

Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 6

The Newfoundland Cod Trade

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Tudor Origins

After the discovery by John Cabot of the rich cod-banks off the coast of Newfoundland in 1497, a small number of West Country fishing boats had spent the summer months fishing there. For many years they were outnumbered by boats from Portugal, the Basque country and from Brittany but after 1583, when Sir Humphrey Gilbert claimed Newfoundland for the Crown, English ships started going out to the Banks in considerable numbers. By the early seventeenth century 10,000 sailors, many of them from Devon, were employed in the Newfoundland fisheries. The ships left in spring, carrying fishermen and supplies and returned in the autumn with their dried and salted cod, which was sold at home or in continental markets, particularly in Spain, Portugal and Italy.



*Newfoundland and the Fishing Banks in 1763
(D. Vaughan QC.)*

In Devon the towns chiefly involved were Exeter, Topsham, Dartmouth, Totnes, Torbay, Salcombe, Barnstaple, Bideford, and Appledore. Dartmouth alone sent out 70 or 80 vessels each year between 1613 and 1623, most of these going straight from the Banks to the Mediterranean.¹

Salcombe's involvement was on a much smaller scale, perhaps only one or two ships going out each year. In the early 1600s a Salcombe merchant named Gilbert Bryce entered into a

bond with another merchant from Southampton to deliver fish on the return of a ship from Newfoundland. The ship, the *Sweet Rose* of Salcombe, 40 tons, Robert Asherman master, was on a fishing voyage and was due to return directly to Salcombe.² In 1607 the English sea captain James Davis, on a voyage from Plymouth to Virginia, via the Azores, 'saw but one saile, being a ship of Salcombe bound for Newfoundland'.³

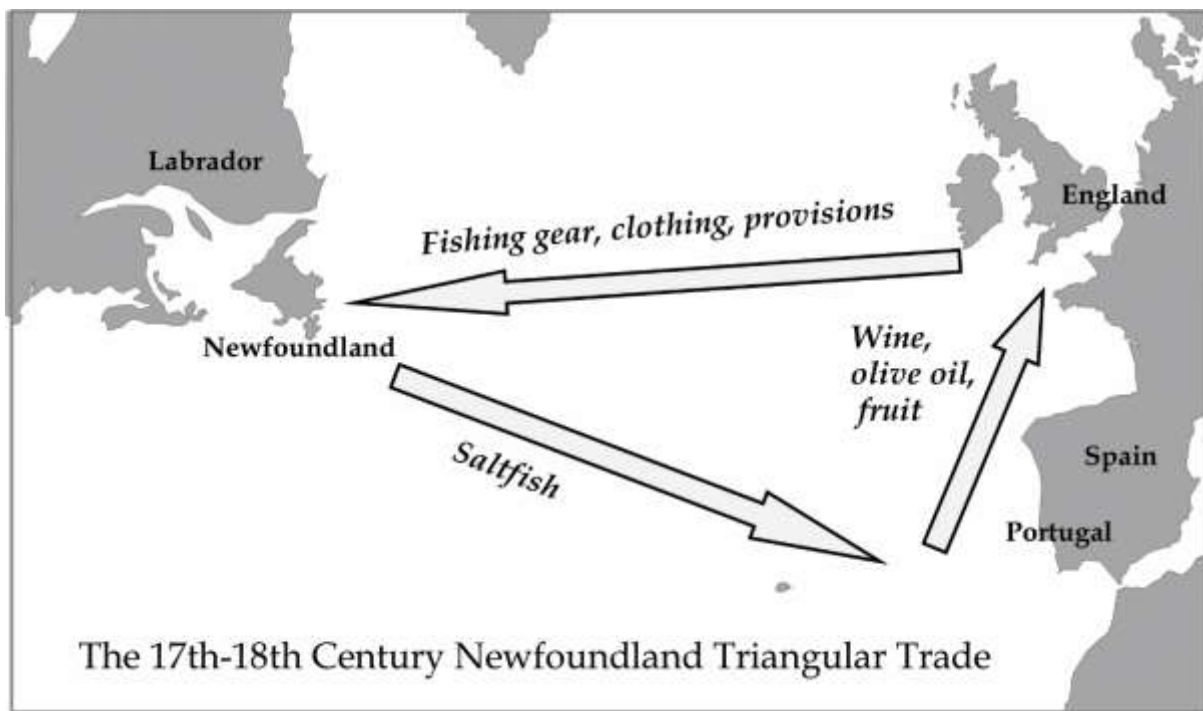
The Newfoundland Trade in the Eighteenth Century



Fishing for, drying and curing cod in Newfoundland c1717 (after Herman Moll)

Every year, since the mid-sixteenth century, except when interrupted by war, Dartmouth had sent out a fleet of 'bankers' to the cod fishing grounds off Newfoundland. By the 1680's 'Dartmouth was the leading port in the ship fishery'⁴ and it was Port of Dartmouth vessels (which included those of its sub-port, Salcombe) that were in the forefront in developing the triangular trade, with salt from the Bay of Biscay

carried out in spring and, at the end of the season, salted fish carried to the Mediterranean, Spain and Portugal, to be exchanged for oranges, dried fruit and wine for the home market. With the progressive settlement of Newfoundland, the migratory fishery gave way, from the mid-eighteenth century, to a carrying trade with ships leaving the Ports of Dartmouth, Teignmouth and Poole, each spring, laden with goods of all descriptions for the settlers.



The trade reached its height with the exclusion of the Americans at the end of the War of Independence in 1783. On 7 April 1788 the *Western Flying Post* reported that 'within the past 24 hours a fleet of nearly 50 vessels has left the port for St Johns, Newfoundland. The whole Dartmouth fleet this season will amount to a full 150 vessels.'

It is not possible to establish the number of Salcombe ships sailing with the Dartmouth fleet, as customs regulations directed that they be subsumed within the figures for the head port of Dartmouth. However, Keith Matthews in *A Who was Who in the Newfoundland Fishery 1660-1840*⁴ noted that 'some of the minor ports such as Salcombe, Brixham and Torquay sent ships directly to Newfoundland. However, Salcombe's contribution was probably quite small and in fact only two references have been found in newspaper shipping reports of ships arriving at Salcombe from Newfoundland between 1772 and 1774 – both were at the end of the year (November and December). However, more are likely to have returned to Salcombe via Mediterranean ports.

A little more information is available of the mariners from Salcombe and nearby

parishes that took part in the trade. Using Dartmouth muster rolls (crew lists) for 1770-76 and 1788, W. Gordon Handcock, in his study of the Newfoundland fishery *Soe longe as there comes noe Women*, established the place of residence, as well as other details, of all the men returning to Dartmouth following voyages to the fishery.⁶ Although the main body of the maritime labour force was raised in an area extending north from Dartmouth towards Torbay, seamen were also drawn from Salcombe and the parishes near the mouth of the Kingsbridge Estuary – Malborough, South Huish and East Portlemouth. Recruitment from these places, may have amounted to less than 5% of their total population of seamen, but it did ensure that the area maintained a close association with the Newfoundland triangular trade. This connection was to have a formative influence on the development of ship-building and ownership in the estuary in the nineteenth century.

In 1772, one local man, Robert Perriton of West Alvington, was obliged to ship himself in 'some vessel employed in the Newfoundland trade from this day until the following season', after having been found guilty of deserting his wife and family. His master was to forward 1s 6d a week to the local overseers for their upkeep.⁷

The Impact of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars 1793-1815

The long wars with France between 1793 and 1815, had a devastating impact on The Dartmouth fleet. By 1808, three-quarters of the pre-war fleet had been sunk by enemy warships⁸ and, in that year, only 30 Dartmouth ships set sail for Newfoundland.⁹ Much of the trade had been captured by Liverpool, from where the Atlantic crossing was both shorter and safer.¹⁰ By 1826, the number of Dartmouth vessels (including those belonging to Salcombe) sailing for Newfoundland had been reduced to fifteen.¹¹

With the decline in the historic triangular trade a small number of Dartmouth brigs maintained the Newfoundland connection by continuing the practice, begun in 1692, of sending port wine to mature in Newfoundland. The response from Salcombe and Brixham mariners and shipowners, however, was to develop the final and most profitable 'leg' of the trade from the Azores, Iberia and the Mediterranean to British home ports. Capitalizing on the strong trading connections built up with Spain and Portugal over many generations, they began to specialise in importing high valued fruit. With the revival of the shipping industry after the post-war depression, Salcombe and Brixham flourished in the 1830s and emerged as the leading players in the fruit trade.

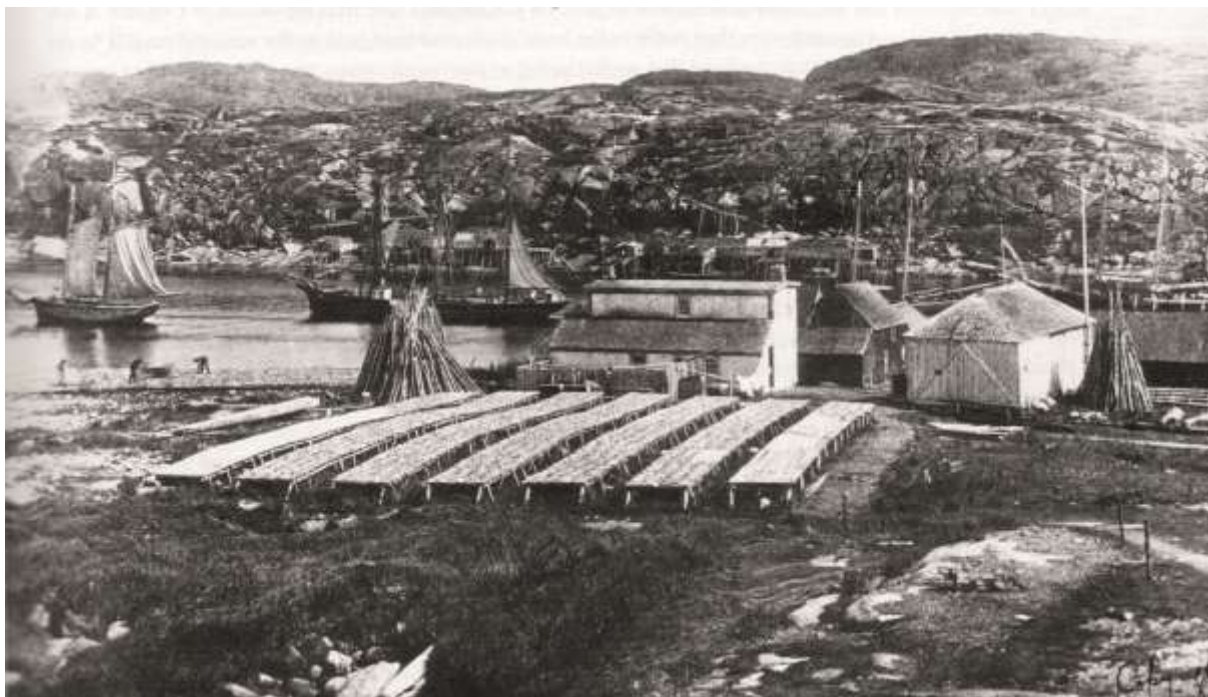
By this time the Newfoundland trade had all but died out as control of the fishery passed from West Country merchants into the hands of the Newfoundlanders themselves. A small number of Salcombe schooners, such as the *Mantura*, *Beau Ideal*,

Nerio and *Jessamine* managed to combine the Mediterranean and Azorean fruit trades with an annual voyage to Newfoundland in the 1830s and 1840s, but it was not until the 1860s that Salcombe schooners were chartered in any numbers.

The Revival of the Newfoundland Trade in the 1860s

The historic saltfish trade enjoyed a revival from the 1860s when the Newfoundland merchants, rather than using their own vessels, started chartering schooners from Salcombe, as well as from other West Country and Welsh ports.¹² The revival saw the re-emergence of the triangular trade, with schooners sailing to the Mediterranean with general cargo and loading salt for Newfoundland.

From there they sailed to Labrador to load fish and sailed back to the Mediterranean just in time for the season's new fruit for Bristol or London. As the fruit trade declined that particular leg of the round voyage was made with other cargoes and the Newfoundland and home trades between them provided the basis of the schooners' employment after 1870. By its very essence this was a small ship trade... and because of the nature of the seas to be traversed... a trade peculiarly suited to topsail schooners.¹³



*Venison Tickle, Labrador. A typical small harbour with cod drying on the flakes.
(Public archives of Newfoundland)*

Salcombe vessels gained a foothold in the revived trade by shipping out coal from Cardiff and Newport to the Mediterranean, as well as general cargoes from their other traditional home trading ports of London, Liverpool and Glasgow. From the mid-1860s, Salcombe schooners, such as *E.D.*, *Speedy*, *Elinor*, *Ernest*, *Juan*, *Marian* and *Pass By* were regularly fitting in an annual voyage on the Newfoundland run. Salcombe's involvement increased in the 1870s and the following schooners were all taking part in the seasonal round: *Daring*, *Dolores*, *Ellen*, *Isabella*, *Island Maid*, *Island Queen*, *John & Henry*, *Lady Rodney*, *Mantura*, *Mary and Elizabeth*, *Mary*, *Mary Ann*, *Queen of the South*, *Queen of the West* and *Rebecca*. Most of them spent the rest of the year sailing to their regular trading ports in the Azores, the eastern Mediterranean and the West Indies.

With the return of Salcombe vessels to Newfoundland, the trading pattern had come full circle. This time round, however, South Devon shipowners were far from being the dominant players and faced fierce competition. In Fowey, the energetic John Stephens began to concentrate on the 'Western Ocean' trade and, from 1880, his fleet, which included four schooners built by William Date of Kingsbridge, were continuously employed on the Newfoundland run. Date also built four schooners for Westcott of Plymouth between 1889 and 1894 for the Newfoundland trade. In the 1880's, Porthmadog vessels had entered the trade on a regular basis and, by 1891, Porthmadog was sending out purpose-built three masted schooners: the famous Western Ocean yachts.



*The schooner Lady St. John's built by William Date of Kingsbridge in 1898
(Kingsbridge Cookworthy Museum)*

By 1900 the only Salcombe schooner remaining in the trade was the 114 ton *Lady St. John's* built by William Date for Frederick William Hill in 1898. Basil Greenhill paid this tribute to the *Lady St John's* in *The Merchant Schooners*.

The *Lady St John's*, the last of the remarkable series of fine-hulled schooners which W Date launched at Kingsbridge in Devon in the 1890s, and the last of the United Kingdom based schooners, deserves some record of her later passages. Between 1924 and 1926 she made five easterly passages of average twenty-nine days including one from St John's to Oporto of only fourteen days. In 1927 she was twenty-seven days westward and in 1928 her three eastward passages averaged eighteen and a half days. She was lost without trace shortly after her sale to French owners in 1930. The *Lady St John's* was the last British sailing vessel in a sailing vessel trade which had continued uninterrupted for four and a half centuries.¹⁴



*The Lady St. John's at Burin, Newfoundland on her maiden voyage in 1898
(Mrs Peggy Cleave)*

Note: a more detailed account of the role of Salcombe ships in the revived Newfoundland trade is set out in the author's book *Salcombe: Schooner Port* published by the Museum in 2018.

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