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Negotiations for the establishment of a pilchard fishery at Bantry in 1875

By ARTHUR E. J. WENT., D.Sc.

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In their reports for the year 1875 the Inspectors of Irish Fisheries¹ stated that they had induced a Cornish gentleman, experienced in the pilchard fishery, to visit Ireland and report on the possibility of reviving an Irish pilchard fishery. After exhaustive inspections had been carried out, Bantry was fixed on as a suitable venue for the commencement of operations. It was thought that a small company with a capital of £2,000 might be set up. For various reasons, however, this company was never formed. Recently the existence of a few papers connected with this fishery came to my knowledge. These papers, fifteen in number, included letters addressed to Major Hayes, who in the period covered by these letters (1875-'77) was one of the Inspectors of Irish Fisheries.

Five of these letters are of no Irish interest being from W. Roberts of Penzance and Howard Fox of Falmouth to Major Hayes on the subject of the Cornish Pilchard Fisheries in the period from 1875-1877, giving details of the yields in that fishery. Howard Fox was, incidentally, the historian of the Cornish pilchard fishery.²

The papers indicate that Major Hayes was the prime mover in the negotiations in 1875. The first letter from a Mr. J. W. Payne of Bantry dated 3 March 1875 expresses interest in the project. Howard Fox came to Ireland in March 1875 and on his return to Cornwall he wrote to Major Hayes on 2 April as follows :

Falmouth

2nd April, 1875.

Dear Major Hayes,

We have provisionally secured a first rate man to take the continuous and personal superintendence of the erection of press beds etc., and of the curing of the fish through the season. He has been our agent at Mevagsissey hitherto. We have also secured a good master seiner and the only pressing matter is to secure suitable premises concerning which we are in communication with Mr. Payne, Mr. Murphy, Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Copithorne.

When the company is formed no time must be lost in getting the press beds laid down and the premises adapted for fish curing.

We think one of the Cork steamers may tow over 3 seine boats and the Ilen could tow them to Bantry in fine weather.

Major Hayes,
Greenwood,
Blackrock.

Yours sincerely,
Howard Fox

¹ *Rep. Irish Fish Inspect.* 1875, 6-7.

² Howard Fox, "Observations in further illustration of the history and statistics on the pilchard fishery." *Rep. Roy. Cornwall Poly. Soc.* 1878, 73-119.

As a result of the investigations a memorandum appealing for funds was issued by G. C. Fox and Co., of which Howard Fox was a principal. A copy of this memorandum is available in the collection. It read as follows:

County Cork.

Pilchard Fishery.

G. C. Fox and Co. find after consultation with resident gentlemen and fishermen and personal inspection of the coast that *Bantry* presents good facilities for the establishment of a pilchard fishery.

They consider it desirable that 10 Cornishmen and 10 Cornishwomen thoroughly experienced and efficient in the catching and curing of pilchards should be sent to Bantry when the season commences and that seines, boats, salt, warps, grapnels and other necessary gear should be bought without delay and delivered not later than 1st June.

In order to provide sufficient accommodation and appliances for curing 1,500 to 2,000 hhd a capital of £2,000 should be raised, £500 of which should be paid on 1st May, £1,000 on 1st June and the balance when required.

G. C. Fox and Co. engage to make all the necessary arrangements, settle all accounts and take sole management of the business (their only remuneration beyond out of pocket expenses to be 10% of profits) but reserve liberty to retire from the management after the close of any season.

The following sums have already been promised:

G. C. Fox and Co.	Falmouth	£500
E. Pike.	Cork	£100
M. Pike	"	£50
E. Pike	"	£50
G. H. Fox	Falmouth	£100

Lord Bandon who had been approached for his assistance found himself unable to support the project as he stated in his letter dated 7 April 1875 to Major Hayes. Two days later Mr. Payne wrote to Major Hayes as regards the prospectus as follows:

Beach, Bantry,

9th April 1895

My dear Major Hayes,

Yours of yesterday just received I will attend at once to your commission about Harrington's pilchards. I had a letter from Mr. Fox with a short sketch of what he proposes and list of subscriptions. He said he had also sent one to you.

I got Mr. Barrett's name and my own down and sent the list on to a friend near Cork who had expressed a wish to join in it, a shrewd practical man of business who worked his own way up in the world and made a large fortune.

When he returns it I will let you know how we stand.

I suggested to Mr. Fox that we should not go deeply in details etc. at once as there is no doubt that when the market opens the fish can be purchased in abundance at a cheap rate.

I do not see why we should not be quite prepared for work this season,

Very sincerely yours,

J. W. Payne.

On 8 May 1875 Howard Fox wrote to Major Hayes stating that owing to lack of local support they had decided to abandon the idea of the Bantry fishery for pilchard, at least for the time being. Messrs Payne and Barrett decided to go ahead on their own, as shown in a letter dated 2 November 1875 to Major Hayes in which Barrett refers to the abundance of pilchards in Bantry Bay at that time.

By 11 December 1875 preparations had been made in Bantry as Payne states in a letter of that date to Major Hayes. Major Hayes was, however, still endeavouring to raise funds to have a proper trial made of the fishery, as is shown by a copy of a letter he wrote on 7 November 1875 to Mr Payne.

Messrs Payne and Barrett cured a small quantity of pilchards as the Inspectors reported.³ Operations were on a small scale in 1876 at Bantry. This was clearly not the fault of the persons managing the fishery as the pilchard was not particularly plentiful around the Irish coasts. Even the Baltimore Fishing Company set up in 1876 and operating for the first time in 1877 failed to make a profit.

It is clear that Major Hayes was main spring of these attempts to revive the pilchard fishery so important to Bantry in former times. It was unfortunate that the fishery was not successfully revived at that time.

³ Rep. Irish Fish. Inspect. 1875. 7.