

Plymouth and its fishermen before 1620

by Todd Gray

The Duke of Buckingham's survey of seafarers reveals that 3,653 men lived on the south coast of Devon in 1619. Some of these men were already familiar with the coastline where the *Mayflower* would 'accidentally' land a year later.

These men were fishermen. More than a century earlier they had established a unique network of fisheries which extended far beyond the herring fishery on the north coast and that for pilchards on the south. They were regularly fishing in the English Channel and in the North Sea by the late 1400s as well as in Ireland. In the early sixteenth century they became annual visitors to Newfoundland and from the 1590s they voyaged to the region which would later become known as New England. Fish could be smoked, pickled or salted.

This industry was migratory and the fishermen could be away from Devon for a considerable part of the year. It involved many thousands of men, principally from Devon but also from Cornwall, Dorset and Somerset. These mariners were in Massachusetts Bay for a generation before the *Mayflower* arrived in 1620. The Pilgrims understood the dynamic nature of the fishing industry and not long after their arrival begged for fish to supplement the low level of provisions in their colony.

Fishing not only provided income for working class men in Devon but the cured fish was an additional export for Devon's merchants. At this time Continental merchants regularly travelled to Devon to purchase fish and Devon men sold their fish in ports in France, Portugal, Spain and Italy. The demand for fish was increased by the number of non-meat days specified by the Roman Catholic Church.

Colonisation of the North American seaboard brought the fishermen into conflict with settlers. In both New England and Newfoundland there was a tension between the two groups. It was in the interest of permanent settlers to reserve the best fishing places for themselves but these had often been used for generations by visiting Westcountrymen. Not only were the colonists taking the land which had belonged to Indigenous Americans but they were also dislodging Devon fishermen from it.

Devon men played a considerable role in the early history of New England but this has largely been forgotten. It contrasts with the overblown association with the *Mayflower* which, as is not always recognised, was caused merely through inclement weather and the opportunistic use of Dartmouth and Plymouth as safe harbours. The meaningful contribution was made by working class men working in an ordinary industry which made a significant contribution to the Devon economy.

The survey of Devon's mariners was published by The Devon & Cornwall Record Society as *Early-Stuart Mariners and Shipping* and is available from www.stevensbooks.co.uk, sales@themintpress.co.uk and 01392 459760.

Image of 16th Century cod processing in North America

<https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Fishing-Room-narrow.jpg>