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 and 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.

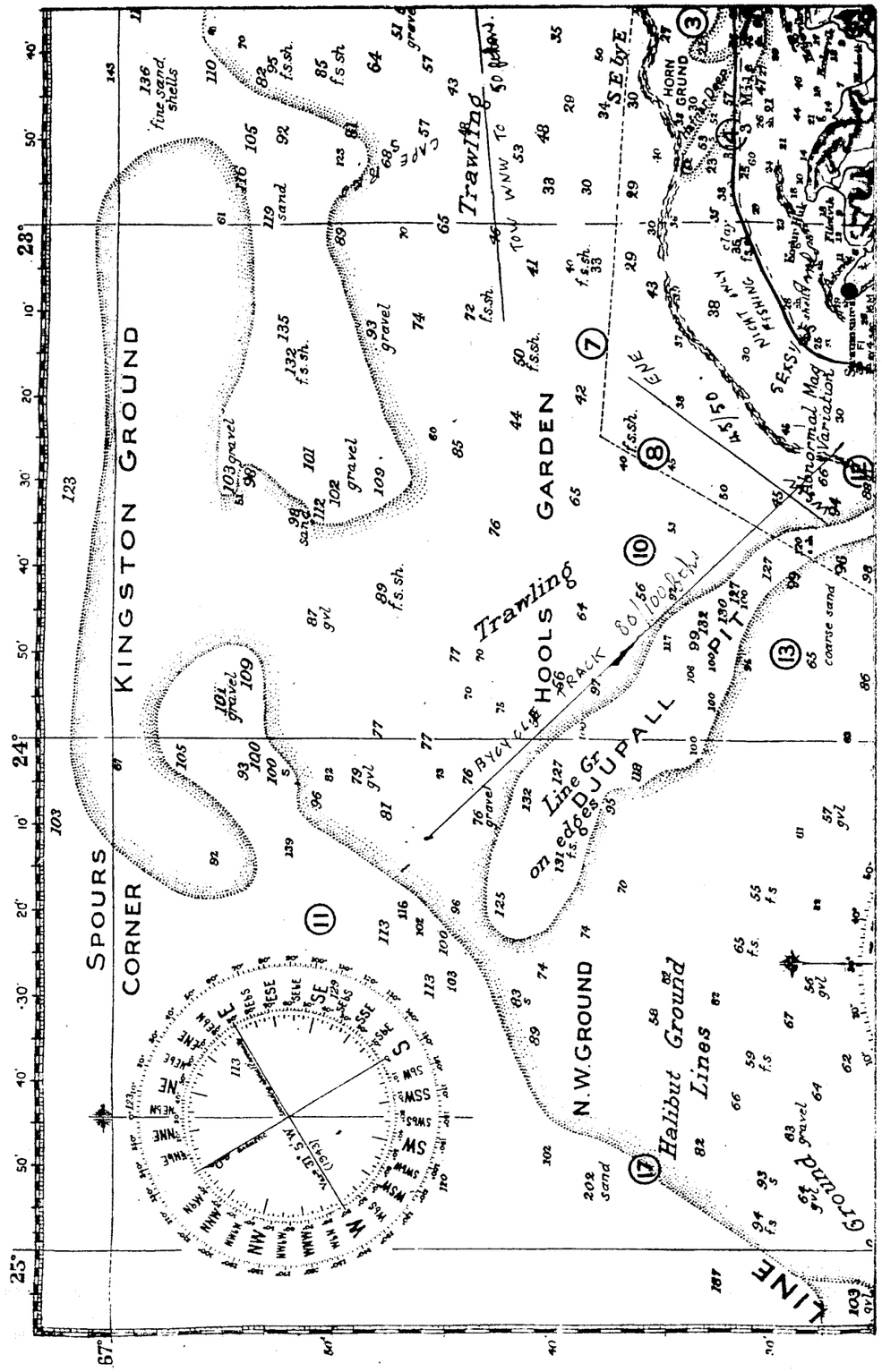
The fisherman, like all hunters, has a different view of the world from the farmer and other settled people. He does not make his living from his own familiar acres, but has to find it where he can, often in new territory whose names if any are in unfamiliar tongues. But to find his quarry and his own 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 definitive of the spot immediately referred to'. 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 kilometer 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 'Vikurall' 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 WALL 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 fishermens' place-names. The simplest is by lining up two objects on shore, the traditional 'meet' (cf. English Dialect Dictionary s.v. meeth) well dealt with for Norway by Per Hovda in Norsk Med and for Iceland in Sjosokn. 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

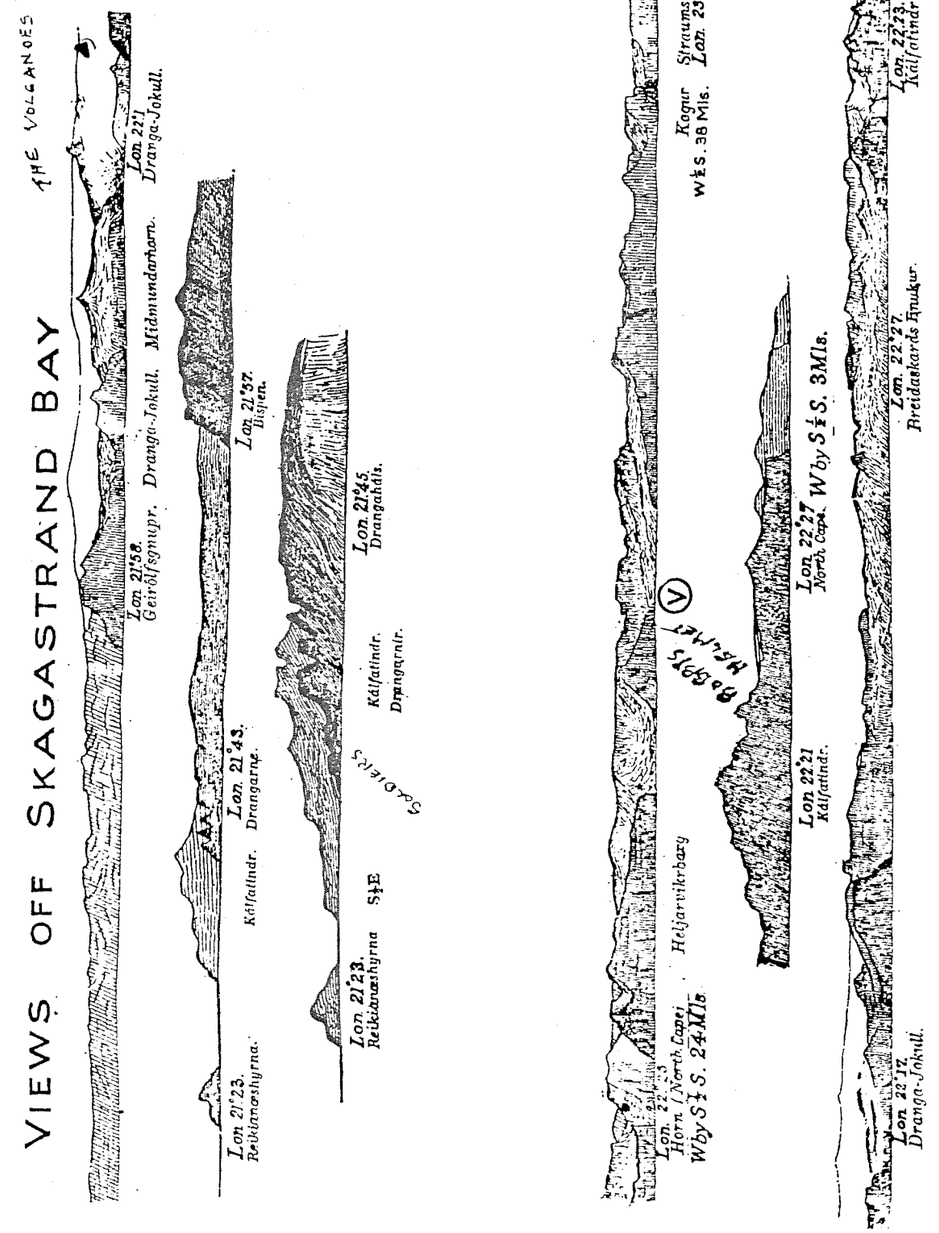


FROM SKIPPER DICK COUSINS' COPY OF CLOSE'S FISHERMEN'S CHART OF ICELAND: EXTRACT 1

is OLD TOWER AND BLACK STONES (or ON BLACK STONES) recorded in a coble off Flamboro 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 RIDGES 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 used, 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 meet 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 Rivtange 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 Rivtange you will most probably feel them' (c. two sea-bed rocks which may break the trawl-warps). 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 Kaddler, as THE HOOF 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 Kalfatindur 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 ATTIC WINDOW (Blakollr)is similar. Icelandic forms of both exist, Bobbinn (a seal) and Vindauginn (the window) but seem to be colloquial, based on the English names. A seal's head bobbing up from the water resembles Kalfatindur 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 collocation the name occurs. This is presumably why Geirfuglasker is WEST ROCK when it contrasts with Drangasker as EAST ROCKS, but HEN AND CHICKS or JUMBO in other contexts, whilst Drangasker is variously, depending on the direction from which it is seen, LION ROCK, SCHOONER 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



FROM SKIPPER DICK COUSINS' COPY OF CLOSE'S FISHERMEN'S CHART OF ICELAND: EXTRACTS 2 AND 3

are all the same place, called by some THE BANANA, but it is typical of these names that not having been on that particular ground I have no means of knowing.

The second principal way in which fishermen establish their position is by soundings: THE LONG FORTIES and THE BROAD FOURTEENS are examples. Note particularly the evidence of attitudes incorporated in the names. In deeper 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 THE OCTOPUS off N. Norway, THE BANANA BANK or THE KIDNEY are likely, in spite of the assertion 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.

This nature of the 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 MERLOG, RIBS AND TRUCKS, THE IRONFOUNDRY, CORAL JUNGLE, BACK OF THE SCRUFF, DOWN IN THE DUFFS, IN THE WHITE WEED (the last three SE of DOG'S HIND LEG, off THE WHALEBACK). Such fine local distinctions of areas a few hundred years 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 tows an expensive and relatively large and fragile net across it. The difference between his detailed sad 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 ROUGH: the sand is there, of course, but it lies on the tops of rough rocks. In its reference to a congregation of Dutch herring boats, the name DOGGER BANK is an earlier example of THE HINDENBURG LINE type of name.

The surface of the sea provides the fourth indication of position. 'The appearance of certain birds, seaweeds and medusae - sudden alterations in the swell', to quote William Scoresby (cf. Viking Voyagers pp. 79,80), has done this since the days of the Anglo-Saxon Seafarer. THE BROWN WATER refers to the change in colour over the Faeroe Bank in 80 fathom (and nearer home to the recognisably 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 seems to be going up a staircase of waves as steep as steps, but seen from it the edge of Latrabjarg looks like a flight of steps. RED HOUSES combines the apparent silhouette of a gable-roofed cottage (complete with chimney if the 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 have known 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 can 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) derive from Consol, THE SIX TO EIGHT and THE PURPLE TEN from Decca Navigator which replaced it. In spite of the official cautions about relying on Consol for detailed position-finding (ignored by empirical fishermen like so many other official cautions) I have observed very successful skippers using it for weeks at a time and even dodging 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 involved in many of these names may be. As a last example of this continuous creation I 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 guardians of a tradition. 'The classical fishing was Stalberg to the Gully' 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 places as well as naming them. SLEEPY HOLLOW at the top end of Patreksfjordhur was a refuge from hard labour as well as bad weather, and KLONDYKE, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, reflect a joyous gold rush by nineteenth-century trawlers to their North Sea Eldorado. This latter word is still current for a lucrative bank, applied in the late sixties to a new spot off Flamboro Head. The first time I heard CHERRY TREE ISLAND as a name for Bear Island I took it as an instance of this attitude indication, a grim irony when there are no trees of any kind for hundreds of miles, but it is more interesting than that. It was discovered by Barents in 1596, but a British expedition in 1603 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 1860'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.

Discoverer names exist in large numbers, of varying degrees of formality, but are not essentially different from other discoverer names of mountains or rivers, except insofar as the names involved are those of village Hampdens. ALBROW GROUND, THOMPSON GROUND, NAYLOR GROUND, THOR IVERSEN BANK, WALTER LEWIS HOLE, JACK HAMLING'S U TOW, BRUCEY'S GARDEN, 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 rosehole as they are also known. THE ROSE HOLE appears off Clee Ness on a chart of inshore fishermen's names drawn for me by Skipper Jack Priestly of Grimsby. WILSON'S CORNER has been explained to me as a joking reference to a renowned Hull pub (cf. Rayner's, the fisherman's name for a pub which has had many landlords since: the name on its sign is scarcely ever used). This humorous mixture of Hull local names with distant Scandinavian locales is very typical, and also

reminiscent of soldier slang names. It may well reflect a similar emotionally based need to impose warm familiar associations on remote and hostile places. THE BEAN on Digranes Flak at Iceland is said to be 'PARK ST. BRIDGE'(in Hull) because 'you can only go over it NE/SW' (you come fast any other course).

Personal names are not, of course, invariably those of discoverers or patrons. KAY OLSEN BANK is a re-formation of Faeroese Kjolsen, and ANTON DOHRN BANK and SCOTT PATCH are named immediately after ships of that name (themselves named after the men). ELIZABETH BANK, ROSEMARY BANK are probably ship-names, but possibly skippers' wives or daughters or all three, and JUBILEE BANK is I think, 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 SNOWEY, the name for Snaefells jokull, the OLD may be influenced by the song 'On top of Old Smokey' as well as indicating familiarity: I have heard a snatch of song to the same tune 'In sight of Old Snowey' 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 strongest impressions left by these names. RICOCHET CORNER is simply a shot at Icelandic Reykjaneshyrna, 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. ANNIE'S HILL is an intelligent version of Faeroese Enniberg, 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 Cowpman Haven master of the Springing Hart, and the Alfredian Scirincges heal and Blekinga Eg show a similar denizenization, phonetic, lexical, and inflectional. Blekinge is not an -ingas name, and the Anglicisation of Skiringsalr has adopted heal for salr whose English form sele was purely poetic. Icelandic Drangarnir 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 Geirfuglasker becomes THE GRENADIERS there is obviously no translation, but the sound echo is reinforced by awareness of the appropriateness of 'soldiers' for a row or rocks. Sometimes a different visual metaphor is used. Evidently Gaasholm was not unmistakably enough a goose, or the reason for the Scandinavian name was not involved, and English fishermen called it THE WEDGE. 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 Lambadalur was presumably a good sheltered place for sheep: to fishermen it appeared as a steep sided notch in the skyline and was called THE TAR-POT. FAIRY ROVER as the name for the next deep, west of Hunafloi, 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 NOSE for Sviatoi Nos 'the cape of the saints', is typical.

NOTE

*This is a revised version of the paper given at the Thirteenth Conference of the Council for Name Studies at Hull on March 27th, 1981. The paper owes much to the patient help of fishing skippers too numerous to mention, to Mr. J. Marshall, Chart Room Superintendant of UK Trawlers Mutual Insurance Co. and to the Institut for Navnforskning of Copenhagen University, where it was first given in 1978. The names dealt with, insofar as they occur in print, are in Close's Fisherman's Guide. Illustrations are from Close's Fishermans' Chart of Iceland with additions by Skipper Dick Cousins.

ALAN BINNS

University of Hull