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**Martin Wilcox: William Papper (Vignette).**

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### William Papper Vignette

The murder of fourteen-year-old William Papper shocked the nation. Papper had been apprenticed to trawler owner and skipper Osmond Otto Brand in 1881. At first Brand had seemed to treat him well, but shortly before they sailed in the *Rising Sun* in December Papper apparently made some remark hinting at an affair between his sister and Brand. 'I'll pay you when we get out,' Brand responded. That evening he beat Papper as they lay at anchor, and once at sea subjected him to a fortnight of starvation and gross physical abuse, until he was so disfigured Brand feared to take him back to Hull. He died that day, and his body was thrown overboard in the early hours of New Year's Day 1882. Brand threatened the rest of the crew into silence and reported on arrival in Hull that Papper had been knocked overboard by the foresail. Such accidents were commonplace, and aroused no suspicion. There the matter rested until March, until two of the crew went to the police. The trial of Brand and third hand Frederick Rycroft attracted angry crowds and the attention of national newspapers. Rycroft was convicted of common assault and received three months' hard labour, and Brand was hanged for murder at Armley Gaol, Leeds, in May 1882.

The scandal exposed a side of the fishing industry little known beyond the major fishing ports. Trawler owners in Devon had long taken apprentices, who started as cabin boys when they were young teenagers and were promoted to deckhand during their term of apprenticeship, which usually ended on their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Most were local boys and lived with their masters. They were paid only pocket money and the proceeds of small fish they were allowed to sell, but were usually well treated. This old-fashioned, paternalistic system worked well, and continued throughout the nineteenth century at smaller trawling ports. On the Humber, however, trawler owners adopted some of the practices used by early factory owners and the big London trawler owners. Large numbers of teenaged boys were recruited from workhouses and reformatories, or simply tramped to the ports and asked for work. Many were unruly, unhealthy and unsuitable, but the industry was desperately short of labour and owners only too willing to take them. Some signed their indentures with no real idea of what they were committing to. By the late 1870s about 1,200 of the 2,300 fishermen in Hull were apprentices. Many owners, some of them wealthy men with fleets of trawlers, were either unwilling or unable to accommodate them in their own homes, and instead paid them a small allowance and left them to fend for themselves.

The results were predictable. On shore apprentices tended to drift into the slums of the port towns, and acquired a reputation for heavy drinking, prostitution and brawling. At sea training was minimal and accidents common: almost one in twenty Hull and Grimsby apprentices in the 1870s died at work. Worse still, crews were paid partly by share and were under pressure to work as intensively as possible, in harsh and dangerous conditions. Some had little patience with frightened, clumsy and sometimes resentful apprentices. Bullying and petty intimidation were common; serious violence and sexual assaults not unknown. About a quarter of all apprentices absconded; many more were caught, brought back and sent to prison for breaking their indentures. Some even preferred prison to the relentless labour of the Dogger Bank fishing grounds and the cramped cabin of a sailing trawler. Although many completed their apprenticeships and went on to become skippers themselves, an apprentice had a far greater chance of drowning than owning his own boat.

The apprenticeship system had begun to decline in Hull from the late 1870s as the Hessle Road community became more established and better able to provide casual labour, and in 1880 a change

in the law had made apprehending deserters more difficult and allowed many apprentices to run away. The industry was still trying to adapt to this when the murder of William Papper hit national headlines. In response the government ordered an enquiry which fed into legislation to bring fishing and its apprenticeship system under control, but by then apprenticeship was in terminal decline and had all but disappeared from Hull by 1900, although at some other ports it survived into the 1930s.

The modern fishing industry was built on the often unwilling labour of thousands of teenage boys, without whom it could not have grown as quickly as it did. The murder of William Papper exposed the conditions they worked under, the risks they ran, and the appalling cruelty with which a few of them were treated, and changed the industry forever.