

## **British Whaling Activity to the north of Australia**

### **Background**

For 350 years until the early 1960s the British were involved in several types of whaling and sealing. This involvement was divided into three distinct trades; the northern whale fishery between 1610 and 1914; the southern whale fishery or 'south seas trade' from 1775 to 1859; and the modern whaling trade, from 1904 to 1963. Each of the trades was distinguished by the geographical location in which it was undertaken, the types of whales pursued and to some extent by the methods and techniques used to capture whales. The northern and southern whale fisheries were even differentiated and defined by law.

The 'south seas trade' has always been the most poorly understood of these trades – a 'Cinderella'. Until A G E Jones undertook his massive project to document the trade by indexing *Lloyds List* and the *Registers of Shipping* we hardly knew which ships; who commanded them; how many voyages; and, where they went – the trade was unseen and unappreciated. When British whaleships ventured to the bottom of the Atlantic we didn't even know whether they sailed east or west? Even today we still don't know this for a couple of hundred voyages.

But we do now know that 947 vessels made a total of 2550 voyages to the southern whale and seal fisheries with at least 293 of them (perhaps more) voyaging to the north of Australia where they undertook whaling to the north-west of Australia through the Moluccas and across the top of New Guinea to the Solomon Islands.

It is to the nature of these 293 plus voyages that this paper is addressed. By identifying candidate voyages for British and American whaleships from the Whaling History website datasets a picture of frequency, seasonality and whaling grounds frequented by the two fleets have been drawn. American whalers did frequent Indonesian waters but apparently not to the same scale as the British.

### **Whaling in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia)**

Until 1798 British whaleships were not even allowed to sail or trade in the Indian Ocean to the northwest of Australia as the vast area above 10 degrees south was the province of the Honourable East India Company (HEIC). But this monopoly was being challenged by both the whaleship owners and their supporters within the Government. Though the HEIC resisted, by 1802 it had been directed to permit British whaleships to proceed under licence to the north of Australia. By a quirk of fate the narrow channel made available to the whaleships, essentially to the south, and then east of Java to above the equator, passing through a number of areas well populated by sperm whales.

Over the next 50 years at least 293 British whaling voyages were made through or undertook whaling in this area. In July and August 1804 a fleet of British whaleships were at the Dutch port of Coupang [Kupang] on the southwest side of Timor. The vessels included the *Charlton* (owned by Mathers); the *Commerce*; *Elizabeth*; and *Mary* (owned by Lucas & Co.); the *Eliza*; *Elliot*; and *Fox* (owned by Daniel Bennett); *Iris* (owned by Hurry & Co.); *Greenwich* (owned by the Enderby partnership); the *Perseverance*; and *Policy* (owned by the Mellish family); and *Venus* (owned by Champion & Co.). This gathering established a pattern of reprovisioning and then operating from Kupang and other ports across the Dutch East Indies [modern day Indonesia] which persisted for the next 50 years.

Where did these British whaleships find the whales they were seeking and in what sort of numbers? After having traversed the Indian Ocean on a northeast course, very often passing using the Islands of Saint-Paul and Amsterdam as sighting points, the whalers would first encounter sperm whales to the south-west of Java. They would then sail under Java encountering whales to the south and south-west of Sumba before calling at Kupang to re-provision. Often this might be only the first port of call since the Azores or Cape Verde Islands.

From Kupang British whalers had a number of options. During certain months the Timor Strait off Kupang was frequented by migrating large males. They could sail back towards Sumba and southwest to the grounds of northwest Australia or northeast through the Timor Strait towards Buru, Ambon and Seram. Options also existed to the west on the eastern side of Sulawesi and north or northwest to the Molucca, Celebes or Sulu Seas. The ports of Ternate in the Moluccas and the small village of Kema on Sulawesi were other re-provisioning ports. To the southeast of Seram the deep waters in the Gorong and Watubela archipelagos down to the Kai Islands also offered opportunities.

By the 1820s the reach of British whalers had extended even further. To the northeast in April past the south of the Philippines through the Marianna and Bonin [Ogasawara] Islands and the rich whaling grounds off Japan. Alternatively, they could cruise east along the equator north of New Guinea to encounter whales in large numbers around New Britain, New Ireland, Bouka and the Solomon Islands. In more instances than not, the whaler would also re-traverse these same paths to undertake another season of whaling in Indonesia.

## **Bibliography**

### Books

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Ships Employed in the South Seas Trade 1775-1859: Volume 3 - A G E Jones. Edited by Dale Chatwin (2014)

### Datasets

BSWF Voyage dataset - <https://whalinghistory.org/bv/voyages/>

American Offshore Whaling Logbooks - <https://whalinghistory.org/av/logs/aowl/>

### Websites

British Southern Whale Fishery - <https://www.britishwhaling.org/>

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