

Revival of a Great UK Fishing Fleet?

By Geoff Walker



A rough night in Icelandic Waters



Long gone are the heady days of the major British fishing ports during the 1960-70s, such as Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Hull, Grimsby, Fleetwood, Kingston-upon-Hull, Brixham, Lowestoft, Whitby, and Newlyn, to name but only a few.

Throughout history, the Great Britain always enlisted a significant fishing fleet, netting a wide variety Pelagic and Demersal fish, both in coastal and distant waters. British trawlers, and drifters, were commonly seen sailing in large fleets to and from the fishing grounds, in support of a major domestic fishing industry.

The entry of the UK as a member of the European Union (or Common Market as it was then known) in 1973 caused the rapid decline of the fishing industry, as the UK was progressively stripped of its fishing rights under the EU imposed Common Fishing Policy (CFP), with foreign trawlers from other EU nations granted substantial access to British coastal waters, leaving the fleet with a pittance of the allowable catch, causing the inevitable near demise of the fishing fleets and industry. It was the quota the UK was permitted to land under this policy that caused the problems for UK fishermen. For decades, fishermen across Britain have complained about regulations imposed by the European Union.

By way of comparisons within the EU, at the end of December 2019, the number of vessels in the UK's fishing fleet was only the seventh largest in the EU after Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, and France. The UK's fishing fleet was second largest in the EU in terms of gross tonnage, after Spain. This latter measure is a better indicator of fishing capacity.

Now, with the UK leaving the EU and regaining full sovereignty over its coastal and fishing waters, perhaps there will once again be an economically viable fishing industry. The British Isles should celebrate the soon to be reinvigorated UK fishing fleet, as of 1st January 2021. Time will tell, but the opportunity has finally presented itself to the previously disadvantaged fishermen, once again to achieve their former greatness. Especially if financial support plans announced by the UK Government eventuate

This short article is a salute to the UK fishing fleets of the past, and the anticipated re-growth of its fleet ready to reap the benefits of newly regained fishing independence.

One of the big discrepancies in the mix is the number of large trawlers, owned by foreign companies, but placed under the British Flag. These super trawlers “hoover up” almost everything in UK coastal waters then land their catch either in Dutch or German ports. In the process they do much to destroy many fish species. The only benefit to the UK is the registration fees from those foreign owned trawlers placed under UK flag, which is a miniscule amount in the overall equation.



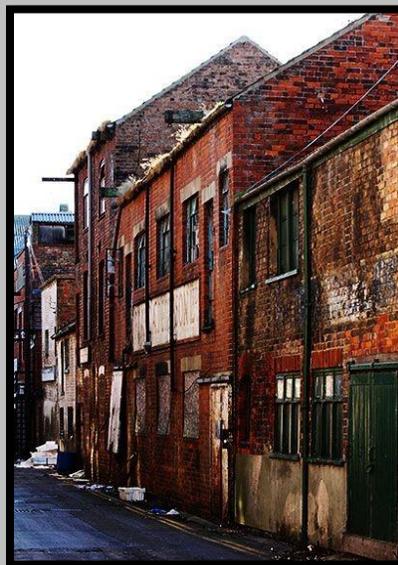
Foreign flag Super Trawlers such as this, decimating fish stocks in UK waters.

The UK sees little if any benefit since the vessel owners have bought up much of the UK fishing quotas.



Another Foreign owned Super Trawler pillaging UK waters

The decaying remnants of a once vibrant Hull fishing industry, for example, can be seen in the narrow streets behind the Fish Docks of Grimsby, known as the Kasbah, in which still stand the many buildings that housed the once thriving, warehouses, fish outlets, markets, traders, ship chandlers, etc. Sadly, many of the old warehouses are still standing, but the majority are boarded up and in a state of dereliction. Another abandoned building was once the world's largest ice factory. It churned out ice blocks by the ton, which were then crushed up and sent to the dock and trawlers. This was obviously in the days prior to self-sustaining, "Freezer" trawlers. Now, the factory roof is in a state of collapse, falling in. Fenced off by a mesh fence and a symbol of Grimsby's fall from fame, fortune, and grace. Recent years have seen an effort to clean-up and revitalize the once thriving area, but it will never regain the sounds, smells and cultural nostalgia of years long gone, including fishermen with cash loaded pockets, known as "3day millionaires", after a successful 2-3week fishing trip, to distant fishing grounds.



The consequences of the EU's CFP – a derelict urban society! Image of abandoned fishing businesses.



External view of the former Ice - House at Grimsby Docks, ca 1970s



Above and below - Images of the now derelict Ice – house at Grimsby Docks, resulting from CFP, and typical of the decimation to the Fishing Industry in the UK



A modern - day Trawler, registered in Peterhead, Scotland.

Below, a relatively modern Penzance Trawler the “St Georges”



One of the latest
British Trawler
designs



Could this be the Trawler of the future under UK Flag? A relatively new Russian design for Deepwater Trawlers.



The sun rises but stays low on the horizon, in the Arctic Circle. Let us hope for more altitude of the Sun after Brexit, in terms of a redeemed fishing industry.

Morbid nostalgic memories over the “days that were”, will not regenerate our ailing fishing industry but rather, let us hope that BREXIT and the ending of the transition period as of 1st January 2021, the sun has risen once again, and signals the rebirth of the UK Fishing Industry with a rejuvenated word class fleet. Even though the UK Fishing Industry only contributes a tiny part towards the UK economy – it has become emblematic of a spirited, independent Britain, freed from the restraints, restrictions and regulations set by other people in other countries, inaugurating its own way in the world of fishing.

In view of the recently secured “deal” on fishing, a senior member of the UK negotiating team said the trade deal and accompanying funding package would help "rebuild" Britain's fishing industry and get it back to "the eminence it deserves", within five years. The terms of the deal on fishing agreed between

London and Brussels represented a significant compromise on both sides, an inevitable outcome. Was any notion of anything more favorable just, pure speculation, naivety and “wishful thinking”?

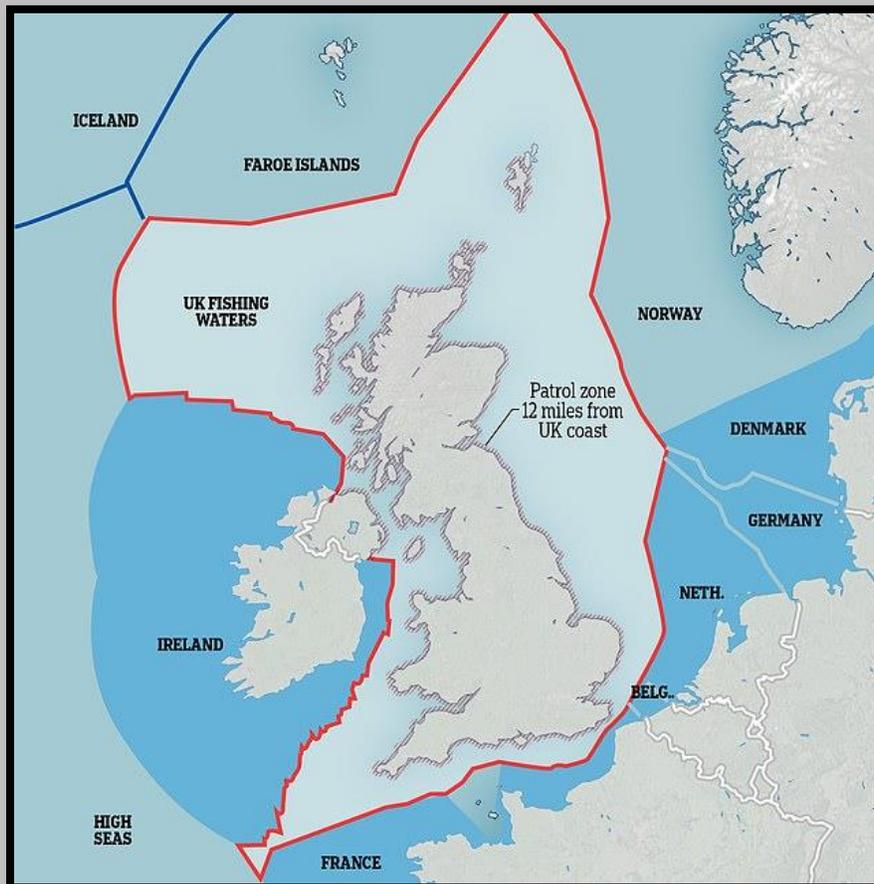
There is potential for Britain's fishing industry to be restored to its former glory within five years. Can this be achieved? This is a conundrum. Some within the fishing industry will accuse the UK Government of selling out the industry. When push came to shove, despite the legal, moral, and political strength of the UK's case, fishing was partially sacrificed for the overall national interest, based on its national net worth to the Union.

In the overall scheme of things, in an ideal scenario, the UK would have liked to have been a faster transition period, less than 5 years - ideally 3 years, but that was best the UK negotiators were able to agree. At the end of that period there is full control and normal, annual negotiations on foreign quotas.

At best, the deal will be seen by those in the industry as recognizing UK sovereignty over their waters.

Foreign-owned super trawlers, presently control almost a quarter of England's fishing quota, will take biggest share after Brexit, their catch going directly to EU ports. Anti-Supertrawler campaigners claim more than half of England's fishing quota will be controlled by foreign fishing companies and they want a radical overhaul of fisheries policy, in banning these destructive ships from UK waters.

This map below shows the extent of the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone - the waters Britain will take back control of following Brexit.



Plans are afoot by the government to consider banning the large supertrawlers from UK waters, and Foreign-owned vessels which are UK-registered, must meet certain conditions to show an 'economic link' to the UK, not just by Flag alone. The UK The Government is proposing to strengthen the rules from January 1st, 2022 requiring these vessels to land 70 per cent of their catch in UK ports or to hand back some of their quota. The big boats can earn £500,000 on a single trip. Lorries line up at ports such as IJmuiden in the Netherlands, ready to take up to 2,500 tons off to markets around the world, making vast profits for their owners.

An analysis of records held by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2018 found Spanish fishing companies control much of the quota from the Bristol Channel to the Scottish border. Whilst Dutch and Icelandic groups dominate on the east coast, and most of the Welsh quota is controlled by foreign companies. Only a small proportion of quota in Scotland and Northern Ireland is foreign controlled.

The fleet of ten super-trawlers – an unprecedented number for the English Channel – has been busy scooping up thousands of tons per day of herring and mackerel. The fleet, which includes The British, Dutch, and French-flagged vessels, use sophisticated technology to track the biggest shoals and keeps mainly outside the 12-mile zone of UK waters.

A relatively recent Greenpeace investigation found 25 super-trawlers fished for 2,963 hours in 39 Marine Protected Areas around the UK coast in just one year. In the first six months of 2020, super-trawlers spent 5,590 hours working these protected areas and Greenpeace expects the final tally for 2020 will be four times higher than the previous year. These figures have been rising steadily in recent years. We are not calling for these vessels to be banned but they should be prevented from entering protected and sensitive maritime areas,' said a spokesperson for Greenpeace UK.

Britain has led international efforts to protect almost one-third of global waters – yet Ministers rejected a bid earlier this year to stop super-trawlers from harvesting fish in these protected areas, which cover 40 per cent of England's seas. The fleet owners argue that their fishing takes place further offshore and often in bad weather so requires bigger boats, while insisting they target abundant stocks and follow sustainable practices.

Greenpeace argues that prohibiting super-trawlers from protected areas offers the chance of 'a Brexit dividend' that does not depend on trade talks. Crucially, it would show that Ministers are serious both about taking back sovereignty and protecting the environment.

Yet these issues of competing national interests, rapacious fishing fleets, protection of precious fish stocks and safeguarding coastal communities go far beyond Britain's coastal borders. Global overfishing has certainly become a hot topic nowadays.

There is widespread global concern over 300 Chinese fishing boats and supporting fuel tankers in waters close to the Galapagos Islands, with their unique wildlife, to scoop up hordes of giant squid and fish. China, the world's biggest exporter of seafood, has 17,000 'distant water' vessels compared with an EU fleet of 300 boats and a 230-strong US fleet. Having depleted their own seas, they are sailing far further afield to many areas which encroach upon the sovereignty of other nations, with the intent to also pillage and devastate those waters.

Many Chinese boats are so big they grab as many fish in a few days as African or South American vessels catch in a year. Chinese crews often stretch nets between boats, a technique loathed by marine conservationists since it leads to huge bycatch. Analysts believe, Beijing heavily subsidizes its fishing fleet to extend its influence and reach around the world, while also supporting an industry that employs millions of Chinese, to ensure they remain subservient to the Communist regime.

The exploitation of Fishing certainly has evolved into a highly sensitized and volatile political issue, on the international stage and it will be interesting to follow how the UK fishing sector will navigate its way through the challenging times that lay ahead, over the next 5 years.

No matter what your preferences in the political spectrum, one should place trust the Government's commitment to rebuilding the UK Fishing Industry, and which translates into real actions, and not simply rhetoric, to pacify Fishing Industry campaigners.

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