**The Admiralty’s interwar planning with the British fishing industry, 1925 - 1940**

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**(7750 words)**

**Abstract**

The Admiralty and the Royal Navy made extensive use of the British fishing fleet in a variety of auxiliary roles during the First World War. On demobilisation the emphasis quickly switched to increasing the economic output of the British fishing industry and many of the wartime lessons were lost during the following decade. Throughout the interwar period the Admiralty struggled to frame a requirement for the contribution of the fishing fleet in during any future conflict. The conflicting interests of minesweeping, anti-submarine warfare and fisheries protection were not reconciled with the result that the overall requirement was never fully visible.

As the Second World War approached the Admiralty’s planning was further hampered by a loss of corporate understanding of the fishing fleet’s capabilities, a lack of technical intelligence (in the case of minesweeping) and by the effect of the British fishing crisis. This paper examines the Admiralty’s attempts to establish a coherent policy for the employment of the fishing fleet in an auxiliary role during the interwar period and its results on the outbreak of the Second World War.

**Keywords**

Admiralty, Royal Navy, fishing fleet, fishing industry, fisheries protection, trawlers

**The Lessons of the First World War**

Prior to the First World War the Admiralty had recognised that Britain’s fishing fleet represented a relatively cheap and efficient way of countering the tethered contact sea mine, an asymmetric threat to its freedom of operation at sea. In particular trawlers that fished by dragging an open net at a fixed depth underwater to catch demersal species could be converted and their crews trained to sweep for mines. In 1908 the Royal Navy (RN) began minesweeping trials with trawlers and worked towards developing the techniques and equipment required to effectively clear enemy minefields.[[1]](#endnote-1) In 1911 the Admiralty authorised the creation of a Trawler Section, which could be called on for minesweeping duties during any conflict at sea. Negotiations with the owners of the leading trawler companies resulted in an agreement that 100 boats, along with their crews would be listed by the Admiralty as liable for naval service should the need arise. The fishermen would become part of the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR), which had been created in 1859. The RNR Trawler Section (RNR(T)) was established for 142 skippers and 1,136 men by the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914.[[2]](#endnote-2)

By the end of September 1914 German submarines had sunk the light cruiser HMS Pathfinder and the cruisers HMS *Cressy, Hogue* and *Aboukir* with the loss of seventy-one officers and 1,649 men.[[3]](#endnote-3) With no regular anti-submarine capability the Admiralty and the RN very quickly began to look at methods by which trawlers could be used to deter, damage or destroy enemy submarines. Trawl gear was developed in order to indicate the presence of a submarine, snare it or even damage or destroy it while submerged. Fishing drifters were also brought into naval service, their long surface suspended nets, used to catch pelagic species of fish, were modified to restrict the movement of submarines and force them to the surface where they could be engaged by guns that had been fitted to the fishing boats’ decks. As the war progressed the techniques and tactics of minesweeping and anti-submarine warfare were developed and improved. Trawlers and drifters were the most successful anti-submarine vessels operated by the RN during the war as part of the Auxiliary Patrol, accounting for thirty-seven of the 112 German u-boats sunk.[[4]](#endnote-4) When the convoy system was finally instigated in mid-1917 the fishing fleet was an integral contributor with both capabilities. The use of the fishing fleet was expanded and by the end of the war 1,435 trawlers and 1,490 drifters had been requisitioned or built for naval service and nearly 4,000 skippers and over 50,000 seamen had been enlisted.[[5]](#endnote-5)

After the Armistice in 1918 the Auxiliary Patrol and the contributing boats and crews from the fishing fleet were rapidly demobilised so they could return to their primary task of fishing and resume contributing to the economy. Much of the corporate appreciation of what the fishing fleet had achieved during the war was lost during the ensuing decade. An understanding of the scale of effort was lost or forgotten which, along with steadily reducing naval budgets during the 1920s led to a decline in the perceived requirement for any contribution by the fishing fleet during a future war with a major power. In 1925 it was estimated that 300 fishing vessels would be requisitioned on the outbreak of any major conflict for unspecified duties with a further 200 trawlers being requisitioned in the first four months of any war.[[6]](#endnote-6) By 1933 the number of fishermen retained in the RNR amounted to 240 skippers, 840 enginemen and approximately 2,200 seamen.[[7]](#endnote-7) Discussion on the future utility of the fishing fleet for warlike purposes was fragmented between directorates and departments responsible for minesweeping, anti-submarine warfare and fisheries protection. Even an appreciation of the difference in potential capabilities of the trawler as compared to the drifter seemed to have been lost and the latter was largely discounted from Admiralty calculations as they were considered too small and slow for future naval utility. The result was a protracted period of muddled planning with confusion over the numbers and types of fishing vessels available and required, their capabilities and potential tasks.

**Fishing and fisheries protection**

During the First World War approximately twenty-five percent of the fishing fleet was not requisitioned by the Admiralty and continued to fish in the seas around the British Isles. In theory they did so under RN orders governing where and when they could work. The British fish catch reached a record high in 1913/14 with over 1.2 million tonnes being landed by British vessels at ports around the country. During the war the annual figure dropped by sixty to seventy percent to around 400,000 tonnes.[[8]](#endnote-8) Part of the downturn was offset by a loss of export markets but, nonetheless, the result was a sharp increase in domestic retail fish prices of up to 132 percent. This led to individual catches being worth up to £2,000 at market, approximately five times the pre-war wholesale price.[[9]](#endnote-9) With potentially lucrative financial returns for fishing skippers and their crews the regulations the RN attempted to enforce ‘were often disobeyed at sea in the absence of authority to compel their obedience’. The result was a steady increase in the number of fishing vessels lost at sea to mines or German submarines. In the first year of the war seventy-three trawlers were lost from the port of Grimsby alone.[[10]](#endnote-10) Direct naval control of all fishing activity was imposed at the end of 1917 with the result that losses fell dramatically and less than half a dozen trawlers were sunk in the final fifteen months of the war. [[11]](#endnote-11)

In 1930 the Admiralty’s Trade Division proposed that on the outbreak of any future war direct control by the RN would be imposed immediately on the entire fishing fleet. In practical terms this meant that each major fishing port would have a Senior Naval Officer in Charge (SNOIC) to control activity working with a Fishery Captain from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. All trawlers and drifters would be chartered by the Admiralty at a nominal rate and all skippers and crew enlisted. Fishing fleets would work in squadrons of twelve to twenty vessels under the control of at least one naval officer at sea. Each squadron would have wireless communication with its home port and one in four boats would be fitted with a 12-pounder gun. Of the estimated 1,699 ocean-going fishing vessels working from the United Kingdom the Trade Division planned to ensure that 1,200 would continue fishing organised into approximately eighty squadrons around the coast, working under the control scheme in order to provide a degree of fisheries protection. [[12]](#endnote-12)

Steps were also taken to ensure that an adequate number of fishermen remained available to the fishing industry during any future conflict. During the First World War many fishermen either volunteered or were conscripted into the army or into general naval service rendering them unable to either continue fishing or man the fishing vessels of the Auxiliary Patrol. In future it appeared desirable to earmark fishermen only for service on the small vessels they were accustomed to working with and that would form a significant portion of any future auxiliary fleet. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries drew up a general policy for the employment of fishermen in war time as follows;

‘(1) that fishermen should be earmarked for service at sea, either with the Navy or in their normal occupation, and should not be permitted to enlist in the Army or the Air Force.

(2) that they should, as far as practicable, be enlisted only for the purpose of serving on small naval craft, particularly those comprising the Auxiliary Patrol.

(3) that until required for naval service, or if not so required, they should continue fishing.’[[13]](#endnote-13)

**The magnetic mine and the rehabilitation of the drifter fleet**

The Trade Division’s estimated requirement for fishing and fisheries protection would leave less than 500 trawlers and drifters available to be requisitioned and converted for minesweeping and anti-submarine duties, a figure far short of the requirement suggested by the experience of the First World War. The RN’s minesweeping capability had been seriously degraded during the interwar period and an appreciation of the importance and utility of the fishing fleet as auxiliary mine sweepers appears to have been lost. By 1936 the 1st Minesweeping Flotilla based at Portland consisted of just seven new sloop minesweepers, a trawler section of three old trawlers and five fishery protection trawlers converted for minesweeper training. It was assumed that the establishment would be rapidly expanded to eight additional trawler flotillas if required but there was no detail on how that might be achieved.[[14]](#endnote-14) By August 1939 the establishment for auxiliary minesweepers had been set at 200 trawlers under the direction of the Royal Naval Patrol Service (RNPS).[[15]](#endnote-15) By the beginning of December 1939 however, despite the urgency, crews were ready for just 180 to contribute to the minesweeping effort.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The changed nature of the threat presented technical challenges that also delayed the build-up of an effective minesweeping fleet. It was widely assumed that the main danger in any future war would come from tethered, buoyant contact mines as it had done during the Great War. Both Britain and Germany had begun to develop non-contact mines of various types towards the end of the First World War. One of the principal methods of detonation was through the proximity of a ship or boat causing a deflection in the earth’s magnetic field that would then actuate an electrical firing mechanism. Between the wars the German navy developed the magnetic ground mine which would sink to the sea bed and detonate beneath any ship passing over it on the surface. Sweeping for such mines was a difficult prospect and required technical intelligence on the fine detail of the firing mechanism. Without it countermeasures were crude and unreliable such as the ‘A’ sweep, a floated cable towed between two boats with large bar magnets hanging beneath it. It proved so difficult to handle it became known as the ‘Bosun’s Nightmare’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Another option was to degauss ships to render them magnetically invisible. Both counter measures were investigated by HMS *Vernon* at Gosport from 1935 and in 1936 the Admiralty Non-Contact Committee was established to attempt to coordinate activity. Despite those initiatives little practical progress was made and according to one mine warfare officer, ‘The position may be summed up by saying that when World War II broke out we *knew* a lot, but we could not *do* a lot until we discovered what type of non-contact mechanism the enemy was employing…’.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The danger from the magnetic mine quickly became apparent. On 10 September 1940 a convoy was sailing down a swept channel along the Suffolk coast when the cargo ship SS *Magdapur* was struck by the explosion from a magnetic mine, broke in half and sunk with the loss of seven lives. Six days later the passenger ship *City of Paris* was disabled in the same location. Within five weeks another twenty ships had been sunk by German non-contact mines off the east coast of England and the channels at the mouth of the Thames.[[19]](#endnote-19) An intact example of a German magnetic mine was required to investigate counter measures and it was required quickly. At the end of September HMS *Europa,* the headquarters of the RNPS at Lowestoft along with HMS *Vernon* hastily improvised a small fleet of auxiliary minesweepers to try to trawl up a magnetic mine. Under the direction of Lieutenant Commander Charles Hammond RN six wooden herring drifters, together with their skippers and crews were assembled and spent two weeks preparing and fitting trawl gear. The flotilla under the control of Skipper Sydney White in His Majesty’s Drifter (HMD) *Silver Dawn* along with the *Ray of Hope, Jacketa, Lord Cavan, Formidable* (later renamed *Fidget*) and *Fisher Boy* redeployed to Ramsgate and spent two fruitless months groping for magnetic mines in the Channel and the Thames estuary.[[20]](#endnote-20) On 10 December 1939 HMD *Ray of Hope* winched herself backwards over the only mine the flotilla found. It detonated blasting the small vessels to pieces and killing nine of the twelve crew.

At the same time that White’s small flotilla was trawling for a magnetic mine a new method of sweeping had been developed and tested. The Mark II Sweep was a large towed raft supporting a powerful electromagnet driven by power from the towing vessel and capable of triggering a magnetic mine. The system, generally known as the ‘skid’ was an improvement on the ‘bosun’s nightmare’ but still had limitations. To prevent the towing vessel having to pass over the submerged non-contact mine before the sweep the ‘skid’ was towed behind and between two fishing boats, thus doubling the requirement for minesweeping vessels. Additionally, when the ‘skid’ detonated a mine it was in turn destroyed by the resultant explosion. Nevertheless, the Mark II Sweep proved its effectiveness and the Admiralty was quick to request additional resources to provide the towing vessels. It was made clear that it would ‘not be possible to employ existing minesweeping trawlers for towing the sweep as these will be fully employed against moored mines which the enemy is also laying’. It was therefore suggested that 100 drifters should be earmarked to tow the ‘skid’. The Admiralty believed ‘that there are a great many drifters laid up and that the herring drifting season is about to close for six months. It is not therefore expected that any great distress in the fishing industry will be felt as a result of taking up these craft’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Despite its availability and suitability in terms of low magnetic signature the drifter was still considered inadequate for modern minesweeping duties. The conditions towards the end of 1939 however, forced the Admiralty to resort to its use. The Director of Torpedoes and Mines considered there were still ‘obscurities’ in the proposal to use drifters that could only be clarified through dialogue with the fishing industry. A meeting was quickly convened at the Admiralty on 25 October 1939 involving attendees from the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Scottish Home Department and representatives of the fishing fleets from the main herring ports: Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Peterhead and Fraserburgh. The fisheries’ representatives reported that a large number of drifters were laid up in Lowestoft, the Moray Firth and at Fife due to the approach of the end of the herring season and the restrictions imposed by the war. The Admiralty suggested the fishing representatives should decide among themselves how to equitably allocate drifters from among the ports to fulfil the Admiralty’s requirement while causing least disruption to the current and future fishing industry. On 20 November 1939 the Treasury agreed to provide the £779,500 to convert 100 boats and pay for 450 magnetic sweeps and with that the drifter found its place back in the auxiliary minesweeping fleet through necessity rather than planning.[[22]](#endnote-22)

On 23 November 1939 personnel from *HMS Vernon* recovered, defused and disassembled a pair of German magnetic mines that had been dropped by parachute on mud flats in the Thames estuary. With its firing mechanism revealed counter measures were quickly developed in the form of the successful ‘Double-L’ electro-magnetic sweep. On 28 March 1940 the first four ‘Double-L’ equipped vessels began work sweeping in the Thames estuary and quickly detonated four non-contact mines. Further success followed rapidly which, ‘taken together showed that the period of palliatives and of hasty improvisations was passing, and that the conquest of the magnetic mine was now in sight’.[[23]](#endnote-23) The auxiliary fleet continued to expand to meet the minesweeping requirement and over 350 trawlers and close to 200 drifters were employed in the role in all maritime theatres.

**Anti-submarine warfare and the modernisation of the trawler fleet**

As with minesweeping, the corporate appreciation of the utility of the auxiliary fleet, including fishing vessels, in anti-submarine warfare declined rapidly after demobilisation in 1919. At the same time the Admiralty raised discussions on the number of fishing vessels required for anti-submarine duties in any future major conflict. Initial thoughts suggested 200 trawlers and 100 drifters would be sufficient but this was modified to 300 trawlers being required on mobilisation and a further 200 during the first four months of the war. Drifters were dropped from the calculations as being too small and slow to be effective in future anti-submarine operations. The numbers were calculated in isolation of the other Admiralty departments working on the auxiliary fleet’s contribution to fisheries protection and minesweeping.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Very little thought appears to have been applied to the subject during the following decade until 1936 when the increasing probability of a future war with Germany brought focus to the Admiralty’s thinking. Foremost in the collective memory was how long it had taken to establish the convoy system during the previous war. Thanks largely to Admiralty resistance regular convoys as a means of protecting shipping from submarine attack did not develop until mid-1917 by which time hundreds of thousands of tons of merchant and civilian shipping had been sunk bringing Great Britain ‘unpleasantly close to defeat’. The Admiralty was determined not to make the same mistake again. If adequate and effective anti-submarine measures were in place from the outset of any future war it might discourage the enemy from resorting to unrestricted submarine warfare. That aspiration would require anti-submarine warfare vessels with a marked improvement in speed, acceleration and manoeuvrability to counter nearly twenty years of advances in submarine technology and performance. A new, modern anti-submarine sloop cost £200,000 however, money that the Admiralty did not have allocated or available in its budgets in the mid-1930s.[[25]](#endnote-25)

As a more economic option the use of the fishing fleet was brought back under scrutiny. The Admiralty drew up a staff requirement of the capabilities required of a modern trawler that could cope with the rigours of future anti-submarine warfare. Such a vessel needed to be 45 metres in length and have a gross tonnage of 457 tonnes. It was required to have a top speed of a minimum of twelve and a half knots but preferably fifteen knots and an endurance of 7,400 kilometres. It had to be capable of carrying a crew of twenty-three to operate the boat and the weapon systems that would be fitted in time of war: a four-inch quick-firing (QF) gun, two Lewis guns and two depth charge launchers with twenty-five depth charges. It was also noted that the trawler needed superior acceleration, although no figures were specified.[[26]](#endnote-26) The staff requirements for anti-submarine trawlers were stringent but there were boats already in the British fishing fleet that fulfilled most of them. The fifteen *Northern* class trawlers operated by Mac Line fisheries were all launched in 1936.They had all been built in Bremerhaven and handed over to the British fishing industry as part of the First World War reparation programme.[[27]](#endnote-27) A RN officer from HMS *Osprey*, the anti-submarine training establishment in Portland, was sent to assess the *Northern* class of trawlers and whether they met the staff requirements. The officer visited Mac Line’s office in Fleetwood on 29 April 1937 and spent the day on the *Northern Sun*. The trial took place in the Irish Sea where the trawler had no difficulty in maintaining twelve knots and could reach fourteen knots in bursts. The inspecting officer concluded that, ‘this class of ship would appear to very suitable for conversion to A/S [anti-submarine duties] in war time’.[[28]](#endnote-28)

A year earlier the owner of the successful Earl Steam Fishing Company of Grimsby, Sir Alec Black Bt had approached the Admiralty on a similar subject. On the outbreak of the First World War and following a request from the RN, Black had handed over his fleet to the Admiralty for naval use. Eight of his modern steam trawlers were voluntarily offered for naval acquisition before any terms had been agreed and were prepared and ready for use within twenty-four hours. He presented two more of his brand new trawlers as soon as they were launched in 1916. As a result Black received his baronetcy in 1918. In 1936 Black was considering replacing much of his fishing fleet with modern trawlers. He thought that, ‘…the Admiralty may be interested to consider the possibility of the construction of trawlers, which may, in a National emergency, be capable of a speed greater than that of any existing trawlers, particularly in view of the of the activities of certain other nations, which are reported to be in possession of fast and specially constructed trawlers, designed to be adaptable for war purposes’. To build a trawler capable of fifteen knots would mean moving away from the typical triple expansion steam engine and towards the use of the diesel engine. That could however, render them too expensive and uneconomical to run in many respects. Black proposed therefore, to build new trawlers that met the staff requirement and make them available for anti-submarine duties during a ‘National emergency’. In return the Admiralty would assist in balancing the economic situation by paying an annual grant of £1,000 per trawler to the Earl Steam Fishing Company.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Sir Alec Black prepared drawings of proposed designs for new trawlers and on 29 June 1936 he was invited to explain his ideas and proposal to a meeting in the Admiralty chaired by the Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (ACNS), Rear Admiral Charles Kennedy-Purvis. Black outlined the technical characteristics of the trawlers he proposed to have built and explained that he was willing to construct them to Admiralty staff requirements if the Government was prepared to pay a ‘retainer’ of £1,000 per annum. ACNS informed Black that he had no power over financial matters and that his only concern was whether the types of trawler being proposed would be suitable for use in war. To that end ACNS agreed to forward drawings of the recently launched Admiralty trawler *Bassett* to the East Steam Fishing Company to assist Black in drawing up his own plans.[[30]](#endnote-30) The Assistant Post Master General, Sir Walter Womersley MP, who also attended the meeting suggested that conditions had changed and ‘…that whereas a subsidy for special shipping for Admiralty use in war was in the past out of the question, he was hopeful that a different view could now be expected’. He would approach the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the matter. The meeting ended without a firm conclusion but an undertaking from ACNS that Black’s proposal would be carefully considered once he could submit more technical detail.[[31]](#endnote-31)

To many of the officers involved in the development of anti-submarine warfare and the discussions with Sir Alec Black this seemed to be a straightforward decision. If the proposal was taken up, within a year or two it could result in a fleet of suitable trawlers stood ready for a rapid conversion to anti-submarine duties for a relatively modest outlay. Nonetheless Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson, Controller of the Navy and therefore responsible for the purse-strings for procurement and materiel, did not agree.

‘I appreciate that it would be very nice to have 50 trawlers built so that they are readily adapted for naval requirements in war, but what we have to balance it with is the consideration “Is the cost worth it”? In other words, will there be a considerable extra security to trade if we spend (assuming that each trawler costs £1,000 per annum for 15 years) ¾ of a million? What will we get for this ¾ of a million? A couple of valuable knots, and possibly a saving of from a month to six weeks in fitting out’.

The Controller went on to explain that with a merchant fleet at full strength the country could afford to lose a few ships in the opening stages of a war, no matter how undesirable that thought might be. It would take time to establish the convoy system and controlling organisation, time during which existing trawlers could be requisitioned and converted. He did not believe a top speed of fifteen knots was necessary when the fastest tramp steamers did not make much more than ten knots. Henderson had considerable experience in the matter. As a junior commander he had been prominent in promoting the convoy system during the First World War. He continued, ‘I think we must also remember that the Powers that are likely to go to war with us cannot, I think, reach the strength of the German Submarine Service in 1917 in under four years if by then. If my appreciation is logical, then there can be only one answer to give [to Sir Alec Black], and that is to let the matter drop’.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Undeterred, a year after his initial proposal had been rebuffed Sir Alec Black approached the Admiralty once again and invited representatives to inspect his new trawler, *Man o’ War*, with a view to its suitability for anti-submarine duties. The *Man o’ War* had been launched by Cochrane & Son of Selby for the Earl Steam Fishing Company to work distant waters such as the White Sea. It was the first of five that Black had on order and was inspected by representatives from the Directorate of Naval Defence and the Directorate of Naval Construction at Hull on 13 April 1937. In many respects the trawler met the staff requirements but had a declared top speed of thirteen knots. The claim could not be tested during the inspection due to thick sea mist but the report calculated that even thirteen knots was slightly over optimistic. Additionally the inspecting officers reported that the trawler’s steering gear made it unsuitable for minesweeping duties and would make it difficult to convert for anti-submarine use. The deep draft of the vessel was also undesirable in both disciplines.[[33]](#endnote-33) With those conclusions what might have been a useful and economic relationship with Sir Alec Black was dropped. In the event the *Man o’ War* was requisitioned in September 1939 and converted to anti-submarine duties with the 21st Anti-Submarine Strike Force.[[34]](#endnote-34)

**The effect of the British fishing crisis 1933-1938**

Part of the Admiralty’s reluctance to engage with Sir Alec Black’s proposals may well have been because they suspected his motives. There is no doubt that his work during the First World War was altruistic and based on his sense of duty to the nation’s need but twenty years later the underlying conditions had changed. In 1914, with record catches being landed fishing fleet owner were making large profits. In the mid to late 1930s however, the British fishing industry was experiencing economic hardship and the Admiralty possibly suspected Black’s approaches were, at least in part, prompted by financial motives.

In order to belatedly curtail spiralling fish prices during the First World War the Fish (Prices) Order came into force on 23 January 1918 setting maximum retail prices across Britain.[[35]](#endnote-35) When the RN auxiliary fleet was demobilised in 1919 the fishing fleet consequently expanded rapidly just as the price controls were rescinded. The sudden, large increase in catches resulted in an unstable fish market and widely fluctuating prices that the industry struggled to predict. By 1920, thanks to the post war fishing boom the annual catch had recovered to over one million tonnes of fish landed at home ports by British vessels.[[36]](#endnote-36) That level was environmentally unsustainable and stocks in the nearer fishing grounds began to fail. Between 1920 and 1935 the amount of demersal fish being caught in the North Sea and landed by English steam trawlers fell by approximately fifty percent.[[37]](#endnote-37) The overall catch remained high however as larger and more powerful fishing vessels were built which could exploit distant waters such as the Icelandic coast, the Barents and White Seas. As a perishable commodity the fish caught in distant waters and landed in British ports was of a lower quality, with a proportion being unloaded stale and uneatable. As a result wholesale prices fell at a time when, in contrast agricultural producers were enjoying steady growth. To make matters worse, at the same time the price of coal, one of fishing’s major expenses, was steadily increasing. The entire fishing industry suffered as a result of ‘this vicious circle of over-building, over-fishing, depleted stocks, constant widening of the sources of supply, increased landings, poorer quality, lower prices and the attempt to recoup losses by ever-increasing expansion and greater production.’[[38]](#endnote-38) In an attempt to break the cycle the fishing industry, acutely aware of its own inherent problems, instituted a scheme for owners to voluntarily ‘lay-up’ a proportion of their fleet to avoid uneconomic competition. Nevertheless, the situation steadily deteriorated and, with the underlying effects of the Great Depression the fishermen rendered unemployed, along with their families, were the chief victims of the crisis. As a largely self-employed workforce reliant on a seasonal industry fishermen were particular susceptible to any economic downturn. Many men left the industry to find more regular and reliable employment and did not return.[[39]](#endnote-39) Between 1921 and 1931 the number of active fishermen in East Anglia for example, fell by approximately twenty percent.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Sir Alec Black’s proposals may have been provoked by his genuine sense of duty but the Admiralty suspected he was motivated, at least in part by the economic crisis in the industry. Negotiations broke down as it was considered that ‘the sum he asked for was prohibitive’.[[41]](#endnote-41) Other submissions to the Admiralty were more direct in their purpose. In January 1937 the Fleetwood Fishing Vessel Owners’ Association lobbied the Admiralty for economic support. They wrote to Lord Edward Stanley, Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty claiming, ‘the Fishing Industry is experiencing particularly distressing times, and it is therefore necessary that something should be done, and done quickly, if the industry is to survive’. The Association made it clear why the Admiralty should be concerned by the situation. ‘The laying up of vessels is not only a very serious matter to the Trawler Owner, but detrimentally effects labour as each vessel laid idle means that a crew of 12 hands are out of employment…’[[42]](#endnote-42) Men laid off from fishing would inevitably look for employment elsewhere and if they found more stable and reliable work they were unlikely to return to the industry even when an economic upturn began. Added to the men who had left the industry in the 1920s this represented a potentially serious decrease in the skilled maritime manpower available to the RNR if mobilisation was required again in the future.

Another potential area of concern to the Admiralty was the fate of those trawlers laid up. Vessels tied up still required a financial outlay from their owner’s in terms of maintenance and mooring. With profits negligible or non-existent it might make economic sense to sell them off. Buyers were unlikely to be found in Britain during the crisis leading to the real risk of capable trawlers being sold abroad. The Admiralty considered that, ‘such sale may have two disagreeable consequences –

(a) Vessels which are to be regarded as potential units of the naval service pass out of the control of this country, and

(b) they may, directly or indirectly, pass into the control of a potentially enemy country’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The Civil Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. John Llewellin received a deputation from the British Trawler Federation on 24 March 1938. The Admiralty anticipated that the group would request subsidies in order to support the industry and allow boats and crews to be retained and maintained throughout the crisis. In 1933 the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Chatfield had written to the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Walter Elliott on a similar matter.

‘I am seriously concerned at the decline in the fishing industry, not only on account of its great national importance, but more particularly because of its almost vital importance from the point of view of national defence… the fishermen provide a potential reserve of great value. You may rest assured that any scheme calculated to help the industry will have my fullest support.’

In retrospect this statement may have been misconstrued as a promise of financial support. The Admiralty in 1938 was more hard-nosed and was clear that with the current state of the Navy budget and the plethora of urgent requirements money could not be diverted to maintain the British fishing industry on an uneconomic basis. The fishing fleet should be allowed to decline until it reached a self-supporting model. It was suggested that the line to be taken should be ‘that the Admiralty –

(1) view with concern the laying up of trawlers and non-employment of their crews;

(2) cannot give a subsidy from Navy Votes, as any subsidy must be a national matter and one for the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and Board of Trade;

(3) would strongly support any proposal to support the industry’.[[44]](#endnote-44)

When the deputation was received it gave the impression to those assembled in the Admiralty that its members were motivated by genuine concern for the capability of a future auxiliary fleet rather than by self-interest or financial gain. The British Trawler Federation members explained that the current voluntary laying-up scheme meant that in Hull, for example, ninety-six trawlers were already idle, representing twenty-five percent of the fleet in that port. The deputation first asked if the Admiralty would take over those vessels and their crews and perhaps use them for minesweeping training but the suggestion was turned down without discussion. The deputation was not very sanguine about the curt response and so moved on to the question of subsidy. Could the Admiralty charter the idle trawlers and berth and maintain them out of the Navy budget or could funds be provided to the current owners for the same expenses? The Admiralty however, had done their homework. Out of the ninety-six trawlers laid-up in Hull only thirty-three were on the list of vessels likely to be called up for auxiliary service and a further eighteen were less than ten years old and could possibly be subject to requisitioning. That left forty-five trawlers that the Admiralty had no motive to subsidise. For the fifty-one of interest chartering would cost around £30,000 per annum and subsidising over £60,000. That was for a single port, albeit an important one, multiply the figures across the fleet and it equalled a sum that the Admiralty simply did not have available. It was also made clear that chartering or subsidising the vessels still did nothing to retain the crews. Additionally, subsidising trawlers but not the drifter fleet would cause further economic unbalance in the industry and expose the Admiralty to accusations of creating unfair advantage for some ports over others.[[45]](#endnote-45)

It was clear that the Admiralty were sympathetic to the British Trawler Federation’s plight but not inclined or able to assist financially. After the meeting the Director of Plans concluded, ‘Modern Opinion is unanimous in asserting that wars are won as much by economic resources as by fighting power; and a prosperous fishing industry provides, in war as in peace, a valuable source of economic strength in food supply. In fact, the Admiralty are in some ways less concerned in a reduction in the number of fishing vessels available than those departments responsible for ensuring food supplies, since the RN will in war undoubtedly have first call on the boats available, which at present are in no real danger of falling below naval requirements in quantity – though quality may be affected, and the balance only will be left to provide supplies of fish’.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In July 1938 the Admiralty informed the British Trawler Federation that unfortunately but inevitably it was unable to adopt any of its suggestions for assistance. The matter was passed to the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence for his consideration and to the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries to examine the case for subsidisation.[[47]](#endnote-47)

**Conclusion**

It would appear that the Admiralty missed an opportunity in turning down Sir Alec Black’s proposal and the approaches made by the Fleetwood Fishing Vessel Owners’ Association and British Trawler Federation. Certainly the RN was suffering from financial restrictions and even as late as 1938 imminent major conflict involving Britain was by no means a certainty. It remained understandably difficult to be confident of the scale and capability of any future requirement for an auxiliary fleet of fishing vessels. Nevertheless, when war did break out the Admiralty’s rejection of the fishing fleet’s proposals over the preceding three years possibly appeared to have been a false economy. During the course of the Second World War the Admiralty requisitioned, bought or built hundreds of fishing vessels to carry out various roles at enormous cost. In the first months of the war in Grimsby for example, it was reported that the Admiralty had paid £2,000,000 for the trawlers taken up from that port alone.[[48]](#endnote-48)

During the second meeting of the Defence Preparedness Committee during the final week of August 1939 instructions were given to requisition the first thirty-five trawlers for anti-submarine duties.[[49]](#endnote-49) In the following three months a further 300 were requisitioned. Out of a fleet of 1,030 British trawlers available in 1939 a total of 816 were requisitioned or bought during the course of the war. By no means did all those vessels serve throughout the entire war with up to a maximum of 690 committed to naval duties at any given time.[[50]](#endnote-50) In addition nearly 100 foreign trawlers were requisitioned, bought or seized from Commonwealth, allied or enemy fleets. A further 200 trawlers were purpose built by the RN between 1939 and 1945. Taking their initial role on transfer to naval duties (many were reassigned during the course of the war) over 370 were converted to minesweepers and over 200 to anti-submarine vessels. Over eighty trawlers were involved in harbour and port security, employed as boom defence vessels, a task not considered during inter-war planning. [[51]](#endnote-51) 146 trawlers on naval duties were lost during course of the war. Despite it being discounted as a useful auxiliary vessel between the wars the burden on the drifters was proportionally greater with approximately 200 requisitioned from a pre-war fleet of 277.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Approximately a quarter of the trawler fleet, between 200 and 300 vessels, continued to fish throughout the war. Nearly 200 trawlers were converted to armed patrol vessels most of which were assigned to fisheries protection duties during the war.[[53]](#endnote-53) The Admiralty’s plans for fishing control measures were put in place almost immediately on the outbreak of war through the Fishing Vessels (Permit) Order 1939. The system generally followed that proposed in October 1938 and quoted above but initial losses were still high. The threat changed as the war progressed. During the first four months of the war a number of vessels were sunk by gunfire from German submarines. From the beginning of 1940 air attack became the primary threat but attacks virtually ceased from the end of 1941 after which the mine became the chief danger. A total of eighty-five trawlers engaged in fishing were lost to ‘war causes’: thirteen to gunfire, twenty-three to air attack, twenty-five to mines and twenty-four to indeterminate causes. Twenty five drifters were also lost, most sunk by mines. In addition, a further thirty-nine trawlers and several drifters were lost to marine causes including collisions, stranding and in storms. As a result eighty-eight skippers and a further 739 fishermen were killed while engaged in fishing during the war. ‘Few, if any, other industries can have sustained losses on this scale, and it was at this price that a vital part of the nation’s food supply was gathered in’.[[54]](#endnote-54)

It is clear that, despite the lessons of the First World War, the scale of effort required from the fishing fleet between 1939 and 1945 outstripped the Admiralty’s inter-war estimates of the requirement by a considerable degree. This in part was due to departments and committees throughout the Admiralty conducting dislocated planning in isolation of one another. The Plans Division, Trade Division, Local Defence Division and the Director of Mines and Torpedoes all assessed the requirements in their own areas of responsibility without consideration of the others. The Director of Personnel Services, the Admiral Commanding Reserves, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Board of Trade also made disjointed contributions to the process with the result that the overall requirement was never fully visible. It required unified oversight to bring coherence to the planning process, a role that a dedicated committee under the chair of ACNS might have achieved.

In minesweeping the understandable lack of technical intelligence meant that no effective counter to the magnetic mine had been developed prior to the outbreak of war. Tactics, techniques and technology had to be extemporised with the Admiralty being forced to bring the drifter into service having largely discounted its value during inter-war planning. Having identified a key lesson from the First World War the Trade Division did demonstrate foresight in allocating a high priority to the continuation of fishing and advocating and implementing immediate fisheries protection measures. Nonetheless, the relatively small proportion of trawlers and drifters that continued to fish resulted in an inevitably dramatic drop in domestic fish supplies and a corresponding rise in prices. Fisheries protection was allocated a high priority to try to protect and sustain the fishing industry but still over ten percent of vessels were lost to enemy action along with their crews. The fishing crisis of 1933 to 1938 presented the Admiralty with the valuable prospect of securing a proportion of its potential anti-submarine requirement at minimal cost. Financial constraints, a lack of foresight and a presumption that it could requisition the requirement at minimal cost once war broke out meant it missed the opportunity. These issues within the Admiralty and in its relationship with the British fishing fleet during the inter-war period compelled improvisation in the process of mobilisation of the auxiliary fleet in 1939 just as it had in 1914. In many areas the lessons had not been learned and were therefore repeated.

1. Robinson, ‘A Forgotten Navy’, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. d’Enno, *Fishermen against the Kaiser,* 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Barry, *The War in the North Sea,* 70-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918,* 729. A further eleven of the 112 German submarines were sunk by Q Ships, many of which were also fishing vessels. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. House of Commons (HC) Debate, vol.314 col.381, 1 July 1936. For a comprehensive account of the fishing fleet’s contribution during the First World War see Robinson, *Fishermen, the Fishing Industry and the Great War at Sea*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. TNA, ADM 1/8676/51, Director of Plans (DP) minutes, 5 and 13 February 1925. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Admiral Commanding Reserves (ACR), draft reply to Parliamentary question, 1 December 1933. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Uberoi, ‘UK Sea Fisheries Statistics’, p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. d’Enno, *Fishermen against the Kaiser*, 167-168. General food prices across Britain rose by seventy-eight percent during the same period. In cities and large towns fish prices rose by up to 157 percent. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ibid, p.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. TNA, ADM 116/3805, Report of the Committee to prepare a Scheme for the Control and Direction of the Operation of the Fishing Fleet (other Coastal Fishing) in War, 23 September 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. TNA, ADM, 116/3805, Fishing Vessels – Arrangements for Admiralty Control, 12 October 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Fisheries in War Time*, p.47. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. TNA, ADM 116/3805, Organisation and Expansion of Fisheries Protection and Minesweeping (F.P. & M.) Command in Time of War, 19 August 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. TNA, ADM 1/9936, Director of Personnel Services (DPS) minute, 3 August 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. TNA, ADM 1/10315, Draft Report of a Meeting Held to Discuss Progress in Combatting the German Magnetic Mine, 1 December 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Cowie, *Mines, Minelayers and Minelaying*, 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. ibid, 106-107. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Brookes, *Glory Passed Them By*, 28-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Lund and Ludlam*, Trawlers go to War*, 25-29 and Ministry of Information, *His Majesty’s Minesweepers*, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. TNA, ADM 1/10885, Director of Minesweeping Division (DMD) minute, 20 October 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. TNA, ADM 1/10885, Treasury Inter-Service Committee, German Magnetic Mines, Counter Measure, 20 November 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Rosskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. TNA, ADM 1/8676/51, Director Mobilisation Division (DMD) minute, 5 February 1925. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. TNA, ADM 116/3367, DP and DTD joint minute, 10 September 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Briefing note for DCNS on Sir Alec Black’s proposal, 23 May 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Toghill, *RN Trawlers, Part Two: Requisitioned Trawlers*, 322-329. Fourteen of the fifteen *Northern* class trawlers were converted to anti-submarine duties between 1939 and 1942. *Northern Rover* and *Northern Princess* were sunk by a German submarine in 1939 and 1942 respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. TNA, ADM 116/3367, report from Senior Officer A/S Trawlers Portland to the Captain A/S, HMS *Osprey,* 4 May 1937. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Briefing note for DCNS on Sir Alec Black’s proposal, 23 May 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Toghill, *RN Trawlers, Part One: Admiralty Trawlers*, 37. The *Bassett* class of Admiralty trawlers (HMT *Bassett* and *Mastiff*) were launched in 1935 and served as a prototype for a further 180 Admiralty trawlers constructed during the Second World War. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. TNA, ADM 116/3367, minutes of a meeting on trawlers for A/S purposes, 29 June 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Controller of the Navy to ACNS, 8 September 1936. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Inspection of Trawler ‘Man of War’ [sic], 24 April 1937. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Toghill, *RN Trawlers, Part Two: Requisitioned Trawlers*, 291. At least twenty-one trawlers from Sir Alec Black’s Earl Steam Fishing Company were requisitioned or bought by the Admiralty during the Second World War of which at least four were sunk. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare*, 235-237. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Uberoi, ‘UK Sea Fisheries Statistics’, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Russell, *The Overfishing Problem,* 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. House of Lords Debate, vol.108 col.986, 11 May 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Butcher, *Living from the Sea*, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Lummis, *The East Anglian Fishermen,* 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. TNA, ADM 116/3367, DP minute, 22 March 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Letter from the Fleetwood Fishing Vessel Owners’ Association to the Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty, 18 January 1937. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. TNA, ADM 116/3367, Admiralty minute to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 14 April 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. TNA, ADM 116/3367, DP minute, 22 March 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. TNA, ADM 116/3367, minutes of a meeting with the British Trawler Federation, 24 March 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. TNA, ADM 116/3367, DP minute, 1 April 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. TNA, ADM 116/3367, letter from the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty to the British Trawler Federation, 27 July 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Toghill, *RN Trawlers, Part Two: Requisitioned Trawlers*, ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars, Volume II,* 482. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Fisheries in War Time,* 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. These figures are extracted from the most thorough and detailed source Toghill, *RN Trawlers, Parts One and Two.* [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. *Fisheries in War Time,* 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Figure extracted from Toghill, *RN Trawlers, Part Two: Requisitioned Trawlers.* [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. *Fisheries in War Time,* 32 and 43.

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