

Ships in the British Southern Whale Fishery

Over the 85 years of the British Southern Whale Fishery some 923 vessels sailed as part of the British Southern Whale Fishery. For much of the life of the trade the main source of vessels were re-purposed merchantmen or Admiralty prizes. Only after 1825 did specialist built whaleships start entering the trade in any numbers. These specialist built whaleships were designed to sail to the whaling grounds and back as quickly as possible and did not have the characteristic bluff-bowed shape favoured by British Arctic whalers and the Americans. British vessels of this period also tended to favour a different colouring scheme to the whaleships of other nations, being characterised by brown futtocks and yellow-orange -cream gun ports rather than the black futtocks and white gun ports favoured by American, Colonial and French whalers. An earlier reference to British whaleships (circa 1796) described two whaleships as both painted upper half red – lower black – yellow line along the rail Many whaleships in the trade had long careers in the fishery with 164 vessels undertaking five voyages or more voyages but the trade was certainly a dangerous business with 193 vessels lost.

HARPOONER (operating 1830–1848)

The *Harpooner* (374 tons) was the first whaleship built and launched for the firm of Green, Wigrams & Green at their Blackwall Yard shipyard on the Thames in 1830. Over the next eight years the firm built and launched another four whaleships for their whaling fleet.

The *Harpooner* made four whaling voyages for the firm. The first voyage between 1830 and 1833 under the command of John Clark was very successful. Clark sailed again in command in 1833 but died early in the voyage, the cruise being completed under the command of the first mate. The third voyage under Abijah Lock was from 1837 to 1841. The crew list records that on return to London that Lock was unable to sign his name ‘through a hurt’.

The last voyage was a long one, commencing in 1842 and not being completed until 1848. It appears as if the Master (William Debney) became aware sometime during the voyage that the firm had been dissolved in 1843 as the voyage shifted from a focus on whaling to finish as a merchant voyage. Whilst whaling near the Solomons in early 1845 the *Harpooner* was badly damaged by a hurricane, losing her mizzen-mast and main topmast, sprung her foremast and lost or damaged all of her boats. The vessel made for Sydney for repairs where Debney transhipped the cargo of oil to London, planning again to sail to the whaling grounds but the voyage was marred by ill-luck and many of the crew deserted. Debney called at Hobart in late 1846 and supplemented the cargo of oil with freight before sailing for London via Adelaide in December 1846. For some unknown reason Debney left the vessel in Adelaide and on departure for London via Sydney it became apparent that the vessel was ‘leaky’ with the vessel struggling to leave Australian waters. The *Harpooner* finally sailed for London in late 1847 arriving 11 February 1848 after a voyage of over seventy months.

Two paintings of the *Harpooner* exists. A painting of the vessel leaving England (probably painted around 1830) in the collection of the Science Museum, London (probably by Huggins) and a painting in company with another Green, Wigrams & Green whaleship, the *Vigilant*, in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (signed W. J. Huggins). The *Vigilant* and *Harpooner* never actually sailed in company and the location depicted in the painting is fictitious. [DC]

Sources:

[Chronicles of Blackwall Yard](#)

[A Trade so Uncontrollably Uncertain: A study of the English Southern Whale Fishery from 1815 to 1860](#) - MA Thesis (1996) – Dale Chatwin

[Whaleship Harpooner '1830' - painted by Huggins?](#)

[The ships' Vigilant' and 'Harpooner' offshore \(1831\)](#)

NARWHAL (operating 1834-1852)

The *Narwhal* (370 tons) was built and launched for the firm of Green, Wigrams & Green at their Blackwall Yard shipyard on the Thames in 1834. The vessel had originally been commissioned for the whaleship owner, William Mellish, but on his death in 1834 the vessel was taken over by the firm. The Blackwall Yard had previously built the *Thames* (370 tons) and *Sir James Cockburn* (340 tons) for William Mellish. It is clear looking at those vessels and the whaleships that the firm built that the Blackwall Yard built to a specific 'type'.

A Certificate of Registry, dated London 28 April 1835, no. 128. (NMM GRN/14) survives. It describes the *Narwhal* as has having two decks and three masts, one hundred and five feet five inches in length, twenty-eight feet ten inches wide at widest point, height between decks six feet six inches, square rigged with a standing bowsprit, square sterned and carvel built, with no galleries and with a woman bust figurehead.

Despite being completed in November 1834 the *Narwhal* didn't sail until December 1835, sailing under the command of William Darby Brind. This was probably a consequence of Mellish's death which was in the process of being dispersed. The cruise however was very successful and the vessel docked in London in December 1838. The vessel sailed again in May 1839 under Brind but he left the vessel in November 1840 in New Zealand leaving the vessel under the command of the first mate, Edward Baker. The vessel immediately returned to whaling not arriving in London until September 1841. The *Narwhal* sailed on its third cruise, again under Baker, in late December 1841 returning in September 1844 a 'full ship'.

The Green and Wigram partnership had by then been dissolved and most of the whaling fleet sold but Richard Green decided to keep the *Narwhal* and purchased her for £2900. The *Narwhal* undertook two more voyages for Green. The first between 1845 and 1848 was reasonably successful but the last between 1849 and 1852 was very unsuccessful. The *Narwhal* was dry docked on 31 January 1853 then moved to the West India Dock on 25 February pending sale.

A scrimshaw whale tooth with the *Narwhal* depicted on it exists (see image below). [DC]



Sources:

[Chronicles of Blackwall Yard](#)

SAMUEL ENDERBY (operating 1834-1854)

Built at West Cowes by Thomas White for the Enderby family and launched in 1834. The Registration Certificate records London 9 Oct 1834/300 : 422 57/94ths tons, standing bowsprit, square sterned, carvel built, quarter galleries, man figure head; 2 decks, 3 masts; L 107'9", B 29'10" above, D 6'4" between decks [PRO : BT 107/65].

The *Samuel Enderby* was the first new built British whaleship to be treated with the 'Kyanising' process developed by John Howard Kyan to prevent dry rot and a detailed report was provided on the completion of its first voyage of 29 months. The report is also valuable as it provides an extensive description of the sailing and other qualities of the vessel.

The *Samuel Enderby* sailed four times for the Enderby family before majority ownership was sold to William Lisle (a former master) and Elhanan Bicknell, spermaceti refiner [Bicknell was a patron of William Turner's whaling paintings]. In 1849 Lisle and Bicknell sold the vessel to the Southern Whale Fishery Company. Between 1849 and 1854 the vessel was employed in whaling from the Company's Auckland Islands Whaling settlement and on the demise of the company was sold. [DC]

Sources:

[Samuel Enderby hull model \(1834\)](#)

[Samuel Enderby \(Print\) 1834](#)

[John Howard Kyan](#)

[A Lecture on the Dry Rot – Robert Dickson](#)

VIGILANT (1831-1842)

The *Vigilant* (383 tons) was built and launched by the firm of Green, Wigrams & Green at their Blackwall Yard shipyard on the Thames in 1831.

The vessel sailed in October 1831 and demonstrated her fine sailing qualities on the voyage out with her Master (Samuel Swain) recording on 30 November 1831 that she passed another vessel 'like a shot'. The *Vigilant* sailed via Timor, New Guinea and finally New Zealand before heading to Sydney 'to put in Kentlage' [i.e. ballast] as the vessel's handling had deteriorated in heavy seas due to the weight of her cargo. In Sydney the Master transhipped the cargo for London and ventured out for a second whaling voyage finally returning to London in August 1835.

The *Vigilant* sailed on its second cruise under a new commander (Munro) in October 1835 again for Timor. In Kupang, the Master's wife, who had accompanied him on the cruise, succumbed to illness and less than three months later the Master of the vessel was also dead. The first mate took command but the rest of the voyage did not go well and the vessel saw two more masters take command before arrival back in London in December 1838.

The *Vigilant* departed on her third and final voyage for the Green, Wigrams & Green partnership in March 1839 sailing for Timor and the Japans under Edward Grey. In February 1842 the Master died on board not long after having departed Kupang with the first mate sailing the vessel back to England to arrive in August 1842. When the Green, Wigrams & Green partnership was dissolved the *Vigilant* was sold and resumed her career 'black whaling' off the east coast of South Africa.

A painting of the *Vigilant* in company with another Green, Wigrams & Green whaleship, the *Harpooner*, is in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The *Vigilant* and *Harpooner* never sailed together and the location depicted in the painting is fictitious. [DC]

Sources:

[Chronicles of Blackwall Yard](#)

[Vigilant Journal: a British whaling ship voyage in Indonesian waters and the Pacific](#) – Litt. B Thesis (1987) – Dale Chatwin

[A Trade so Uncontrollably Uncertain: A study of the English Southern Whale Fishery from 1815 to 1860](#) - MA Thesis (1996) – Dale Chatwin

[The ships' 'Vigilant' and 'Harpooner' offshore](#)