



Norfish Dataset 14

**English Newfoundland  
Cod Fishery 1520–1790**

*Supporting Documentation*

Josh Ivinson, John Nicholls



*Idolised version of the departure of John Cabot from Bristol to Newfoundland in 1497  
(Board 1906)*



# English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520–1790

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## Summary

**Dataset Title:** English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520-1790  
**Norfish Case Study:** English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520-1790  
**Large Marine Ecosystem:** 59: Iceland Shelf and Sea; 22: North Sea  
**Subject:** Catches, Newfoundland, North Atlantic, cod, 1520-1790

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**Extent:** 271 records

**Keywords:** Atlantic cod catches, Newfoundland, English, 1520-1790

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## Contents

Summary .....	2
Contents .....	3
Sources and Chronology .....	4
Conversion Factors.....	9
Other Processes .....	9
Data Fields .....	10
Bibliography.....	14
Appendix 1.....	17
Appendix 2.....	17

## Sources and Chronology

An English presence was felt in the Newfoundland fisheries since around 1500, but on a minor scale. French, Spanish and Portuguese fishers established themselves in Newfoundland from this time and developed successful fisheries, but there is little evidence to suggest that the English fishers were especially engaged alongside their fellow Europeans. Since 1497 when John Cabot's voyage to Newfoundland brought news that fish were so plentiful there that they could be caught by simply lowering baskets rather than having to even use lines (Pringler1997 p.36).

Indeed, the first permanent English settlement in Newfoundland was a colony at Cupers Cove in 1610 which has been settled ever since according to archaeologists at Memorial University, Newfoundland (Ibid, p.33). Excavations indicate that the port settlement, like many coastal settlements around Newfoundland, was dominated by a cod industry of fishing, processing and trade. This is a firm suggestion that while the English were not as active during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century their influence and interests had grown to the point where permanent stations were established and the cod trade featured as a serious industry for them. French interests continued to dominate into the 17<sup>th</sup> century and their established industry maintained a strong presence throughout the period until 1790 when the Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars effectively ended the trade.

However, English interests expanded massively and eventually overtook the established levels of French trade by 1740. Spanish/Basque and Portuguese fishing efforts were effectively squeezed out by the expansion of the English effort and the continued dominance of the French. By 1640 France and England held a complete monopoly over the Newfoundland fisheries with England eventually dominating. (Nicholls et al 2021, p.12-13).

This data series was compiled based on a collection of isolated letters, correspondences, parliamentary proceedings and miscellaneous writings for the period before 1675, From 1675 data are primarily available from archival Admiralty records, Colonial records and various period letters and correspondences.

### Prior to 1578

There are no specific data to determine data points during this period. As suggested before, an English presence was most likely felt, but on a minor scale. It is likely that any levels of fishing activity that took place would have emulated the French trend; a trend analysis was carried out using the Capacity Trend Method (Nicholls et al 2021) enabling a reasonable trended level of activity to be depicted.

## 1578 to 1674

From 1578 a series of occasional data points is available based on information contained in archived Letters sent between prominent people in England, and between the Newfoundland cod fishery area and England. The first such letter, by Anthony Parkhurst to Richard Hakluyt identifies 30 English vessels active off Newfoundland (Parkhurst 1589) while in 1577 40 vessels are identified in another Parkhurst letter likely to Edward Dyer (BL Lansdowne MS100). In 1578 yet another Parkhurst letter, again to Hakluyt sees 50 English vessels in Newfoundland (Parkhurst 1589).

In 1594, Sir Walter Raleigh in a correspondence to Sir Robert Cecil quotes “above 100 sails” engaged in the Newfoundland fishery CP (27/46).

Writing about the year 1601, John Keymors made the observation that Dutch fishing fleet lent itself to 5,000 to 6,000 men engaged in New World fishing; he goes on to cite a 40 to 50 ships of the 'India' fleet that engaged 5,000 to 6,000 men in “this Your Fishing, one of the greatest Sea-businesses of the World”. While this quote pre-dates the East India fleets, it is likely an indication of the Newfoundland fleet (Keymoor 1664).

In proposals made by London and Bristol merchants to the privy council, referred to Trinity House in 1610, 200 vessels served by 6000 fishers are identified (Trinity House of Deptford Transactions. 1983).

In response to complaints presented to King James I by the French Ambassador, Sieur de Buisseaux, at the Court of his Majesty in 1614 regarding activities relating to English fishing interests, 200 vessels served by 6,000 fishers are mentioned (TNA SP 103/9).

For the year 1615 several sources describe activities which provide corroborating evidence. Revenue from Newfoundland fishing is cited as £120,000 for fish and £15,000 for oil highlighting the enormity of the trade (BL MS 2902), while more than 400 vessels in total (excluding English ships) were counted at Newfoundland (Cell 1982 p123-4). In that year, while performing his duties, Admiral Whitbourne identified that about 170 of the c.250 ships he counted were “impanelled” (engaged) in “seuerall inquests”, imparting the understanding that the entire Newfoundland fishing effort by all nations came to about 650 vessels. However, in a separate correspondence, Robert Kyall declares that: “Newfoundland employs some 150 saile, from all parts, of small ships” (Kyall 1615).

Referring to 1618, Robert Wood there were c.200 Newfoundland vessels, and that the number and trade are greatly decreased by 1718: “Nor have I confidered Newfoundland under this Head, the Filhery whereof is of very great Concern to us, both to Preferve and

Encourage; and in which we had about a hundred Years ago, up wards of 200 Sail of Ships annually employed, when we furnifh'd all Europe with Filh, how few Ships foever we may now employ in this Trade” (Wood 1722, p.194).

In “A booke touching Newfoundland 1619”, Whitbourne cites 250 vessels serviced by 5,000 men and bring a revenue of £130,000 (BL Whitbourne MS 194).

For 1620, John Mason, provides “A brief discourse of the New-found-land” which cites 10,000 fishers of which 3,000 are specialised 'seamen', as well as 20,000 employed at home in England in the industry (Cell 1982, p.94).

During his speech in the Parliamentary Commons, Mr Neale cites 250 English vessels in Newfoundland during the second reading and debate of an Act for the Freer Liberty of Fishing on 16 October 1621 (Preston, 1939).

For 1623, John Mason, again provides “A brief discourse of the New-found-land” which cites 250 vessels in the Newfoundland fishery (Cell 1982, p.232).

In 1624, in his work pertaining to plantations in Newfoundland, Richard Eburne states: “...our ships doe yeerely and vsually, two or three hundred saile of them goe thither on fishing voyages” presenting an average of roughly 250 vessels (Eburne 1624). Furthermore, on 1 March 1624 Sir Edward Seymour stated in Parliament: that: “already most of the western ships [West Country] are at the Newfoundland and not to return until Michaelmas ... All the Shipping of the West Country at Newfound-land, a fishing” (Baker nd). In the same year, Sir William Alexander, speaking of New England and North Virginia vessels cited “fortie or fiftie Sayle are imployed there from England yeerely” (Alexander 1624). Also, in 1624, “There hath beene a fishing this yeere upon the Coast about 50. English ships” was stated by Captain John Smith (1624). The disparity in counted numbers highlights that the Newfoundland fishery was large; observers had little ability to assess the overall size of the English fleet based on independent observation, however, once aggregated and corroborated, the values appear to be in the region of 250 vessels per annum for this period.

In 1625 the number of “men” active in the Newfoundland fishery ranged between 4000 and 5000 according to a report regarding Barbary Corsairs (TNA SP 16/5), but according to Hagthorpe, the summer of that year saw some 6,000 to 7,000 “Englishmen” in Newfoundland in the summer and between 200 and 300 ships (Hagthorpe 1625, p.33 & 35). In seemingly contrary style, John White reports that prior to beginning of the war with Spain in that year (i.e.1625), 40 to 50 ships went fishing in New England (White1630).

By 1626 there were “not more than 10” Welsh ships heading to Newfoundland, while 150 left from Devon each year, with 550 overall bringing a total of between 500 to 600 vessels



(Vaughan 1626, p.25). However, these totals do not clarify whether the figures refer to all vessels from all nations, or only from England. The assessment of some 6,000 men, comprising “4000 sailers and 2000 men [who were] “drawn out of the country” (TNA SP 16/103 f78) implies about 300 vessels were engaged from England.

In a petition from Calvert to the Duke of Buckingham it is outlined that the fisheries contribute £300,000 to the realm in total in 1628, but this included imports from Spain and other countries (Cell 1982, p.273-4). According to State Papers: “10,000 men and their families are maintained by this east coast fishing trade” (TNA SP 16/90 f.93). This provides an estimate of 300 vessels for 1628.

1629 saw active changes in the fishing efforts undertaken in Newfoundland. IN February 1629, in a “Memorial touching the preparation of the French for Canada, Terra Nova, and St. Christopher.” It is cited that: “The French have 20 sail ready for those parts. Capt. Kirke bound for Canada, with six good ships and three pinnaces, where he may be able to encounter them. “Our people” [the English] not provided at St. Kitt’s; speedy succour should be sent. Some 40 fishing vessels only at Newfoundland. It is suggested that some men-of war be speedily sent to Lord Baltimore, to withstand the enemy and secure the interest of the English, who now enjoy the sole trade of fishing in those parts” (CO 1/5 No.3 America and West Indies 1629). However, in the same year – presumably later in the season - in a “Remonstrance concerning the Newfoundland trade” the number of ships (not including sack ships) is shown at 270; the “number of men” including all activities employed in the industry is given as 20,000 (TNA PWDRO 1-19).

For 1632 evidence of 200 vessels is shown based on a Naval Tract by William Monson (BL Harley MS 4113). This figure is corroborated in Coke’s treatise where he cites 300 vessels engaged in the “New World” fishery (TNA SP 16-229 no78-79); Newfoundland would reasonably have accounted for at least 200 of these vessels.

By 1635, 300 ships were annually fishing in the Americas; this figure would have incorporated Newfoundland and New England. With a likely figure of at least 150 vessels servicing Newfoundland (Morton 1635, p.221).

Lewes Roberts (1638) produced a series of detailed annotated charts and maps including Newfoundland, citing 500 vessels in 1638, of which probably at least 250 were active in Newfoundland. This may indicate the peak of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The next available data are from 1644 when a related account states: “about 1644 at least 270 fishing ships were annually employ’d in the Newfoundland Fishery, besides those that supply’d them with salt etc., and that carry’d their fish to market. The burthen of these

270 sail may be computed 21,600 tons, and for every 100 tons 50 men and at least 10 boats. To each boat they generally allow'd 5 men, and usually made 200 to 300 quintals of fish pr. boat, which was then sold in ye country at 14 to 16 rials, or from 7s. to 8s. pr. quintal" (CSP Colonial 1717-1718)

A 1660 petition to the Crown in respect of material property cites 100 vessels active in the fishery at Newfoundland (BL Egerton 2395, f264).

These diverse sources provide a sporadic, interrupted series that needed to be filled through calculation. The missing values were derived from trended figures relating to the French Newfoundland fishery. The Capacity Trend Method was used (Nicholls et al 2021) to indicate probable fluctuations in the trend as opposed to simple straight-line assumptions.

## 1675 to 1790

In terms of data points, this period benefits from two highly detailed datasets that have already been done: HMAP 6 (Pope 2003) and HMAP 5 (Haines 2004). These two datasets were part of the History of Marine Animal Populations project that ran until 2011 and benefitted from the expertise and dedicated attention to detail of the late scholar, Peter Pope. HMAP 6 contains highly detailed landings data reported in specific ports and landing stages (e.g. suitable beaches, makeshift harbours, etc.) in Newfoundland during the period 1675 to 1692. HMAP 5 contains similarly detailed information relating to the period 1698 to 1833.

Both of these datasets, despite including annual data across a large range of ports and landings, suffer from various missing elements; in some instances, a particular port may only have a few data points represented across the span of the dataset period while others are relatively complete.

To determine an overall aggregated figure for annual catches for Newfoundland, several considerations were made. Using the Capacity Trend Method (Nicholls et al 2021), a baseline of annual values was determined taken from those ports that were best represented with the fewest missing data points; these ports were termed Primary Ports). The Primary Port aggregated values were used as a trend line that was applied to the missing values for the remaining ports (referred to as Secondary Ports). In some instances, where a port was especially void of data, it was identified as a Tertiary Port – filled values were not deemed to be much better than an informed estimate; these ports represented less than 5% of the overall annual figures. The complete annual figures for both of these datasets was adopted and included in this dataset series. A full schema and development of these data can be observed



at: [https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Franco-English\\_Combined\\_catch\\_data\\_1675-1790\\_xlsx/11860770](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Franco-English_Combined_catch_data_1675-1790_xlsx/11860770).

HMAP6 (Pope 2003) and HMAP5 (Haines 2004) are primarily sourced from Admiralty records held at The National Archives in London, but are also largely dependent on various Colonial records, corroborating letters and correspondences, especially plantation records and similar literature of the period.

A vital insight derived from these datasets is Peter Pope's (2003) assessment of the cod processing that took place in Newfoundland prior to being shipped to European markets. Typically, cod was cleaned, salted and open-air dried to the extent that a live weight fish to dried cod ratio was about 1:4.7 (Nicholls et al 2021). This ratio enabled an accurate assessment to be made of the typical liveweight of cod caught in Newfoundland (and on the Grand Banks) over the entire period. Importantly, vessels known as "bankers" which were included in the survey, did not have this adjustment applied as they specifically caught fish on the Grand Banks and sailed directly back to their European markets.

## Conversion Factors

- Vessels varied in size and weight, but typically carried around 50 metric tonnes of fish on average.
- Average weight per vessel (mean tonnage) = 50 metric tonnes
- Average crew per vessel = 20 to 30 fishers
- Average live weight to dried cod ratio = 1:4.7

## Other Processes

The marine species information that informs the dataset is obtained from the World Register of Marine Species (WoRMS 2020) which validates common species names, scientific names and sources.

The metadata system underpinning the dataset is based on Darwin Core (OBIS 2017; 2020) which provides static formulations of all data fields as outlined in the Data Fields section of this document.



# English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520–1790

## Data Fields

Darwin Core Field Name	Description
<b>occurrenceID</b>	A globally unique “per record” identifier based upon the concatenated institutionCode, collectionCode, catlogNumber and ID fields (TCD_Norfish_EngNewlviNicCod_1)
<b>type</b>	Description of data series type. (Dataset)
<b>modified</b>	Most recent date the data was modified; ISO 8601 metric date/time standards apply. (2021-03-01)
<b>license</b>	Data licensing conditions that apply. ( <a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode</a> )
<b>bibliographicCitation</b>	Author citation for the dataset. (Ivinson, J. and Nicholls, J. 2021. Norfish: English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520-1790. Dublin: TCD)
<b>references</b>	Denotes the link where more detailed information about the dataset is held. ( <a href="http://www.vliz.be/imis?module=project&amp;proid=5064">http://www.vliz.be/imis?module=project&amp;proid=5064</a> )
<b>institutionCode</b>	Identifies the institution which owns the data - Trinity College Dublin. (TCD)
<b>collectionCode</b>	Code of the project or research group. (Norfish)
<b>datasetName</b>	Name of the dataset. (English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520-1790)
<b>basisOfRecord</b>	Specifies the nature of the observed or researched specimens or data. (HumanObservation)
<b>dataGeneralizations</b>	Source data that informs the provenance of the data. (Sources: Parkhurst, Anthony. 1589. A letter written to M. Richard Hakluyt in 1578. In: Richard Hakluyt (ed.). Principall navigations. pp.674-7.).



# English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520–1790

<b>catalogNumber</b>	Identifier of the data within the institution and project – “Eng” refers to English, “New” refers to Newfoundland, “Ivi” refers to Ivinson, “Nic” refers to Nicholls, “Cod” refers to cod. (EngNewIviNicCod)
<b>occurrenceRemarks</b>	Comments about the occurrence record. (Fishing took place around the coast of Iceland, in the Icelandic Sea and into the North Sea)
<b>recordedBy</b>	Researchers who recorded the data. (Josh Ivinson   John Nicholls)
<b>organismQuantity</b>	Quantity of fish represented in the record shown in Kg live weight. (20383200)
<b>organismQuantityType</b>	organismQuantity unit of measurement. (biomass in kilograms (kg))
<b>occurrenceStatus</b>	Stipulates the physical presence or absence of animals relating to the record. (present)
<b>eventDate</b>	Actual date and time at which an occurrence was recorded. ISO 8601 metric date/time standards apply. (1520)
<b>year</b>	Year taken from the eventDate field. (1520)
<b>locationID</b>	Marine Region unique identifier. ( <a href="http://marineregions.org/mrgid/8544">http://marineregions.org/mrgid/8544</a> )
<b>locality</b>	Local name for the overall location or region. (Newfoundland and Grand Banks)
<b>locationAccordingTo</b>	MRGID location identifier based on the <a href="http://marineregions.org/mrgid">marineregions.org/mrgid</a> system. (MRGID)
<b>locationRemarks</b>	Description of location identifier. (NOAA described Large Marine Ecosystem)
<b>decimalLatitude</b>	Latitude shown in decimal notation based on the WGS 84 (EPSG:4326) geodetic datum standard.



## English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520–1790

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	(50.13898)
<b>decimalLongitude</b>	Latitude shown in decimal notation based on the WGS 84 (EPSG:4326) geodetic datum standard. (-54.93281)
<b>coordinateUncertaintyInMeters</b>	The smallest circle (radius) in metres from the ground zero point depicted by the decimalLatitude and decimalLongitude fields. In this instance, "1351881" depicts a radius of c. 1,352 Km.
<b>georeferenceRemarks</b>	Remarks indicating the geographic area identified – Large Marine Ecosystems are used. (9: Labrador-Newfoundland)
<b>scientificNameID</b>	The WoRMS LSID associated with the scientificName, based on the Marine Species database. (urn:lsid:marinespecies.org:taxname:126436)
<b>scientificName</b>	Scientific name of the animal based upon the vernacularName. (Gadus morhua)
<b>kingdom</b>	Together with taxonRank assists in determining broader animal characteristics for darwinCore search engines. (Animalia)
<b>taxonRank</b>	Together with kingdom assists in determining broader animal characteristics for darwinCore search engines. (species)
<b>scientificNameAuthorship</b>	Based on the scientificNameID field and discoverable through the WoRMS database. (Linnaeus, 1758)
<b>vernacularName</b>	Literal common name applied to the animal involved. In this case, all values are cod
<b>identificationRemarks</b>	Details that assist in identifying the animal. (Common name used was cod - often simply referred to as stockfish, dry, fresh or green fish)
<b>conversion</b>	Conversion factor applied to derive catchMT.

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## English Newfoundland Cod Fishery 1520–1790

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	(Vessels varied in size and weight, but typically carried around 50 metric tonnes of fish on average; Average weight per vessel (mean tonnage) = 50 metric tonnes; Average crew per vessel = 20 to 30 fishers; Average live weight to dried cod ratio = 1:4.7)
<b>numberOfVessels</b>	Number of vessels engaged in the fishing effort. (30)
<b>tonnagePerVesselLiveWeight</b>	Typical tonnage per vessel engaged in the fishing effort in live weight of cod in metric tonnes. (235)
<b>tonnagePerVesselDriedWeight</b>	Typical tonnage per vessel engaged in the fishing effort in dried weight of cod in metric tonnes. (50)
<b>catchMT</b>	Derived metric tonnes value based on the calculated fields as shown in the conversion field, or as shown in the codes field.
<b>trafficLight</b>	Traffic Light coding system denotes level of certainty, and/or level of accuracy that can be described for each record; see Appendix 1 for details.
<b>codes</b>	Explanation codes that highlight the process for each record; see Appendix 2 for details.

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## Appendix 1

### Traffic Light System

Traffic Light	Explanation
green	Values provided from sources with minimal conversion required
amber	Values given as numbers of vessels with conversions to metric tonnes; some values given as zero due to conflict
red	Values not available, estimates determined based on the Capacity Trend Method using the French trend

## Appendix 2

### Codes

Codes	Explanation
a	No data available, Capacity Trend Method applied based on French trend.
b	Number of vessels given, liveweight calculated based on 50 tonnes per vessel and conversion to dried weight.
c	Detailed information provided, converted from quintals to metric tonnes.
d	Zero values assumed based on hostilities during the War of the League of Augsburg (1688-1697).
e	Combined available data and Capacity trended based on French trend.