

# SEA FEVER

A BRITISH MARITIME  
MISCELLANY

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PROFILE BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

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*Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet ... then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.*

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

The sea. A place to live and work, a place to see and be seen. A place to run risks, a place to run away from it all. The sea is Rule Britannia – and two fingers up to authority. The sea is our bulwark, our barricade. Our playground, our larder. It is the songs and poems that drum deep in our collective consciousness. It is our island's joint inheritance, made as much from stories as sediment and saltwater. The sea is where we can breathe deep, fling our arms wide and look outwards to friendship, opportunity and adventure.

*Sea Fever* tries – personally, partially – to capture a little of this sundry spirit, hoping to divert you whenever *southwesterly 5 to 6, rain or showers, moderate becoming poor* disrupts your better-laid plans. But once the cold front passes and the barometer rises, please jettison us without a backwards glance.

The sea will be calling.



## THE SHIPPING FORECAST

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There is no more quintessentially British sound than the shipping forecast. For some, it's a lullaby at the end of a long day. For others, it's more important than the news. For sailors stuck on shore it elicits varied emotions. Pity (*Irish Sea, northeasterly 6, wintry showers, poor*), jealousy (*Portland, Plymouth, west 3 or 4, mainly fair, good*) or outright fear (*Rockall, southwesterly gale 8, becoming northwesterly storm 10 later, rain and showers, poor, occasionally very poor*). It even stars in its very own Britpop classic.\*

At sea aboard a small boat, once you've lost phone signal, it takes on a quasi-religious quality: disembodied words, handed down to a (furiously scribbling) skipper, and woe betide the lowly crew member who interrupts with a query about the course.

However you listen to it, the shipping forecast is a sober reminder that we are all islanders perched on a scrap of land in the North Atlantic, at the mercy of whatever sea and sky may throw at us.

It is issued by the Met Office four times a day at roughly 11 p.m., 5 a.m., 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., and transmitted on BBC Radio 4 at 0048, 0520, 1201 and 1754. Each forecast covers the twenty-four hours from midnight, 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m. respectively.

About four minutes and 350 words long, it follows a strict format familiar to loyal listeners. First come gale warnings, if there are any, followed by a general synopsis

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\* Thank you, Blur: who doesn't want to go around the Bay of Biscay and be back in time for tea?

giving a rough overview of what's going on weather-wise, including the position of areas of *high and low pressure*, measured in *millibars (mb)*. For example:

Now the shipping forecast issued by the Met Office on behalf of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency at 0015 on Thursday the 19th of April. There are warnings of gales in Trafalgar, Hebrides, Fair Isle, Faeroes and Southeast Iceland. The general synopsis at 1800: high, Germany, 1032, slow moving with little change, new low moving rather quickly north, expected 300 miles east of Iceland 995 by 1800 Thursday.

Next the forecast tackles each of the thirty-one forecast areas surrounding the British Isles, starting with the coast of Norway, working clockwise south through the North Sea, west along the Channel, followed by an excursion to northern Spain, and then back up to finish off in Iceland.

The exact order is: Viking, North Utsire, South Utsire, Forties, Cromarty, Forth, Tyne, Dogger, Fisher, German Bight, Humber, Thames, Dover, Wight, Portland, Plymouth, Biscay, Trafalgar,\* FitzRoy,\*\* Sole, Lundy, Fastnet, Irish Sea, Shannon, Rockall, Malin, Hebrides, Bailey, Fair Isle, Faeroes, Southeast Iceland.

Each area forecast is broken down into three parts: wind speed and direction (if the wind is expected to be force 8 or above on the Beaufort scale, it is given its full title: *gale 8*,

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\* Trafalgar features only in the 0048 version of the forecast.

\*\* FitzRoy, named after Vice-Admiral Robert FitzRoy, captain of HMS *Beagle*, and founder of what became the Met Office, only came into being in 2002.

Previously it was called Finisterre (Latin for *the end of the earth*) after a cape in northwest Spain, but the name was changed to avoid confusion with a Spanish forecast area.



*severe gale 9, storm 10, violent storm 11, hurricane force 12*);  
weather; and visibility.

For example:

Trafalgar, easterly 6 to gale 8 in far southeast otherwise  
northerly 5 to 7; rain or showers in west; moderate or good,  
occasionally poor in west

The words the shipping forecast uses all have a very specific  
meaning:

**On gales:** *imminent* (within six hours), *soon* (six to twelve  
hours), *later* (more than twelve hours away)

**On wind direction:** *backing* (wind moves anti-clockwise),  
*veering* (wind moves clockwise), *cyclonic* (a depression  
is passing the area; wind direction likely to change  
dramatically), *variable* ('no idea really, but nothing to  
worry about')

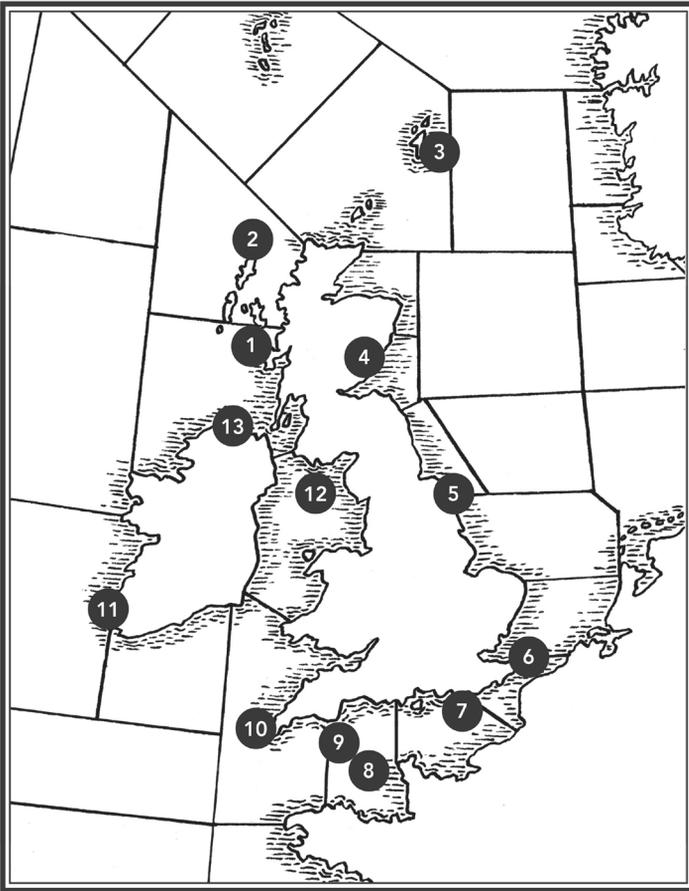
**On visibility:** *good* (greater than 5 nautical miles), *moder-  
ate* (2 to 5 nautical miles), *poor* (1,000 m to 2 nautical miles,  
*very poor* (less than 1,000 m)

**On sea state:**\* *smooth* (waves less than 0.5 m), *slight* (0.5 to  
1.25 m), *moderate* (1.25 to 2.5 m), *rough* (2.5 to 4.0 m), *very  
rough* (4.0 to 6.0 m), *high* (6.0 to 9.0 m), *very high* (9.0 to  
14.0 m), *phenomenal* (more than 14.0 m)

The 0048 and 0520 broadcasts are followed by reports  
from up to twenty-two coastal stations (as well as by the  
more detailed *inshore waters forecast*), which give you actual

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\* Available if you're reading the shipping forecast online.



- 1. Tiree
- 2. Stornaway
- 3. Lerwick
- 4. Leuchars
- 5. Bridlington

- 6. Sandettie Light Vessel
- 7. Greenwich Light Vessel
- 8. Jersey
- 9. Channel Light Vessel
- 10. Scilly

- 11. Valentia
- 12. Ronaldsway
- 13. Malin Head

(rather than predicted) information about wind, visibility and atmospheric pressure around Britain.

For example:

And now here are the weather reports from coastal stations for 2300 on the 18th of April.

Tiree Automatic, southeast by south 6, haze, 4 miles, 1013, rising slowly

Stornoway, south by west 6, 7 miles, 1011, falling more slowly

Lerwick, south by east 4, recent fog, 2 miles, 1020, falling slowly

If you are a meteorological aficionado, you can combine these reports with the general synopsis to create your own *synoptic chart*, a weather map marking areas of high and low pressure, with concentric lines, known as *isobars*, drawn to show where pressure is the same. This (given practice) helps you understand why the wind has got up so dramatically – or why it's disappeared altogether. Of course, nowadays you can summon a synoptic chart to your phone with a few jabs of your thumb, but sometimes it's nice to do things the hard way.

## ORIGINS OF SHIPPING FORECAST AREA NAMES

Towns	Islands or near islands	Estuaries	Fishing banks	Seas, bays and bights	Rocky islets	Capes and headlands	People
Cromarty	North Utsire	Forth	Viking	German Bight	Fastnet	Trafalgar	FitzRoy
Dover	South Utsire	Tyne	Forties	Biscay	Rockall	Malin	
Plymouth	Wight	Humber	Dogger	Irish Sea			
	Portland	Thames	Fisher				
	Lundy	Shannon	Sole				
	Hebrides		Bailey				
	Fair Isle						
	Faeroes						
	Southeast Iceland						



## SEASICKNESS



Seasickness – so tightly enmeshed with seafaring that the ancient Greek word for ship, *naus*, huddles inside our word *nausea* – is capricious. Treat it with bravado, and it will haunt you. Show it respect, and it might spare you. The following advice should work just as well whether you're mackerel fishing, whale-spotting or grimacing on a lumpy cross-Channel ferry.

### LAND AHOY

'Homesickness is a bit like seasickness.' Roald Dahl is spot on. 'You don't know how awful it is till you get it, and when you do, it hits you right in the top of the stomach and you want to die. The only comfort is that both homesickness and seasickness are instantly curable. The first goes away the moment you walk out of the school grounds and the second is forgotten as soon as the ship enters port.'

In other words, however horrible seasickness feels at the time, it *will* end.

### APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

The forecast might promise *variable 1 to 3*. From the dock-side the sea might look sedate. But beware: out past the harbour-mouth, out past the headland, the swell from a faraway storm may be doing uneasy battle with the chop whipped up by a sea breeze.

### DON'T EAT

For an hour before you put to sea, shun coffee, Marmite and battered fish. Do not give seasickness ammunition. If

you're likely to be away from land long enough that you can't avoid eating, turn first to the sacred quintet: Ginger Nuts, salt & vinegar crisps, Ritz crackers (accept no alternatives), lemon sherbets and Coke.

**DON'T DRINK (ALCOHOL)**

And never *ever* put to sea on a hangover. Seasickness shares the morning-after's creeping existential dread, and nobody wants to double down on that.

**DON'T SMOKE**

In Rudyard Kipling's *Captains Courageous*, poor-little-rich-boy Harvey is so keen to prove he doesn't get sick that he *accepts a cigar*. He staggers on deck: "There he doubled up in limp agony, for the Wheeling "stogie" joined with the surge and jar of the screw to sieve out his soul." In fact, he's so sick that he *falls overboard*, which is a cautionary tale if ever there was one.

**MAYBE TAKE DRUGS**

Magic cordial, originally deployed on the battlefield in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is the only medication that quells seasickness instantly. Away from Narnia, people swear by various pills, but they can make you very drowsy. A cinnarizine haze is admittedly quite pleasant, but not if you have to look after anyone other than yourself.

**KEEP THE WIND ON YOUR FACE**

Swaddle yourself in as many layers as possible (seasickness often rides on cold's coat-tails) and stay on deck. If you're travelling overnight, only go down below once you're so tired and wind-blasted that you'll fall asleep the moment you lie down. Better still, pass out on deck. While you're

asleep, you often seem to synch with the sea, meaning you may awake the proud owner of a pair of sea legs.

### **MAKE LIKE NELSON**

The vice-admiral wrote: 'I am ill every time it blows hard and nothing but my enthusiastic love for the profession keeps me one hour at sea.'

*That's* the real secret. Technically, seasickness is an imbalance of the inner ear, but this physical upset is compounded by helplessness. To combat this, and thereby recover control of your stomach, assume as much responsibility as your skills allow: ask to keep watch, to hold a rod, even better to steer. *Moby-Dick's* narrator, in fact, tells us he never goes to sea as a passenger, because *passengers get seasick*.

This might seem hard to apply on a ferry, but make-believe works almost as well: stand near the bow, stand tall, look forwards, scan the horizon for enemy ships, breathe deeply and (under your breath) issue the command to *beat to quarters*.

### **WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS**

Be sick to *leeward*.

### **AND FINALLY**

If you ever find yourself pregnant, morning sickness\* will have a pleasing familiarity to it. It's just like seasickness, but without the fresh air and lovely views.

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\* *Mal de mère?*



## SEASIDE RESORTS

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The seaside has always existed as a *place*, but it wasn't until 250 years ago that we began to go there for *pleasure*. Until then, the beach was where you launched a fishing boat; the coast was where you mustered an army. The sea might be fruitful, but it was never your friend. What changed? To begin with, it was a health fad: Richard Russell, an eighteenth-century physician, was one of the chief evangelists of *sea bathing*, which, when combined with *sea drinking*, was touted as a radical cure for pretty much everything. His masterwork, *A Dissertation on the Use of Sea Water in the Diseases of the Glands*, gave proof after proof of its efficacy:

A girl from London, about twelve years of age, had her eyelids, nose and upper lip infested with a swelling and redness. Besides the glands of her neck, between her ears and clavicles, were swelled and hard. She had taken many medicines according to the advice of the London physicians, and at length was brought down to Southampton. I directed her to leave off all remedies and to stick to bathing in the sea water, to drinking it and to hot embrocations.

As with many miracle cures, Russell's method was suspiciously comprehensive, applicable to: head pains, gonorrhoea, excoriated breasts, fever (of the hectic variety), spasms and convulsions, wet *and* dry leprosy, immoderate flux of the menses *and* obstruction of the menses. Perhaps he'd simply lit upon the abiding truth that everyone feels a lot better after a day by the sea.

Russell's ideal beach, however, has stood the test of time rather better than his medicine. A beach, he wrote, should be 'clean and neat, at some distance from the opening of a river that the water may be as highly loaded with sea salt, and the other riches of the ocean, as possible, and not weakened by the mixing of fresh water with its waves. In the next place, one would choose the shore to be sandy and flat for the convenience of going into the sea in a bathing chariot. And lastly, that the sea shore should be bounded by lively cliffs and downs to add to the cheerfulness of the place.'

Bathing chariots (or machines) were an essential feature of the seaside for generations, fading away only with the last Victorians. The picaresque (i.e. unreadable) novels of Tobias Smollett help us imagine how they would have looked in an early beach resort. Here he is at Scarborough:

You have never seen one of these machines. Imagine to yourself a small, snug, wooden chamber, fixed upon a wheel-carriage, having a door at each end, and on each side a little window above, a bench below.

The bather, ascending into this apartment by wooden steps, shuts himself in, and begins to undress, while the attendant yokes a horse to the end next the sea, and draws the carriage forwards, till the surface of the water is on a level with the floor of the dressing-room, then he moves and fixes the horse to the other end.

The person within being stripped, opens the door to the sea-ward, where he finds the guide ready, and plunges headlong into the water.

Women were not excluded – it has always been entirely proper for a lady to worry about her health. Female bathing attendants were on hand, as were voluminous flannel

bathing suits, plus screens extending seawards from the bathing machines, the better to protect one's modesty.

Scarborough, Smollett observed, was a 'paltry' town but 'romantic', a category that gained currency at a rate of knots as the eighteenth century drew to a close.

For a Tudor, staring down at the sea from a cliff's edge was terrifying. Here's Edgar in *King Lear*: 'How fearful / And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low! ... I'll look no more; / Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight / Topple down headlong.' Two hundred years later that dizziness was recast as awe, and untamed landscapes were no longer terrifying, but a desirable (and modish) route to the sublime. For Lord Byron, the romantic *par excellence*, there was *rapture* on a lonely shore, *music* in the deep sea's roar; he *wanted* in breakers, revelling in a *pleasing fear*.

Thanks to such enthusiasm, our shores were destined to become a lot less lonely, especially after George IV-to-be, the playboy heir to the throne, started work in the 1780s on the Royal Pavilion, his opulent pied-à-terre in Brighton. Soon anyone who was anyone wanted to exclaim Byronically over Britain's coast. Witness good Fanny Price and bad Henry Crawford, mid-rapture, in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*:

... everything looked so beautiful under the influence of such a sky, the effects of the shadows pursuing each other on the ships at Spithead and the island beyond, with the ever-varying hues of the sea, now at high water, dancing in its glee and dashing against the ramparts with so fine a sound ...

Not everyone was there for the view, however. If you were very, *very* bad, like Austen's arch-flirt Lydia Bennett, the

seaside thronged with a different sort of danger: officers.\*

‘They are going to be encamped near Brighton,’ she squeals in *Pride and Prejudice*, ‘and I do so want papa to take us all there for the summer! It would be such a delicious scheme; and I dare say would hardly cost anything at all. Mamma would like to go too of all things! Only think what a miserable summer else we shall have!’

She even tries the health angle – ‘a little sea-bathing would set me up for ever’ – but we all know her heart is set on that other great seaside tradition: the *dirty weekend*. She gets her wish and arrives in Brighton, only to lose her head and elope with the *wicked* George Wickham.

Austen’s final, sadly unfinished, novel also unfolds in an (embryonic) resort. Mr Parker, who has drunk deep from the well of Richard Russell, plans to turn Sanditon, ‘a quiet village of no pretensions’, into a ‘small, fashionable bathing place’. He reckons it’s a sure thing: fine pure sea breeze, fine hard sand, deep water but ten yards from the shore, no mud, no weeds, no slimy rocks.

Parker’s aim is to attract ‘regular, steady, private families of thorough gentility and character’, perhaps an Emma Knightley née Woodhouse, displaying the sort of *snobisme* with which resorts differentiate themselves to this day.

Austen’s characters were, of course, the one per cent of the age. Two things needed to arrive before the seaside could be enjoyed by everybody else: *railways* and *paid holidays*.

Trains reached Great Yarmouth in 1844, Scarborough in 1845, Blackpool in 1846 and Torquay in 1848, with holidaymakers often heading to their nearest stretch of .....

\* What was catnip to Lydia, was anathema to John Keats: ‘On the road from Cowes to Newport I saw some extensive Barracks, which disgusted me extremely with Government for placing such a Nest of Debauchery in so beautiful a place.’