Hull Fishermen's Place-Names*

Recent changes in fishing limits and in the technology of the industry have profoundly affected the Hull deep-sea fishing community, and if they have not yet destroyed the oral culture to which these names belong, they have removed much of their economic importance. It is thus desirable to set down my views on important aspects of these names whilst they can still be tested by reference to users who acquired them as part of a living, continuously self-renewing system, not as antiquarian folk-lore. Some aspects are particularly characteristic of fishing, others may suggest conclusions useful for name studies in general.

The fisherman, like all hunters, has a different view of the world from the farmer and other settled people. He does not make his living from his own familiar acres, but has to find it where he can, often in new territory whose names are in unfamiliar tongues. But the way home is his own, and his own way home he has to be sensitive to many things in an apparently featureless waste, and to codify these observations in a way which can be readily recalled, compared with others' experience, and transmitted to others. Where route-finding and location is concerned, this accumulation and comparison seems to me to have produced recognisably purposeful names embodying information required for the survival of the community.

The concept of 'place' in some of these names is fascinating, and reminds me of some of Benjamin Lee Whorf's views on language, for it transcends purely geographical co-ordinates and is sometimes, it seems, best defined as 'the area in which an activity takes place so characteristic that it becomes definitely associated and related to place'. It is as if a field name were to involve reference to crop, soil type, season, and weather, as well as position, in one name. HESSLE WHELPs for example is an area of the Humber off the old Fish Dock (St Andrew's Wall End). It is unlikely to be more than one kilometre square: in it, with a strong flood tide running up against a westerly wind, very impressive standing waves develop. The corresponding, less prominent features on the south side is known as BARTON BULLDOGS. Their position on any day may vary by up to three kilometers: I have discussed them in detail in 'Humber Words', Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society vol. X (part LVII), pp.10-25.

The fishing ground known to Icelanders as 'vikorrall' was a favourite haunt of German trawlers, hence its post-1918 name on English fishermen's charts of THE HINDENBURG LINE. It may be about 60 km long by 20 km wide, and perhaps 30 km from where it was yesterday. It depends on where this procession of trawlers is to be found, and another name for part of it, THE BICYCLE TRACK, presumably reflects the six-day bicycle races of the twenties. One skipper explained to me how difficult it could be to force a place in the line: 'You had to slot in where you could'. THE MALL OF DEATH, another fairground reference, was a tow along the edge of an underwater cliff.

There are four principal ways in which place on the ever-varying surface of the sea can be established, and all are illustrated in Hull Fishermen's place-names. The simplest is by lining up two objects on shore, the traditional 'meet' (cf. English Dialect Dictionary s.v. moath) well dealt with for Norway by Per Hovda in Nordl. Med and for Iceland in Sjóskó. Alan Hjorth Rasmussen deals with Danish North Sea names in the forthcoming North Sea studies jointly published by Stavanger Museum and the National Maritime Museum to which we both contribute.

Some meets are of great age, and were an important resource of Viking age navigation (cf. my Viking Voyagers, London, 1980, pp.185-94). A simple example
is OLD TOWER and BLACK STONES (or ON BLACK STONES) recorded in a cable off Flamborough Head in 1977. It is important to observe that as the stones are selected to be part of a mark seen from seaward, they need not be very black, or even the blackest in the area, once they have been pointed out and memorised.

From a land-features point of view they may be inconspicuous or even invisible, as are THE LEDGES at South Flannan light, or THE CARRIAGE DRIVE and ROMANS WALK (NW and NE respectively of Ingolfshofdi, S. Iceland). The object's only prominence may be in the mind of an observer seeking a feature to line up with some conspicuous one in order to define a patch of water perhaps thirty miles away. If two objects in line cannot be found, then two which are almost so have to be up, and due allowance made. By controlling the speed at which they close together or open apart, even curved courses to avoid obstructions (Fasteners) can be described. This angular separation of the objects not in line is never in neat names described as an angle but always as a length, and considerable experience is required to interpret what is meant. I do not think the element of deliberate mystery in fishing names is as great as occasionally believed, but they quite naturally require explanation on the actual spot because that is where they arose and were handed on: they were never intended to communicate anything to people who had not taken part in the activity on the spot. 'Tow (c. the trawl) to the eastward with Nakker Head about a boat's length outside the Saddleback. What is called the Old Arm Chair will be seen coming clear of Riptange Point. The seat of the chair appears first and then the back becomes clear and if you get Nakker Head about a handspike length outside the Saddleback and the seat of the Old Arm Chair just to be seen coming clear of Riptange you will most probably feel them (c. two sea-bed rocks which may break the trawl-warp). The economic importance of this knowledge to avoid damage costing the profit of the voyage is obvious; there is no Faeroese equivalent of THE OLD ARM CHAIR, which is only crucial if you are towing a trawl. THE SADDLEBACK is not really very like a saddle, but is largely to be explained as a re-formation of Faeroese Kuddler, as THE NOOD is of Icelandic Hofdi.

Some meets are even more complex and establish distance off the land as well as a line of position. THE BOBBY'S HELMET is a particularly interesting example. I have a copy of Close's Fishing Chart of Iceland of the 1930's in which it has been added by hand. A small knob on the first crest of Kalfantindur seen from seaward has somewhat the appearance of a policeman's helmet silhouetted on the horizon. From further offshore it is lost against higher ground and is thus an indication of distance off as well as direction. THE ATKING (Dakkjói) is similar. Icelandic forms of both exist, Bobhinn (a seal) and Windwinn (the window) but seem to be colloquial, based on the English names. A seal's head bobbing up from the water resembles Kalfantindur as much as does a policeman's helmet, and if the mark were a half-tide rock might seem more appropriate. But BOBBY'S HELMET was often used by English fishermen for this shape (there is another, north of Malangen in N. Norway) and attic windows were a good deal rarer in nineteenth-century Iceland than in Hull. The lively, sometimes almost poetic, creative imagination displayed in some of these names, was perhaps a requisite, as in soldiers' slang names, of their survival. The dull names simply did not seem to enough people to be worth adopting.

One feature often has alternative names, but this is not always a matter of some people preferring one and some another. The same feature, seen from different bearings, may be part of a different system of information, and the two or three different names are not redundant but indicate in which location the name occurs. This is presumably why Seigrjullásker is WEST ROCK when it contrasts with Drangskáker as EAST ROCKS, but HEN AND CHICKS or JUMBO in other contexts, whilst Drangskáker is variously, depending on the direction from which it is seen, LION ROCK, SCHÖNNER ROCKS, THE FINGERS. Of course often the names are simply the different usages of different groups, and not systematically determined: I suspect that THE BABY'S FOOT, THE BABY'S TOE, THE BABY'S BOTTOM
are all the name place, called by some THE BANANA, but it is typical of these names that not having on that particular ground I have no means of knowing.

The second principal way in which fishermen establish their position is by sounding: THE LONG FORTIES and THE BROAD FOURTEENS are examples. Note particularly the existence of attitudes incorporated in the names. In deep water it was, before the introduction of the echo-sounder, difficult to get enough soundings to give a clear picture of the sea-bed, so that names implying a specific shape for a bank, like OCTOPUS off N. Norway, THE BANANA bank or THE KIDNEY are especially, in spite of the quirkiness of some skippers, to date from after 1945. This increased definition picture was at the expense of the actual samples of material brought up by the old-fashioned lead.

The nature of this bottom was the third principal means of establishing position, and names involving it tend to be older than those just mentioned. THE RED SOIL, THE HERLING, RIBS AND TRUCKS, THE IRONFOUND, CORAL JUNGLE, BACK OF THE SCHUFF, DOWN IN THE DUTCHS, IN THE WHITE WEED (the last three SE of DDB'S HIND LEG, off THE WHALEBACK). Such fine local distinctions of areas a few hundred yards wide a thousand miles from home are not as surprising as they may seem at first sight. The exact nature of the bottom is more important to the trawlerman than to anyone else as he taws an expensive and relatively large and fragile net across it. The difference between his detailed and experience and official general optimism is well shown by his name for the NW corner of the Dogger Bank, where the Admiralty chart describes the bottom as fine sand. It is THE NORTH-WEST TOUGH: the sand is there, of course, but it lies on the tops of rough rocks. In its reference to a congregation of long boats, the name DOGGER BANK is an earlier example of THE HINDEBURG LINE type of name.

The surface of the sea provides the Fourth indication of position. 'The appearance of certain birds, seaweed and medusae - sudden alterations in the swell', to quote William Scoresby (cf. Viking Voyagers, p. 79,80), has done this. Names of the Anglo-Saxon Sea-farers, like THE SEASIDE (meaning the change in colour over the Faeroe Bank in 80 fathom (and nearer home the recognisable Humber water off the river mouth on the ebb), and THE WHelps BULLDOGS, etc. mentioned above are further examples.

Any division of names by categories such as these is bound to be artificial, as many of the most interesting names combine several indicators. THE STAIRCASE is a tidal overfall off the Hook (Stalberg Corner) where the ship sometimes, after a series of waves as steep as steps, but seen from eddy of Løtenbøl look like a flight of steps. RED HOUSES combines the apparent silhouette of a gable-roofed cottage (complete with chimney if range is properly chosen!) on the echo-sounder with slabs of red sandstone ('the roof-tiles') coming up in the trawl tickler chains. This depends on a fine discrimination echo-sounder, and in spite of the claim of one informant to know the name before the first world war, I think it is a credit to the imagination of some North Sea skipper of the fifties or sixties. I doubt if, in the nature of these names, its first occurrence may be more closely dated. The name RED SOIL is undoubtedly much older, and may well have been the model for this particular mnemonic and explain the confusion. Other recent electronic innovations equally date the names they have given rise to - THE THIRTY LONG and THE THIRTY PIPS (on The Kidney Bank) derived from Consol, THE SIX TO EIGHT and THE PURPLE TCN from Dacy Navigator which replaced it. In spite of the official cautions about relying on Consol for detailed position-finding (ignoring, like so many other official cautions) I have observed very successful skippers using it for this purpose and obtained sea-bed wrecks by Consol! It may be important to point out that the Consol names remained in use after the system had ceased to be used in practice. I have been told that THE HARI KARI BANK east of Pap Grunn is so named because a wartime American minefield, incompletely cleared, made fishing there in the early fifties suicidal; someone else said its NE corner was to be avoided 'because the Rawalpindi sunk there'. I don't suggest these are mutually exclusive, but adduce them to show how complex, and relatively recent, the net of associations incorporated in names may be. Examination of this continuous creation may cite a name just off the Humber but new to all on board, heard from two other skippers chatting on VHF at 18.40 on 7.iii.78, talking about CHARLIE'S STONE RIFF as the starting point of a tow. Whether the name will become established and survive I cannot tell.

It is no wonder that those experienced men who had in a lifetime mastered the unprinted culture embodied in these names should be consciously proud of its traditions. 'The classical fishing was SHALLOWS' one told me; 'anybody can go to Bear Island, the fish was giving itself up!'. They made their own written notes as well, sometimes accumulated on a single chart which accompanied their whole life afloat. I have seen one which was in effect a family history, marking the places where relatives and friends had been lost, and the names of the ships involved, as well as fishing banks and fasteners, but more often a small notebook, usually called a bearing book, was used. These, as closely guarded secrets (in some vessels I have been in, only the skipper was allowed to know where the vessel was), were rarely accessible outside the family circle, and not always within it. A trawler owner told me that the son of a don skipper would usually make better than average trips, but his performance would improve dramatically when his father finally retired and then handed over the last of his jealously guarded knowledge.

Much more could be said about the operational aspects of these names: what of the language aspect? As has been pointed out, many express attitudes to the sea as a zone, naming them as SLEEPY HOLLOW at the top end of Patrekefjordhur was a refuge from hard labour as well as bad weather, and KLOODYKE, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, reflect a joyous gold rush by nineteenth-century trawlers to their North Sea Eldorado. This latter word is an echo of a lucrative family history, marking the places where relatives and friends had been lost, and the names of the ships involved, as well as fishing banks and fasteners, but more often a small notebook, usually called a bearing book, was used. These, as closely guarded secrets (in some vessels I have been in, only the skipper was allowed to know where the vessel was), were rarely accessible outside the family circle, and not always within it. A trawler owner told me that the son of a don skipper would usually make better than average trips, but his performance would improve dramatically when his father finally retired and then handed over the last of his jealously guarded knowledge.

Discoverer names exist in large numbers, of varying degrees of formality, but are not essentially different from other discover names of mountains or rivers, except insofar as the names involved are those of village Hampsers. ALBROW CRAG is an example. It is named after the discoverer of the BEMPTON BANK, WALTER LEWIS HOLE, JACK HAMILTON'S U TOWN, BRUCEY'S CARDEN, WILSON'S CORNER. There is more to some than may appear at first sight. THE ROSE GARDEN (shades of medieval courtly love!) is any illegal fishing ground inside other people's limits, and BRUCEY was certainly not the only skipper to have a favourite rookery as that. It was discovered by Barretts in 1956, but a British expedition in 1963 named it Cherry Island after Sir Francis Cherry who had despatched them, and the name, like White Sea For Barents Sea, continued in use among Hull whalers into the 1960's. It seems to have survived the two-generation gap before Hull men again began to frequent the places, and shows how far some of these names go back; many different periods are involved in the creation of the names in current use.

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reminiscent of soldier slang names. It may well reflect a similar emotionally
based need to impose war-familiar associations on remote and hostile places.
THE BEAN on Dignanes Flak at Iceland is said to be 'PARK ST. BRIDGE' (in
someone's Hull) because 'you can only go over it NE/SW' (you can't ask any other course).

Personal names are not, of course, invariably those of discoverers or
patrons. KAY OLESEN BANK is a re-formation of Faeroese Kjølsen, and
ANTON DOHN BANK and SCOTT PATCH are named immediately after ships of
that name (themselves named after men). ELIZABETH BANK, ROSEMARY BANK are
probably ship-names, but possibly skippers' wives or daughters or all three,
and JUBILEE BANK is that, from the dates involved, marginally more likely
to be named after a vessel named for the Jubilee of Queen Victoria than for
the event itself. I doubt whether BILL BAILEY BANK was really named after an
eponymous discoverer; I have never met anyone who claimed knowledge of him,
and the discoverer of the OUTER BAILEY in 1908 first called it THE LOUSY BANK,
and there is even a MRS BILL BAILEY BANK north of Bill Bailey Bank. It should
be remembered that there was a popular music-hall song 'Won't you come home
Bill Bailey?' and these banks are out in the Open Atlantic, much more exposed
than the other favourite fishing-places of the day. In OLD SMOKY, the name
for Sneafells jokull, the OLD may be influenced by the song 'On top of Old
Smoky' as well as indicating familiarity; I have heard a snatch of song to
the same tune 'In sight of Old Smokey' and it represents very well the range of
allusion available to the makers of these names.

This familiar sense of being at home in two different places a thousand
miles apart is one of the strangest impressions left by these names. RIDICU Petit
CORNER is simply a shot at Icelandic Reykjaneshyving, imposing an English form
upon it, as is DALTANGE pronounced to rhyme with orange, but others represent
a more interesting tradition which one can even trace back to Old English.
ANNE'S HILL is an intelligent version of Faeroese Ernberg, by someone
familiar with the Scandinavian pronunciation of English, as well as the meaning
of berg. In the Order Book of Hull Trinity House (Yorkshire Archaeological
Society Records Series (1941) ed. F.W. Brooks) we find on March 27, 1646,
Albert Hanson of Cowan Haven master of the Springing Hunt, and the Alfredian
Sciricungs heel and Blekinga Eq show a similar denization, phonetic,
lexical, and inflectional. Blekinga is not an -jungs name, and the Angliciza-
tion of Skiringja has adopted heal for malr whose English form sole was
purely poetic. Icelandic Dragarnir is to English fishermen THE SOLDIERS,
which may be translation as well as adoption of the same visual metaphor for a
serried rank of rocks; when Geirfuglasir becomes THE GRENADES there is
obviously no translation, but the sound echo is reinforced by awareness of the
appropriateness of 'soldiers' for a row of rocks. Sometimes a different visual
metaphor is used. Evidently Gashholm was not unmistakably enough a goose, or
the reason for the Scandinavian name was not involved, and English fishermen
called it THE NUDGE. Not that bird and animal names are always visual in
origin. Some names may be, as Olsen suggests, an attempt to suggest the
different sound of the sea against different rocks (cf. Viking Voyagers p.21
and the references there) and Lambadalus was presumably a good sheltered place
for sheep; to fishermen it appeared as a steep sided notch in the skyline and
was called THE TARMOT. FAIRY ROVER as the name for the next deep, west of
Hunaflói, may have something to do with Faeringa but I have no evidence for this.
Russian is much less familiar to trawlermen than the Scandinavian languages are,
and all the names I know are simply sound approximations with no analysis of
meaning. SWEATY NUT for Svialt Nus 'the cape of the saints' is typical.