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‘Let’s make a good job of it and stay in business’: the British distant-water trawler fleet and the coastal mackerel fishery, 1975–1985

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ABSTRACT

The historiography of British distant-water fishing concentrates on the period prior to 1976 and the third ‘Cod War’ that saw British trawlers excluded from their principal fishing grounds. Little research has hitherto been done on the period afterwards, during which the industry was obliged to prosecute a variety of fisheries, mostly in home waters, on a seasonal basis. This article partially fills that gap by examining its participation in the coastal mackerel fishery, which during the late 1970s and early 1980s offered the most promising opportunity to keep the fleet employed. However, it forced upon trawler firms a different pattern of operations and required participation for the first time in the burgeoning international market for fish. Despite the difficulties of adapting to this new form of fishing, the mackerel fishery kept the distant-water fleet in business until overfishing, tightening restrictions on catches and the finalisation of the Common Fisheries Policy drove a further wave of contraction in the industry during the early 1980s.

KEYWORDS

Fisheries; trawling; Cod Wars; globalisation; diversification; adaptation

This article seeks to fill a lacuna in the literature on British fishing. For all that a great deal has been written about the decline of the distant-water fishing industry, most of this focuses on the Cod Wars of the 1950s and 1970s, and the consequent loss of access to its principal fishing grounds around Iceland.[1] Even works that are broader in scope tend to treat the conclusion of the Third Cod War in 1976 as an end point, and few have looked at the evolution of the industry beyond it.[2] It is thus all too easy to conclude, and widely believed, that with the expulsion of British trawlers from Icelandic waters the trawler firms simply took the decommissioning payments on offer and ceased operations, and ‘the fish docks at … the principal ports fell silent’.[3] Yet this was not the case. At the end of the 1970s there were still five large trawler firms on the Humber, deploying 47 distant-water vessels, among which were 31

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modern freezer-trawlers, the newest only five years old.[4] Far from simply walking away in 1976, these firms fought hard to remain in business, navigating a precarious economic and political climate to exploit what opportunities were available and keep their vessels occupied.[5]

Among these opportunities was the coastal mackerel fishery, in which all of the surviving distant-water firms engaged, and which saved some from bankruptcy, at least for a few years. Mackerel fishing was a very different endeavour to the Arctic demersal fishery that had previously been their core business. It required a new pattern of operations, the deployment of previous unfamiliar technologies, and engagement for the first time with the developing global market for fish, which was then increasing rapidly in importance. Approximately 25% of global production entered international trade in the early 1970s, a figure that had increased to 37% by 2012.[6] Yet although fish is now one of the most traded food commodities, the existing literature concentrates on the global supply chain in the present day and its development has been little historicised.[7] This article is thus a case study of the emergence of an international fish supply chain, albeit at a time when the developed world was a net exporter of fish rather than the net importer it is now.[8] It is also a case study in the development of fisheries governance, because the spike in mackerel catches, to which the British distant-water fleet contributed strongly, resulted in some of the first attempts in Britain at introducing the licensing and quota arrangements that govern sea fishing to the present day. The distant-water fleet thus served as a catalyst for the development of controls on sea fisheries that have since become standard British and European practice.

Drawing on the archives of trawler firms and government departments, as well as the trade press, this article is organised in four sections. The first surveys the British mackerel fishery at the start of the 'attack' by the distant-water fleet.[9] The second looks at the catching operation, and the practicalities of deploying the distant-water fleet in a fishery for which it had not been designed and where its arrival was not welcomed. The third examines the marketing of the catch, a business far more complex and often riskier than selling the demersal species the fleet had previously caught. The final part places the mackerel fishery in the context of contemporary European and British fisheries policy and traces the introduction of the controls to manage the fishery.

The mackerel fishery to 1976

Mackerel is a migratory, shoaling fish, caught on a seasonal basis in locations that, over the long run, change due to variations in sea temperature.[10] During the 1970s and '80s, the fishery was conducted in the North Sea during the late summer, in the autumn in the Minch and off north and west Scotland, and from November to March off south-western England.[11]

British catchers have targeted mackerel for centuries, using the old technologies of drift nets and, in the south-west, ground seines to take shoals close

inshore, though from the 1960s these were supplanted by hand-lines.[12] However, until the mid-1970s, the quantities caught were relatively small, because the market for mackerel in the British Isles was limited. Despite the perception that it was a food of the poor, surveys during the 1970s found evidence of consumption by higher social classes, but it was not widespread anywhere. Many consumers did not consider it an option, nor did some retailers stock the fish. Its strong smell and flavour, the presence of small bones and, in some quarters, a perception it was potentially poisonous deterred consumption of fresh mackerel. Consequently, such mackerel as was consumed was largely in processed form, either as smoked fillets or pâté.[13] Nor was there a significant export market. As a result, mackerel commanded low prices, fetching £36 per tonne in 1960 compared to an average of £63 per tonne for all species.[14] Prices did rise slightly as exports from the south-west became easier after Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, but demand nevertheless remained low, and there was little attempt to expand the fishery.[15]

However, from the late 1960s a series of changes served to increase interest in catching mackerel. On the supply side, it could substitute for herring, the overfishing of which and consequent catching restrictions encouraged diversion onto mackerel. Moreover, as concerns over the sustainability of fisheries increased, so did awareness that mackerel represented one of only a few large fish populations in British waters that was not subject to heavy fishing pressure, especially as shoals began to overwinter closer inshore off the south-west peninsula.[16] On the demand side, there was growing interest in 'industrial' fishing for reduction to meal, which previously had been made from offal and fish condemned as unfit for human consumption, and for which mackerel seemed suitable.[17] The development of the purse seine net, introduced initially in Norway but which subsequently spread to Scotland, represented a new highly efficient method of catching pelagic species and satisfying this demand, as Norwegian 'pursers' demonstrated on both herring and mackerel stocks in the North Sea before restrictions imposed by the Norwegian government, and subsequently the ban on fishing for herring in 1977, curbed their activities.[18]

Perhaps the most important factor, however, was the arrival of factory trawlers from the Eastern Bloc. Soviet economists had argued in the 1950s that protein could be obtained more cheaply from fish than meat, on which basis heavy investment had been made in distant-water fishing, such that by 1975, 400 of the world's 900 factory trawlers belonged to the USSR and more to its satellite states.[19] Their operations were global in scope, but 40 were reported to be working in the North Sea and off the south-west in autumn 1976, an incursion bitterly resented by Cornish hand-lining interests, who complained of unsustainably high catches and dumping of dead fish in large quantities, which was thought to drive away the shoals.[20] The declaration of a European Exclusive Economic Zone from 1 January 1977 brought their depredations to

an end, but they were followed by an equally unpopular influx of Scottish pursers, driven largely by the ban on North Sea herring fishing. There were also the first exploratory trips by British distant-water trawlers, whose combined landings in 1975 exceeded those of the Cornish hand-line fleet for the first time. By 1978 hand-liners were taking less than 10% of the national mackerel catch.[21]

Meanwhile, the distant-water fishing industry, by then based only at the Humber ports of Hull and Grimsby, was entering a critical phase in which its very existence was threatened. This was driven partly by the energy crisis of the mid-1970s, which rendered that proportion of the fleet driven by oil-burning steam engines, approximately half of the non-freezer side-trawling fleet, unviable. It was also driven by the 'chaotic jungle' of the developing global fish market, in which they were uncut by imports of subsidised frozen fish.[22] The most visible threat, however, was to their staple fishing grounds. Access to Icelandic waters was lost altogether in December 1976, and by early 1977 the fleet was limited to Norwegian waters and a small area of the White Sea, trips to formerly lucrative Greenland and Newfoundland waters having proved unprofitable in the face of overfishing and tightening restrictions.[23] Encouraged by the White Fish Authority, the industry did attempt to seek out viable opportunities in the south Atlantic, especially off the coast of West Africa, but these had yielded little by the time the third Cod War reached its conclusion. Unlike the fleets of some other European countries, the British fishing industry did not expand its operations outside the North Atlantic to any significant extent.

Since the nineteenth century, the British fishing industry, like others, had responded to declining opportunities in near waters by exploiting more distant grounds, but that was no longer an option and, instead, the fleet had to be deployed on whatever opportunities were available nearer to home. This tipped much of the European distant-water sector into sharp contraction. Germany, the other state directly affected by the Cod Wars, saw its 'high seas' fleet drop from 108 vessels in 1970 to 56 a decade later, while the British distant-water fleet declined still more sharply, its fleet falling from 161 to 47 trawlers over the same period.[24] The surviving firms were pitched into an economy of makeshifts, scratching a living from occasional distant-water trips and what opportunities were available in home waters; North Sea herring (when permitted), haddock fishing off Rockall and, between October and February, the mackerel fishery.[25] A few fresh-fish side trawlers were deployed on the latter, but primarily it occupied the fleet of freezer-trawlers, in which heavy investment had been made since the early 1960s.

Their involvement started tentatively, with a couple of vessels sent on an experimental basis in 1975, but within a few years it had come to employ much of the fleet. In autumn 1978, 20 of the 34 freezer-trawlers then based on the Humber were reported to be heading for the south-west, while two

years later the entire 26-strong freezer fleet was licensed for mackerel fishing, though not all were active at any one time.[26] Thereafter, the number of trawlers employed dwindled, as licensing restrictions slowly drove them out of the fishery and many were decommissioned by their owners, two of which sold off their catching interests and one of which went into receivership during the early 1980s. This left only two distant-water firms active by the time their involvement in mackerel fishing ceased.

Catching mackerel

The arrival of the trawlers and pursers on the mackerel fishery created a dramatic expansion in mackerel catches, as Table 1 shows.

Coupled with declining catches of the previous staples, cod and herring, by 1978 this made mackerel the species caught in the greatest quantities by the British fleet.[27] These figures do not tell the full story, however, because until 1977 transhipments into other vessels at sea (of which more below) were not included in the landing figures. Moreover, these figures include all sectors of the British industry and the figures for frozen-at-sea mackerel dramatically understate the contribution of the distant-water fleet, because a substantial proportion of their catch was transhipped wet and subsequently frozen in the receiving vessel, a process referred to as 'klondyking', or it was landed or exported unfrozen. Surviving figures are scattered and fragmentary, but in April 1979 the UK exported 6,431 tonnes of frozen mackerel and 7,982 fresh, and in the same month of 1980, 4,908 and 3,742 tonnes respectively.[28] These figures are probably broadly typical, suggesting that the distant-water fleet's involvement accounted for approximately half of the spike in catches during the late 1970s. It should be remembered that these figures only cover British vessels, and not those of the Eastern Bloc or Dutch trawlers which, like the Scottish vessels, entered the fishery primarily as a diversion from herring fishing.[29]

Table 1. Mackerel landings by UK vessels, 1974–86.

	Mackerel landed by UK vessels (tonnes)	Mackerel frozen at sea by UK vessels (landings, tonnes)
1974	30,126	58
1975	48,378	603
1976	87,098	4,895
1977	186,765	18,204
1978	320,960	45,938
1979	353,454	62,026
1980	253,100	40,717
1981	197,232	11,875
1982	185,666	6,639
1983	175,475	3,446
1984	186,329	1
1985	174,223	60
1986	132,099	695

Source: UK sea fisheries statistical tables, 1974–86.

'Mackerelling' was a completely different operation from bottom trawling on the Arctic grounds, to the extent that some trawlermen drew a distinction between it and the 'fishing' with which they were familiar.[30] It was an operation for which distant-water trawlers had not been designed and were not ideally suited. Their gear required extensive adaptation for pelagic trawling at a cost of up to £150,000 per vessel, and those still prosecuting demersal species outside the mackerel season then required further costly refits.[31] Their freezing capacity of 25–30 tonnes per day was insufficient to cope with the quantities caught. Even when expensive modifications increased it to 40–60 tonnes this compared badly with the vessels deployed by the Dutch, which were capable of freezing 120 tonnes per day.[32] Where the freezing plant could keep up, crew inexperience and haste led to disputes over damaged or inadequate packaging, and the inclusion of undersized fish.[33] To keep within their freezing capacity and avoid bursting their nets, trawlers had to make tows of only a few minutes' duration, rather than the hours to which they were accustomed, and try only to clip the edges of the shoals, which was not easy as their fish-finding gear was unsuitable for locating them. Some also handled poorly, to the point that one firm remarked that one of its own vessels 'does not make … a very stable or safe fishing platform'.[34] Moreover, inshore operations in unfamiliar waters were inherently risky, and led to the grounding and loss of the Grimsby-registered trawler *Conqueror* in December 1977.[35] This was the only serious accident, however, and on the whole the fleet successfully managed the transition to this novel form of fishing.

The catches were processed in various ways. In the first years of the fishery some mackerel was consigned directly to fishmeal plants, some of the Hull firms' early involvement, and that of some purse-seiners, having been driven by demand from Denmark for fish suitable for reduction.[36] 'Industrial fishing' was proscribed from 1977, however, after which only fish unfit for human consumption was 'mealed'. Over the winter of 1979–80 this accounted for about 1.5% of the freezers' catches, as opposed to 7.4% of total British landings.[37] Some mackerel was landed fresh in European ports. The overwhelming majority, however, was either frozen aboard, wrapped in plastic and cartoned for export before transhipment into refrigerated cargo ships, or it was klondyked. Many of the receiving vessels for klondyked fish were from behind the Iron Curtain. The Hull firm of J. Marr and Son was reckoned to be supplying five Soviet 'reefers' during the Minch season in 1981, while after their exclusion from active fishing some Eastern Bloc trawlers were repurposed as static freezing plants. In January 1978 it was estimated that they received over 2,000 tons of mackerel a month from British catchers.[38] A small proportion of klondyked fish was also exported fresh (Table 2).[39]

Transhipment took place in a variety of locations, again marking a very different pattern of operations for firms and crews accustomed to returning to their home ports at the end of each trip. Some transhipments took place on the Humber, but the majority were in ports in the south and west, such

Table 2. Export destinations for mackerel, 1978–79.

	1978		1979	
Fresh and chilled	Tonnes	£/tonne	Tonnes	£/tonne
France	16,802	118	12,766	138
USSR	15,053	93	103,432	86
East Germany	15,937	100	26,748	91
Poland	11,528	100	12,615	91
Bulgaria	10,044	100	8,180	91
Nigeria	4,230	89	22,469	83
Others	6,357	125	5,851	140
Frozen: whole/headless				
France	1,260	155	2,479	195
Italy	1,431	140	1,411	137
Yugoslavia	812	153	1,093	237
Liberia	–	–	1,200	180
Ivory Coast	–	–	3,217	180
Nigeria	49,621	173	52,121	174
Others	51,226	144	4,475	305

Source: HHC, Hellyer Papers, British Fishing Federation: UK mackerel exports by country of consignment.
Note: These figures cover only January–November of each year.
Note 2: It is probable that much of the fresh/chilled mackerel supplied to the USSR and East Germany was klondyked and subsequently frozen.

as Falmouth and Milford Haven, and in western Scotland. Facilities at some of these ports were inadequate, and time and effort were expended on reconnoitring suitable locations, while labour disputes and port congestion frequently slowed the operation.[40] Nor could the presence of receiving ships be guaranteed when needed. Hellyer Bros,[41] Boston Deep Sea Fisheries and Boyd Line estimated that during the 1978–79 season they had operated a third below capacity because of delays in transhipment, while in 1981–82 the same three firms found themselves fighting a $20,000 claim for demurrage charges because of the diversion of one reefer from its agreed transhipment point.[42]

Meanwhile, with purse-seiners, trawlers and, in the south-west, the Cornish hand-lining fleet all prosecuting the fishery, conflicts were inevitable, especially in the early years when different interests lacked familiarity with one another's operating methods. Hand-liners claimed that the 'blaze' of deck lights from trawlers frightened away the fish, that their nets broke up the shoals, that the large quantities of fish they discarded poisoned the grounds, and that they would destroy the fishery for all. For many Cornish catchers, a photograph published in 1978 showing a Hull trawler towing right past the local fleet seemed to sum up the unfairness and potential danger of the situation, and led to vigorous complaints.[43] Meanwhile, the behaviour of crews on shore did not always serve to defuse tensions, and *Fishing News* remarked on how the 1976–77 season in the south-west had witnessed 'a wake of drunken behaviour that will long be remembered locally' and three deaths attributed to excessive drinking.[44] At times, relations on the ground both in the south-west and Scotland were felt to be potentially 'explosive', while meetings at management level 'produced a lot of hot air, most of it blowing in the direction' of the distant-water firms, although in the south-west the Scottish seiners were no better regarded than the trawlers.[45]

Marketing mackerel

The mackerel fishery was export oriented. Despite attempts by the White Fish Authority to promote mackerel to consumers there was little increase in domestic consumption.[46] It was thus overseas markets, not home demand, that drove the doubling of the price of mackerel shown in Figure 1, and it was this which attracted the distant-water firms into the fishery.

There were three main areas in which mackerel was in high demand. The first was western Europe, which took primarily unfrozen fish and tended to take smaller quantities but pay the highest prices. The second was the Soviet Union and its satellite states, which had constituted the prime export market for British-caught herring prior to the Russian Revolution and which only now re-emerged as a major export destination.[47] The third and newest was western Africa, especially Nigeria, although later Egypt and Tunisia also emerged as potential markets. So did Iran, although the quantities exported were small. Precise export figures are unobtainable, because official statistics of the period do not distinguish mackerel from other pelagic species, or consistently identify individual countries. However, surviving figures generated by industry bodies such as the British Fishing Federation, which represented the distant-water fleet, show the principal countries involved.

All of the distant-water trawler firms' core business had historically consisted of bringing back unfrozen fish to sell into the wholesale markets of the Humber. However, this began to change from the late 1950s, as the largest processors

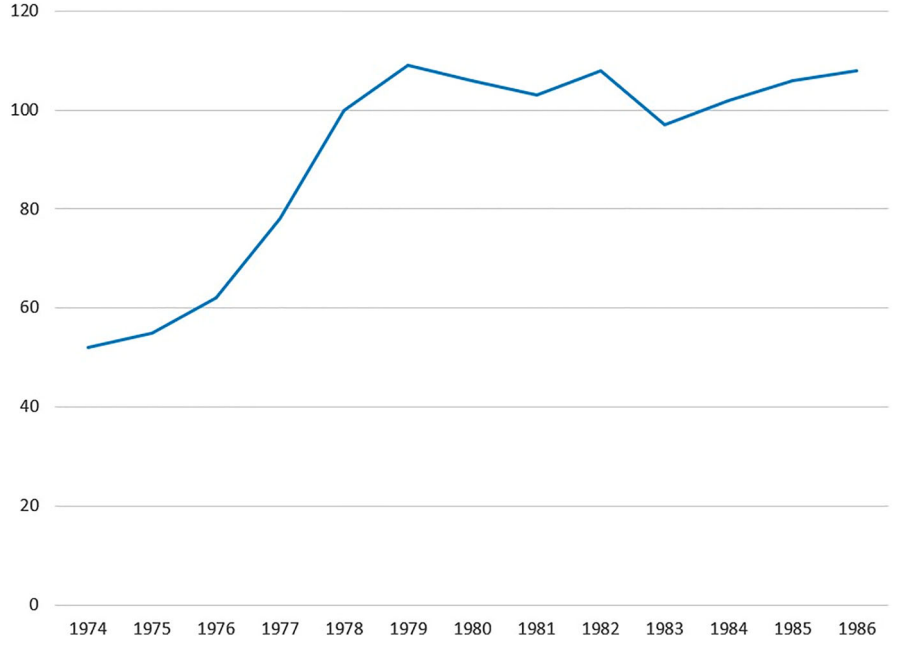

Figure 1. UK wholesale mackerel price, 1974–86. Source: See Table 1.

began to bypass the wholesale market and purchase fish on contract direct from the catchers.[48] During the 1960s the trawler firms found themselves in competition with imported frozen fish, as the proportion of global catches traded internationally began to increase.[49] Nevertheless, active participation in the export market for mackerel was a new departure. Three of the Humber firms – Boston Deep Sea Fisheries, Hellyer Bros and Boyd Line – formed the parallel Fresh and Frozen Mackerel Consortia to present a joint front to buyers, while the other two operated alone. Thomas Hamling and Co. at times co-operated with the consortium and sold through the same channels. The final firm, J. Marr and Son, did likewise, but also co-operated closely with Eastern Bloc interests, sometimes to the concern of the other firms involved, who feared what they nicknamed a 'Sovie-Marr' arrangement which would corner the market east of the Iron Curtain.[50]

With the exception of klondyking operations, marketing mackerel internationally entailed working through intermediary firms. The prominence of such actors in the international fish trade was increasing, at a time of growing disparities between what national fleets in the developed world were still able to catch and what their home markets demanded, and in which seafoods were increasingly sourced on a global scale.[51] Figure 2 depicts in simplified form the complex trading arrangements that the mackerel fishery entailed and serves to highlight the centrality of such firms to the operation. Some appear to have been established commodity trading firms that moved into fish broking as opportunity arose, such as the New York-based Atalanta Corporation.[52] Others, such as Lagos-based logistics and distribution firm Primlaks, were newcomers.[53]

The most important player, from the British trawler firms' point of view, was the Canpex Corporation, which both the consortium firms and Thomas Hamling and Co. dealt with consistently throughout their involvement in the

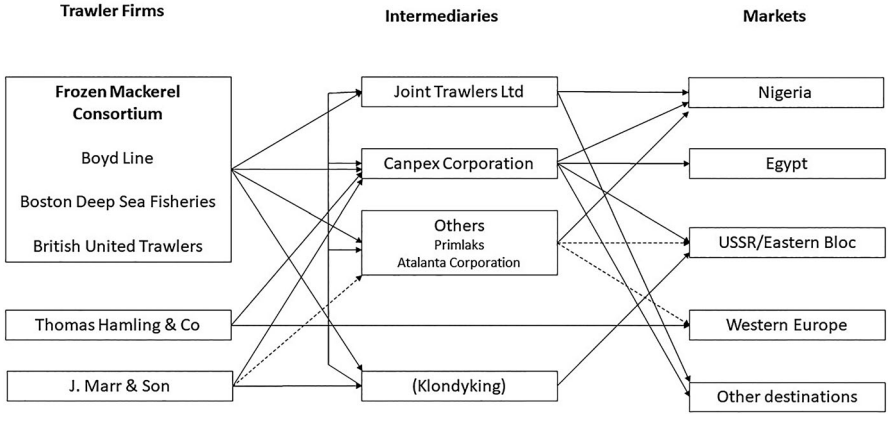

Figure 2. Export arrangements for frozen mackerel, *c.* 1980.
Note: Dotted lines represent probable export flows.

fishery. Canpex was based in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and focused much of its business on exploiting the Canary Islands' proximity to the ports and rich fishing grounds of West Africa, the advantages of Las Palmas as a centre for operations in these waters, and probably also the presence of Soviet buyers in the city.[54] Supplying the Nigerian market seems to have been its most consistent activity at this time, though references are also made to actual or attempted deals in Argentina and Iran, in the latter of which it tried to interest the Humber firms since it was potentially a market for Rockall haddock.[55] Nothing seems to have resulted from this, though the consortium did sell haddock to Canpex for other destinations. In general, the trawler firms seem to have regarded Canpex, a small operation in which all decisions appear to have been made by the Mahtani brothers who ran it, with a measure of suspicion. At various times they remarked with frustration on the Mahtanis' tendency to overpromise, the difficulty of pinning them down to an agreement, and their lack of a sufficient office staff.[56] However, much as their records give the impression that they regarded the firm as faintly disreputable, it was far too well connected to the Nigerian market to bypass. Indeed, when in 1980 Canpex emerged as the only probable buyer of mackerel for the coming season, one trawler firm director remarked that 'although no-one wants all their eggs in one basket, T. Mahtani's track record is such that I would be prepared to risk it'.[57]

A better-established firm, but evidently a more difficult trading partner, was Joint Trawlers Ltd. This was a Swedish company with subsidiaries in Britain and North America, which specialised in dealing across the Iron Curtain, and by 1980 was buying fish from British, Soviet and East German vessels to sell into African markets, although it was also taking Alaskan cod to an increasingly cod-deficient Europe. It was also involved in obtaining licences to access third countries' waters for vessels under contract to supply it.[58] Joint Trawlers' approach to dealing with the catching firms was conspicuously aggressive. On at least one occasion it made complaints against the consortium for supplying fish unfit for human consumption, an allegation disproved via an inspection by port health authorities at the consortium's expense, and it pursued them hard for compensation for delays. It was equally aggressive in advocating, when catch quotas were reduced for the 1980–81 season, that the catchers 'tell the Government to go to Hell' and ignore the restrictions, which was hardly realistic.[59] At one point Neil Parkes, managing director of Boston Deep Sea Fisheries, wrote that 'if relationships are going to continue in this vein, then I personally see little point in entering into a contract with you for future supplies'.[60] However, as with Canpex, Joint Trawlers was too important an intermediary to bypass, and Boston, along with its consortium partners, signed a contract for 5,000 tonnes the same day.[61]

Further complications arose with the administration of contracts. In particular, there was the question of how they should be denominated, as actors sought to use the currency most advantageous to them in the post-Bretton Woods

world of floating exchange rates. Early contracts were usually denominated in sterling, but as North Sea oil and then the monetary policies of the first Thatcher government drove up the value of the pound, contracts began to be denominated in US dollars.[62] Volatile exchange rates at times held up the annual contract negotiations as buyers waited to see how they would move before agreeing on a final contract price.[63]

It is not possible on the strength of the available figures to calculate the profitability of the mackerel fishery, but such figures as do survive suggest that it was marginal. Hellyer Bros estimated in October 1979 that the Minch fishery, in which their eight freezers were then active, had yielded a loss of £92,000, but this overall figure concealed a wide variation in results from individual vessels and trips. During September of that year, for example, their *Norse* was reckoned to have been catching fish worth an average of £4,600 per day, which was well over their estimated break-even point for the vessel, and that trip realised a profit after depreciation and overheads of nearly £19,000. Conversely, during the following month a trip by *Invincible* resulted in a loss of £19,900.[64] Clearly, not all seasons can have been as unprofitable as the 1979 Minch season was to Hellyer Bros, and scattered voyage accounts for the 1980 south-west season and for fishing in the Minch in 1983 suggest that many trips then did realise a profit. Nevertheless, the economics of the fishery overall were shaky, and central to the operation were the rebates that exporters were able to claim until 1983 from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund.[65] In 1979–80, these were equivalent to £37.37 per tonne, at a time when the average price obtained for exports to Nigeria was £174 per tonne. When the European Commission sought to reduce these rates by a fifth during 1980, Boston Deep Sea Fisheries observed that 'the Export Refund … is the only way available to us to make a profit'.[66] Certainly, the sums involved were substantial: between October 1979 and July 1980, Thomas Hamling and Co. claimed £403,215.91 in rebates.[67] To claim the rebate, however, proof of importation was needed, and obtaining this was not always easy. As one firm involved in processing the payments put it in a letter to Thomas Hamling and Co.: 'I realise that it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain evidence from Nigeria of importation due to the difficulties involved with the Nigerian Authorities'.[68] Canpex, to which the beleaguered trawler firm also complained and which as importer was responsible for obtaining the documents in the first place, responded pithily that 'we do not command the Nigeria customs'.[69] The payments do invariably seem to have been made, but only after lengthy delays that caused concern to trawler companies whose financial position was, in some cases, precarious.

Exposure to the global fish market kept the distant-water trawler firms in business, offering a profitable – if only by dint of the rebate – means of employing their vessels at a time when few other opportunities were available. However, it also exposed them to new risks. Delays in payment and exchange

rate difficulties were manageable, but the aftershocks of the second oil crisis of 1979 led to much more serious threats. Initially, the spike in oil prices led to a major flow of funds into Nigeria, for which petroleum products accounted for over 90% of export earnings.[70] The economic uplift this engendered perhaps helped to support the strong demand there for mackerel in the peak years of the fishery. However, the collapse in oil prices during 1981–82 tipped its economy into severe recession and spelled disaster for its government's finances. Total revenues collected fell by nearly a third between 1980 and 1982, and its deficit on current account trebled. By April 1982 Nigeria had scarcely reserves enough to pay for a month's imports, and in that month 'draconian' stabilisation measures were introduced. In addition to stringent austerity measures these included bans or restrictions by licence on a wide range of imports, higher tariffs and pre-shipment inspection of a series of commodities, including frozen fish.[71]

The response of Hellyer Bros was probably typical. Pointing out that much higher quality control standards would be imposed, it instructed crews to discard all unfrozen fish that had been out of the water for 18 hours or longer and restated previous instructions on the temperatures and packaging of frozen fish, backing this up with the threat of disciplinary action. As its operations manager wrote in September 1982:

> Whether we like it or not the commercial world is getting harder every year, more and more firms are going bankrupt, and we do not intend to be one of them, it is only with the utmost attention to the quality of the package we are attempting to sell can we hope to keep going … We have 15,000MT of Mackerel to catch by Christmas. Let's make a good job of it, and stay in business.[72]

If Hellyers' position was precarious, that of Thomas Hamling and Co. was critical. During 1980–81 the firm had repeatedly pressed for rebate payments, making clear that these were an essential support to its cash position. This deteriorated further during the following year, and in January 1983 delays in payment from Nigeria tipped the company into insolvency.[73] Thomas Hamling and Co. was the only distant-water firm bankrupted during this period, but the contraction of one of the main export markets clearly damaged the position of all firms involved in the mackerel fishery. Coupled with the controls and political uncertainties explored in the next section, it contributed to a further sharp decline in the distant-water fleet during the early 1980s.

Licensing fishing

The mackerel boom coincided with, and contributed to, a period of profound change in fisheries policy, of which North Atlantic fisheries were at the forefront. The global expansion of fishing capacity post-1945 and 'ruthless' exploitation placed unprecedented pressure on fish stocks worldwide, leading to a

process of territorialisation of the seas via declarations of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), in which states claimed the right to control activity.[74] The 1970s saw a rapid expansion of this process, and in some cases a 'domino effect' in which states responded to the establishment of EEZs elsewhere by declaring their own to deter influxes of displaced vessels. At the same time, states, often via intergovernmental Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, such as the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), sought to curtail fishing effort via the introduction of then-novel output controls. These came in the form of Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for individual species, divided into quotas for participants in the fishery. They were unsuccessful, because the TACs agreed between contracting states were set at too high a level to effect a significant reduction in fishing effort, because methods for determining and allocating quotas were rudimentary, and because enforcement was weak or non-existent.[75] As a result, many participants in the British fishing industry in the mid-1970s felt that output controls were not an effective way of regulating fishing effort.[76] Nevertheless, from 1976 they were pioneered in the mackerel fishery, and by the early 1980s had assumed in key respects the form they retain to the present day.

It was, of course, territorialisation, in the form of Iceland's declaration of a 200-mile EEZ in 1976, that excluded the British distant-water fleet from its most important fishing grounds and triggered a search for alternative employment opportunities. Territorialisation also facilitated their entry into the mackerel fishery, because from January 1977 Britain, in conjunction with other EEC member states, declared its own EEZ, excluding the Eastern Bloc trawlers. It did not, however, exclude those of other member states, because although the conservation components of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) were still to be determined, the principle of non-discrimination between states was already in place.[77] The distant-water fleet's early participation in the fishery thus took place in something of a policy vacuum, because although the European EEZ reserved the relevant fishing grounds for member states, the failure to agree on Europe-wide conservation measures left exploitation by them unchecked.[78] It also took place against the backdrop of intensive and sometimes acrimonious negotiations over what form the Common Fisheries Policy should take, and thereby in a climate of uncertainty over what opportunities would be available in future.[79] This persisted until the adoption by the European Commission of the finalised conservation measures in January 1983.[80]

In the meantime, the entry of the distant-water fleet, Scottish pursers and Dutch trawlers rendered mackerel vulnerable to massive overexploitation. How serious this could be was unknown. It was known that the mackerel stocks were large, but little research had been conducted on a fishery in which there had been relatively little commercial interest. Lack of knowledge hindered the development of policy towards the fishery, while the likelihood that any quota regime introduced under the aegis of the Common Fisheries

Policy would be based upon historic fishing performance incentivised the government to allow easy access to the fishery for British catchers.[81] However, as alarm mounted about the level of exploitation, the British government found itself 'increasingly obliged to impose restraint' on the catching effort.[82] From October 1976 it was able to act unilaterally because, pending final agreement of the Common Fisheries Policy, member states were permitted to impose conservation measures in their own EEZs provided the principle of non-discrimination was respected.[83] In practice this meant that the British government sought to create a fisheries regime that did not discriminate on paper but 'will hit our Common Market partners more than ourselves', although most of this applied to demersal fisheries and there was little that could be done for the mackerel fishery that would not hamper British catchers as much as the Dutch.[84] Moreover, government also faced the classic dilemma of balancing competing domestic interests, in this case the heavily capitalised distant-water trawler firms and purser operators and the small-scale hand-liners. This came at a time when the declining fortunes of the former, previously the only part of the fishing industry with significant political influence, were creating space for the latter to assert their interests more strongly.

Prior to the introduction of an effective quota system, civil servants simply 'blew the whistle' in some areas when catches were deemed too high, while, as noted above, 'industrial' fishing was banned in 1977. Area restrictions were also applied, in the form of form of bans on mackerel fishing within six miles of the coast by vessels over 60 feet in length, and subsequently, in 1979, a 4,000-square-mile 'mackerel box' off the south-west. This was similar to the 'pout box' already marked out in the northern North Sea, although in this instance it aimed to protect the target species rather than those taken as bycatch.[85] Mackerel fishing was also banned off north-western Scotland.[86] Area controls and limitations of the fishing season such as this had already been imposed on the North Sea fishery.[87]

The real innovation in regulating the fishery, however, came in the form of licensing restrictions introduced from 1977. Licences as a means of restraining capacity had previously been deployed in some Asian and African fisheries.[88] In Britain the legal basis for licensing had been established in 1967 and had been deployed in the North Sea herring fishery in 1974 as a means of instituting a ban on fishing for herring. In the case of the mackerel fishery it, and concomitant reporting of catches by licensed vessels, were deployed initially as a measure to monitor effort. However, as the level of effort expended grew and concerns about overexploitation became increasingly serious, the government's focus shifted from monitoring the fishery to controlling it.[89] Licences were initially issued on request to all vessels prosecuting the fishery, but in December 1979 a restrictive scheme was announced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. This was rescinded the following month, but thereafter licences were not issued to purse seiners or trawlers entering the fishery for the first time.

Moreover, vessels that were to be used as receiving ships for klondykers, as some of the distant-water trawlers were on occasion, had to surrender their licences with no guarantee that these would be returned.[90] This amounted to the first attempt to reduce the participation of large vessels in the fishery. Conversely, from November 1978 the smallest vessels, those under 40 feet in length, no longer required a licence.

Alongside licensing came quotas, which quickly developed into the main means of managing down the catching effort in a way that had not been attempted before. Quotas were not regarded with much favour in the distant-water sector because of the failure of the NEAFC regime, and some felt that they would only be a stopgap until 'limitation of capacity through a restrictive licensing regime, backed by more severe and effectively applied conservation measures' could be implemented.[91] All accepted, however, at least in public, that overcapacity in the fishery was a problem that needed to be addressed, and that in the short run there was no alternative to some form of output control.

The quota regime in its early years was highly provisional and the basis for calculating quotas changed several times, as the Ministry gained experience and in response to feedback, and often complaints, from the industry. Quotas were initially set on a tons-per-man basis, allowing all participants to catch 3.5 tonnes per crewman per day, a formula which 'patently ignored both capital inputs and relative efficiency'.[92] This was the basis on which the 1977–78 season was conducted, but in November 1978 a new system was introduced under which quotas were put on a weekly basis and calculated by vessel length. This persisted through the 1978–79 and most of 1979–80 seasons, although the quotas were repeatedly cut in an attempt to reduce catch levels. Weekly quotas did not suit the operating patterns of the distant-water fleet, and from August 1980 they were given the option of a fixed quota of 1,200 tonnes for the season. The following spring these were put on a sectoral basis, with the freezer sector as a whole allocated 37,000 tonnes to divide between themselves.[93]

Charles Cann, the civil servant who led the Ministry's attempts to regulate the fishery, portrayed this as a significant concession to the needs of the freezer fleet.[94] However, the general thrust of the quota system was to disadvantage the larger operators, for which quota reductions were invariably more severe than they were for small vessels. When in December 1980 the Ministry announced that the weekly quotas were to be reduced across the board by 70 tonnes a week, to the level then prevailing for the smaller vessels, he 'made no bones of the fact that this was designed to make mackerel fishing uneconomic for all vessels save the small boats'.[95] Similarly, although the sectoral quota was welcomed, it represented only 53% of distant water vessels' total catches for the previous season, and substantially less than this for the most productive of them. As managing director of Boyd Line, Thomas Boyd, put it:

> Surely to God you are not expecting any other section of the industry to accept such a cut as we all know how disastrous our recorded earnings, through lack of fishing opportunities, have been … Your present offer is, without a doubt, highly discriminatory and can only result in companies having sufficient fish for less than one freezer in four. If we have to write off the additional three vessels you will annihilate the freezer trawler industry and push the companies into bankruptcy.[96]

Mackerel had been the principal means of compensating for the 'lack of fishing opportunities' to which Boyd pointed. It had been a lifeline for the struggling fleet but was now being slowly withdrawn, and partly as a result the Boyd Line fleet was laid up for two-thirds of possible operating days in 1980–81, as opposed to 26.3% two years earlier.[97]

Restrictions were tightened further during 1982 and 1983, although the sectoral quota arrangements remained in place, while in 1984 mackerel was designated one of the 'pressure stocks' subject to heavy fishing, and the issue of licences was restricted to vessels which could demonstrate historic performance in the fishery. However, by then it was becoming irrelevant. The announcement of revised CFP proposals in the summer of 1982, in a form close to those finally adopted the following year, was greeted with dismay by the distant-water sector. The British Fishing Federation concluded that the proposals contained insufficient opportunities to catch demersal fish to support more than five or six freezer trawlers. The mackerel fishery was no longer a solution, because of tightening restrictions on large trawlers and because unsustainable catch rates, especially by Dutch vessels, would leave it 'commercially and biologically ruined'.[98] It was therefore imperative that they press home the case they were already making for decommissioning payments. By then Boston Deep Sea Fisheries was losing money rapidly and winding down its catching operations, while Hellyers' parent company, Associated Fisheries, decided in the wake of the CFP settlement to dispose of its distant-water catching interests. Both firms' fleets were sold off during 1984–86.[99]

With the bankruptcy of Thomas Hamling and Co., this left just two distant-water trawler firms operating, both of which diversified much of their operations out of the catching sector, and into fishing vessel management and marine survey work. In the case of J. Marr and Son, one of its principal moves was into the global fish market that it had been forced to confront in the previous decade. The seafoods division of Andrew Marr International, into which the firm was reorganised in 1986, continues to trade globally in mackerel, but now largely caught in African waters and the Pacific.[100] Meanwhile the mackerel fishery, like other commercial stocks, continues to be governed by a system of licences and quotas which resembles a further developed version of the licences and quotas introduced to manage it in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The mackerel fishery was far from the only source of experience upon which those who produced the 1983 Common Fisheries Policy settlement drew upon, but it was certainly influential, and informed the development of a

regime that continues to govern fishing in European waters and the post-Brexit British Exclusive Economic Zone to this day.

Conclusion

The distant-water move into the mackerel fishery is significant in three respects. Firstly, it was the principal means by which the British distant-water fishery managed to weather the storms which broke over it during the 1970s. The fleet continued to decline throughout the 1977–1983 period, but most of this was accounted for by the withdrawal of side trawlers, and the mackerel fishery kept most of the modern freezer-trawler fleet in business until tighter output controls, the aftershocks of the second oil crisis and then the CFP settlement drove a further wave of contraction. Nevertheless, the mackerel fishery saved the distant-water sector from a sharper and even more painful decline after the loss of Icelandic and other traditional hunting grounds.

It also represented the first foray into the international market by an industry whose business model was built upon catching fish to bring to its home ports. For all that the British fishing industry has been criticised for its conservatism and resistance to change, the fact is that the five companies which prosecuted the mackerel fishery – at that time the largest and most influential players in the industry – did so successfully, until factors beyond their control forced the end of their involvement. In the case of one of the firms that survived the final collapse in the early 1980s, it was the foundation on which they built a new business model based not on traditional trawler operations but on vessel management and international fish trading.

Finally, the mackerel fishery is significant as a case study in the development and evolution of an international fish supply chain. Aspects of it in the early 1970s and early 1980s were somewhat ramshackle, but nevertheless, within a few years a functioning system had emerged. Such developments were affecting fisheries worldwide at the time, and further research into their development is urgently needed.

Notes

1. See, for example, Thór, *British trawlers and Iceland*; Jóhannesson, *Troubled waters*.
2. See, for example, Robinson, *Trawling*.
3. See Wilcox, *Fishing and fishermen*, 128.
4. Thompson, *Hull and Grimsby stern trawling fleet*, 127; UK Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables 1979. 'Distant water' in this context refers to vessels over 140 feet in length.
5. Byrne, *Beyond Trawlertown*, 146.
6. Bellman, Tipping, and Sumaili, 'Global trade in fish', 181.
7. One notable exception is Holm, 'Global fish market'.
8. Wilkinson, 'Fish': 140–2.
9. Fishing News, 24 June 1977.

10. Jansen and Gislason, 'Temperature affects'.
11. Whitmarsh and Young, 'UK mackerel fisheries': 221–2.
12. Ibid., 222–3.
13. White Fish Authority, 'Mackerel research'; White Fish Authority, 'Mackerel promotion exercise'.
14. 'Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Fishing Industry' (hereafter 'Fleck Report'), BPP, 27 (1960–1), 20.
15. 'Fifth report from the Expenditure Committee: the fishing industry, vol. 2, minutes of evidence', BPP, 356-III (1977–9), q. 2,237.
16. Whitmarsh and Young, 'UK mackerel fisheries': 223–4.
17. 'Fleck Report', 30; Coull, *Fisheries of Europe*, 108,
18. Henderson and Drummond, *Purse seiners*, 13; *Fishing News*, 9 January 1976; Sea Fish Industry Authority, 'Importance of klondyking'.
19. Yányshev-Nésterova, 'Soviet big business'; Wilcox, 'Beyond the North Atlantic', 311–2.
20. 'Fifth report from the Expenditure Committee: the fishing industry, vol. 1, *BPP*, 356-III (1977–9), 17; Lockwood, *Mackerel*, 132.
21. Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: Directorate of Fisheries Research, 'Mackerel research', 2; Lockwood, *Mackerel*, 122.
22. HHC, C DBTH/20/40, British Trawler Federation Directors' annual report, year ending 31 October 1968; HHC, Hellyer papers, Fishing Industry Joint Committee papers, 1984. (Archival sources listed as 'Hellyer Papers are part of a separate collection to the official Hellyer Bros archive in C DBHB and are currently uncatalogued.)
23. *Fishing News*, 18 and 25 March 1977.
24. Folsom, Rovinsky, and Weidner, *World fishing fleets*, 82; UK Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1970 and 1980.
25. Sea Fish Industry Authority, 'Hull fish industry', 10–11.
26. *Fishing News*, 29 September 1978; C DBTH/20/130, Fish Producers Organisation memorandum, 18 December 1980; UK Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1980.
27. UK Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1977.
28. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, Fish Producers Organisation: UK mackerel exports by country of consignment, April 1979–April 1980.
29. Folsom, Rovinsky, and Weidner, *World fishing fleets*, 119–20; Loomeijer, 'Between Brussels and the biologists', 59–65.
30. Byrne, *Beyond Trawlertown*, 110.
31. *Fishing News*, 16 September 1977.
32. Sea Fish Industry Authority, 'Hull fish industry', 10.
33. HHC, Hellyer papers, survey of mackerel frozen on vessels based in Falmouth, December 1980; 'Mackerel season 1982/83', September 1982.
34. HHC, Hellyer papers, '*Orsino* – report on two trips during mackerel fishing', 13 March 1976.
35. Thompson, *Hull and Grimsby stern trawling fleet*, 30–1
36. *Fishing News*, 14 October 1977.
37. HHC, Hellyer papers, memo: Fish Producers Organisation to members, 7 March 1980.
38. *Fishing News*, 1 January 1978.
39. Ibid., 5 August, 23 December 1977.
40. HHC, Hellyer papers, report of visits to Stornoway, Lyness and Scapa Flow, 2 October 1980; Boyd Line to HM Customs and Excise, Stornoway, 15 September 1980.
41. Hellyer Brothers was a component of British United Trawlers, itself part of the Associated Fisheries group. However, it maintained the separate identity by which it is referred to here.

42. HHC, Hellyer papers, Boston Deep Sea Fisheries to Joint Trawlers Ltd, 24 February 1982.
43. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, note of an informal meeting between SFF, SFO and BFF regarding safety of navigation, etc. in the Minch, 21 August 1979.
44. *Fishing News*, 11 April 1977.
45. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, note of an informal meeting between SFF, SFO and BFF regarding safety of navigation, etc. in the Minch, 21 August 1979.
46. Wilcox, 'A record of abortive enquiries and empty of achievement?'.
47. Reid, 'From boom to bust', 191–3.
48. Fleck report, 61.
49. Iudicello, Weber and Weiland, *Fish, markets and fishermen*, 14.
50. HHC, Hellyer papers, notes of meeting with Canpex Ltd, 26 October 1981.
51. HHC, C DBTH/54/5, brochure for Joint Trawlers Ltd, n.d., but c. 1978.
52. Atalanta Corporation, 'Our story', https://www.atalantacorp.com/our-story.php (accessed 15 January 2022).
53. Primlaks, 'History', https://www.primlaks.com/origins_history.php (accessed 15 January 2022).
54. HHC, Hellyer papers, report on Visit to Las Palmas, July 1980; Yányshev-Nésterova, 'Soviet big business': 7.
55. HHC, Hellyer papers, notes of meeting with Parso Mahtani, Canpex Ltd, 15 April 1981.
56. HHC, Hellyer papers, notes of meetings with Canpex Ltd, Las Palmas, 13–16 May 1980.
57. HHC, Hellyer papers, 'Salient points from frozen mackerel meeting – Bostons – 5 August 1980'.
58. *Australian Fisheries*, October 1981; Mackovjak, *Alaska codfish chronicle*, 260; HHC, Hellyer papers, minutes of meeting between Frozen Mackerel Consortium and Joint Trawlers Ltd, 26 August 1980.
59. HHC, Hellyer papers, notes of mackerel meeting between Wet and Frozen Mackerel Consortiums and Joint Trawlers, 28 May 1980.
60. HHC, Hellyer apers, telex: Boston Deep Sea Fisheries to Joint Trawlers Ltd, 12 October 1981.
61. HHC, Hellyer papers, contract between Frozen Mackerel Consortium and Joint Trawlers Ltd, 12 October 1981.
62. HHC, Hellyer papers, Fishing Industry Joint Committee papers, 1984.
63. HHC, Hellyer papers, notes of meeting at Chesterfield Hotel, London, 2 July 1981.
64. HHC, Hellyer papers, Minch mackerel season: profit and loss to date, 21 October 1979; voyage accounts for *Norse* (11 September–1 October 1979) and *Invincible* (21 September–26 October 1979).
65. Holden, *Common Fisheries Policy*, 18.
66. HHC, Hellyer papers, Boston Deep Sea Fisheries to Robert Battersby, MEP, 17 July 1980.
67. HHC, C DBTH/6/21/21/3 undated memorandum listing claims for export rebate; C DBTH/21/21/1–2, telex: Thomas Hamling and Co. to Canpex, 4 January 1980.
68. HHC, C DBTH/6/21/21/3, Gillespie Bros and Co. to Thomas Hamling and Co., 22 July 1980.
69. HHC, C DBTH/6/21/21/3, telex: Canpex to Thomas Hamling and Co., 19 August 1980.
70. Pinto, 'Nigeria during and after the oil boom': 421.
71. Owosekun, 'Stabilization measures in Nigeria': 208–12.

72. HHC, Hellyer Papers, 'Mackerel season 1982/83', September 1982.
73. Sea Fish Industry Authority, 'Hull fish industry', 8; HHC, C DBTH/2/1/7, Thomas Hamling and Co. to National Westminster Bank, 10 January 1983.
74. Holm, 'Global fish market'.
75. Driscoll and McKellar, 'North Sea fisheries', 131–6.
76. HHC, U DMR/59, 'Fishing into the 80s: a discussion document', April 1978.
77. Holden, *Common Fisheries Policy*, 19, 35.
78. White Fish Authority, Annual report.
79. *Fishing News*, 16 July 1976.
80. Holden, *Common Fisheries Policy*, 55.
81. Whitmarsh and Young, 'UK mackerel fisheries': 229.
82. HHC, C DBTH/20/76, British Fishing Federation Directors' minutes, 27 December 1978.
83. Driscoll and McKellar, 'North Sea fisheries', 145.
84. HHC, C DBTH/20/71, British Fishing Federation Directors' minutes, 13 January 1977.
85. Bigné, Nielsen, and Bastardie, 'North Sea pout box,' 136–8.
86. Whitmarsh and Young, 'UK mackerel fisheries': 234–5; *Fishing News*, 27 October 1978; Sea Fish Industry Authority, 'Importance of klondyking'.
87. Underdal, *International fisheries management*, chapter 5.
88. Gulland, *Management of marine fisheries*, 132–3.
89. Whitmarsh and Young, 'UK mackerel fisheries': 226.
90. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, Fish Producers Organisation: memo from chairman to principals of freezer companies, 28 August 1980.
91. HHC, C DBTH/20/76, British Fishing Federation Directors' minutes, 27 December 1978.
92. Ibid.
93. Whitmarsh and Young, 'UK mackerel fisheries': 234–6.
94. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, C.R. Cann to T.W. Boyd, 29 December 1980.
95. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, memo: Fish Producer Organisation to members, 2 December 1980.
96. HHC, C DBTH/20/130, T.W. Boyd to C.R. Cann, 19 December 1980.
97. HHC, Hellyer Papers. Fishing Industry Joint Committee papers, 1984.
98. HHC, C DBTH/20/82, British Fishing Federation Directors' minutes, 13 July 1982.
99. Thompson, *Hull and Grimsby stern trawling fleet*, 20, 52; Byrne, 'After the trawl', 146.
100. J. Marr, 'Fish', https://marsea.co.uk/fish (accessed 6 February 2022).

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