POVERTY, EXPLOITATION AND FISH?

GRIMSBY PAUPER APPRENTICES 1860-1900

John Emmerson M.A. (Cantab.)

Submitted for The Open University M.A. in History

4 January 2022

15,139 words
ABSTRACT

This study examines the reasons why apprentices, at least half of whom were pauper boys, came to provide the bulk of the Grimsby fishing labour force. It assesses the exploitative characteristics of the apprenticeships, considering the effects such exploitation and abuse had on the apprentices and examines the defence mechanisms that they adopted in response.

Some scholars maintain that apprenticeships in their traditional artisanal form became largely obsolete at the start of the nineteenth century, being replaced by a more exploitative form predicated on the provision of cheap labour. The contrary view is that the traditional form lingered alongside the newer form in non-industrialized trades. Few scholars believe pauper apprenticeships were common in the later nineteenth century.

The study concludes that pauper apprenticeships were indeed extensively used in this period in the Grimsby fishing industry. They represented an expedient means of recruiting a cheap and compliant labour force in the face of an acute manpower shortage. The guardians of the pauper boys, largely adhering to older moralistic ideas and uninfluenced by more empathetic concepts of welfare gaining currency elsewhere in society, did not exercise an active role in loco parentis. Freed from the constraints that active supervision by guardians might have imposed upon them, smack owners utilized, and manipulated, the legal controls inherent in apprenticeships to exert exploitative control over their apprentices. Exploitation often spilled over into physical and mental abuse. The abandonment and alienation that many boys felt as a result of their treatment manifested itself in criminality and degenerate behaviour, causing reputational damage to the industry.
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I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at the Open University or at any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work submitted for assessment as part of A825.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I should like to thank Dr Rachel Duffett for her guidance in the supervision of this dissertation.
INTRODUCTION

On 14 March 1882, at the age of 14, William Page from Leeds Reformatory signed indentures to begin a new life as an apprentice on the Grimsby fishing fleet. By the time he had reached 20 – still as an apprentice – he had fled countless times from his vessel, each time being apprehended and sent back to sea; served four prison terms for refusing to obey orders, a further one for drunkenness and assaulting the police and one for using obscene language in the street.¹ Starting at the earliest days of fishing at Grimsby and concluding at the point when apprentice numbers began to dwindle, this study will seek to explain why fishing smack owners adopted a system of apprentice labour to crew their vessels and how that system resulted in boys like Page being exploited, abused and driven to a life of degeneracy and crime.²

The voices of the boys themselves are almost entirely missing from the primary sources for this study. Fortunately, the Registers of Fishing Apprentices, diligently maintained at Grimsby from 1880, document regular supervisory interviews held with them, allowing something of their lives to be reconstructed and their voices briefly heard. They will be extensively referenced. The transcripts of the various inquiries by Local Government Board or Board of Trade officials that took place into the apprenticeship system in Grimsby in 1873, 1878, 1882 and 1894 will also be used. While it must be recognised that the use of such evidence can be problematic, as witnesses may tend to be circumspect in expressing their views or may be more concerned with following a line previously agreed among their peers, the main testimonies utilized here from these sources are those smack

¹ North East Lincolnshire Archives (NEL) 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1882
² ‘Boys’ and ‘lads’ will be used interchangeably to refer to the apprentices as these were the terms contemporaries invariably used when talking of them.
owners and skippers. They were blunt men seemingly without a great deal of artifice and their voices are plausibly authentic.

Turning to secondary sources, Robinson has noted that ‘it is possible to read most of the standard economic history texts and never realize that the late Victorian and early Edwardian British fishing industry was the largest and most successful the world had ever seen’. Compared with those of the factory system, the history of labour relations in fishing at this time is academically relatively unmined. It is perhaps indicative of this neglect that a historian could claim in 2014 that pauper apprenticeships died out in the early nineteenth century, when palpably they survived in rude health, not just at Grimsby, but at most other trawling ports well into the late nineteenth century. The most authoritative work on fishing labour, that of the sociologist Tunstall, concentrated on a much later period. Studies of the Victorian fishing labour force, on Grimsby’s by Boswell and Horn, and more generally by Rule and Wilcox, have concentrated on the recruitment aspects of the apprentice labour force. Wilcox has provided a useful corrective to this emphasis, pointing out that the extensive use of apprenticed labour was confined to trawl fishing and was little utilized in other types of fishing. Absent from the literature is any consideration of the role that apprentice labour played in the creation of the later fishing labour force. Should apprenticeships have led to long-term career outcomes, this could arguably be taken in mitigation of their more exploitative aspects.

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Boswell, Rule and Horn reached very different assessments of the nature of Grimsby fishing apprenticeships. Boswell primarily saw the use of apprentices as a conservative decision by owners which left the industry, to its long-term detriment, without a modern skilled labour force.\(^8\) From a Marxist standpoint, Rule saw the exploitation of the North Sea smacksmen as precursor to the creation of a fishing proletariat.\(^9\) Meanwhile, Horn saw in the apprenticeships the survival of beneficial elements more typical of the traditional artisanal type.\(^10\) This study will assess the system in the context of these different judgements.

Studies of non-fishing apprenticeships and pauper apprenticeships have concentrated on assessing how long the institutions survived and considering how exploitative they were. Lane believed that traditional artisanal and pauper apprenticeships died out at the start of the nineteenth century, to be replaced by apprenticeships that were solely intended to supply cheap factory labour.\(^11\) Honeyman and Withall have both detected evidence of the survival of pauper apprenticeships in some form into a later period, although they disagree about how exploitative they were.\(^12\) These questions also form central themes for this study. Chapter 1 examines the reasons leading to the adoption of fishing apprenticeships at Grimsby, considering the factors that drove smack owners to subvert their traditional benign form into one facilitating exploitation of the apprentices. Chapter 2 explores aspects of that exploitation and looks at the physical and mental abuse the boys suffered. It then turns to the ways in which apprentices sought to escape their unfortunate situations and the legal coercions owners used to quell their revolt. Chapter 3 considers how the boys’

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\(^8\) Boswell, pp. 141-2  
\(^9\) Rule, p. 411.  
\(^10\) Horn, p. 173.  
alienation led them into crime and degeneracy and how shifting concepts of welfare
influenced wider society’s view of this behaviour. It concludes with an examination of
whether these newer concepts had any influence on the level of care afforded to the boys
by their putative protectors – parish guardians.
CHAPTER 1: ‘DIABOLIC BUSINESS’? VICTORIAN FISHING APPRENTICESHIPS

Most Grimsby fishing smacks left port with a five-man crew, a minimum of three of whom were apprentices – pauper boys as young as twelve, virtual captives, to all appearances. Every year, four in every hundred of them remained forever at the bottom of the North Sea.¹ The rest endured unremitting hardships. While owners considered the apprenticeship system ‘the grandest thing we have’, much of contemporary opinion was scathing.² The Daily Chronicle declared ‘this apprenticeship business is a diabolic one’.³ Even the President of the Board of Trade, Joseph Chamberlain was driven to suggest in 1882 that it might equate to ‘a state of serfdom’.⁴ Small wonder that the Grimsby Herald sighed:

Respectable people said they would be glad if Grimsby could be erased from the map of England. If they knew as much about the treatment of some of these lads…. they would feel surprised that the judgement of Heaven did not fall upon us.⁵

While Snell has called historians’ debate on eighteenth and nineteenth century apprenticeships ‘chaotic’, there has been general acceptance that they played little part in employment after 1850.⁶ Dunlop believed that 1814 and the repeal of Statute of Artificers marked the end in their traditional form, while More and Thompson argued for a continuation in artisan industries until 1850.⁷ The use of pauper apprenticeships on any scale is seen to have ended with the Lancashire textile trade in the early years of the nineteenth century, though recent revisionist work by Withall has demonstrated their

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² British Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Sea Fishing Committee of the Board of Trade 1882 (hereafter ‘BOT 1882’), 2050
³ Daily Chronicle, 16 June 1894
⁵ Grimsby Herald, 8 February 1873
survival until at least 1870.8 This chapter will support Withall’s conclusions by showing that paupers were indentured in numbers to the Grimsby fishing trade for the whole of the period of this study. It will then turn to considering the circumstances that led the town’s smack owners to adopt pauper labour, before examining the characteristics of these fishing apprenticeships.

In 1900 four out of every ten fishing boats in Britain sailed from the port of Grimsby. It was the ‘world’s premier fishing port’.9 Yet fifty years previously it was barely a fishing port. In the census of 1841, of 1,015 employed males in the town, just 13 were classified as ‘fishermen’.10 When the Dogger Bank Silver Pits grounds were discovered teeming with soles in the 1830s, initially it was the ports of Hull and Scarborough, not Grimsby, that benefited from the increased activity. Soles were prime fish immediately transhipped upon landing by fast sailing cutter to Billingsgate for middle class tables. Other than salted herrings, fish did not feature in working-class diets in the first half of the nineteenth century.11 Fresh fish could not be transported rapidly enough for it to arrive in industrial towns in edible form. Consequently, cod and haddock caught by the Silver Pits fishermen (termed ‘offal fish’ at the time) were largely wasted, as George Alward, a pioneer of the Grimsby fishing industry noted: ‘Part of my occupation as a youth was to pitch the haddocks and such fish overboard, saving the soles, turbot and plaice.’12 As with much of

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12 George Alward, Development of the British Fisheries During the 19th Century, with Special Reference to the North Sea (Grimsby: Grimsby News Company, 1911), p. 23.
Victorian Britain, the railway was to transform the fishing industry, allowing the ‘offal fish’ to be transported rapidly enough to enter working-class diets.

The Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway Company arrived in Grimsby in 1848, and its directors immediately sought to promote the town as a fishing port, offering incentives that successfully induced owners such as the Howards to move their fleet of smacks from Manningtree to Grimsby. Grimsby, though, already possessed natural advantages over its principal rival, Hull. Fishermen could land their catches and be back on the fishing grounds in the time it took to sail the 25 miles upriver to Hull. Not only did their dead catch arrive fresher, but the live fish kept in the well of their smacks, which died in the river water on the journey to Hull, could be landed still alive and in prime saleable condition.13 These advantages ushered in a period of spectacular growth for the fishing trade at Grimsby.

In 1854, just 9 trawling smacks were based at Grimsby.14 By 1860 there were 70, increasing to 264 in 1870 and 445 in 1877.15 A Board of Trade report stated that in 1878, 3,874 fishermen were working from the town.16 In 1841, the total population of Grimsby had been 3,700 – including the 13 fishermen – and was still only 8,900 in 1851.17 The town’s labour force was insufficient in numbers and lacked the fishing skills to crew the growing number of smacks sailing from the port. While Gerrish has identified that 765 people migrated to Grimsby between 1851 and 1861, most being experienced fishermen largely from the Thames ports of Barking and Greenwich, the numbers of such migrants

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13 Robinson, Trawling, p. 47.
14 Alward, Development, p. 17.
16 BOT 1882, Appendix 30
were finite and insufficient for the booming trade. For the remainder of the century the town suffered from ‘a want of sufficient men’. Smack owners addressed that ‘want’ by turning to apprenticed labour.

The exact number of apprentices indentured at Grimsby in the years of the great expansion of the trade after 1860 until 1900 cannot be known. From Boswell’s analysis of the Registers of Fishing Apprentices it can be shown that 4,965 boys were indentured between 1880 to 1900, although this excludes part of 1892, the whole of 1893 and part of 1894 where the Registers have not survived. The Board of Trade Report of 1882 recorded that 4,277 boys had been indentured in the years 1868-1878. Wilcox used the Board of Trade Registers of Apprentices (BT150) to suggest that 76 and 144 were indentured respectively for his sampled years of 1860 and 1865. Adding together these known figures produces a total of 9,462 boys indentured for the 33 years of the period 1860-1900 where data is present. These apprentices quickly came to dominate the labour force. By 1872 they already outnumbered other fishermen 1,350 to 1,150. On a five-man North Sea smack the cook, deck hand and third hand would all be apprentices. An apprentice nearing the end of his indenture term would sometimes fill the mate’s berth and it was not even unknown for a vessel to be entirely crewed by apprentices, their fates entrusted to an apprentice skipper. Thomas Salmond told the 1882 Board of Trade Inquiry into the fishing trade of his rapid promotion from third hand to skipper:

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18 Gerrish, p. 165.
19 TNA, MAF12/15, Report by Mr A.D. Berrington and Mr J.S. Davy on an Investigation of the Fishing Apprenticeship System, 27 July 1894, Letter from Charles Jeff, Director, Great Grimsby Ice Company in attached correspondence
21 BOT 1882 Appendix 47
22 Wilcox, ‘Apprenticed Labour’, p. 73.
23 Gillett, p. 247.
I know my term of apprenticeship. I served five and a half years: two as cook, three years as deck hand, four months as a third hand and two months as a skipper. So, I never really served as a second hand [mate] at all.24

The proportion of apprentices who came from poor law unions and other public bodies again cannot be known with certainty. Pauper boys were certainly being recruited from the earliest days of the trade. The Board of Guardians of St Matthew Bethnal Green reported in 1873 that the union had sent 56 boys to date, providing detailed information on 51 of them.25 Analysis of this information shows that at least 4 were already out of their time. As Baldwyn Fleming noted in his 1873 Local Government Board report that boys were indentured at the age of 12 or 13 at this time and were invariably bound until their 21st birthday, this suggests that those out of their time in 1873 had almost certainly become apprentices in the early 1860s.26 For the proportion of paupers out of the total apprentices in the 1860s and 1870s, it is necessary to trust the estimate of 40% made by the Port Superintendent, Henry Nalan, in 1882.27 By the late 1870s, though, their numbers were in temporary decline. When the Board of Trade sent two investigators, Stoneham and Swanston, to Grimsby in 1878, they noted a ‘current scarcity of boys’ due to ‘reports as to the discreditable condition of the trade which had been freely circulated’.28 Chapter 2 will show that the reputation of the town’s fishing trade had become tarnished by reports of the ill-treatment of apprentices and, not wishing to bring opprobrium upon themselves, many guardians had begun to think better of sending their boys to Grimsby.29 Horn has calculated that just 4.9% of apprentices indentured between March 1879 and March 1880

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24 BOT 1882, 2106
25 London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) BE/BG 037, Report of the visit of D. Collins (Chairman), J.H. Edwards (Vice-Chairman) on 27/28/29 August to Grimsby as to the Treatment of Apprentices to Smack Owners, p.1
26 The National Archives ('TNA') 32/99, Baldwyn Fleming, Treatment of the Pauper Apprentices to the Grimsby Fishing Trade, Report to the Local Government Board 1873, p.2
27 BOT 1882, 2190
28 BOT 1882, Appendix 37, Joint Report of Mr Stoneham & Mr Swanston dated 8 August 1878, p.219
29 Robinson, Trawling, p. 60.
were of pauper origin. The dearth was short-lived. From the Registers of Fishing Apprentices, Boswell categorically identified that a total of 2,554 (51.4%) apprentices were drawn from unions and public bodies out of a total of 4,965 apprentices indentured between 1880 and 1900.

This wholesale use of pauper apprentices over such an extended period at Grimsby casts doubt on Wallis’ assertion that pauper apprenticeships had died out by 1810. Withall has already shown, based on research on naval apprenticeships in Liverpool, Bristol, and Southampton, that the institution survived at least until 1870. It demonstrably survived beyond that point in Grimsby and for a time at many other fishing ports including Hull, Ramsgate and Brixham. That the minute book for the Board of Guardians of St Matthew Bethnal Green containing the above report on Grimsby and covering just eight months of 1873 recorded that, in addition to sending 9 boys to the fishing trade in Grimsby, in the period, 10 other paupers were indentured into presumably local trades such as barbers and butchers, lends some support to the view that the use of the institution was commonplace. They had certainly always played a part in in fishing.

Devon trawl fishermen had always tended to indenture only their relatives, but the Thames fisheries were less family-based and the use of pauper apprentices from London unions was not uncommon. When men such as the Howards from Manningtree moved their

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31 Boswell, p. 55.
33 Withall, ‘Shipped Out?’, p. 286.
34 Horn, p. 189.
35 LMA BE/BG 039, Data collected from the minutes of the Bethnal Green Board of Guardians 22 April to 18 November 1873
36 Horn, p. 174.
operations to Grimsby in the late 1850s, they brought with them pauper apprentices, like James Plastow and Harrison Mudd, who would go on to become substantial smack owners in later years. Boswell believed owners had turned to apprenticeships to solve their labour shortages because they were ‘uneducated’ and ‘conservative’ men ‘incapable of resolving the problem by original thinking’. Yet More has demonstrated that apprenticeships were common in the nineteenth century in a wide range of artisanal industries. They were a tried and tested means of satisfying shortages of skilled labourers and had been used extensively in the Lancashire textile mill earlier in the century. The smack owners were unimaginative only to the extent that they were men of their time.

The fishing trade, then, took root in a port blessed with every advantage to foster its spectacular growth other than a ready supply of labour. Owners turned to apprenticeships to fill that gap partly through following the tradition of the industry from its artisanal days and partly because it was general custom and practice. Later, as stories of ill-treatment of apprentices began to circulate, some contemporaries characterized these apprenticeships as a ‘traffic in pauper boys’ leading to ‘tyranny and slavery’. More has divided eighteenth and nineteen century apprenticeships into ‘old style’ or ‘exploitative’. The aim of the former was to control entry into a trade. ‘The master personally taught the apprentice; took responsibility for the latter’s moral welfare; and gave him board and lodgings.’ Exploitative apprenticeships ‘failed to teach a worthwhile skill or limit the labour market’, with the apprentices being nothing more than cheap labour in a deskilled industry.

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37 BOT 1882, 2538  
39 More, p. 42.  
41 The Truth, 5 & 6 September 1894  
42 More, p. 41.  
43 More, p. 43.
1868, the Sea Fisheries Act had removed virtually all regulations governing fishing, enabling the industry to become ‘the true and final apotheosis of classical *laissez-faire*’.44 Did any of the elements of old-style apprenticeships survive in this red-blooded capitalist environment?

While trawling was an industrialized process, far removed from cosy postcard images of gansey-clad, ruddy-faced fisherman tending their nets, it was not deskillled. A smacksman’s life and livelihood depended on the correct application of skills learned over the course of years. An apprentice started at sea as the smack’s cook, assisting in trimming the lamps and cleaning the deck. After a couple of years and promotion to fourth hand, as well as hauling the trawl and gutting fish, he would be expected to handle the sails and steer the vessel under normal seas. When he became third hand, he should have been a competent seaman able to handle the vessel.45 Many, like Thomas Salmond, went on to take the responsibilities of mate or skipper during their indenture terms. The skills necessary to handle a sixty-feet, sixty-ton vessel dragging a trawl net along the bottom of the North Sea in all weathers, often sailing dangerously close to many similar vessels, were not acquired overnight. George Alward batted away his sarcastic interrogator at the Board of Trade Inquiry of 1882:

> Would you tell me how long it would take for a lad to learn his trade? – An average of six years
> Do you know, as a matter of fact, that it only takes five years to make an attorney? – I should say myself that it takes a great deal more practical things to be in the mind of an individual to make a practical seaman than to make an attorney.46

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46 BOT 1882, 1808-9
An apprentice on reaching the age of 21, then, should have acquired the skills to have a career in fishing, though how many actually had such careers is unknown. Honeyman has noted that it is ‘regrettable’ that little research into the outcomes of parish apprenticeships has so far been undertaken.\textsuperscript{47} The fishing industry is no exception to the dearth. On the other hand, there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence. James Plastow told the 1882 Board of Trade Inquiry:

I was an apprentice from Hackney union in 1854 to the fishing trade in Barking, to Mr Robert Hewett of that town. I served seven years, came out of my time in 1861. A good man’s wage at that time was 14s per week in the summer and 16s in winter. I saved out of that amount £20 per year for two years, then I came to Grimsby in 1863. I saved £65 for eight months, making a total of £105 in less than three years. I then took a smack to work out, paid £100 down and paid the remaining part £650 and interest clear off in three years. I went to sea for two years afterwards…. I am now the owner of several smacks… I believe every lad in the fishing trade has the same chance of a successful life as I have had, provided he saves his money instead of spending it.\textsuperscript{48}

Such progression was certainly possible. Baldwyn Fleming had noted that a smack cost around £1,100 to buy in 1873.\textsuperscript{49} Having acquired the necessary skills and experience during his apprenticeship, a successful skipper could expect to ‘work off’ the mortgage on his vessel within a couple of years. Purchasing and working off a second boat generally produced sufficient wealth for the owner to employ skippers for both boats and retire from the sea. That some pauper apprentices followed Plastow’s path is undoubted, but even in the first days of the fishing trade their numbers were necessarily few. The pioneers had swiftly achieved positions of dominance in the trade and consolidated their control by diversifying into the provisioning of vessels, thereby making entry into the market much more difficult for the small operator. When the first steam trawlers, the \textit{Zodiac} and the \textit{Aries}, had begun to fish from Grimsby in 1881, their ability to use two sets of fishing gear, together with their speed and range, signalled the rapid demise of the sailing smack.


\textsuperscript{48}BOT 1882, 2538

\textsuperscript{49}TNA 32/99 Baldwin Fleming, \textit{Treatment of the pauper apprentices}, p. 45
Costing £3,500, they were also beyond the financial reach of small owners.\(^{50}\) Steam accelerated the concentration of the industry into the hands of a few joint stock companies. In 1887 alone, 30 small smack owners went bankrupt.\(^{51}\) From this time on, the definition of progression for apprentices was certainly limited to that of joining the ranks of skippers and mates.

*The Truth* newspaper in 1894 called the idea that the Grimsby industry offered a career path ‘twaddle’ whose swallowing requiring ‘a considerable grain of salt’. ‘Even if one or two have become owners, their success comes at the price of many hundreds driven into criminal and vagrant classes by the system’.\(^{52}\) Furthermore, when James Plastow was presenting his vision of boundless opportunity, the bonanza years were already over in Grimsby. Overfishing on the Dogger Bank quickly meant that smacks had to incur increased fuel and icing costs ranging further afield to find their catches. A smack in the late 1870s was estimated as spending only a sixth of its voyage actually trawling.\(^{53}\) Carl Mundahl, who vaguely testified to the Board of Trade Inquiry in 1882 that he owned ‘about 12’ smacks and had ‘40 to 50’ apprentices, claimed that his annual net earnings were only ‘£16/2s, 3d’.\(^{54}\) While his subsequent attempts to explain his calculations suggest a less than perfect grasp of accounting principles, his claim is indicative of the financial pressures facing the industry. With falling yields and rising catching costs, owners could only maintain the profitability of their businesses by minimizing other operating costs. Apprentice labour was the key to that.

\(^{51}\) Ekberg, p. 34.
\(^{52}\) *The Truth*, 6 September 1894
\(^{53}\) *Grimsby News*, 30 October 1878
\(^{54}\) BOT 1882, 2306, 2307, 2353
For all that the lads did learn navigational and fishing skills while indentured, the fact that most smacks went to sea with apprentices making up a minimum of 60% of their crews makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that apprenticeships were more about owners acquiring a labour force. Even though, for reasons examined in Chapter 2, around two thirds of them failed to complete their full indenture terms, apprentices consistently outnumbered other labourers in the Grimsby labour force throughout the period.\textsuperscript{55} The Board of Trade officials, Stoneham and Swanston, largely favourably disposed towards the apprenticeship system, were forced to concede that a typical apprentice: ‘would appear to be regarded as merely part of the machinery for taking fish.’\textsuperscript{56} For owners the great advantage of this ‘part of the machinery’ was that it was unpaid.

Under the terms of their indentures, apprentices were given three suits of clothes annually together with their lodgings. It was customary for them to receive a small amount of pocket money.\textsuperscript{57} The rates for this were regularized by the Board of Trade in 1880 at a scale of 6d a week as cook, 1s a week as deck boy and 1/6d a week as third hand.\textsuperscript{58} It was also customary for apprentices to receive a share of the proceeds of sale of livers, roes and ‘stockerbait’ (small and unwanted fish). Although owners resented their lads’ entitlement to this money claiming that it was ‘too much and is leading the boys into degeneration’, in reality, it amounted to no more than a few shillings at the end of each trip.\textsuperscript{59} Apprentices were also entitled to a share of any salvage at the rates of 4\% for the cook, 6\% for the fourth hand and 8\% for the third hand. While this could be lucrative – Jess Hammond, 

\textsuperscript{55} Boswell, p.143 calculated for the years 1880 to 1900
\textsuperscript{56} BOT 1882, Appendix 37, Joint Report, p.218
\textsuperscript{57} LMA BE/BG 039, Report of the Visit, p.1
\textsuperscript{58} North East Lincolnshire Archives (NEL) 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1880
\textsuperscript{59} TNA, MAF 12/15, Letter from G. Alward to J. Porteous, Port Superintendent, 16 January 1893
from Ongar union received the considerable sum of £17/12s in December 1896 – such windfalls were necessarily rare.60

Boswell, with his rather dim view of the capabilities of the Grimsby smack owners, believed the idea of apprentices as a form of cheap labour was an ‘illusion’ which attracted ‘ignorant persons’ into the industry; men who subsequently damaged its reputation and deterred the more enterprising fishermen who could have shaped a better future for the town’s trade.61 Horn largely echoes his view.62 Clearly, apprentices were not free and came with maintenance costs. In 1878 W.T. Lundie, the headmaster of Grimsby Grammar School, prepared a report for the Grimsby Smack Owners Association. Lundie stated that ‘an owner pays 10s to £1 per quarter for lodgings, mending and washing plus 7d to 8d for each meal ashore’. According to Harrison Mudd in 1882, the pay for a casual deckhand was 14s a week, although it could rise at times of labour shortage.63 Owners did not keep cost accounts and a direct comparison of the costs of the two types of labour is impossible. All that really matters is that owners themselves believed apprentices were a cheap form of labour and that this belief conditioned their actions.

Owners though did not want just any apprentice. They had a strong preference for pauper boys. They made a compliant workforce: 12, 13 or 14 years old, far from home, working under rough, ready, and often violent, skippers and mates and – as Chapter 3 will show – largely abandoned by the poor law guardians who stood in loco parentis for them. Non-pauper boys with real parents were much more troublesome. When the supply of pauper boys temporarily dried up towards the end of the 1870s, smack owners had turned to

60 NEL 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1893
61 Boswell, p. 142.
62 Horn, pp. 188–89.
63 BOT 1882, 2528
utilizing ‘decoy ducks’ to visit inland cities to entice impressionable boys off the streets into service in Grimsby. George Riley of Leicester was on his way to deliver his father’s dinner, when he met a well-dressed young man who, with tales of the riches to be earned on the balmy waters of the North Sea, induced George to follow him to Grimsby. His father, William, would not accept his son’s career choice. He wrote to the _Leicester Chronicle_ complaining that his son was the victim of a ‘kidnapping’ and that the promised ‘slashing life at sea’ had turned out to be one of abuse.  

He subsequently wrote to the Board of Trade providing further details of his son’s treatment, including his being ‘lashed to the mast’ and ‘tied up with one leg to the rigging of the ship and then beaten’. 

Riley’s letters stirred up many similar complaints to the press and ultimately led the Board of Trade to initiate Stoneham and Swanston’s inquiry into the Grimsby fish trade. Pauper boys seldom had a William Riley to look after them.

A rapidly expanding fishing trade at Grimsby from 1860 led to acute labour and skills shortages and smack owners turned to apprenticeships to fill these gaps. Most had been apprentices themselves and apprenticeships were the customary means to address labour shortages. In theory the apprenticeships were about training the boys to become skilled fishermen who could one day aspire to owning their own boats. In reality, by the mid-1860s the industry had passed the pioneering stage when such a paradigm was at least technically possible. Any connection between the apprenticeships and training must be seen as remote, when the industry was happy to see vessels set sail under apprentice skippers with apprentice crews. Pauper apprenticeships provided owners with a cheap and

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64 _Leicester Chronicle_ 2 February 1878
65 BOT 1882, Appendix 43, letter dated 15 February 1878
compliant labour force. For pauper boys themselves, they were the gateway to exploitation and abuse: the subject of Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 2: ‘SLAVERY IN BRITAIN?’ EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

In February 1873, *The London Figaro* demanded to know ‘Is there Slavery in Britain?’ and declared in reply:

> We are informed that a system of slavery as infamous as any system of slavery ever devised, exists at Great Grimsby.¹

While the *Figaro*’s language would probably have evoked in its readers very specific images of slavery from Classical Greece or Rome, the modern concept of slavery – ‘severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain’ is more encompassing.² Quantifying exploitation or comparing forms of exploitation over time are tasks fraught with difficulty and the approach taken in this Chapter is simply to seek in the fishing apprentices the elements of exploitation from Honeyman’s summation:

> The model of child exploitation used in modern analyses is based on claims of abandonment, abuse, compulsion, cruelty, discipline, disposability, hardship, overwork and undernourishment. Evidence of any of these features is argued to indicate exploitation.³

For Thompson ‘the exploitation of little children’, particularly pauper children, cast a dark shadow over British industrialization.⁴ In his unremittingly grim exposition of the working lives of North Sea fishing apprentices, Rule voiced similar sentiments.⁵ While not adopting a completely revisionist approach, Honeyman found among the experiences of pauper children in the Lancashire textile mills at the turn of the nineteenth century, ‘a range of levels of exploitation’ from ‘brutal’ to ‘humanitarian’, furthermore detecting evidence of the exercise of care by parish guardians towards the apprentices both before and after their

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¹ *The London Figaro*, 15 February 1873
² www.antislavery.org
signing indentures. For Honeyman, pauper apprentices were not always passive victims, expressing agency in refusing to sign indentures and in absconding from service. The levels of responsibility that poor law guardians felt towards the boys they indentured into the Grimsby fishing trade will be discussed more in Chapter 3. This Chapter will seek to identify in the boys’ working lives the elements of exploitation identified above. It will then turn to the means by which boys expressed their discontent, before looking at the legal coercions that masters used to assert their control over their apprentices, and to reassert it even in the face of legislation designed to impose restraints upon it. It must start, though, with a consideration of whether the apprentices were children at all.

Victorian childhood was generally regarded to end at age 14. In the 1860s it was common for boys of 12 or 13 to be indentured at Grimsby, though in 1873 Mr Bailey, who attested the indentures, assured Baldwyn Fleming that ‘for many years past he has refused to allow any boy to be apprenticed under twelve years of age’. In truth, owners and skippers did not want boys that young. All crew members needed to participate in the physically demanding task of hauling the catch on board; a task which, until the introduction of the steam capstan in the late 1870s, required hours of backbreaking labour. Boys under 12 were simply not strong enough. In 1883 the Merchant Shipping (Fishing Boats) Act imposed a minimum age of 13 for indenturing apprentices. The fishing apprentices, then, would largely technically not have been considered children. They were not the infant chimney sweeps and tiny mill boys and girls whose plights had attracted such attention earlier in the century. For all that, the imagery of the condemnatory press reports on the

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7 Honeyman and Goose, pp. 76–83.
9 TNA 32/99, Baldwyn Fleming, *Treatment of the Pauper Apprentices to the Grimsby Fishing Trade, Report to the Local Government Board 1873*, p. 3
Grimsby fishing apprentices is redolent of that used in coverage of these earlier infant workers, indicating a shift in the perception of childhood. The victims of kidnapping by the ‘decoy ducks’ (see pp.16-17) had been aged between 14 and 17, but reports stress their child-like naivety and the suffering of their parents. The *Leicester Daily Mercury* appeared to suggest that the current definition of childhood was too restrictive:

> By a strange misnomer the very ‘infant’, who in the eye of the law is considered irresponsible for the slightest debt he may contract, is entitled to be beguiled, cozened and cheated into self-surrender to a white slavery as coarse as it is cruel and degrading; while his hapless parent, though withal liable for his maintenance, is utterly powerless to prevent his self-immolation.\(^{10}\)

The *Hull Packet* described the apprentices as ‘boys of tender years’.\(^{11}\) The *Daily Chronicle* stressed their innocence – ‘absolutely green’, while *The Truth* talked not of youths or lads but of ‘The Grimsby Boy Market’.\(^{12}\) They may not have been children, but the Grimsby apprentices were clearly regarded as of vulnerable age. It is appropriate, then, to use Honeyman’s criteria for child exploitation when looking at their working lives.

A typical fishing smack was a 60-foot wooden-hulled vessel with a single 17-foot cabin serving as both galley and living quarters for the five-man crew. When the Pollyanna-like guardians from Bethnal Green union visited Grimsby in 1873, they felt smacks ‘resembled Gentlemen’s Yachts being so nicely fitted out’ and the bedding ‘most excellent’.\(^{13}\) A more reliable observer was Alexander Gordon, who went out to sea on a fishing smack in the mid-1880s as part of his work for the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, founded in 1881 by Ebenezer Mather. He described the cabin (or, as he quaintly termed it, ‘the common room’) as

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\(^{10}\) *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 13 February 1878

\(^{11}\) *Hull Packet*, 27 September 1873

\(^{12}\) *Daily Chronicle*, 16 June 1894; *The Truth*, 21 June 1894

\(^{13}\) London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) BE/BG 037, *Report of the visit of D. Collins (Chairman), J.H. Edwards (Vice-Chairman) on 27/28/29 August to Grimsby as to the Treatment of Apprentices to Smack Owners*, p.2.
of scant proportions, but in divers corners, a steward’s miniature pantry, and a few shelves intended for beds, we suppose, but which look more suited for the stowage of mere worthless lumber than fitted for the repose of human beings.\textsuperscript{14}

In fact, the deck boy explained to him that the men slept in their working clothes on the floor.

It’s too much trouble to unship our togs an’ besides, one niver knows when skipper or night watch may sing out “All hands on deck”.\textsuperscript{15}

Another of Mather’s followers, James Runciman, in 1888 summed up conditions aboard thus:

Try to imagine a kind of life which combined the horrors of a Liverpool slum with those of the forecastle in one of the ships that Smollett knew, and then you may have some idea of the condition of the floating villages wherein the fishers lived out their awful lives.\textsuperscript{16}

The cabin was permanently wet and usually cold, that is until the arrival of the steam capstan for hauling the nets; accommodated in the cabin, it turned it into a furnace.\textsuperscript{17} In their ‘common room’, the crew ate breakfasts of fried fish, dinners and suppers of salt beef suet pudding boiled in sea water followed by the same suet pudding with treacle.\textsuperscript{18} While the diet was monotonous, it would almost certainly be better and more substantial than that offered to boys in the workhouse. Gordon’s conclusion on the cabin was that it was ‘hardly a congenial sphere for the growth of the social virtues’.\textsuperscript{19} That skippers and mates shared equally in the hardships of this uncongenial sphere is hardly mitigation for the boys’ discomfort. Their work regime was equally uncomfortable.

Apprentices had specific duties as cook, fourth or third hands, but tasks such as hauling the nets and gutting the catch required all the crew’s participation. Third hands were expected,
in addition, to share night watches with the skipper and mate. The working day began with hauling the previous night’s trawl before breakfast and ended when the trawl was shot for the final time at 11pm. A smack fishing alone would stay at sea for 2 to 3 weeks in summer and 10 days or so at other times.20 Single fishing, though, was not efficient and, faced with falling yields, owners turned to ‘fleeting’ in the summer months from the 1870s. Under the fleeting system, smacks transferred their catch at the end of the day to a fast steam cutter which returned to port while the smacks carried on fishing. Smacks now stayed at sea for 8 to 12 weeks at a time, fishing every day the weather allowed. As well as increasing the workload, fleeting brought additional dangers. The fraught task of uploading the catch onto the much larger cutter from a small rowing boat was generally given to the third and fourth hands. Collisions in bad weather with similar boats jostling to transfer fish were common. In the Great Storm of March 1883, 250 men and 43 fleeting smacks from all ports were lost.21

Little of the abandonment boys can be expected to have felt at sea can be gleaned from the intimidated, monosyllabic and often self-contradictory testimonies of the few Grimsby apprentices who were asked to appear before the Board of Trade Inquiry of 1882, though Henry Coe, when asked whether he feared the sea, did let slip that ‘I did not like it’.22 It does not, though, take a great leap to imagine the terror and discomfort that physically underdeveloped boys felt, transported from their homes as far away as Berwick or Plymouth, toiling seasick, cold and wet in the alien environment of the North Sea. It is hard to see anything other than fear of the sea life in the behaviour of James Walters from

Southampton union, recorded in the Grimsby Register of Fishing Apprentices of 1882. In the six months immediately after his indenture in February 1882, he refused duty ‘alleged seasick’, cut his smack’s warp so that it had to return to port, complaining of being beaten by the skipper and mate twice, and three times ‘stopped the ship’ by failing to report for duty or jumping off the boat as it left the dock. For the last of these offences, he received a month’s gaol sentence and, on his release, promptly absconded.23 Even though the Victorian era was ‘an age full of harshness’, the working lives of fishing boys stand out as arduous, dangerous and unrelenting.24 As tales of abuse began to circulate from the late 1860s, it became clear that it was not the limit of their suffering.

Skippers and mates generally had few of Gordon’s ‘social virtues’. They were hard men who plied their trade in a brutal environment. As Baldwyn Fleming noted in his report of 1873, they had ‘roughed it’ all their lives and were ‘apt to think that the rope’s end which taught them their work is the best means of teaching it to others’.25 Furthermore, skippers had a pecuniary interest in ensuring the success of their fishing trips, normally being paid a 9% share of the catch rather than a wage.26 With only four fellow crew members, they could not afford to have anyone operating below optimum. Apprentices who, when they first arrived on board, could ‘no more fry a fish, coil a rope, or tie a knot than any other lads from a city workhouse’ threatened their skippers’ livelihoods.27 The duties of an apprentice for the first year or two were principally to cook, trim the lamps and clean the deck. Meals mattered for a crew not just as sustenance but also as brief respite from demanding labour. Keeping the deck lit and free of fish scales and slime meant the

23 North East Lincolnshire Archives (NEL) 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1882
27 Daily Chronicle, 16 June 1894
difference in pitching waters between staying on board or ending up in the North Sea. Little patience was shown to apprentices who failed to perform their tasks adequately. Skippers routinely dispensed disapproval with the ship’s rope – a practice known as ‘rope-ending’ – but could go a great deal further.

Frederick Donker apprenticed by St George’s-in-the East parish in London made the mistake of burning the fish aboard the Jubilee on the morning of 21 August 1873. His skipper, William Brusey, took exception to having his breakfast spoiled.

‘Come here, old man, let’s give you a hand bat or two’. Brusey got him to hold out his two hands and hit him two or three blows with a stick over two feet long and over an inch in diameter. He said, ‘Come further into the cabin’, and on his doing so gave him another stroke. The boy cried, rushed on deck, jumped overboard and was drowned.28

Four days earlier, Brusey had given Donker ‘twenty blows or so over the hands with a rattling line’. Though Brusey was eventually cleared of the charge of manslaughter, it was the outcry over Donker’s ill-treatment that had stirred the guardians of the neighbouring Bethnal Green parish into visiting Grimsby to check on the boys they had apprenticed there. Their report found apprentices kitted out in uniforms with ‘the luxury of a velvet stripe’, sleeping between ‘linen sheets’ in ‘feather beds’ and any ideas that boys had been complaining ‘certainly not true’.29 It was received with a degree of scepticism: the Hull Packet felt it was ‘to use an Americanism, something of a “caution”.30 Nevertheless, the same year Baldwyn Fleming found no ‘systematic ill-treatment’ and only punishments ‘inflicted with a rough and ready, perhaps undue, severity – but with no thought or intention of malicious cruelty’.31 Yet the stories of ill-treatment persisted. Further inquiries ensued which also ended up largely exonerating masters and skippers. In 1878, for

28 Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, 16 September 1873
29 LMA BE/BG 037, Report on the visit, pp. 2-3
30 Hull Packet, 30 May 1873
example, Stoneham and Swanston concluded that ‘skippers and men were rough but not unkind’ and ‘masters, irritated beyond endurance, adopt rough measures for the coercion of the boys’.32 All the investigators were predisposed towards the apprenticeship system. Baldwyn Fleming may have felt it ‘absolutely necessary’ for the survival of the fishing trade, but he was also reporting to the Local Government Board, and, as Chapter 3 will demonstrate, he would have been aware of its value to local parishes for shipping out boys who would otherwise have become a burden on ratepayers. Inquirers generally only relied on the testimonies of the boys’ masters. The boys themselves were often conveniently out at sea and the bland assurances of contentment from the few that they did meet were taken at face value.

A decade of bad press reached its apogee with the murder of two boys in separate incidents on two Hull smacks in 1882. It led to the 1882 Board of Trade Inquiry into the nation’s fishing industry. The death of William Papper on board the Rising Sun became a national scandal and even inspired a theatre play (‘Adrift or the Fisherboy of Hull’, starring Mr Harry Lynn and his two Talented Daughters, Lotty and Jenny’).33 The second victim, Peter Hughes from Middlesbrough union, achieved less notoriety but had been a Grimsby apprentice. His brief entry in the port’s Register of Fishing Apprentices gives a clue to his struggles.

2 December 1881 Boy admitted cutting ship’s warp for which master had him thrashed
5 December 1881 Indentures cancelled. Master will send to Hull with 3s and a complete shifting of clothes
Subsequently heard that boy was lost at sea in February 1882 off the smack Gleaner of Hull.
J. Wheatfill, mate, apprehended in June and charged with murder and hung.

32 BOT 1882, Appendix 37, Joint Report of Mr Stoneham & Mr Swanston dated 8 August 1878, p.218.
33 Notice from The Era, 14 June 1884
At his trial Wheatfill, who had subjected Hughes to a catalogue of abuse including beatings and making him stand naked in the ice store, claimed the lad had fallen overboard while collecting water.\textsuperscript{34} Although it was not the case here, apprentices did frequently lose their lives in this way; boys like John Langdon ‘lost overboard off the \textit{Frank} while drawing a bucket of water’.\textsuperscript{35} These losses give the lie to owners’ claims that apprenticeships were about training. George Alward admitted that in his time at sea ‘it was considered an offence if a boy was to draw water, because it is a dangerous occupation’.\textsuperscript{36} Yet Bernard Monds, Port Missionary, confirmed boys were drawing water in a state of ignorance:

\begin{quote}
They throw the bucket overboard, they have no idea of the resisting force of the sea, they put the rope round their hands, and if they do not pull the bucket up, the bucket will pull them down.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Although sexual abuse was not mentioned at the trial of Wheatfill, he was reported to have made Hughes run around the deck naked on several occasions. As a taboo subject, there are only a few guarded allusions to similar behaviour in the Grimsby Registers of Fishing Apprentices. William Heath accused J.A. Raynor, his master, of ‘an unnatural crime’ against James Roberts from Cranbrook union in July 1889 but was ultimately himself found guilty of libel and sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment.\textsuperscript{38} Charles Adnum, an older apprentice, was found guilty of ‘an unnatural crime of a disgusting nature’ against two younger apprentices despite his defence of somnambulism.\textsuperscript{39} It is impossible to say more than it seems unlikely that these tales were the sole instances of abuse.

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\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Hull Packet}, 28 July 1882  
\textsuperscript{35} NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 22 February 1881  
\textsuperscript{36} BOT 1882, 1762  
\textsuperscript{37} BOT 1882, 1499  
\textsuperscript{38} NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 29 July 1889 & 3 March 1890  
\textsuperscript{39} NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 22 September 1886
\end{flushright}
A consequence of the 1882 Inquiry was the Merchant Shipping (Fishing Boats) Act 1883, which attempted to give apprentices some protection. Port Superintendents were given investigative powers and the right to bring prosecutions. They were required to interview boys about their well-being at least every six months. Some boys at Grimsby did take the opportunity of these interviews to bring complaints, but successive Superintendents, while undoubtedly diligent in their investigations, seldom took the word of a boy against that of a skipper or mate. When Frank Kirk from Darlington union, for example, complained of ill-treatment, he was found ‘to have deserved correction’. Faced with such official scepticism, boys found it easier to take their own forms of redress.

Honeyman has identified absconding as one of the ways apprentices could demonstrate agency, finding the rate of such absconding from the Lancashire textile mills to be around 8%. For Marine Society apprentices in the merchant navy in the period 1859-1862, Withall found the rate to be just 1%. In the period prior to 1880, the rate of absconding among Grimsby fishing apprentices is unknown, but limited evidence can be found in the report of the Bethnal Green guardians in 1873. Of the 56 Bethnal Green apprentices listed, 8 are reported to have ‘run away’ or ‘gone away. In the later period, of the 4,886 boys apprenticed between 1880 and 1900, Boswell identified that 1,345 (27%) successfully absconded. It was not easy for a penniless boy to abscond from Grimsby, an isolated port with only one railway station at which owners posted employees to apprehend escapees.

For every individual who succeeded in fleeing, there were many who tried and failed, often

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40 NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 29 November 1881 & 5 May 1888
43 LMA BE/BG 037, *Report on the visit*, Appendix
on multiple occasions. John Rutherford, indentured by Beverley union, absconded on 4 September, 27 October and 4 December 1886, each time suffering capture and imprisonment.\textsuperscript{45} Rates of absconding far in excess of those noted by the studies of other apprentice industries suggest that it was more wholesale rebellion than an expression of agency that was taking place in Grimsby.

Absconding was not the only way in which boys sought to escape. In addition to ‘pure’ absconding – desertion and flight from the vessel and port – apprentices could also practice ‘stopping the ships’, whereby they failed to report at sailing time or jumped ashore as the vessel was leaving port. While not technically absconding, since the boy remained in his master’s service and could go back to sea, the two crimes tended to be treated similarly by the courts. Stopping the ship infuriated owners. Either their vessels missed the tide and had to spend another day in dock, or they had to hire replacement weekly hands who, being well aware of their strong bargaining power, demanded high wages. Sabotage was another option for the boys. Cutting the trawl warp, as James Walters had done, forced the smack to return to port and meant a £50 bill for owner, but sabotage could take almost self-destructive forms. David Richards, from Dover union was noted in November 1888 as having ‘been throwing the ship’s stores overboard’.\textsuperscript{46} Some boys even resorted to self-mutilation. The \textit{Grimsby Observer} rather unsympathetically recorded the behaviour of an unnamed apprentice on the \textit{Young Florence}:

\begin{quote}
To disable himself from service at sea, the young rascal actually took up a hatchet and chopped off one of his fingers as the vessel was about leaving port.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

The actions of James Nye from Chatham union were even more dramatic.

\textsuperscript{45} NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1886
\textsuperscript{46} NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 29 November 1886
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Grimsby Observer}, 13 October 1875
Boy attempted suicide on two occasions by cutting his throat and trying to jump overboard. Not safe to take to sea.  

While they could do little about boys like Nye – indeed, his master sensibly accepted the Superintendent’s assessment, annulled his indentures, and even gave him his fare back to Chatham – they had a strong legal weapon to use against absconding and defiant apprentices.

Under s243 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1854 an apprentice absconding from his vessel or refusing to obey orders was liable to imprisonment of up to 12 weeks. Crucially, s246 of the Act empowered the boy’s master, skipper or mate to apprehend him and place him in pre-trial custody without the requirement to obtain a constable’s warrant. Owners effectively acted as their own police force, using, as Steinberg noted, ‘the criminal justice system both as a means of threat and coercion’. In the single year to 30 April 1873, Baldwyn Fleming was informed by the Police Superintendent of Grimsby, 208 prosecutions had been brought for absconding and 40 for disobeying orders or refusing to work. Of the total, 108 cases were discharged, usually because the boy agreed to go back to sea and the remaining 140 cases resulted in sentences of between 7 days and 2 months in Lincoln prison. Fleming would have been aware that when the Lincolnshire Chronicle gave voice to local disquiet, the story had been taken up by The London Figaro and stirred up a national outcry.

Lincoln rings with indignation at the treatment these lads receive at the hands of the authorities. The lads are brought by train, which generally arrives about 9.30pm and are heavily chained together…and…marched through the busiest part of the High Street of our city for more than a mile to their destination.

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48 NEL 298/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 10 October 1887
50 TNA 32/99 Baldwin Fleming, Treatment of the pauper apprentices, pp. 31-9.
51 Quoted by The London Figaro, 15 February 1873
The practice of chaining, as the most visual representation of the legal coercions they exercised over their apprentices, was quietly dispensed with, but a greater threat to owners’ authority came from the Merchant Seaman (Payment of Wages and Rating) Act of 1880. The Sea Fisheries Act of 1868 may have removed virtually every legal constraint on fishermen’s exploitation of the seas, but, as Harris has pointed out, for mid-Victorian politicians ‘economic laissez-faire did not necessarily entail moral laissez-faire’. The 1880 Act removed at a stroke masters’ powers of arrest and detention and handed apprentices the right to give 48 hours’ notice of their intention not to sail. Apprentices deserted fishing ports in droves: ‘Our boys have run away, and we have not been able to get them back’. Deprived of the means to restrain fleeing apprentices, owners at many ports turned toward employing weekly hands – at least they were willing parties in the economic arrangement. In 1880 Hull and Great Yarmouth had recruited respectively 227 and 29 apprentices. Ten years later it was just 22 and 3. Only at Grimsby, where the comparative numbers were 285 and 290, did the widespread use of indentured labour continue. This continuation was made possible by the application of a unique interpretation of the 1880 Act by magistrates there.

This Act had left in place the legal sanctions of the 1854 Act against disobeying orders at sea. When apprentices asserted their rights under the 1880 Act to refuse to sail, Grimsby magistrates interpreted this as disobeying orders at sea and allowed prosecutions against them, even though the ‘offences’ had taken place on dry land. It was a wilfully perverse interpretation of the law, and one unlikely to survive a higher court, but, given that apprentices were never in a position to appeal their judgments, it prevailed. In 1881, there

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53 BOT 1882, 2332 Testimony of Carl Mundahl

were 159 successful prosecutions of apprentices in Grimsby. By comparison, Hull had just 14.\textsuperscript{55} The unique interpretation at Grimsby was motivated by self-interest. Though the Bethnal Green guardians may have meekly accepted the assurances in 1873 of ‘An Alderman’ that ‘None of the magistrates of Great Grimsby have any pecuniary interest in the fishing smacks’, Stoneham and Swanston five years later knew better.\textsuperscript{56}

It should be a \textit{sine qua non} that the magistrates should be free from all personal interest in these fishing adventures; but here arises the difficulty, that the whole of the community would appear to be more or less interested in the industry.\textsuperscript{57}

If George Alward is to be believed, and two-thirds of the population of 45,000 in 1882 were ‘dependent on the fishing interest’, it would have been remarkable if magistrates were not.\textsuperscript{58} In fact, of the 17 magistrates who presided over the continued prosecutions of apprentices in 1881, 8 were smack owners and a further 5 held mortgages over smacks.\textsuperscript{59}

Alderman Harrison Mudd, who had been an apprentice in Howard’s fleet that had relocated to Grimsby from Manningtree in the 1850s, toasted Grimsby’s magistrates at a banquet at the Royal Hotel in 1890, congratulating them on preserving the apprenticeship system at Grimsby.\textsuperscript{60} If Ekberg’s assurances are to be believed and ‘horse’ (as salt beef was known) suet pudding boiled in sea water was ‘very good’, apprentices may have risked high blood pressure but they did not suffer from malnutrition.\textsuperscript{61} With that exception, this chapter has identified in the treatment of the apprentices all the other elements of child exploitation in Honeyman’s definition – abandonment, abuse, compulsion, cruelty, discipline, disposability, hardship and overwork. By perpetuating the apprenticeship system’s survival, Grimsby magistrates ensured that wholesale economic

\textsuperscript{55} BOT 1882, 1396
\textsuperscript{56} LMA BE/BG 037, \textit{Report on the visit}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{57} BOT 1882, Appendix 37, \textit{Joint Report}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{58} BOT 1882, 1744
\textsuperscript{60} Gillett, p. 273.
\textsuperscript{61} Ekberg, p. 24.
exploitation of boys endured into the twentieth century. It also ensured that the boys’
alienation continued to manifest itself in criminal and degenerate behaviour. Attention
should now turn to examining this behaviour and responses to it.
CHAPTER 3: ‘FRIENDLESS BOYS’? RESPONSES AND CARE

A seafaring life, especially that of a fisherman, is necessarily a very rough one; but there is no reason why it should be made harder than it need be. The boys who become apprentices are obtained chiefly from workhouses and reformatories... These lads are often lodged on shore with strangers of doubtful character and no responsibility; they are left to choose their own society, often in the lowest haunts of squalid vice; they are frequently apprenticed at a tender age for a long term of years on conditions with which they are very imperfectly acquainted; and against injustice or ill-treatment they have no redress save what they can extort for themselves or can obtain from the honesty or goodwill of their masters. What wonder if in such circumstances they are often discontented and prone to take every advantage…?¹

In *The Times* of 27 December 1882, alongside a piece discussing the threat to British global supremacy posed by the emergence of Austria and Russia as Mediterranean powers, is a lengthy editorial on the Grimsby fishing apprentices. That the august voice of the establishment felt it necessary to turn its mind from the consideration of weighty matters of state to that of the welfare of a raggedy collection of pauper boys in a remote Northern town is indicative of the position of national prominence the apprentices held. Newspapers such as *The London Figaro, Daily Chronicle* and *The Truth* ran campaigns to highlight their plight, returning regularly as each fresh scandal broke. Their coverage reached audiences far beyond their own readerships though, as from 1880 the Press Association had begun syndicating most articles in the national press to virtually all the regional and local papers.² Local papers too syndicated articles via the Press Association with other local papers. Court reports of the prosecutions of apprentices in Grimsby could be found from the *Cornish Telegraph* to the *Inverness Courier*. What is striking about *The Times* editorial, though, is not just its prominence, it is also notable for the degree of sympathy it has for the boys and their plight. They were portrayed largely as victims of their circumstances with no suggestion that they might be the authors of their own misfortune.

¹ *The Times*, 27 December 1882
In the words of another newspaper, they were ‘friendless boys treated with vindictive severity’.3

The idea that it was an individual’s moral choices that determined his life outcome dominated intellectual thought in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the Poor Law of 1834, it found expression in the concept of ‘pauperism’ – that if a person was poor, it was a voluntary condition of that person’s own making.4 Early twentieth century historians such as A.V. Dicey and Sidney and Beatrice Webb saw the influence of such sentiments fading over the century, as the Victorian era moving seamlessly from individualism at its beginning to collectivism at its end. Harris notes that any transition was more complicated than that.5 Governments in the early Victorian period were perfectly willing to intervene periodically in social affairs to, in the words of Home Secretary Sir Assheton Cross in 1875, ‘lubricate an autonomous self-governing pluralistic society and free market economy’.6 It is undoubtedly true, though, that awareness of social problems among elites did increase in the later years of the century. Acceptance of the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin led to the belief that individuals were at the mercy of environmental forces. It was economic determinism, not choice, that led to individuals into ‘poverty’. In the face of these impersonal forces, it increasingly came to be accepted that social policy had a role to play in caring for the weak and dispossessed. In examining the shift in thinking over the period, historians have largely focussed on the extent to which interventionist ideas affected elites. Rather less attention has been given to the extent to which they permeated society. This chapter will look for evidence of that influence in

3 The Truth, 5 April 1894
4 David Englander, Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 11.
6 Quoted by Harris, p. 199.
contemporary responses to the Grimsby apprentices’ criminality and degenerate behaviour. It will then turn to poor law guardians. Standing legally in *loco parentis* for the pauper boys, did they too accept that they had responsibilities of care towards the boys?

Chapter 2 examined the criminality of apprentices – absconding, stopping ships and sabotage – in response to the privations of their working lives. This chapter will concentrate on their social lives. While ashore, still subject to the legal controls of traditional indentures, but largely freed from their inbuilt mechanisms for moral restraint, apprentices embraced drunkenness, crime and vice. Under a traditional fishing apprenticeship, while ashore a boy lodged with his master who fed and clothed him and attended to his welfare by ensuring he kept regular hours and stayed clear of temptation. Such apprentices were known as ‘indoor apprentices’.7 The alternative form was much looser. An ‘outdoor apprentice’ was paid a wage and found his own lodgings and food, with the exercise of care by his master remote and largely ineffective. From the 1861 census, Gerrish identified 38 indoor and 30 outdoor apprentices in Grimsby.8 As the number of apprentices taken on rose rapidly over the next decade, masters could not accommodate all their apprentices in their own homes, and indoor apprentices effectively became outdoor ones, housed in lodging houses of varying quality. When joint stock companies became smack owners, a remote employee of the company acted as an apprentices’ nominal master. Young boys were housed under minimal supervision in purpose-built company dwellings alongside more worldly-wise older apprentices. The care and supervision the boys had received when living with their masters were lost. Boys could please themselves in all the places that a port had to offer. With a few shillings stockerbait

in their pockets, boys frequented pubs, music hall and brothels. Baldwyn Fleming was
horrified to find in 1873

quite small boys [who] told me they could without difficulty get served with as much beer as
they wanted, and I fear that it is no uncommon thing for apprentices of tender years to be
affected by venereal disease.\(^9\)

Furthermore, boys ‘purposely committed offences when so diseased in order that they
might receive medical attention in Lincoln County Prison’. A quarter of the apprentices
sent there from Grimsby in the previous 12 months had arrived with VD.\(^10\)

Boys exhibited behaviour that offended social mores in other ways. The Registers of
Fishing Apprentices are filled with reports of lads with ‘filthy habits’. This is almost
certainly a euphemism for masturbation. The Port Superintendent recorded three separate
times in 1883 Register that Mark Thompson from Basford union was ‘very dirty’ and in
exasperation told his skipper to ‘punish the boy by giving him night watch’. Owners such
as Charles Jeffs of the Great Grimsby Ice Company were worried about the effect the
practice was having on the work force:

Quite two thirds of our lads from workhouses or schools have inherited or caught the habit of
self-abuse, the result of which if not stopped is that phthisis sets in, and they die, or their
reason gives way. I have made a special study of this disease and there is scarcely a day goes
over my head but that I have to take one or more of the lads aside and endeavour to teach
them the dangers of the above practice. The lad named Ringham from Boston, quite two years
before he died, I warned, but he took no heed.\(^11\)

Nor were the boys even free from vice when out on the North Sea. As the practice of
fleeting became common in the 1880s, and a smack’s time away from port was extended to
up to 12 weeks, some crews inevitably sought relief from the long hours of hard labour.
Coopers, or ‘bum boats’ as they were known, were Dutch or Belgium vessels taking
advantage of international waters to supply the fishermen of the fleets with cheap tobacco.

\(^11\) TNA 12/15. Letter from Charles Jeffs to J.S. Davy, 18 September 1894
The more unscrupulous of them surreptitiously extended their supply range to include alcohol and mildly pornographic postcards, with deleterious consequences, as Alexander Gordon of the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen noted with horror:

> It is the fiery aniseed brandies, the poisonous Schiedam schnaps and intoxicating pollution of kindred mixtures that have wrought the dire havoc…Even more atrocious is material that is some of the vilest output of continental lubricity. That is all I can say.¹²

For all his religious zeal and florid prose, Gordon does not express condemnatory sentiments. He quite understood that men and boys found ‘in drunken dissipation at least a temporary relief from their life of insipid joy and humdrum toil’.¹³ On what relief they gained from the ‘continental lubricity’ though, he was less forthcoming. Owners hated the bum boats, but for different reasons. Apart from the obvious dangers of having a drunken crew in charge of their vessels, when a crew’s money ran out, the coopers often accepted a smack’s nets, its sails or its catch in exchange for continuing to supply alcohol.¹⁴ It was not unheard of for an owner to have to retrieve his vessel from new ‘owners’ in Antwerp or Zeebrugge.

Echoes of Gordon’s empathic response to the apprentices in their degeneracy can be seen in campaigning newspapers such as the *Daily Chronicle* and *The Truth*. Boys were portrayed as victims of their circumstances: ‘brutalised’ in the words of the *Chronicle*.¹⁵ In 1894 its ‘Special Grimsby Correspondent’ gave a pen picture of an apprentice. While not entirely managing to dispense with the two mainstays of popular journalism – titillation and prurience – the Correspondent still managed to evoke the reader’s pity:

> I don’t know which is the sight that makes you feel queerest, that of this sea urchin, in his sou’wester, stiff from the voyage and well smeared with dirt and slime, dragging himself along to his barrack in a pair of huge sea boots and sack-like trousers, with a cod or whiting slung over his shoulder, or the same figure in his shore togs, more recognisable now as the

¹³ Gordon, p. 45.
¹⁴ Gordon, p. 46.
¹⁵ *Daily Chronicle*, 16 June 1894
weedy slum type of Bethnal Green and Poplar, Middlesbrough and Sheffield, as he reels home from the music hall, perfectly drunk, with the stump of a cigar between his lips, and his female friends who live on him not far off.\textsuperscript{16}

Such responses were not uniform, as the period was one of transition in attitudes and there were many who still clung to the older way of thinking. The boys never received a great deal of sympathy from the various investigations into the fishing apprenticeship system that took place from 1873. In 1878 W.T. Lundie, headmaster of Grimsby Grammar School, was quite clear that the boys were the authors of their own state of misfortune, concluding his commentary on the fishing trade with the judgement:

\begin{quote}
I am induced to attribute the great number of cases of disorderly apprentices…rather to the restless disposition of the lads than to any other cause. They are well fed and well clad and supplied with far too much ready money…in the midst of the worst temptations.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Berrington and Davy felt similarly in 1894. An apprentice was a young man whose ‘animal instincts are high, and judgement is weak’. He easily gave way to temptation and would think nothing of stopping his ship ‘because he wishes to amuse himself for a day or two longer on shore, or to go to a football match or some other form of entertainment’.\textsuperscript{18} On his copy of the report, preserved in The National Archives, Sir Courtenay Boyle, Head Secretary to Board of Trade, wrote in the margin ‘Simple idleness and truancy’ and presumably turned to resolving more challenging issues.

It is probably that many shared Sir Courtenay’s reductionist approach to social issues, but it has been possible to see in the newspaper coverage of the Grimsby apprentices a conviction that they were victims of the harsh circumstances into which they had been placed, rather than of their own moral weaknesses. These newspapers, though, had only an indirect influence on pauper apprentices’ welfare. Parish guardians stood directly in \textit{loco

\textsuperscript{16} Daily Chronicle, 16 June 1894
\textsuperscript{18} TNA, MAF12/15, \textit{Report by Mr A.D. Berrington and Mr J.S. Davy on an Investigation of the Fishing Apprenticeship System}, 27 July 1894, p. 6
parentis for them. Attention should turn to whether the newer ideas of social welfare influenced the care that they showed to the boys.

Dickens’ Bumble, the beadle in *Oliver Twist*, came to personify early-Victorian poor law administrators: flint-hearted, utterly lacking in compassion and concerned only with minimising the burden of the poor and infirm upon parish ratepayers. *The Truth* invariably included a reference to ‘Bumbles’ in its coverage of the Grimsby apprentices. Historians have tended to the view that this fictional portrayal accurately reflected the reality. Withall found only very limited exercise of care in port apprentices from Liverpool, Bristol and Southampton before 1870, concluding that ‘children’s welfare was not the principal driver behind parish apprenticeships’.19 Honeyman’s revisionist view, based on the Lancashire textile mills at the turn of the nineteenth century was that, while the exercise of care was far from complete, guardians did demonstrate care by conducting checks on potential masters, visiting factories and maintaining post-indenture contact.20 In the period after 1870, Lees has contended that guardians took a conscious decision to treat children differently from adults, with the emphasis on ‘dispauperization’ and ‘family-style care’.21 Did parish guardians show paternalistic care to the Grimsby apprentices of sort identified by Honeyman, or care driven by concepts of social welfare, or did they remain the unfeeling Bumbles of *The Truth*’s portrayal? The answers lie in an examination of the three elements of care – diligence over placing the apprentices, inspection of their work and home environment and maintenance of contact – and the evidence is found in the various official investigations into the fishing trade.

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Baldwyn Fleming’s 1873 investigation was at the behest of the Local Government Board which had responsibility for parish guardians. He did make recommendations for guardians to improve the care given to those indentured at Grimsby, suggesting that they inspect a prospective apprentice’s lodgings and food, as well as assessing his master’s suitability for the task. Fleming though was guilty of passing over a gross abuse of trust that was taking place in the indenturing of boys at Grimsby. He accepted the assurances of Mr Bailey, the gentleman who attested indentures on behalf of their guardians that he (Bailey) always checked them diligently and personally satisfied himself from talking to the boys that they were willing to sign. Fleming confidently stated there was ‘no case in which a lad had not known the full force of what he was doing when he bound himself’.22 The more forensic Board of Trade investigators Stoneham and Swanston five years later found an altogether different story. Stoneham considered the conduct of Mr Bailey and the arrangements for binding boys at Grimsby so ‘wholly indefensible’ that in the middle of the investigation he wrote to the Board of Trade to demand an immediate change. Mr Bailey, rather than being a public official, was a retired customs man who was allowed to sit in Customs House, where he indentured boys while taking a fee from their new masters. It was in his financial interest to bind as many boys as possible, willing or otherwise, and Stoneham estimated he was making £50 a year in this way at 1s or 2s a time.23 Furthermore, the indentures the boys were signing were ordinary ones rather than those dictated by the Merchant Shipping Act 1878 which had required guardians to be made party to them.24 That these practices had operated unchallenged from the 1860s suggests that guardians believed their duty to

22 TNA 32/99, Baldwyn Fleming, Treatment of the Pauper Apprentices, pp.4-5
23 BOT 1882, Appendix 34
24 BOT 1882, Appendix 37, Joint Report of Mr Stoneham & Mr Swanston dated 8 August 1878, p.217
their pauper charges ended when the boys were despatched to Grimsby and the customary £5 clothing allowance handed over to their new masters.

The one union that is known to have made a visit to Grimsby, Bethnal Green in 1873, produced a report whose only slight notes of concern were that boys were allowed to stay out too late and had few places for ‘intellectual amusement’. With its ‘feather beds’ and ‘gentlemen’s yachts’ it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the report’s authors were determined to validate a system which had proved so useful to them in ridding them of burdensome boys. The 1882 Board of Trade Inquiry into the relations between masters and apprentices in the fishing trade did not call evidence from guardians. The inquiry was conducted at a time when bad publicity concerning the ill-treatment of apprentices had scared many unions off sending boys to Grimsby and successive owners used the opportunity of their appearances at the Inquiry to lament their absence. For guardians though, the apprenticeship system may have been too useful for them to allow it to cease for long. From 1882 to 1900, unions sent a further 2,425 boys to Grimsby.

It is from the final investigation into the Grimsby fishing trade – a non-open inquiry conducted in 1894 by Berrington for the Board of Trade and Davy for the Local Government Board – that the most comprehensive understanding can be obtained of the motivations of the guardians for sending these boys to Grimsby and how they saw their responsibilities to the boys once indentures had been signed. Prior to commencing their investigation, Davy wrote to unions asking simply ‘what the experience of the Guardians’ was in relation to boys apprenticed at Grimsby. While any reply to an official request

25 London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) BE/BG 037, Report of the visit of D. Collins (Chairman), J.H. Edwards (Vice-Chairman) on 27/28/29 August to Grimsby as to the Treatment of Apprentices to Smack Owners, p.3
26 TNA, MAF12/15, Letter from J.S. Davy, 14 May 1894
will necessarily be circumspect, the vagueness of the question in this case encouraged a
degree of openness in the 33 letters received from guardians. Berrington and Davy
summarized the replies:

The experience of four others has been more or less unsatisfactory, although the opinion of
none of the four is unfavourable to the system for a certain class of boys.\footnote{TNA, MAF12/15, Report by Mr A.D. Berrington and Mr J.S. Davy, p. 9}

That what made the system satisfactory was that it removed boys from being burdens on
the parish was put starkly enough by C.J. Spence of Nottingham:

The Guardians had every year thrown upon their hands a lot of youths whose education and
moraals were of the lowest and most depraved character; they could only stay in the Union
schools a few months. There were two choices for the lads – either the workhouse or
Grimsby.\footnote{TNA, MAF12/15, Reply dated 18 May 1894}

One of the four unions to express reservations, Liverpool, found the apprenticeship system
‘not entirely satisfactory’. They had sent 35 boys to Grimsby, as many as 19 of whom
returned to the workhouse at the end of their trial voyages. Nevertheless, in a telling
conclusion, the Clerk reported that ‘because the difficulty of placing 14 to 16 year-old boys
was so great’, they had resolved to send another batch.\footnote{TNA, MAF12/15, Letter from H.J. Haggar, 16 May 1894}

The Registers of Fishing Apprentices suggest that unions did not necessarily apply
rigorous selection techniques to the boys they shipped out. Southampton union sent
Archibald Fall to Grimsby in April 1882, only for him to be returned one month later due
to ‘Bad eyes and doctor certified unfit for the sea’.\footnote{North East Lincolnshire Archives (NEL) 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1882}

One of the Liverpool boys, George
Head returned because he was ‘suffering from heart disease and wholly unfit for the sea’.\footnote{NEL 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 30 May 1894}

Unions appeared equally keen to offload boys of suspect character. Charles Jeffs, a director
of the Great Grimsby Ice Company which had hundreds of apprentices complained:

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{TNA, MAF12/15, Report by Mr A.D. Berrington and Mr J.S. Davy, p. 9}
\item \footnote{TNA, MAF12/15, Reply dated 18 May 1894}
\item \footnote{TNA, MAF12/15, Letter from H.J. Haggar, 16 May 1894}
\item \footnote{North East Lincolnshire Archives (NEL) 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 1882}
\item \footnote{NEL 208/1, Register of Fishing Apprentices, 30 May 1894}
\end{itemize}
The notion still prevails with many Guardians that any bad boy will do for the fishery, and this is a great mistake.\textsuperscript{32}

In their replies to Davy, few unions indicated that they had visited Grimsby before or after indenturing boys, despite Fleming’s earlier recommendation. Middlesbrough union did say it had carried out an inspection but the date of its sole reported visit, 6 May 1894, suggests it may have been prompted more by the announcement of Berrington and Davy’s inquiry and the need to present the union in a good light, than routine solicitude. Either way, the clerk to the union could reassuringly report that boys were ‘carefully placed out’ to ‘great credit of the Master’.\textsuperscript{33} For the remainder of unions, receiving ‘no complaints’ from those boys who bothered to write back from Grimsby, or an assurance from the same, and possibly not entirely disinterested, Charles Jeffs that all was well, or just having ‘no reason to suppose that the boys are treated otherwise than well’, appeared to be enough to satisfy any duty of care to the boys.\textsuperscript{34}

Guardians, then, as frontline practitioners of social care were little affected by new ideas of the nature of welfare and responsibility that can be seen in newspaper responses to the apprentices. There is also a complete absence of the older type of paternalistic care identified by Honeyman. Despite recommendations from the Local Government Board to extend the scope of their care, most guardians continued to believe that it ended as soon as the ink was dry on a boy’s indenture. This complacency is best summed up by the response to Davy in 1894 from the Eastbourne union. Leonard Jeffrey, the clerk, reported that they had sent just 4 boys to Grimsby. Little had been heard of any of them except for Alfred

\textsuperscript{32} TNA, MAF12/15, Letter from Charles Jeffs to J.S. Davy, 18 September 1894
\textsuperscript{33} TNA, MAF12/15, Letter from T. Johnson 22 May 1894
\textsuperscript{34} TNA, MAF 12/15, Letters from John Copland, Sheppey, 17 May 1894; John Mellor, Oldham 17 May 1894 and Thomas Crowther, Bradford 24 May 1894
Kirkby, who had died at sea in suspicious circumstances. They were ‘on the whole satisfied’ with the system.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35} TNA, MAF 12/15, Letter dated 16 May 1894
CONCLUSION

This study has sought to explain how pauper apprenticeships came to dominate the fishing labour force at Grimsby in the second half of the nineteenth century and how they led to exploitation and abuse. Chapter 1 found that, faced with an acute labour shortage in the town, smack owners used fishing apprenticeships to supply the necessary crews but that the apprenticeships adopted were far removed from the traditional artisanal model, creating an unfree, unpaid labour force of dispossessed and poverty-stricken boys.

Chapter 2 then examined the ways in which apprenticed boys were exploited and abused, detailing the physical and mental ill-treatment many boys experienced. It found that, when boys sought to escape from such abuse by fleeing or by sabotage, owners were able to assert control over their charges using the legal coercion inherent in indentures and aided by a compliant magistracy, to reassert their control when challenged by progressive legislation.

Chapter 3 considered the ways in which the boys’ alienation led many of them into deviant behaviour and found that acceptance of determinist views of poverty and belief in the concept of welfare manifested themselves in sympathetic and caring responses to this behaviour. It could find little evidence of a similar thinking among parish guardians, who clung to traditional moralistic approaches.

Horn has shown that it is possible to interpret the apprenticeship mechanism at Grimsby more favourably and to see, in the transfer of fishing skills and the possibility of a structured career post-apprenticeship, the survival of elements of the artisanal
Such a view is largely predicated on the untested assumption that apprentices ultimately stayed in the fishing labour force after they ‘came out of their time’. It may equally, though, have been the case that skills learned on sailing smacks were not readily transferrable to steam trawlers and that the latter were crewed by a mainly new labour force. Testing the assumptions about their life outcomes represents an opportunity for further research.

This study began with the story of one Leeds Reformatory apprentice. It should end with another. Charles Hodson complained of being assaulted on his very first trial voyage from Grimsby in April 1881. No action on the complaint was deemed necessary. The following year he was ‘brutally beaten’ aboard the Hopeful. The perpetrator served two months’ imprisonment. ‘Since then, boy gave much trouble and stole clothes.’ Eventually, he absconded and was not heard of again. Owners liked to claim that the fishing apprentice system at Grimsby ‘put many a lad on the high road to a better condition in society’. Motivated by avarice and expediency, they used the system to exploit generations of vulnerable pauper boys, leaving them alienated, abused, and, like Charles Hodson, abandoned by the side of that high road.

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