.
- <sup>70</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 19, 24 Aug 1953; TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association and representatives of the British Transport Commission, 28 Jul 1953.
- <sup>71</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fishing Vessel Owners' Association and representatives of the Railway executive and Docks and Inland Waterways executives, 24 Aug 1953.
- <sup>72</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Report on Transport of Fish by Road, August 1952.
- <sup>73</sup> HFMPA Minutes, Meeting between BTC, HFMPA and Grimsby Fish Merchants' Association, 27 Dec 1951; TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Report on Transport of Fish by Road, August 1952; letter from White Fish Authority to Lord Hurcomb, 22 Jul 1953; BTC Memorandum on Transport of Fish by Road, 10 Jul 1953.
- <sup>74</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Dec 1959, 11 Jan, 24 Jul 1963. Twenty years later, when the WFA was being wound up, the Association noted that it had 'consistently opposed' its existence: see HFMPA Minutes, 25 Nov 1981.
- <sup>75</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Memorandum on Transport of Fish by Road, 10 Jul 1953.
- <sup>76</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Report on Transport of Fish by Road, August 1952.
- <sup>77</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Report on Transport of Fish by Road, August 1952.
- <sup>78</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Oct 1952.
- <sup>79</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Memorandum on Transport of Fish by Road, 10 Jul 1953.
- <sup>80</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, BTC Memorandum on Transport of Fish by Road, 10 Jul 1953; see Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 179, for an explanation of the bulking scheme.
- <sup>81</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Jun, 19 Aug 1953; TNA, AN 13/2244, Memorandum of Discussion in the Royal Station Hotel, Hull, 19 Aug 1953.
- <sup>82</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Jun 1953.
- <sup>83</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Ian Class to Lord Hurcomb, 3 Jul 1953.
- <sup>84</sup> Thór, *British Trawlers and Iceland*, 166-70.
- <sup>85</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 14, 24 Aug 1953.
- <sup>86</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 19, 24 Aug 1953; TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association and representatives of the British Transport Commission, 28 Jul 1953; Notes of a Meeting held at Railway Executive, 17 Aug 1953; Memorandum of Discussion in the Royal Station Hotel, Hull, 19 Aug 1953; Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fishing Vessel Owners'

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Association and representatives of the Railway executive and Docks and Inland Waterways executives, 24 Aug 1953.

<sup>87</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 16 Oct 1953.

<sup>88</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 13 Nov 1953.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 178-83.

<sup>90</sup> TNA, AN 8/19, Report on Freight Traffic Policy, 1958, 57-9.

<sup>91</sup> Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 186.

<sup>92</sup> TNA, AN 8/19, Report on Freight Traffic Policy, 1958, 59.

<sup>93</sup> Gourvish, *British Railways 1948-73*, 192-4.

<sup>94</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 24 May, 21 Jun 1955.

<sup>95</sup> HFMPA, Federation of British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Associations meeting with BTC, 18 Oct 1955.

<sup>96</sup> North, 'Development of the Humber region,' 428-30.

<sup>97</sup> <http://www.motorwayarchive.ihtservices.co.uk/m62goolouse.htm>, accessed 28 Jan 2011.

<sup>98</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Minutes of a meeting between Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association and representatives of the British Transport Commission, 28 Jul 1953.

<sup>99</sup> Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 177; Butcher, *From Steam to Stone*, 111.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, *White Fish Distribution*, 185-6.

<sup>101</sup> Gourvish, *British Railways 1948-73*, 203-13, 255, 303-4.

<sup>102</sup> Reid, 'From Trawler to Table,' 159-64.

<sup>103</sup> Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food*, 186; Chaloner, 'Trends in Fish Consumption,' 84.

<sup>104</sup> Robinson, *Trawling*, 212-9.

<sup>105</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 24 Jul 1963, 11 Jul 1967.

<sup>106</sup> Monopolies Commission, *Ross Group Limited and Associated Fisheries Limited*, 12.

<sup>107</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 29 Mar 1960, 7, 19 Apr 1961.

<sup>108</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 11 Jan 1963.

<sup>109</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 5 Apr, 10 Sept 1963.

<sup>110</sup> Gourvish, *British Railways 1947-73*, 330.

<sup>111</sup> Gourvish, *British Railways 1947-73*, 322-30; Bonavia, *British Rail: The First 25 Years*, 116-7; Freeman Allen, *British Rail After Beeching*, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Freeman Allen, *British Rail After Beeching*, 27-8.

<sup>113</sup> HFMPA, Federation of British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Associations meeting with representatives of the British Railways Board, 1 Oct 1963.

<sup>114</sup> HFMPA, Federation of British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Associations meeting with representatives of the British Railways Board, 1 Oct 1963; Federation of British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Associations meeting, 24 Jan 1964.

<sup>115</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 22 Oct 1963.

<sup>116</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 29 Nov 1963.

<sup>117</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 27 Dec 1963, 30 Jan, 11, 20 Mar 1964.

<sup>118</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 20 Mar 1964.

<sup>119</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 21 May, 10 Jul, 6 Oct 1964.

<sup>120</sup> Gourvish, *British Railways 1947-73*, 326-8; personal communication with David Butcher, who recalls Shirley being involved with the operation of the fish trains, although he does not appear to have taken part in negotiations with the trade.

<sup>121</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 3, 16, 22 Apr, 22 Jul 1964.

<sup>122</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 28 Apr, 22 Jul 1964.

<sup>123</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 4 Sept 1964.

<sup>124</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 21 May, 4, 9 14, Sept 1964.

<sup>125</sup> TNA, AN 13/2244, Report on Transport of Fish by Road, August 1952; HFMPA Minutes, 7 Sept 1964.

<sup>126</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 4, 7, 9, 14, 21 Sept 1964.

<sup>127</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 9 Oct 1964.

<sup>128</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 29 Oct 1964.

<sup>129</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 13 Nov 1964.

<sup>130</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 24 Nov 1964.

<sup>131</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 7 Dec 1964.

<sup>132</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 7 Dec 1964, 12 Mar 1965; HFMPA, List of Daily Road Delivery Services, 1 Feb 1965.

<sup>133</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 14 May 1965, 24 Jan 1966, 26 Jul 1968.

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<sup>134</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 18 Oct 1968.

<sup>135</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 13 Apr, 15 Jun 1966.

<sup>136</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 3 Nov 1964; Butcher, *From Steam to Stone*, 111.

<sup>137</sup> TNA, AN 115/222, Hull-London Freightliner Fish Traffic. Memo to Eastern Region General Manager, 19 Aug 1966, Meeting with HFMPA, 14 Mar 1967; HFMPA Minutes, 30 May, 15 Aug 1967.

<sup>138</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 11 Jul 1967.

<sup>139</sup> TNA, AN 115/222, Hull-London Freightliner Fish Traffic, Memos to Freightliner General Manager, 15, 30 Oct 1968.

<sup>140</sup> Simmons, 'Fish Traffic,' 163.

<sup>141</sup> Simmons, 'Fish Traffic,' 163.

<sup>142</sup> HFMPA Minutes, 24 Jul 1963.

<sup>143</sup> Tunstall, *An Antiquated Industry*; Robinson, *Trawling*, 246-7.



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