

The Arctic Whaling Logs of Captain George Palmer, 1820–33

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Introduction

George Palmer, master of the Arctic whaling ship *Cove*, sailed annually from Newcastle to the Davis Strait whaling grounds from 1815 to 1833. A collection of fourteen consecutive copies of log books of his voyages from 1820 onward is currently being studied. The series overlaps with, and follows in time, the recently edited series of whaling journals by William Scoresby junior, dated 1811–18 and 1820. While Scoresby hunted entirely in waters between Greenland and Svalbard, Palmer hunted entirely west of Greenland, in Davis Strait and Baffin Bay. This paper sets the voyages in the context of the industry as a whole, based on statistics recently derived mainly from two previously unpublished sources: (a) customs returns tabled annually in the House of Lords, 1754–1824, and (b) voyages from all the whaling ports, 1814–42, based on customs returns, listed by William Coltish. Palmer sailed during a period of general decline in the industry, but one in which his particular skills brought him considerable success. Preliminary analysis of the logs reveals his outstanding success in favourable years, and his persistence that led to moderate success even in years of severely adverse weather and ice conditions.

The Palmer logs

Captain George Palmer (Fig. 1) was one of over a dozen whaling masters who sailed annually from Newcastle to the Davis Strait whaling grounds during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Family records held by the late Mrs Penelope Bray, Palmer's great-great-granddaughter, include fourteen consecutive copies of log books detailing his whaling voyages of 1820–33 inclusive. This remarkable collection, until recently known only to a few scholars of Arctic whaling,¹ has been photocopied and is currently being analysed.

From well over 10,000 voyages made by Arctic whale ships from British ports, only some 252 log books and journals are available for study.² The longest series of consecutive journals by a single master hitherto on record is that of William Scoresby junior, whose nine logs for the years 1811–18 and 1820, held in the archives of the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society, have recently been edited in three Hakluyt Society volumes.³ While Scoresby hunted only east of Greenland in the Svalbard whaling grounds, Palmer hunted entirely west of Greenland in Davis Strait, and was among the first British masters to penetrate north into Baffin Bay (Fig. 2). His years overlapped with and followed those of the Scoresby series.

¹ A. Barrow, *North East Coast Whale Fishery, 1750–1850*, University of Northumbria, PhD thesis, 1989, and *The Whaling Trade of North-East England 1750–1850*, Sunderland, University of Sunderland Press, 2001.

² S. Brown, A. G. Credland, A. Savours, and B. Stonehouse, 'British Arctic Whaling Logbooks and Journals: A Provisional Listing', *Polar Record*, 44, 231, 2008, pp. 311–20.

³ C. Ian Jackson, *The Arctic Whaling Journals of William Scoresby the Younger*, 3 vols, London, The Hakluyt Society, 2003, 2008, 2009.



Fig. 1. Captain George Palmer (1789–1866). (The Palmer Archive).

The Palmer logs are bound in two volumes, totalling approximately 900 manuscript pages. Like most such records, they appear to be fair copies, probably made during the return voyages, initially for presentation to customs officers in the home port. The logs of 1821–5 were kept by the mate John Winter, while that for 1828 was kept by a later mate, John Smith. No author is named for the remaining logs. The first five (1820–24) bear the signatures and dates of officers of the Newcastle Customs, confirming that they were examined at the end of the voyage to ensure that requirements of the parliamentary Bounty Acts then in force had been met. Logs dated after 1824, when the bounty was withdrawn and no further examinations were required, remain unsigned, but like the earlier ones were retained by the master as his own records of the voyages.

Entries appear in the two distinct formats adopted in most whaling logs of the period. Outward and homeward journeys through ice-free waters were recorded in a standard tabular log format of two days to a page, entered in two-hourly watches, with navigational details under prescribed headings. Once the ship reached the pack ice, the tabular format was abandoned, entries throughout the hunting period being shorter, less formal, and sometimes packed five or more to a page.

Noon latitudes based on sun-sights were recorded when conditions permitted. Unlike Scoresby and a few other contemporary masters, Palmer appears neither to have carried a chronometer nor to have attempted other ways of determining longitude; nor did he record

temperatures or barometric pressures. Wind directions and strengths on a 32-point scale were indicated several times daily, with details of changes in sail settings and trim. Courses and bearings of landmarks were recorded to 32 points, presumably with reference to a binnacle magnetic compass. Hourly rates of travel were logged during the outward and homeward voyages, and rare sightings of land were recorded by bearing and estimated distance. Palmer seems usually to have sailed in company with other ships, occasionally recording as many as forty sail in sight, but he only rarely mentions other ships by name, and seldom seems to have spoken with other masters. Like others, he stood by on several occasions to help crews of ships that had sustained damage or were in difficulties, taking survivors on board when required.

In addition to the navigational, sailing and other routine information of the logs, both bound volumes include pages recording ‘making-off’: the on-board process of chopping up the blubber and stowing it in casks. From these can be determined the number and size of whales caught, lengths of baleen, and the volumes of blubber brought home from each voyage. The making-off accounts begin in 1818, two years before the first logged voyage, so providing extra years in which the economics of the voyages can be assessed.

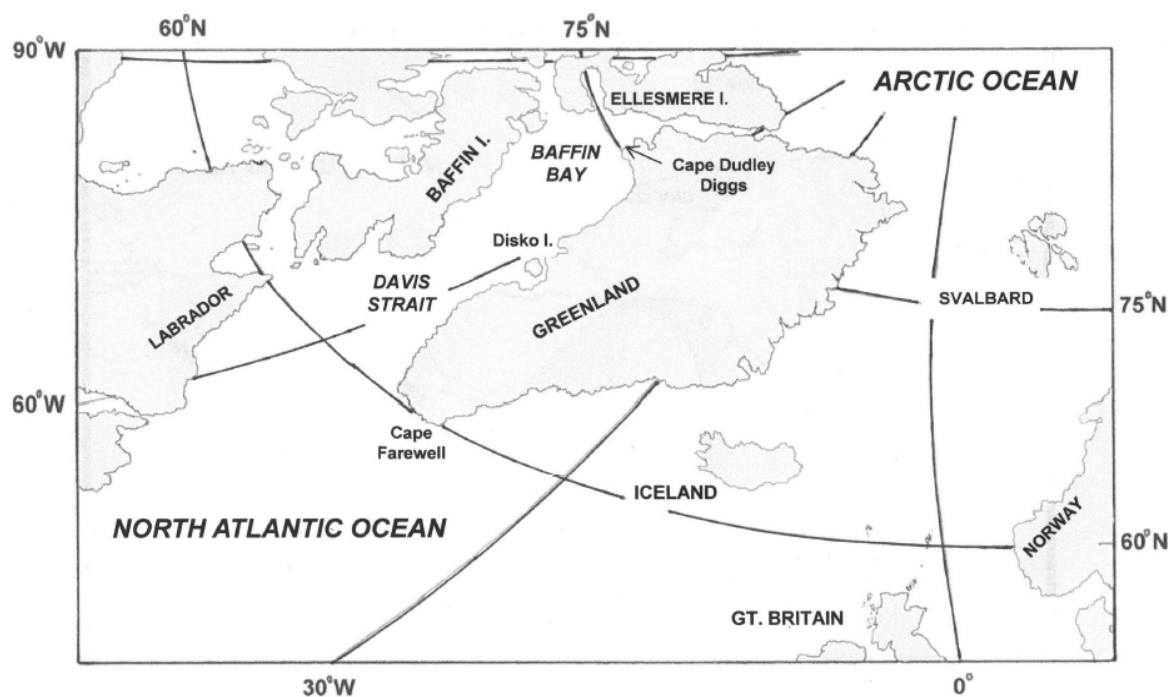


Fig. 2. The Arctic whaling grounds east and west of Greenland.

Palmer's voyages in context⁴

British ships began whaling in the Arctic toward the close of the sixteenth century,⁵ but irregularly and with few ships involved. An annual bounty of 20 shillings per ship-ton offered by Parliament in 1733 attracted little attention among ship owners, but an increase in 1749 to

⁴ For overviews of British whaling as a whole see William Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions*, London, 1820; G. Jackson, *The British Whaling Trade*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1978; C. Ian Jackson, op. cit., 2003, esp. pp. xxxi – xxxvii; and the British Arctic Whaling website of the Maritime Historical Studies Centre, University of Hull (www.hull.ac.uk/baw). For details of the history of whaling from England's northeast ports, including Newcastle, see Barrow, op. cit., 1989, 2001.

⁵ Scoresby, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 98.

40 shillings per ship-ton was followed by rapid growth of the industry. Numbers of ships sailing annually from British ports between 1740 and 1858 appear in Fig. 3. Newcastle was the third port after London and Liverpool to become involved in Arctic whaling, sending its first ship north in 1752. During the ensuing ninety years whaling ships from the Tyne ports of Newcastle and Shields made some 458 voyages.⁶ In the early years, between three and six ships sailed from Newcastle annually, but by 1787 and 1788, when the national whaling fleet had expanded to over 250 ships, Newcastle was contributing over twenty to the annual total.

For reasons discussed in G. Jackson's study,⁷ there followed a general decline in the industry. By the mid-1790s the national fleet had dropped to fifty-six, with Newcastle contributing only one ship per year. The Napoleonic wars stimulated the market for oil; numbers overall increased around the turn of the century; and by 1805 Newcastle was again contributing twelve ships to a national total of ninety-eight. A third peak of over 150 ships nationwide occurred in the years to 1820. Thereafter the industry began a slow and unsteady decline, influenced by the end of the European wars, withdrawal in 1824 of the already reduced government bounty, and growing competition from coal gas and vegetable oils. Newcastle's numbers fell to three ships in 1811 and 1812, and never afterwards exceeded six in any year.

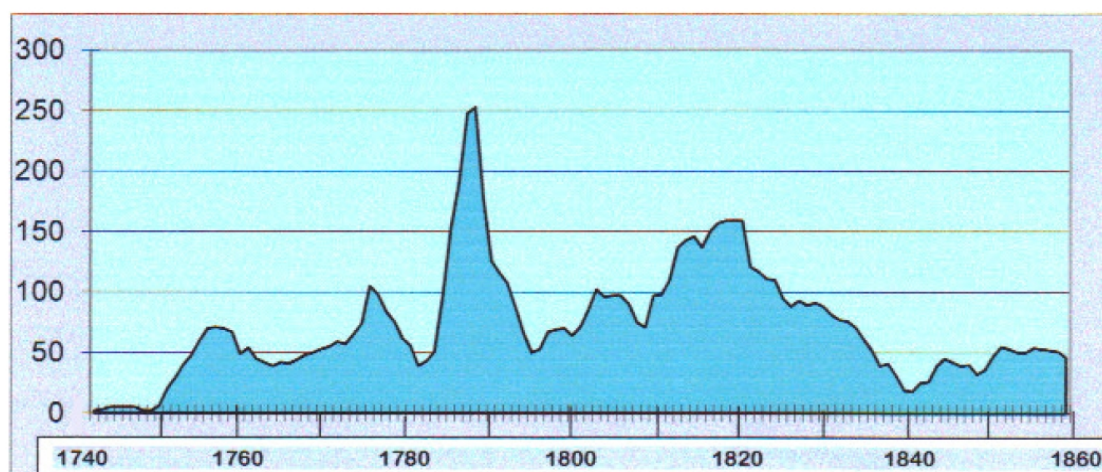


Fig. 3. Numbers of ships sailing annually to the Arctic whaling grounds. Data for 1740 to 1824 are based on Customs and Excise reports tabled in both Houses of Parliament and held in the archives of the House of Lords (Stonehouse: www.hull.ac.uk/baw). Those from 1814 to 1844 are based on a manuscript by William Coltish held in the Hull History Centre (Stonehouse: www.hull.ac.uk/baw). Later figures are from various sources not yet fully authenticated.

Palmer's voyages were made during the period of decline that followed the third peak. Between 1815 and 1821 the *Cove* was one of five or six whalers from Newcastle, and in 1822 one of four, of which two were subsequently lost in the ice. From 1823 to 1830 only three remained, and four in 1831–3. In the years following Palmer's retirement, from 1834 to 1840 three ships sailed, and two in 1841 and 1842. 1843 was the final year of Arctic whaling from Newcastle.

Despite the nationwide decline in the number of ships sailing to the Arctic whaling grounds during the 1820s and 1830s, and the few first-hand records from Arctic voyages that

⁶ www.hull.ac.uk/baw.

⁷ G. Jackson, *The British Whaling Trade*.

have survived overall, the period covered by the Palmer logs is particularly well endowed with other whaling logs and journals: nineteen from the Greenland ground, and thirty-three from Davis Strait.⁸ This is clearly a period from which much remains to be learned about Arctic whaling practices, strategies and catches, in relation to annual variations in weather and ice conditions.

The whaling ship *Cove*

A square-sterned wooden ship of 313 tons, the *Cove* was built at Whitby in 1798 (Fig. 4). In 1812 her owner and master was Captain P. Johnson,⁹ under whom she made her first three whaling voyages. From 1815 her principal owners were Edward Hall Campbell and George Barras, both prominent local brewers. Barras went on to found what was to become the Newcastle Brewery. Palmer's command dates from 1815, after which he sailed every season to Davis Strait until 1833. In 1829 he acquired a controlling share in the ship. After conspicuously successful seasons in 1832 and 1833, he retired from the sea, and the *Cove* was sold to a new owner in Hull. The ship later gained renown when, following the unusually severe winter of 1835–6, she was commissioned by the Admiralty for a voyage commanded by Captain James Clark Ross RN, to relieve a group of whaling ships trapped by ice in Davis Strait.¹⁰

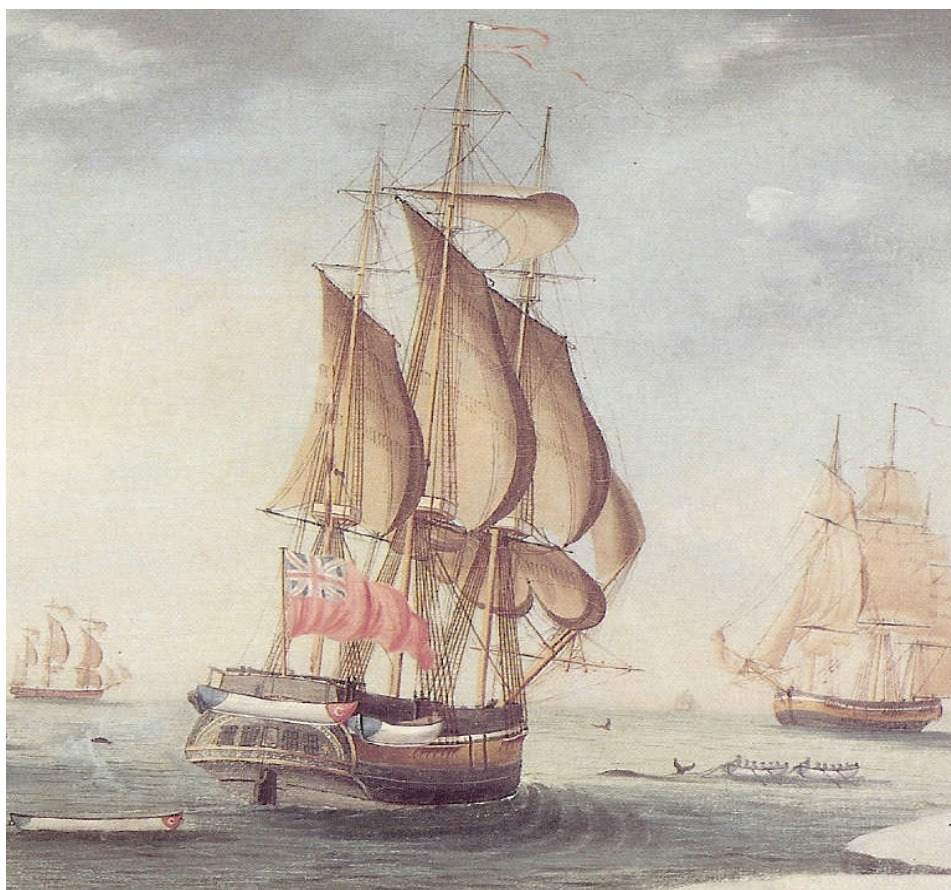


Fig. 4. The whaleship *Cove*, from a painting in the Palmer Archive.

⁸ Brown, et al., 'British Arctic Whaling Logbooks and Journals'.

⁹ Barrow, *The Whaling Trade of North-East England 1750–1850*.

¹⁰ A. G. E. Jones, 'The voyage of HMS *Cove*, Captain J. C. Ross, 1835–36', *Polar Record*, 5, 40, 1950, pp. 543–56.

The voyages of 1820–33

The most reliable contemporary source of information on Arctic whaling, including methods of hunting in the whaling grounds both east and west of Greenland, is William Scoresby's two-volume *An Account of the Arctic Regions* (1820).¹¹ However, Scoresby had sailed only in the waters between Spitsbergen and East Greenland, and his account of whaling west of Greenland¹² was based on information provided by other masters:

Ships intended for Davis' Straits, commonly put to sea a little earlier than the Greenland ships. A few years ago, they were in the habit of sailing in the latter part of February; but at present, they seldom leave their ports before the beginning or middle of March. On their passage outward, the Davis' Straits fishers [i.e. whalers] usually touch at Orkney or Shetland, for the purpose of procuring men... together with a view of trimming and preparing their vessels for accomplishing the passage across the Atlantic... Instead of steering direct for the southern point of Greenland, which lies in about 59½°N latitude, this navigation is usually performed in the parallel of 58°, for the purpose of avoiding a dangerous body of heavy drift ice, which sometimes extends to a considerable distance to the southward of Cape Farewell.

Scoresby noted that on reaching the Strait, whalers customarily continued westward for a few weeks of early-season fishing in the ice off Labrador,¹³ which sometimes yielded 'great cargoes' but at considerable risk. The nights were still long and dark, the men were obliged to use lanterns in their boats, and the stormy weather that frequently occurred at that season exposed them to continual danger. Thereafter they headed northeast to latitude 68°, where a considerable barrier of ice, a few leagues from land, provided a good fishing station.

Palmer's voyages in the years covered by the logs differed from this general description in several respects (Table 1, Fig. 5). All started before the third week of March, except for three in early April. Palmer always stopped in Orkney to pick up extra crew, sometimes being trapped there for several days by contrary winds. He approached Davis Strait much as Scoresby described, passing well to the south of Cape Farewell as was also the practice of Danish ships making visits to settlements along the West Greenland coast.¹⁴ In the absence of longitude records Palmer's tracks in successive years cannot be plotted exactly, but there are no indications that in any of the voyages he hunted even briefly off Labrador. Instead, once in contact with the pack ice that filled the central strait, he proceeded directly northeastward to hunt between the eastern edge of the ice and the Greenland coast, before continuing northward into the hazardous but less crowded waters of Baffin Bay.

¹¹ William Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery*, 2 vols, Edinburgh, Constable, 1820.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 382 *et seq.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 386–87.

¹⁴ C. I. N. Speerschneider, 'The State of the Ice in Davis Strait 1820–1930', *Dansk Meteorologiske Institut Meddelelser*, no. 8, 1931.

Year	Log started	Voyage out (days)	Hunting started	Hunting (days)	Hunting ended	Voyage home (days)	Log ended	Total voyage (days)	Whales caught	Blubber (tons)	Yield of oil (tons)
1820	21-Mar	43	03-May	116	27-Aug	26	21-Sep	185	17	340.7	255.5
1821	24-Mar	43	16-May	131	14-Sep	34	17-Oct	208	16	274.0	205.5
1822	21-Mar	46	06-May	114	28-Aug	25	21-Sep	185	4	71.6	53.7
1823	28-Mar	39	06-May	121	04-Sep	23	26-Sep	183	26	350.9	263.2
1824	29-Mar	37	05-May	145	27-Sep	45	10-Nov	227	5	119.5	89.6
1825	18-Mar	49	06-May	143	26-Sep	23	18-Oct	215	9	204.7	153.5
1826	28-Mar	45	12-May	139	28-Sep	22	19-Oct	206	9	164.7	123.5
1827	11-Apr	21	02-May	150	29-Sep	32	30-Oct	203	12	250.7	188.0
1828	22-Mar	39	30-Apr	147	24-Sep	23	16-Oct	209	12	264.7	198.5
1829	24-Mar	31	24-Apr	157	28-Sep	32	29-Oct	220	16	281.3	211.0
1830	24-Mar	49	12-May	151	10-Oct	19	29-Oct	219	5	96.9	72.7
1831	27-Mar	35	01-May	163	12-Oct	24	04-Nov	221	2	31.2	23.4
1832	06-Apr	28	04-May	165	17-Sep	27	13-Oct	220	35	309.3	232.0
1833	09-Apr	36	15-May	158	14-Sep	25	09-Oct	219	24	281.4	211.1

Table 1. Analysis of Palmer's fourteen voyages 1820–33.

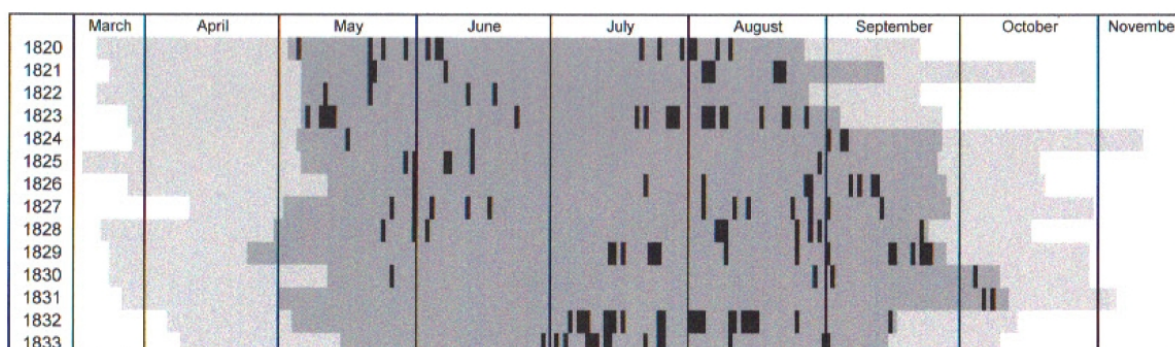


Fig. 5. Summary of Palmer's fourteen voyages, 1820–1833. Pale grey: voyages to and from the whaling ground. Dark grey: the hunting period. Black lines: days on which one or more whales were taken.

Scoresby's account continues:

As the ice opens to the northward, the whales retreat in that direction, and the fishers follow as promptly as possible. The whalers often reach Disko [Island] early in May; but it is generally the latter end of this month, or the beginning of June, before they can pass the second barrier of ice, lying about Hare Island, in the 71st degree of latitude, and enter the northern inlets frequented by the whales... From hence, if no fish [i.e. whales] are found, the whalers proceed to the western part of the Straits, towards Cumberland Island, or proceed along the east side of Davis' Straits towards Baffin's Bay; to the extreme parts of which the fish appear to retreat as soon as the season advances, and as the ice clears away from the northern and eastern shores.

After hunting in the waters west and southwest of Disko Island during May and June, usually but not always with some success (only once during this period in 1826, and none in

1829, 1832 and 1833), Palmer appears to have joined the rest of the fleet in continuing north as the ice allowed. Often he penetrated farther north into Baffin Bay than other ships of that period, making his way through the decaying central ice to the western shore. There in most seasons he hunted successfully for several weeks of July, August and September, continuing into early October during the difficult years of 1830 and 1831.

The voyage of 1820

The first of the recorded voyages is here outlined, as the pattern from which later voyages differed mainly in detail, according to ice and weather conditions prevailing in successive years. In 1820 Palmer left Newcastle on 21 March, reaching Stromness, Orkney Islands, on 26 March to recruit extra crew. He remained for nine days, held up by strong westerly gales, then headed westward in latitudes 58–60°N, progressing slowly against the still-prevailing westerlies. On 22 April he recorded the first snowfall, two days later persistent fog, and on 28 April the first small bergs drifting south, all indications that the *Cove* was safely beyond Cape Farewell and within Davis Strait. On 30 April he began turning north, setting the men to coiling boat lines in preparation for fishing. On 1 May he got the boats out on deck, and on the following day, in 61°18'N, he 'made the ice': the whalers' term for reaching the southeastern edge of the pack ice that filled the centre of the strait. At this point he recorded seven other ships in sight, all apparently adopting the same stratagem for entering the strait.

The first 'fish' was seen on 4 May, and the first kill recorded on the following day. For the next month the *Cove* worked slowly northward along the edge of the pack ice, from mid-May onward seeing whales almost every day and catching enough to keep the men busy hunting and making-off. This successful spell ran out after the first week in June, and for the next six weeks Palmer continued north and east, reaching 65°N on 21 June, but seeing few whales and catching none. On 3 July he made a landfall off Disko Island¹⁵ (70°N), his first recorded sighting of land since leaving the Orkney Islands. By 13 July he was in 73°13'N, well into Baffin Bay off the north end of the small group of Duck Islands. On 19 July he crossed 75°N, and two days later was off 'Cape Digleys' (the compiler's version of Cape Dudley Digges¹⁶), his farthest northeasterly point, where he caught his first whale since early June.

From there Palmer headed southwest toward 'the West Water' off southern Ellesmere, Devon and Baffin islands, where again whales were abundant and he was able to hunt successfully. On 10 August in 74°N he rounded off the season with a catch of four substantial whales. He made his way back across Baffin Bay to the Duck Islands,¹⁷ then south along the Greenland coast, passing Hare Island¹⁸ (just north of Disko Island) on 27 August. On that day the crew began stowing the boats and washing salt from the whaling lines, marking the end of the hunting period. The return journey, including a brief stop off Stromness to return the Orkneymen, took twenty-six days.

Of Palmer's fourteen recorded voyages, this was his second most successful, and one of six in which he brought home more than 200 tons of oil. His mean yield per voyage, derived from the making-off accounts in the logs, was 162.9 tons. In comparison, the mean from eighty-four voyages by Newcastle ships to Davis Strait between 1814 and 1842, derived from the Coltish manuscript, was 123.5 tons. Palmer was clearly a proficient whaling master. The

¹⁵ Now Qeqertarsuaq.

¹⁶ 76°9'40"N 68°46'59"W, 40km south of Uummannaq (formerly Dundas); still known as Kap Dudley Digges.

¹⁷ 74°2'N 57°49'W; still known as Duck Islands.

¹⁸ Now Qeqertarsuatsiaq; formerly Hareøen (Hare Island) on account of the large number of hares found there.

market price of whale oil varied considerably between years. For the years 1801–19, Scoresby (vol. 2, p. 410) gives a mean value of £34 14s per ton, while for the years 1820–35 Coltish gives the considerably lower mean of £23 10s, perhaps reflecting a decline in demand for this major product of the industry. Additional revenue of several hundred pounds per voyage would be derived from the ‘whalebone’ or baleen of mature whales, although several of the whales taken in years of the largest catches (1823, 1832 and 1833) were immature or even sucklings, with little or no baleen of value. The *Cove* earned more than £8000 for her owners in 1829,¹⁹ who by then included Palmer himself.

Palmer’s least successful voyages, those of 1822 and 1831, were both plagued by bad weather and adverse ice conditions. In the disastrous season of 1830, in which nineteen whaling ships were caught and destroyed, he achieved a position of relative safety within the ice. Locked in for almost a month, he witnessed the loss of five ships within a quarter of a mile of his own position. Penetrating north to Baffin Bay by the end of August, in the following weeks he worked round to the west, on 12 October encountering the most violent storm of his experience. Surrounded by icebergs, the log records that ‘no exertion or judgement used by us could have availed in securing us from destruction that seemed inevitable’.²⁰ Yet he was one of the very few masters who returned that year from Davis Strait with a paying catch. We are currently investigating the strategies with which Palmer met the varying conditions in all these voyages.

George Palmer and his family

The Palmer family records include details of George Palmer and his kin, and Barrow²¹ has recorded further notes on his career. Born in Monkwearmouth, Tyneside, in 1789, George was a great-nephew of an earlier whaling captain of the same name (1720–85) who sailed from the same port, and the first son of a master mariner, also George (1759–1825). Muster rolls for Newcastle appear to have been lost. Nothing is known of his apprenticeship or early voyages, but George junior may have taken command of his first whaling voyage in 1812, aged twenty-three, before becoming master of the *Cove* three years later. Unusually among masters, he stayed with the *Cove* for the whole of his career as a whaling captain, completing altogether twenty-one voyages and becoming one of the most successful Tyneside whalers of his era.

On 28 December 1813 George married Maria Taylor, daughter of Thomas Taylor of Hill House, Monkwearmouth, himself a master mariner and whaling captain. Maria’s brother Thomas became successively master of the Tyneside whaling ships *Grenville Bay*, *Lively* and *Lord Gambier*. George and Maria resided for many years at King Street, South Shields, later moving to Priors Terrace, Tynemouth.

Between whaling voyages Palmer diversified into general commercial activities. After his two final and highly profitable voyages of 1832 and 1833, he retired from whaling aged forty-four to invest what may well have been substantial capital, specifically to develop the firm of Palmer, Beckwith and Co., export merchants, timber merchants and sawmill owners, based in Dunston, Newcastle. In the years following he built two new ships, a 334 ton barque named *Palmer*, and a 326 ton barque *Cove*, becoming the sole owner of the latter from 1841 to 1848. After Maria’s death in 1864, George remained a familiar figure in Tynemouth,

¹⁹ Barrow, *The Whaling Trade of North-East England 1750–1850*, p. 96.

²⁰ Quoted in Barrow, p. 95.

²¹ *Ibid.*

strolling along the pier early every morning, telescope in hand. He died two years later and was buried in Jesmond Cemetery, Tynemouth.

George and Maria raised a family of eight: seven sons and a daughter. Two of the sons became master mariners, though neither appears to have followed the family tradition of whaling. George's prosperity gave his sons opportunities for education that enabled them to enter businesses or professions. Conspicuously successful was the fourth son, Charles Mark Palmer (1822–1907), who started in his father's business at Dunston, but subsequently developed commercial interests in North Yorkshire iron mining, coking and shipbuilding. He eventually founded the integrated shipyards at Jarrow; represented the Jarrow constituency in Parliament; and in 1886 was awarded a baronetcy.

Conclusions

The fourteen Palmer whaling logs are unique among currently known whaling logs and journals in forming an unbroken series, and providing first-hand information on summer weather and ice conditions in Davis Strait and Baffin Bay from 1820 to 1833. They detail the hunting strategies adopted by an experienced and successful whaling master, dealing with the widely varying conditions of weather and ice encountered in successive years. The logs include details of the sizes of whales caught, the lengths of whalebone, and the yields of blubber, from which the profits of the voyages can be assessed. The voyages represent hunting during a period in which the British Arctic whaling industry as a whole was in decline. Some fifty other whaling logs and journals from the same period are currently available for comparative studies.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Dr Anthony (Tony) Barrow, who first made the Palmer archives known to us; the late Penelope Bray, who generously allowed us to have the logs, pictures and other family records replicated for study; and Timothy Bray who has encouraged us to continue our research into the life and achievements of his three-times great-grandfather. We also thank Arthur Credland, formerly director of the Hull Whaling Museum, who was first to realise the significance of the Coltish manuscript; the Hull History Centre which now houses the document; and the archivist of the House of Lords, for access to annual customs reports from which are derived most of the data on numbers of whaling voyages, from Newcastle and all other British ports, during the bounty period.

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