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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Harold Fox. *The Evolution of the Fishing Village: Landscape and Society along the South Devon Coast, 1086-1550.* Leicester Explorations in Local History. Oxford: Leopard's Head Press, 2001. xviii + 208 pp. Â£13.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-904920-43-7.

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Published on H-Albion (August, 2002)

Fishing, the Fishing Village, and the Agrarian Economy

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Harold Fox's understated title is quite properly puffed by its jacket blurb. This is indeed "the first full-length study of medieval fisheries, fishing families and fishing settlements for any stretch of coastline anywhere in Britain." It is important for what it says about south Devon, and for the wider implications which its theoretical modelling has for the much longer British coastline. And, since virtually no part of Britain was beyond the reach of supplies of fresh fish during the middle ages, it is important for what it reveals about a neglected part of the agrarian economy.

The "evolution" of the title in some ways mirrors the end of the book's story, the transformation of earlier coastal cellar settlements (generally not dwellings but storage cellars for boats and nets) into fully fledged fishing villages. In south Devon this seems to have occurred in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Long ago W. G. Hoskins felt that the fishing village was thus one of the few new settlement types in the later middle ages, and that its organization was "more or less capitalistic".[1] More recent writers have argued that the modern specialized fishing village had few antecedents before the eighteenth century. Fox's study takes a long view and meticulously establishes the pattern of fishing in its social, economic, and landscape context, dissenting from both traditional opinions. The book may also profitably be read alongside Maryanne Kowaleski's recent work on medieval markets and trade in Exeter which is handsomely acknowledged throughout the text.[2]

Longshore fishing voyages to distant waters seem to have been restricted to port towns, and may have been undertaken by those who were permanently occupied by fishing. But the greater part of the catch in south Devon before the sixteenth century was made outside the towns. Here coastal fishing was undertaken on a part-time basis by men who also farmed. Mostly they belonged to the smallholder or smallholder-craftsmen class rather than the ranks of the larger farmers or landless laborers. Their dwellings were thus generally to be found inland rather than along the foreshore. This separation apparently reflects administrative arrangements of some antiquity and gave rise to a variety of settlement forms

in coastal parishes. The early chapters review the nature of these early modern coastal settlements, ports, quays and fishing villages, and their administrative geography. The now familiar (to landscape historians) study of detached parochial portions along the foreshore reveals that estates sought to retain coastal rights. Haccombe with Combe, for example, shared the southern edge of the Teign estuary with its neighbor, Stoketeignhead, but retained a sandy cove on the shore of Babbacome bay which gave it access to the open sea. The arrangements resemble those of manors in Kent with woodland rights on the Weald. The foreshore had an economic value beyond its access to coastal fishing; local inhabitants gathered shellfish and sea-birds, seaweed and a host of minor commodities, or dug and carried shell-rich sands to improve the quality of inland soils. Salt, however, seems largely to have disappeared during the thirteenth century as cheap imports from the sunnier Bay of Biscay rendered local production by evaporation uneconomical.

For much of the medieval period permanent settlements on the coast were rare. In south Devon, fishing farmers and others stored their boats, nets and other equipment in cellars or storage huts on the strand but lived inland. Some fifty or more survived into the sixteenth century at Starcross on the Exe estuary, used by those within the parish of Kenton and by some outsiders. They were rarely planned sites and cellar-settlements, like the fishing villages which succeeded them, existed (according to a memorable phrase) "in a close-knit disarrangement of buildings" (p. 134). Only Combe Cellars, on the Teign estuary, survives as a modern placename and it is a tribute to Fox's renowned knowledge and command of Devon sources that he has been able so compellingly to recover the details of these unusual topographical features, and their organization, which characterized south Devon fishing. The same is true of his discussion of fishing practice and its associated technologies, from the use of seine nets and snares to fish watching, an ancient communal practice which was manorialized by lords equally watchful of their profits. At Stokenham on Start Bay some two dozen "fish watchers," men and women, were summoned seasonally each year and in rotation from inland tenancies to spot the progress of fish swimming offshore from Slapton Sands.

Much of the evidence here adduced has been painstakingly assembled from a bewildering array of sources, but three well-documented parishes provide Fox with sharply illuminated views of the parts of the craft and its practice. There are excellent, if late, maps and surveys for Kenton, tithe accounts for Woodbury, and custumals for Stokenham. These places form the basis of three detailed case studies. At Woodbury, in an impressive run of tithe accounts between 1423 and 1435, the rapacious vicars choral of Exeter cathedral listed by name those who paid small and personal tithes on a range of lesser "animals" such as geese, or on the profits of their craft, that is to say fishing. The lists give a view of those who fished and confirm that neither the poor nor the wealthy were much involved. The tithes also reveal that there were few large-scale fishers but that many of the middling ranks in the community at Woodbury fished regularly on a small scale. Fishing thus provided additional income for those not wholly engaged in farming, but able to meet the capital requirements of running a boat and nets. For some farmers in Stokenham, where demanding seigneurial labor services continued until a late date, fishing may have been undertaken by tied cottage-laborers who lived in specially constructed cottages close to the farms.

The marketing and distribution of fish, first offered for sale on the shore itself (and thus the target of seigneurial enterprise and market creation), and then sent to inland boroughs and port towns is described. But catches were also carried further afield by ship and by pack-horse, the latter no doubt the direct descendants of contemporary middlemen who magically arrive in English villages in small white vans laden with fresh fish. Some of these networks can be followed in the accounts of lordly estates, some of which, like the abbess of Syon in Middlesex, used their own coastal manors (Sidmouth in this case) to provide regular supplies of fresh fish. The arrangement much resembles the connections between rural manors in the north-west and the salt-houses of the Cheshire wiches.

All of this would seem to have been the dominant model during the middle ages and, as Fox hints, for much longer beyond the documentary barrier of Domesday. But in Devon it was transformed in the later fifteenth century as many cellar settlements became permanent fishing villages in which fishermen, for the first time in centuries, began to turn their backs to the land in newly-built cottages and chapels. The book considers five examples (Dittisham, Hallsands and the three Cockwoods) and convincingly rejects both arguments of climatic change and increased coastal security following the close of the Hundred Years War. Rather the fishing village is seen as the product of a population surge in Devon during the period from c. 1480 to c. 1520. Fox's model of this change is sophisticated and persuasive. An overflow of people is seen as favoring migration towards the waste or

in coastal regions towards the shore. That same growth may have triggered increasing demands both for fish and for other farm produce, at once limiting opportunities for part-time fishing by fisher-farmers and creating opportunities for full-time fishing. By and large these communities seem not to have been capitalistic, but perhaps to have comprised marginal outsiders. Some consideration of occasional social differentiation in fishing villages and of the more usual round of shared action and solidarity is reserved to the book's conclusion, though the implicit contrast, between a craft which, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, required more capital than the poor could command and that, which in the late fifteenth century, seemed to attract the marginal outsider, is somewhat elided. One wonders what resources the new fishing villagers could initially command.

This model is significant, and in a discursive conclusion which moves around the British coast, the author suggests that it may have a wider application, albeit with widely varying chronologies in different regions. There is an interesting discussion of the Lincolnshire coast's somewhat contrasting experience. The book thus ends with an invitation to further research in other communities. In fact the author makes such invitations throughout his own study, suggesting profitable territories for future research and pointing honestly to gaps in his own work. This is Leicester local history at its best, collaborative, almost conspiratorial, and local history as a social movement. It is also an engaging and well-produced book. Moments of Proustian reflection, as for example in the lyrical description of Dittisham, re-create very real places in the reader's mind. The delineation of Thomas Huntbear of Houndbeare (pp. 109-10), a substantial farmer in Woodbury, equally conjures a real person. This is an insider's vision of medieval Devon. The footnotes, too, are often a joy. I especially enjoyed the discussion of a translation for *scorpio*, traditionally "stickleback" but perhaps "prawn" (p. 60), and the confessional note 6 in chapter 5. The illustrations are definitely working pictures; who else could read the detail of Norden's map of Devon, that beyond the pilchard fishing by seine net, a fish watcher stands on the shore and female fish carrier transports fish in a basket on her head?

Stokenham's late fourteenth-century lords were the Montacute family. The book draws attention to John Montacute's "murder ... for his religious beliefs" (p. 122). He appears only to explain the migrations of part of Stokenham's archive to the Huntington library. Montacute was beheaded by a Cirencester mob during the abortive revolt of the earls in support of Richard II in 1400. Perhaps it was then no accident that a contemporary chronicler (*Traison et Mort*, ed. 1846) commented that his head and other body parts, later salted to preserve them, was sent to London in a basket "like fish for the market." Harold Fox has helped to restore the very real world on which that half-joke rested.

Notes

[1]. *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955), p. 97.

[2]. *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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