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**David Atkinson: Whaling (Vignette).**

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## Whaling

Stimulated by a government bounty designed to encourage the outset of whaling ventures, Hull whaling ships sailed north to Arctic waters from the 1750s onwards. The business grew rapidly, and by 1822, at the peak of the British whaling industry, Hull stood alone as the country's most successful whaling port in a lucrative global business. Over 60 whalers sailed from the city, and a substantial whale processing industry developed on the banks of the River Hull.

The whalers hunted the Greenland Black or Bowhead whale: commonly called the 'right whale' because they were slow, passive and profitable, and hence the 'right' species to catch. Whale products were increasingly vital to the emerging consumer capitalism of industrialising Britain. Blubber oil was used for lighting and cooking, for processing leather and fabrics, as soap, as an industrial lubricant and for many other commercial applications. It was highly valuable. 'Whalebone' (baleen - the membranes in the whale's mouth that strains food from seawater) was used to make brushes, nets, upholstery and corsets; it sometimes realised ten times the profit of blubber oil. Other whale products provided base materials for medicines and perfumes and were still more prized.

Whales therefore yielded a host of commodities, the trade in which enriched Hull. This business further fuelled the local economy by stimulating shipowning and seafaring, rewarding the initiative of merchant families and companies, and boosting the city's industrial sector. Less salubrious aspects of the trade included the blubber yards that developed along the River Hull to the north of the Old Town. Whale carcasses were processed initially aboard returning ships, the procedure being concluded in port where the blubber was boiled in the yards until it reduced into oil. In Hull, as elsewhere, these were called 'Greenland yards' after the Greenland Black whales and the 'Greenlanders' (whalers) who hunted them. Ancillary and connected industries, like paint manufacturing, also began to cluster around these noxious yards. Given its importance, the industry was supported by government subsidies and tariffs on imported whale products. A government 'bounty' was also payable to whaling ships that met certain criteria (including having medical cover on board). This bounty helped to ensure whale oil supplies for the British market; guaranteed against fluctuations in catches; and sustained a ready pool of hardy, experienced sailors for naval service in wartime.

The whaling industry declined in the mid-nineteenth century, however. The emergence of gas lighting (in preference to smokier oil lamps) and alternatives to blubber oil and baleen began to undermine the market for whale products in the 1830s. Government bounties had

ceased in 1820 and whale populations were diminished by the frenzied hunting of previous years. As a result, whaling became a more marginal business, and although Hull held on as the last major British whaling port, the final whalers sailed in the late 1860s.

Whaling bequeathed significant legacies for the city. The Greenland yards evolved alternative functions including oil-seed crushing and oil processing. Other traces of this former world-leading industry are found in Hull Maritime Museum, which hosts a whaling gallery and a world-class collection of scrimshaw—the decorative carving of whale tusks and bones that seafarers produced in their spare time. Few would support commercial whaling today, but for eighteenth-century Hull, it brought wealth, employment and prestige.

**David Atkinson**