Fishermen and their families in late medieval and Tudor Kent

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As an island nation, fishing and fishermen have played a key role in England’s history throughout the ages. The provision of fish to an expanding population became even more crucial because of the medieval Church’s teachings regarding the designation of certain seasons and particular days as non-meat days. Although such strictures applied to the general populace, the growth in the numbers of religious houses from the later Anglo-Saxon period, but especially under the Norman and Angevin kings, resulting from the monastic reform movement, meant that an increasing section of the population applied dietary restrictions more widely and rigorously. These demands provided opportunities along the supply chain from those who caught the fish to those who supplied customers at the inland urban markets, as well as in London, with the city’s fishmongers becoming one of the wealthiest and most important of its merchant guilds. For the Kent ports, this provided considerable opportunities for the many fishermen and their families. Much of this rested on the dominance of herring, but by the late Middle Ages, this had changed, bringing a shift in the balance between the eastern and western ports. Yet, the Kentish fishermen appear to have continued to take advantage of their local fishing grounds, as well as adapting as necessary to changing conditions, and it is this proposition that is explored in this chapter.

The rise and fall of king herring

Even though a wide variety of fish might be served at monastic, aristocratic, and other tables, the herring was king, and such was its dominance that herring from the east coast of England was sold in the Devon markets of Exeter. Moreover, presumably in part to ensure sufficient supplies, monastic and other manorial lords sought renders in herring by the thousand, as exemplified by documentary sources including the Domesday Book, and it has been estimated that over three and a quarter million were caught annually in the late eleventh century. The provision of seasonal markets along the English eastern seaboard similarly reflects the herring’s pre-eminence. As a migratory species, the shoals moved south from the Baltic into the North Sea.
Fishermen during the autumn, which meant that the first fair at Newcastle began on 1 August, followed by, among others, Whitby on 25 August. The first of the great fairs took place at Scarborough between 15 August and 29 September, and the second at Great Yarmouth between late September and mid-November, while that at Grimsby began on 13 September and ended on 20 September. In the later stages of the autumn, the herring shoals continued their southern migration, passing through the Dover Straits and into the English Channel. This provided further opportunities for some coastal fishermen with, for instance, the Domesday entry for Dover seemingly implying that the town’s fishermen in the late eleventh century had returned to the town by 30 November (the feast of St Andrew).

Great Yarmouth’s premier position among the east coast fairs, and thus its dominance within the herring trade, was in part a reflection of the heavy involvement of London fishmongers, as well as the presence of the great monasteries, which often held property at the port in order to procure herring stocks. Overseas merchants, too, were major buyers, including men from Gascony and Spain. Complications over the hosting system employed at Great Yarmouth at times resulted in friction between local burgesses and Londoners, but the greatest resentment was reserved for the Cinque Ports fishermen who, by the thirteenth century, collectively received royal authority to oversee the running of the fair and to retain certain dues collected. Kent mariners comprised by far the largest contingent of these Cinque Ports fishermen who, together and individually, jealously guarded this privilege, and were even prepared to defend by force what they saw as their rightful role.

However, this dominance of the eastern ports in the national fishing industry and the high level of involvement of fishermen from the Cinque Ports confederation in the deep-sea herring fleets was not sustained into the later Middle Ages. As Mary-anne Kowaleski, in particular, has argued, the post-Black Death era witnessed a rise in the relative importance of the west coast fishermen, who were able to capitalize on the problems experienced by the eastern ports. Both Yarmouth and Scarborough witnessed a massive decline in the size of the fleets that used these ports, and, as Mark Bailey has shown, the Suffolk town of Dunwich and the coastal villages around it similarly saw a marked decline in the numbers of fishermen and boats. In part, these issues related to natural factors, such as the difficulties caused by storm damage and deposition due to longshore drift that threatened to block the deep-harbour facilities at many ports, including Yarmouth. Attempts by all the head ports of the confederation to counter such problems were only partially successful, and the work was expensive in terms of financial commitments and labour. Moreover, at New Romney and Sandwich, for example, costly experiments in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were initiated to try to flush out the sea channels, with little or no success.

Others factors that led to the downturn in the eastern herring industry in the later fourteenth century were the problems Yarmouth, as the leading port, suffered relating to trading factors, especially the growing monopoly of local merchants, the lessening of interest by Londoners, the availability of salt for curing, and increased competition from the Low Countries. In part, the latter was seemingly a consequence of technological developments, both with respect to boat design and building, and
techniques relating to fish preservation, a key feature for those seeking involvement in the long-distance or export trade.15

Such difficulties meant that the herring industry lost its dominance. Instead, fishermen turned increasingly to other species, leading to the availability of a much greater range of fish for a generally more affluent post-Black Death society, notwithstanding that the total population had fallen by between a third and a half. For the west coast fishermen, this offered considerable opportunities, and by employing a variety of preservation methods, these Westermen exploited the rich fishing grounds around Ireland, and to a lesser degree those close to Iceland. Moreover, by embarking on such long-distance fishing voyages during the summer, these fishermen were able to export their repacked fish cargoes to the expanding markets of Brittany, Iberia, and other southern European destinations, as well as participate in the Gascony wine trade during the autumn. A further advantage of being able to engage in this overseas trade was the opportunity to bring back salt relatively cheaply from Bourgneuf Bay.16

Not all the catch was exported, and growing home demand was another important factor in the rise of the west coast fishermen. Even though the picture is complex, some West Country towns expanded markedly between 1377 and 1524–5.17 In addition, large urban centres such as Bristol offered marketing opportunities, which were apparently taken up by coastal fishermen in Devon, Cornwall, and Somerset. How much of this trade fresh fish comprised is unquantifiable because it does not feature in the customs accounts, but Kowaleski’s work on tithe records suggests it was a significant sector.18 Even if the financial returns from fish did not match those achieved in mercantile trading, the West Country fishing industry employed a sizeable proportion of the coastal population. Yet it is worth noting that those engaged in fishing or allied trades were often part of multi-functional households, thereby combining these activities with farming or another craft.19 Consequently, seasonality was probably a crucial factor, leading to catches of mackerel, pilchards, and hake, as fishermen worked the local fishing grounds in the spring, as well as the summer season. Such occupational integration led to the development of a workforce that was able to take advantage of marine exploration, long-distance trading, and other opportunities during the reigns of the later Tudor monarchs.20

This is a very compelling case, but what about the fishermen and their families in late medieval and Tudor Kent? Had the marked decline in the North Sea herring industry led to their demise, or had post-Black Death Kentish fishermen looked elsewhere in order to continue to earn their living from the sea? If so, and if, akin to their west coast peers, they had extended their fishing of the local coastal waters to supply the home market, what are the most valuable documentary sources to chart such activities?21 To answer these questions, the remainder of this chapter focuses on two areas. First, it examines the evidence to ascertain the incidence and range of the fishing activities that took place in Kent during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Second, it investigates the experiences of a well-documented fishing family. The sources that permit such a study are probate materials, which can be supplemented by other documentary records. The use of the last will and testament had become relatively widespread in Kent from the middle of the fifteenth century, even though for the diocese of Rochester only the Consistory Court records are extant. Inventories

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do not survive from before Elizabeth I’s reign, but they are relatively plentiful there-
after and considerable numbers include items relating to fishing.
Looking beyond the probate sources, there are materials such as estate records, includ-
ing for the Canterbury Christ Church Priory manor of Leysdown, the custu-
mal from the archiepiscopal manor of Teynham, and lists of fish sent to Boxley
Abbey from its Medway fishery.22 Central government and local civic records,
especially from several of the Cinque Ports are similarly valuable.23 Of special note
within these civic archives are the maletotes, local taxation returns that provide
evidence regarding the identities of fishermen, the size of their annual catch, the
methods employed, the fish species caught, and the time of year the catch occurred.
Archaeological excavations in recent years have also offered useful evidence regard-
ing identification of the species caught, fishing techniques, and preparation and stor-
age of the catch.24

Fishing and fishermen: the Kent evidence
Kent’s extremely long coastline, like that of Cornwall and to a lesser extent Devon,
provided the county’s fishermen with a wide range of marine species from shellfish
such as oysters and mussels to herring, mackerel, cod, sprats, and other fish, as well
as sea mammals including porpoises. Furthermore, the three different coastlines of
north, east, and south offered estuarine habitats, foreshores that could be used for fish
weirs or traps called kiddles, and offshore fishing grounds where hooks and lines, in
addition to nets, could be employed. Ideas regarding the level of such diversity can
be gleaned from the nomenclature applied to nets, for example, and in the probate
sources alone, over 30 names are listed for medieval and Tudor Kent. For the south
and east coasts as far as the Isle of Thanet, the most common names are flew, shot,
and sprot, others being drawe, tucke, raigth, and norward.25 Some nets were named
for the species caught: herring, mackerel, plaice, mullet, prawn, pilcher, and shrimp,
with one reference to a ‘porpose’ net.26 The presence of ‘flew’ nets shows that herring
continued to form part of the catch. Flews were a type of drift net that were used in
the local, coastal fishing grounds.27 In addition, some fishermen continued to fish for
herring in the much deeper waters of the North Sea where they used another type of
drift net, the much deeper ‘norward’ nets.28 The Hythe maletote records also provide
evidence for North Sea herring fishing. For example, in 1447 a third of those taxed
as fishermen had landed at least part of their catch at Yarmouth, although often it is
not clear what proportion was landed at the Norfolk port compared to the home
port of Hythe.29

The presence of shot nets, another type of drift net, similarly highlights the signifi-
cance of inshore fishing because they were used to catch mackerel since they were less
deep than flew nets, while the third most common net, the ‘sprot’ net, was employed
to catch sprats in the coastal waters around Kent during the winter months. Notwith-
standing their more limited appearance in the probate records, ‘tramel’ nets, a form of
trawl net, were used by some Hythe fishermen to catch bottom-dwelling fish such as
plaice and other flat fish.30 This form of fishing had been a specialism of Hythe and
Rye to the west from at least the thirteenth century.31
Furthermore, by linking the type of net and fish species to the different fishing seasons, it is clear that Kent fishermen did not confine their fishing activities to the autumn herring season. The coastal waters around Kent provided opportunities for fishermen for much of the year, as exemplified by this division of the year into fishing seasons or ‘fares’. Unlike Brighton, which had eight seasons and Rye, which had five, it is more difficult to ascertain exactly how the year was subdivided in New Romney, Dover, and Sandwich, but the Hythe records are more enlightening. When Thomas Risdale appeared before the mayor and jurats in April 1480, for example, he was able to describe his work (and hence his income) using a combination of fish species, catching methods, and fishing seasons. Regarding the latter, he had been involved in the Yarmouth fare before returning to Hythe, probably in mid-November, to continue fishing for herring in the Channel. Herring was not the only fish he was interested in because, between the feast of St Edmund, king and martyr (20 November) and Christmas, he went line fishing, possibly for cod and mullet. Although he referred to the fishing season before Easter as ‘lentfare’, some of his contemporaries saw it as beginning on the feast day of the Purification of the Virgin Mary (2 February) and extending until Easter. After Easter the ‘tramel’ fare began, which for some ended about the feast day of the Nativity of St John the Baptist (24 June) and was followed by the Scarborough fare for cod and herring, while others continued to fish locally for mackerel until Michaelmas (29 September).

Unlike the nets used on board ship, kiddle nets were set up from the shore, between the tides on the gently sloping open beaches, and were used to catch a variety of fish. Consequently, kiddle fishermen owned or leased the kiddle ground as well as the nets, and the owners of these grounds included institutions such as the churchwardens of St Nicholas’ Church in New Romney, and the civic authorities there, as well as individuals such as Henry Robinson of Sandwich. These grounds often had names; John Lane of New Romney (1488) owned one called ‘Gold Pett’ at Dungeness and another called ‘Long Nett’.

‘Little Sak’ was one of several belonging to the civic authorities at New Romney, and Battle Abbey in Sussex also had a number of kiddle grounds, one of its tenants being Richard Cockeye of Lydd.

Fish weirs were also a feature of the northern coast. Richard Furnes, a fisherman from Graveney, appears to have employed a variety of methods from the range of equipment noted at his death in 1582, and among his possessions were kiddle nets valued at 23s 4d. In addition to those on the open beaches, the creek systems of the Medway and Thames estuaries provided mud flats where fish such as flounders, eels, and dabs were caught. Nevertheless, the fish weirs were considered dangerous obstacles to shipping, especially by the powerful London merchants, and legislation from 1196 onwards required their destruction except on the seacoast. Yet, as a form of fishing, weirs were prized and remained in use, even though they sustained a high level of damage during the storms of the late thirteenth century. At Faversham the weirs were known collectively as Snout Weirs, and among those holding such structures in the late Middle Ages was William Smelt of Seasalter, who in 1472 bequeathed to his wife not only his messuage but several pieces of land and his weir called ‘le Snowte’ for life. She was also the recipient of another of his weirs called ‘Shepyswombe’, but the one called ‘Newere’ was sold to pay his debts. He was one
of a number of men from Seasalter, Whitstable, and the neighbouring parishes who bequeathed such assets, and a century later John Swanton the elder of Whitstable (1561) similarly intended his wife should be the primary beneficiary. However, he did not appear to expect her to hold the weirs beyond his sons’ majority and, when they reached the age of 21, he stipulated that each should receive a specific weir provided he paid 10s annually to his mother.43

Institutional owners were similarly important and among these lessors were Faversham Abbey and Canterbury Christ Church Priory. The abbot received 23s 4d in rent from his tenants of the abbey’s Snout Weirs, although when the weirs were in a poor state of repair this fell correspondingly.44 Among those who leased one of these weirs in the late fifteenth century was Robert Gillmyn, who bequeathed the remaining years of the lease to his wife.45 In addition, the abbot had other fishing rights, which included weirs in the royal manor of Milton to the west, but these were not as valuable as his own weirs at Faversham.46 Similarly among the priory’s manorial property at Leysdown on the Isle of Sheppey were several fish weirs. However, it is difficult to ascertain the value of these weirs for individual tenants during the fifteenth century because the relief and annual rent payments had become fossilized at 2d. The two exceptions between 1402 and 1479 were a relief payment of 1d paid by the heirs of Thomas Ponylond in 1410, and the relief of 4d and the same level of annual rent required from Thomas Broun in 1472 when he acquired a weir from the heirs of Richard Ruffyn.47 Yet such property was presumably valuable because William Riche and William Norden jointly acquired five weirs, among other property, in 1478 from William Feyre.48 Moreover, these tenants were not solely peasants because several members of the armigerous Cheyne family, including Lady Eleanor, held such property from the priory, although it is likely that they sub-leased their fish weirs to local men.49

Though it is difficult to ascertain from the extant documentation precisely how the shellfish, especially oyster, industry was organized in the medieval period, shellfish were clearly valued by Kentish fishermen, and Faversham–Whitstable oysters were particularly known for their high quality.50 There was some governmental regulation of oyster fishing before the late sixteenth century, but, as Hyde and Harrington discuss, ‘there was not the type of company and fraternity of free fishermen and dredgermen’ at Faversham (and elsewhere on the north coast) as found thereafter.51 In addition, specific references to oysters in the medieval manorial records are rare, but to the west of Faversham as part of the archiepiscopal manor of Teynham, the render for a particular two-acre plot was 300 oysters. Furthermore, the alternative of a cash rent of 6d highlights their abundance in the area.52 These oyster fisheries were maintained along much of the northern coastline and fishermen from Queenborough on the Isle of Sheppey, and from Milton, Halstow, and Upchurch on the mainland owned dredges and boats, such as Michael Man of Milton whose dredging cocke (boat) with her furniture was valued at £4 6s 8d in 1582.53 Fishermen at the various coastal settlements on the Isle of Thanet also had dredges but it is unclear whether these were used for oysters or mussels, or the exact site of the fishing grounds.54 Mussels, like oysters, were also present in the Whitstable–Sheppey area, and even though fishing certainly took place, the evidence is limited. In 1521, for example, Robert Stabilgate stole 4d worth of mussels from John Grean at Leysdown.55
As noted above, hooks and lines were employed by Kent’s coastal fishermen thereby providing further flexibility in terms of the fish caught and as a way of extending the fishing season. Two forms of hook are recorded in the sources, small hooks and ‘herbews’ or harbour hooks.\textsuperscript{56} The former were generally employed from early November until Easter, yet at Hythe the peak season seems to have been February to Easter. Harbour hooks were used during the summer months. For the fishermen, this meant they could exploit fish stocks such as whiting, cod, and conger.\textsuperscript{57} Although it is possible that fishermen from all the sea ports used both nets and hooks, the probate evidence appears to indicate that such diversity was favoured among the men of Thanet, Deal, and Walmer, and on the south coast at Dover, Hythe, Folkestone, and Lydd.

In addition to fishing equipment in the probate records, the presence of boats similarly reveals evidence concerning how the industry was organized, and the range of activities for which they were used. Boats varied considerably. There were over 20 names given to boats in the probate records in addition to the generic term ‘boat’. Like nets, some were named for the type of fishing: sprotters, shotters, and tramellers; and perhaps hoker boats were used by those with lines and hooks. However, the basic fishing boat was probably a 20-foot long, clinker-built boat, with a crew of up to five men; tramellers were slightly bigger, that is long, narrow boats with a crew of seven men.\textsuperscript{58} Other boat types in Kent included the hoye, the ketch, and the cocke boat, the latter often differentiated according to its use. Since they were worth less than larger deep-water boats, it is not surprising that these types are more numerous in the records. However, there are some references to crayers, which were suitable for deep-sea fishing and overseas trading voyages. Ellis Grafte of Queenborough owned a crayer or a share in such a vessel.\textsuperscript{59} The 24-ton \textit{Elizabeth Ellen} had two masts carrying a main sail and a top main sail, a fore sail and top fore sail, and she also had sprit sails. In total, she and her furniture were valued at £60 10s, which was considerably less than Robert Nasbye of Sandwich’s third share of a crayer priced at £40 15s.\textsuperscript{60} Nevertheless, his was exceptional and most crayers with their furniture were considered to be worth between £30 and £60. These larger boats required a safe harbour anchorage to load and unload their cargo, whether this was fish or other goods, but the smaller boats of varying kinds were capable of being hauled up onto the open beaches.

Moreover, the inclusion of capstans and cables among the equipment bequeathed or owned by these fishermen seems to indicate that a sizeable part of the county’s fishing fleet was beached in this way. Gently sloping foreshores are extremely plentiful along much of Kent’s coastline, including areas close to the coastal settlements and ports, or as at Lydd within a short distance of the town. These adjacent sites were frequently known as the Stade, and often fishermen are recorded as having fishing cabins there where they stored nets and other equipment, as well as their working clothes and materials including tar.\textsuperscript{61} Although documentary references are rare, the area was also used for the drying of nets, another indicator of the local nature of much of the industry.\textsuperscript{62} Among the assets Robert Lawlesse a Lydd fisherman had at Dungeness were three boats, four cabins with four capstans and in these cabins were various nets, fish hooks, baskets, casks, salt, and several ropes including four winding ropes.\textsuperscript{63} Furthermore, as Kowaleski noted, the rich fishing grounds off the Kent coast
also attracted the Westermen. Whether their presence was seen as detrimental to the local fishermen is unclear, but the Lydd civic authorities presumably welcomed this extra source of income.

Competition might apply to marketing as well as catching, but consumer demand for fish was apparently large enough for both the native fishermen and the Westermen to sell their catch at the fish market at Dungeness. Moreover, the proliferation of fish markets in these coastal towns offered major opportunities for fishermen and their customers alike. The exact location of some of these markets is difficult to determine, but most seem to have been close to where the catch was landed, and thus to the fishermen’s cabins. It is not known whether part of the catch in these numerous ports was sold directly to local consumers. Yet the presence of men known as ripiers and fishmongers, as well as those who apparently engaged in the trading of fish more intermittently, seems to suggest that some Kentish fishermen were involved in the marketing not only of their own fish, but the fish of others. Nevertheless, fresh fish was not the sole commodity and the presence of fish barrels, as well as red and white herring among the maletote and probate evidence, indicates the use of preservation methods. However, this may relate far more to the need to preserve the catch for transportation to inland markets or for storage more broadly, than to fish being brought ashore at Kent ports from the deep-sea fishing grounds of the North Sea.

Indeed, where fish were transported only short distances from the point of landing, the fresh fish market operated successfully. In the later fifteenth century, an additional fish market in Canterbury was established that was specifically known as the Whitstable market, the fishwives from the coastal town regularly supplying ‘their’ market. Such activities would not preclude some of this fish having been caught as part of the autumn North Sea herring trade, but the range of fish seen in the Canterbury chamberlains’ accounts suggests the importance of local fishing. Consequently, although civic authorities imposed regulations to ensure, for example, the wholesomeness of fish transacted through these urban markets, the still relatively large population in the county, including the numerous religious houses, meant demand remained high. Additionally, the county’s still relative affluence provided considerable demand for fish supplies throughout the year.

Looking at this evidence collectively, even though the Cinque Ports continued to send their bailiffs to Yarmouth to try to safeguard their privileged status and to hold meetings at their court of Brodhull to counter breaches of their ancient rights, the number of fishing boats from the Ports landing catches at Yarmouth continued to fall. Notwithstanding, though deep-sea fishing for herring had not been abandoned totally, as demonstrated by the presence of the Yarmouth or norward nets in the probate evidence, and corroborated by the Hythe maletote returns, it was no longer the dominant feature it had once been. Instead, the chance to fish during other times in the year beyond the autumn herring season allowed fishermen to spread risk and to supply local and regional consumer demand. Thus, the evidence highlights the value placed on local fishing opportunities by Kent’s fishermen in the late medieval and Tudor periods, albeit herring remained a significant part of the catch.

The organization of the industry aided this policy. The catch was divided among the crewmen, but others could also receive a share if they had provided a set number
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of nets – a ‘manshare’ – were the master of the boat, or owned or had a share in the boat. Consequently, by fishing locally all those involved did not need to wait for long periods before receiving their allocation. For some widows this may have been crucial, although whether Robert Mayow’s widow at Lydd (1535) was in this position is unknown. However, she and her daughter were bequeathed the profits from the shot net time after his decease, and she was the recipient of a few nets. It might have been expected that fishing families would form partnerships through their extended kin group, but this is not seen in the Kent evidence, and instead there appears to have been a preference for links through the nuclear family, through marriage, or to look to others in the wider fishing community. How far or whether this extended to brothers as crewmen in the family’s boat is difficult to ascertain, but the evidence suggests that in the early sixteenth century the Dyne family of Lydd seem to have shown a greater cohesiveness than most. Yet a preference for non-kin members aboard family boats may also highlight a desire to spread risk due to the uncertain and dangerous conditions faced by fishermen, even in coastal waters. Similarly, bequests beyond a fisherman’s family to members of the local fishing community may denote bonds relating to their shared occupation, and perhaps also feelings of separateness, which were reinforced by the physical distance between the town and ‘the Stade’ or the sea. This might explain the presence of small fishing companies, but possibly also the official, large fishing companies of the various oystermen along Kent’s north coast (see above) and the formation, in 1571, of a fellowship of Lydd fishermen. Even though these organizations were probably established in Elizabeth I’s reign as part of the government’s desire for greater occupational regulation, the initiative at Lydd does appear to have received local support.

The late medieval incidence of life-cycle servanthood, as noted for Yorkshire by Jeremy Goldberg, may also have been significant in Kent, including service in the fishing industry. Stephen Jonson of Deal (1517) bequeathed his house and lands to his son Stephen, but Thomas, his servant, received his master’s fishing equipment. Thomas was probably a young man because this would explain the gift of various nets and two lines ready for the sea on condition that he stayed for a further two years in his old master’s household. The opportunity to serve an apprenticeship or the use of annual contracts to learn sea craft might have drawn boys and young men to the ports, but as Kowaleski noted for Devon and Cornwall, seasonal labour opportunities for those engaged in agriculture might have been equally important. Even though the evidence relates to the eighteenth century, the seasonal relationship between fishing and farming was seen in Kent where farm labourers sought permission during slack periods on the land to earn money from fishing. Consequently, when allowed, after sowing barley, they went mackerel fishing in May (shotfare). After harvest they joined the fishing boats until November (herringfare), returning to the farm to sow wheat. These men were seen as equally capable workers at sea as on land, implying that Devon’s role as the ‘nursery of English seamen’ ought to apply equally to their peers in Kent. This proposition finds support from the knowledge that Francis Drake gained his early maritime skills as an apprentice to a pilot on the Medway after his father brought the family to Kent to escape prosecution.
The flexibility within the crews of the Kentish boats also applied to some of the more senior members of the craft who combined fishing with other commercial activities. Again, probably the most common combination was fishing and farming, the balance varying regarding which was the more important. In part, this presumably related to the farming strategy adopted, and even though much of the coastal marshland was used for mixed farming, cattle declined in favour of sheep farming by the later Tudor period. These changes in the region’s agriculture had implications for the husbandmen, as well as the more prosperous yeoman farmers. In 1469, William Stokham of Lydd bequeathed to his wife both spot and shot nets, as well as three cows, several silver items, and his principal tenement with an adjacent plot of seven acres. John, his son, also received nets, half shares in two boats, and part of a cabin. William gave him another of his tenements, with the remainder of his lands and tenements shared among his other children. However, a century later, testamentary examples are far less numerous, and a much greater proportion of these fishermen-farmers of Lydd can be categorized as belonging to the ‘middling sort’ and the poor, although this may reflect problems in farming rather than difficulties at sea. Yet a few Lydd fishermen combined successfully the two occupations. Among Robert Lawles’s bequests of 1584 were items of fishing gear and his work clothes to several local fishermen, with his wife and daughters receiving his lands and tenements, household items, and cash.

An alternative to fisher-farming was trading. Additionally, the larger boats owned by Kentish fishermen could be used to carry pilgrims, or to transport livestock or other goods to France, the Low Countries, or to sail on coastal voyages to northern ports such as Newcastle, or to London. For those fishing in the Thames and Medway estuaries, the chance to ship goods to London presumably also applied to those with smaller craft. Thus, the versatility of the region’s shipping, and the flexibility of the workforce, was similar to that among the western fishermen. Moreover, the proximity of the great cities of London and the Low Countries might have provided certain advantages for the mariners of Kent. Yet, the county’s location also meant that at times it was vulnerable to raids on the ports, as at Sandwich in 1457 when much of the town was said to have been burned, as well as to disruption to overseas trade due to international political problems.

Building on this assessment of the nature of the fishing industry in Kent in the late medieval and Tudor periods, the final section of this chapter examines the probate records of a fishing family from New Romney, who were involved in the industry for three generations, to explore matters such as flexibility, sustainability, and longevity. Even though there are certain methodological issues regarding the investigation of inheritance strategies using such sources, in particular the absence of *in vitam* gift giving, these records can still offer insights into the way testators manipulated national legal and local customary practices. In Kent, the frequent practice of holding land under gavelkind, including the use of partible inheritance, was apparently applied more widely. In addition, will making provided a further dimension in the allocation of the testators’ movable and immovable assets. This inherent flexibility within certain prescribed limits was deployed by many families, aided in part by the presence of a land market and a market in other capital assets that allowed the older generation...
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to extend the provision of inheritable possessions. They also used cash bequests to provide their offspring with the means to purchase their own resources, and thus maintain their livelihood.

**Strategies of inheritance: the Bedyll family of New Romney**

William Bedyll the elder first appears in the New Romney testamentary records as the executor of his father-in-law William Riche in 1511. Apart from his tenement where he lived, Riche’s main assets were his household and movable goods, including his fishing nets. His family had been residents in the town for at least a generation, and he seems to have intended that his probably only surviving son should continue in New Romney because he was to receive the family home when he was 20, allowing his mother to remain there for the rest of her life. Moreover, he wished his young son to follow his example by becoming a fisherman, and to this end he left all his flea nets to John. Margaret, Riche’s married daughter, had presumably received part of her share of the family assets when she married William, perhaps including some fishing equipment, and at her father’s death, her portion consisted of half the remainder of the household goods. Although speculation, it is feasible that after Riche’s death his son-in-law used the nets on John’s behalf. This would have enhanced William’s share of the catch and provided an income until the young man came of age. Riche’s remaining nets, his seven kiddle nets, were to be sold by his executors to cover his debts and legacies. They were also to provide ‘for his soul’ at his funeral and month’s mind in the form of masses, prayers, and charitable deeds, a stipulation that might have favoured William Bedyll, who may have been able to purchase his father-in-law’s nets at a reasonable price, thereby aiding the family materially and Riche spiritually.

About 35 years later, William Bedyll the elder made his own will. By this time, his own sons were married adults and he had at least one grandson. Initially, the major beneficiary was William’s wife, receiving all his goods and chattels, and his lands and tenements, except the tenement where he was living with its garden. On her death, these were to pass to his surviving sons William and Robert, retaining the majority of the family property jointly within the male line. Presumably, their father had aided them pre-mortem, either when they reached adulthood or marriage. Such gifts might have included fishing rights or equipment, which may explain why he bequeathed his eight kiddle nets and the accompanying kiddle ground to Stephen Pelland, his grandson. Stephen’s parents might have been dead because his grandfather expected that Stephen would reside in William’s own dwelling house, the tenement by the sea. However, if he refused this offer he was to receive instead the nets and 20s, but it is not clear whether the tenement, garden, and kiddle ground would then become the property of his uncles. William’s actions on his grandson’s behalf suggest that he wished to see the next two generations established in New Romney, his sons’ children through their fathers, and his daughter’s son through the right to fish his own kiddle ground. This would allow him to be an independent fisherman for at least part of the year, even if he supplemented his income by working as a crewman or in another occupation.

William the younger made his will before his father’s death, but apparently did not die until 1548, two years after his father. He was a fisherman and, unlike the elder
William, apparently gained all his living from fishing because he did not leave any land and the only livestock listed were two milk cows. He named his father as one of his executors jointly with his wife, and he intended them to receive the residue of his movable goods. His fishing nets and hooks were to be split equally between his son Robert and Joan, his wife, which suggests that he expected his son to continue fishing, possibly using his mother’s nets as well as his own, and on one of the local fishing boats. In addition to the income, Joan would expect to receive from her share of the catch; she may have profited from the two house cows, but it is not clear whether William owned a house because his only other bequest to her was half of his household goods. His daughter Margaret inherited the other half and 40s, which may denote her dowry. This level of provision indicates a man of modest prosperity and might explain William’s concentration on his immediate family.

William the younger’s mother died three years later in 1551, leaving bequests to his two daughters Margaret and Parnell. She also included bequests to his grand-daughter, Robert’s daughter Agnes, and a relative Letyse Bedyll. All these bequests were cash, goods, or a combination of both. Her son Robert was to act as her executor and he presumably shared the family lands and tenements on her death with his brother, but he was the sole beneficiary of the fishing rights she held: a kiddle ground previously purchased from Master John Cheyne. She possibly expected her sons would provide for her grandsons, although why she bequeathed the net she owned to Robert Snode rather than to a member of the family is unclear. Nevertheless, by keeping the kiddle ground in the family she was helping to maintain the family’s connections in the industry as independent fishermen.

Stephen Pelland, her grandson, made his will in 1551, having held his grandfather’s kiddle nets for five years. He might have used them himself during that time but his will fails to mention his kiddle ground. The nets were to be sold, thereby providing 10s for Alice Down and 4s to be distributed among poor people of the parish. His treatment of the nets as commodities, which were available for sale rather than as family property, appears to emphasize the distinction between transient items and property or rights closely identified with the family.

Stephen’s uncle Robert seems to have followed a similar strategy in 1553. He made no specific bequests regarding his movable goods beyond the note that, after his debts and charitable donations had been paid, his wife Alice should receive the remainder. However, he did bequeath to her a life interest in all his lands, tenements, kiddle grounds, rents and annuities, to be inherited intact by his four sons (John, William, Thomas, and Robert) and their heirs on her death. His use of partible inheritance covering all his property suggests that he intended to keep the property within the family, while allowing his sons a degree of flexibility concerning its division. Consequently, only one or two sons would become fishermen, probably combining fishing with small-scale farming or other seasonal craft activities. Another related reason for this division might have been their ages: all were minors, which meant it was more appropriate to leave the division of the property until the survivors were of age. The idea that not all might reach adulthood could have been at the forefront of Robert’s mind because his young daughter Agnes had recently died.
Mortality was an important issue for the family. Within two years of Robert’s death, his wife died and was buried in St Nicholas’s churchyard close to his grave and that of her mother-in-law. Alice bequeathed a considerable number of clothes and silver items to a wide circle of local women, and her business activities are reflected in the debt and credit transactions recorded in her will.97 She did not refer to the property, including the fishing rights, but the overseer of her will was to have custody of her sons and, presumably, he also oversaw her property on their behalf. All four sons received a number of household goods that were to be kept in the family home until their majority when they might form the basis of an independent household. Whether her overseer was a fisherman is not certain, which may have meant some of Robert Bedyll’s sons were directed toward becoming farmers or craftsmen instead of kiddle fishermen. Yet at least two of the four continued within the fishing industry, albeit William was also a successful farmer and, at his death in 1593, his assets included livestock, especially sheep, as well as 17 nets, and the lease of a kiddle ground.98 Thomas, who died in 1600, was probably far less prosperous than his brother, and apart from his kiddle nets, kiddle grounds, house and ‘close’ (farmyard) his only bequest was £5 to his daughter at her marriage.99 Nonetheless, he expected his two sons would maintain the family’s position in the fishing industry, stipulating that the young Thomas would only inherit a particular kiddle ground when he married, with the other kiddle grounds shared between Thomas and John after their mother’s death.

However, Thomas and John’s great uncle Robert described himself as a yeoman when he made his will in 1570, and no mention is made of the fishing equipment he had inherited from his father.100 Instead, his main concerns were the leases he held and the £60 owed to him by William Epps, the mayor of New Romney. With these assets, his wife was to maintain the family, bringing up his young son and daughter until adulthood. He appears, therefore, to have severed all links between his immediate family and the sea. Nevertheless, during this same period another member of the family, although his exact relationship is not clear, not only had interests in three boats, one of which was a crayer with all its equipment, but he also owed seven and a half fare of Yarmouth nets. William Bedyll’s inventory (1573) suggests that even if he did not go North Sea herring fishing himself, he had a degree of investment in the town’s continuing involvement in that sector of the industry.101 Moreover, his crayer was capable of being deployed for fishing voyages, although equally he might primarily have used her for trading ventures. This degree of diversity within a particular family illustrates what was happening more widely by the late Elizabethan period. For the Bedyll family, this meant some family members had turned away from the sea, while others continued to work the family’s kiddle grounds, and at least one member of the family had solely looked to the sea for his livelihood.

To conclude, Kowaleski is right to highlight the changing nature of the English fishing industry between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the consequent rise of the west coast industry. However, some of the factors she sees as enhancing that industry are also pertinent to the situation in late medieval and Tudor Kent. Kentish fishermen, too, seemingly concentrated their efforts on the local, coastal, and estuarine waters, albeit some Cinque Port fishermen did not abandon the North Sea
herring season, and the county continued to be a ‘nursery of able seamen and mariners’. This illustrates the importance of diversity – fishing seasons, fish species, fishing methods – as Kentish fishermen sought to exploit as many areas as possible. Furthermore, even though there are examples of men who relied on fishing alone for their income, occupational diversity was similarly recognized as valuable for its flexibility and as a means to spread risk. Another area of importance was the use of inheritance strategies as families sought to enhance their ability to survive and even prosper. Yet, notwithstanding such means, the fishing families of Kent were not a homogeneous group, and this might have become more marked over the period. Thus, there were prosperous fishing families in late medieval and Tudor Kent, but many should probably be characterized as being of ‘the middling sort’ and for some poverty was the harsh reality in what was and remains a risky industry.

Notes

3 For example, according to Domesday the men of Sandwich provided Christ Church Priory with 40,000 herrings each year. See P. Morgan (ed.), Domesday Book: Kent, Chichester: Phillimore, 1983, 2.2.
7 Morgan, Kent, D.4.
21 The absence of fish caught and sold locally in the national customs accounts is again a problem for the historian.
25 For example, flew, shot, and sprot nets; KHLC PRC 21/10/23; drawe nets; KHLC PRC 21/2/109; tucke nets; KHLC PRC 21/7/312; raigth nets; KHLC PRC 21/6/49; norward nets; KHLC PRC 21/7/132.
26 For example, herring and mackerel nets; KHLC PRC 21/8/208; placte nets; KHLC PRC 21/8/333v; mulnet nets; KHLC PRC 21/1/202; prawn nets; KHLC PRC 10/10/102v; pilcher nets KHLC PRC 21/8/337; shrimp nets; KHLC PRC 21/6/77; eel net; KHLC PRC 21/2/109; ‘porposed’ net; KHLC PRC 32/19 f. 67.
27 Littler notes that drift nets in the late medieval and Tudor periods consisted of between 40 and 70 individual nets attached end to end that were weighted top and bottom so that they floated vertically and in which fish became entangled. See Littler, ‘Fish’, p. 136.
28 Norward nets were eight to ten yards deep and 20 to 30 yards long; whereas flew nets could be 48 to 60 yards long (minimum of 28 yards) and half as deep; Littler, ‘Fish’, p. 136.
29 One of these fishermen was Richard Rawlyn who was taxed on 17 lasts of herring sold at Yarmouth and Hythe, with a further three lasts sold at Yarmouth and nine lasts at Hythe; KHLC H1055 f. 98.
30 Among his nets, John George of Hythe in 1545 had ‘two tramel with all things belonging’; KHLC Marsh PRC 32/20 f. 26.
31 Littler describes these nets as comprising ‘a triple wall of mesh resting on the bottom and of up to 18 furlongs in length in which […] bottom-feeding fish entangled themselves’. See Littler, ‘Fish’, p. 135.
32 For example, the naming of seasons at Dover used a mix of fish species and fishing techniques: herringyfare, hokfare, mackerellfare, saltfare, and shotfare.
33 However, governments did impose some restrictions on certain fishing techniques and times when fishing could take place. See Littler, ‘Fish’, pp. 134–6.
35 KHLC H1058 f. 211v.
36 In 1551, William Hackett, Thomas Foster, and Richard Waller each paid the Romney town treasurer 6s 8d for their kiddle rents; KHLC NR./FAe 7 f. 68v. Among Robinson’s possessions at his death was a kiddle net; KHLC PRC 10/3/163.
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37 KHLC PRC 32/3 f. 201.
38 Those renting a kiddle ground from New Romney appear to have paid 6s 8d per year in the sixteenth century: KHLC NR/FAe7 ff. 64, 68, 83, 189, 231v; KHLC PRC 32/1 f. 73.
39 KHLC PRC 10/13/44v.
40 Eel catching was also conducted in such areas. See I. Jackson and K. Robinson, Of the North Kent Marshes, Privately Published, 2015, pp. 9–10.
42 KHLC PRC 17/2 f. 124.
43 KHLC PRC 17/35 f. 141.
44 Hyde and Harrington, Faversham Oyster Fishery, pp. 24, 40.
45 KHLC PRC 17/7 f. 44.
47 CCAL U15/20/4, U15/20/5.
48 CCAL U15/20/4.
49 CCAL U15/20/4.
54 See: Stephen Garrett of St Lawrence’s, Thanet, KHLC PRC 10/6/69; Richard Emptage of St Peter’s, Thanet, PRC 10/4/273v; Robert Nasbye of Sandwich had two dredges valued at 4s among his extensive fishing equipment and three boats. In total this was said to be worth £191 13s 4d; PRC 10/9/24.
55 CCAL U15/20/4.
56 Parfitt, Townwall Street Dover, pp. 365, 397.
59 KHLC PRC 10/9/408v.
60 KHLC PRC 10/9/24.
62 In 1528, John Tydeman of Folkestone stated that his wife was to have the right to dry the nets she had inherited from him outside his son Henry’s cabin; KHLC PRC 17/18 f. 128. At Dover, certain fishermen were fined for drying their nets upon the beach; KHLC Do/FCa2, ff. 39v, 91, 270.
63 KHLC PRC 21/6/378v.
64 Kowaleski, ‘Expansion’, p. 441.
65 The presence of these Devon fishermen continued to provide Lydd with a source of revenue well into the late 1570s; KHLC LyFaC3, 240, 243, 245. Occasionally West Country fishermen travelled further east to Dover; KHLC Do/FCa1, f. 222.
67 However, some tried to circumnavigate the market by buying directly from the boats before the catch had been landed. In 1533, a rippier called Graunte was fined 12d at Dover for trying to buy 200 mackerel this way. See British Library Add MS 29618B f. 268.
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68 At Dover the fish market seems to have been more elaborate and included the ‘fishmarket house’; KHLC Do/FCa2 f. 114v. See also Parfitt, *Townwall Street Dover*, pp. 400, 403; Draper and Meddens, *Sea and Marsh*, pp. 45–6; Mayhew, *Tudor Rye*, p. 259.

69 In 1468/9, John Sende of Hythe not only sold his own herring, mackerel, and sprats, but he also bought and sold a further 1,000 herring; KHLC H1058 f. 3. See also Mayhew, *Tudor Rye*, pp. 258–62; Draper and Meddens, *Sea and Marsh*, pp. 45–6.

70 Two fishermen from Hythe received allowances on their 1446/7 maletote returns: William Harman took nine barrels of herring to London for Stephen Slegge, and William Halman took another barrel; KHLC H1055 ff. 80, 83. See also, Parfitt, *Townhouse Street Dover*, pp. 365–7.

71 Such markets attracted London fishmongers, as at Lydd in the fifteenth century; Dimmock, *‘Lydd’*, p. 42.

72 CCAL CC/FA2, f. 1999.

73 According to Canterbury’s custumal, fishermen should not attempt to sell fresh fish in the market that was over a day and a night old; HMC 9, pt 1, p. 172. For the national perspective, see C. Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities*, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013, pp. 251–4.

74 For example, at Rye the decline in the number of North Sea fishermen apparently occurred in late Tudor times. See Mayhew, *Tudor Rye*, pp. 164–5.

75 Among those who continued to fish there was Simon Makerell of Hythe (1584), whose 21 ‘norwarde flues’ were valued at £6 5s, which was more than the total for all of his other nets; KHLC PRC 21/7/132.

76 For the various share systems see Littler, ‘Fish’, p. 174.


78 KHLC PRC 32/15 f. 367.


80 KHLC Ly/ZB9.

81 There is no evidence to indicate this occurred in any of the other Kentish Cinque Ports, and a similar attempt at Rye in 1567, and again in 1581, was resisted by the fishermen. See Dulley, ‘The Early History’, pp. 52–3.


83 KHLC PRC 32/12 f. 59.


86 KHLC PRC 32/2 f. 197.


88 KHLC PRC 32/35 f. 111.


91 KHLC PRC 32/10 f. 73.

92 KHLC PRC 32/20 f. 40.

93 KHLC PRC 32/21 f. 92.

94 KHLC PRC 32/24 f. 10.

95 KHLC PRC 32/24 f. 32.

96 KHLC PRC 32/26 f. 12.

97 KHLC PRC 32/26 f. 47.
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98 KHLC PRC 21/12/498v.
99 KHLC PRC 32/38 f. 300.
100 KHLC PRC 32/31 f. 388.
101 KHLC PRC 21/2/46.

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