THE PORT OF BRISTOL
IN THE
MIDDLE AGES

J. W. SHERBORNE

Price 5/- or 25np.

1971

Maritime commerce is known to have been important in Bristol's history for almost one thousand years. The early centuries, however, as Professor E. M. Carus-Wilson has written, are 'an obscure twilight of conjecture and uncertainty.' [1]   It is only after 1200 that the picture begins to assume more than hazy shape and not until about 1350 that relevant material accumulates in quantity. Even as late as 1500 no detailed study of port administration is possible and for this reason it will be necessary to concentrate mainly on the economic history of the port. We begin, therefore, with uncertainties and advance tentatively across the vital years when Bristol first established herself as a great town and a major port.

Bristol—*Bricgstow* is the earliest place-name form—had its origins at some unknown date in the Anglo-Saxon period in a bridge across the Avon. In due course a *stow*, or collection of houses, grew up to the north on raised ground which was almost encircled by the Avon and its tributary the Frome. The earliest settlers had chosen their site well; it had natural defences against land attacks and the distance of more than six miles from the sea rendered it almost immune from assault by water. Here was an obvious place for men to gather for trade, here was a safe anchorage for shipping.

The first evidence of Bristol comes from the last years of the unhappy reign of Aethelred II (978-1016) in the form of coins struck at the town mint. 'The little Anglo-Saxon penny', it has been said, 'is an historical document', and it is interesting that these coins precede the first written mention of Bristol (1051 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) by more than thirty years. In the year 1000 there were at least 70 mints operating in England including, at no great distance from Bristol, the ancient towns of Bath and Gloucester as well as Axbridge and Malmesbury. A mint implied some local demand for coinage and a measure of economic acti-

(1) E. M. Carus-Wilson, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages*. Bristol Record Society's Publications (*B.R.S.*), vii (1937), 5. My indebtedness to this (cited as *Overseas Trade*) and to the same author's chapter on 'The Overseas Trade of Bristol' in *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (1954), pp. 1-97 (cited as *M.M.V.*) is very great.

vity although often these were only modest. It is therefore surprising that Bristol which by 1100 was one of the most prosperous towns in England had no mint until c.1009-c.1017. Three coins of the 'Last Small Cross' issue of Aethelred II have been found with the inscription *AELFWERD ON BRIC*. Although Mr. R. H. M. Dolley is hesitant about identifying the mint-signature 'Bric' as Bristol, there appears to be no conclusive argument for postulating some other site. [1] Once founded the mint became busy and six moneyers struck Cnut's first issue ('Quatrefoil') which is ascribed to the years 1017-23. Once again the mint-signature 'Bric' was used.

A town which had work for six moneyers was no occasional market. Bristol was flourishing, and, if the coin evidence is interpreted correctly, experiencing growth of recent origin. How far can we explain what was happening? Mr. Dolley has suggested that the opening of the Bristol mint reflected a great increase in the volume of trade with Ireland. [2] This argument is attractive, but is perhaps used to explain too much. Trade between the vigorous Norse towns on the east coast of Ireland and the Severn-Bristol Channel region may be presumed to have existed in some degree from at least the early tenth century, but it is only towards the year 1000 that numismatic evidence implying it is available. Shortly after about 995, for example, the Dublin mint issued coins modelled on pennies struck at Bath and Watchet; a Gloucester coin was hoarded at Kildare c.991 and a Bath coin near Dungarvan somewhat later. [3] This Anglo-Irish trade was in all probability increasing in the early eleventh century and was no doubt a factor behind the establishment of the Bristol mint. But Bristol's economic activities, one supposes, were growing on more than one front, and Ireland provided only one strand in a fabric of expanding internal and external trade.

One aspect of Bristol's trade with Ireland during the eleventh century was a traffic in slaves, which aroused the opposition of Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester (1062-95). According to Wulfstan's biographer the men of Bristol often sailed to Ireland and their trade in slaves was 'a very ancient custom' which they were reluctant to abandon. After a long campaign of preaching, however, Wulfstan brought it to an end. [4] How much further afield Bristol

ships ventured at this time and from what foreign ports her visitors came is unknown. Voyages to France are likely. Nearer at hand we may assume that the Severn was important in the pattern of Bristol's commerce and that goods were exchanged with Gloucester, the centre of a vigorous iron industry. Small vessels may have sailed further up river. Tolls were paid by ships at Chepstow on the Wye as early as 1086, and some of these doubtless came from Bristol. Domesday Book reveals the town as prosperous and few others are known to have been a source of greater revenue to the king. [1]

The course of Bristol's progress during the twelfth century is hard to discern. This was clearly a time of growth, and two chroniclers writing before 1150 leave no doubt about the activity of the port. The author of the *Gesta Stephani* described Bristol as 'almost the richest of all the towns in the kingdom' with a harbour for a thousand ships which brought merchandise from near and far. We may pardon some exaggeration of the capacity of the harbour, but it is clear that for the writer Bristol derived much of her wealth from the sea. This was also the opinion of William of Malmesbury for whom Bristol was a 'very famous town . . . the resort of ships coming from Ireland, Norway and other countries overseas.' [2] The reference to ships of Norway suggests that these were regular callers at this time, possibly sailing via Ireland. All too little is known of the 'other countries overseas' and it is only by chance that we learn from an inquest of 1236 that merchants of Picardy frequented Bristol in the reign of Henry II. [3] As these men dealt in woad, we are grateful for this early indication of a cloth industry which was probably already mainly to be found across the bridge in the prosperous suburbs of Redcliffe and Temple Fee.

Bristol's Irish trade continues to be largely unrecorded, but it is likely that Dublin was the most frequented overseas port of call in the twelfth century. We catch an interesting glimpse of Bristol ships transporting supplies for Henry II's expedition to Ireland in 1171. Six vessels carried victuals brought by boat from Gloucester, wine sent from Winchester and cheeses from Abingdon and Newbury. [4] Shortly afterwards (October 1171-April 1172) Henry granted Dublin to the men of Bristol, and this was no doubt an

(1) R. H. M. Dolley, 'Three Late Anglo-Saxon Notes', *British Numismatic Journal*, xxviii (1955-57), 92-99. Mr. Dolley kindly helped with this and related problems.
(2) R. H. M. Dolley, 'An Unpublished Chester Penny of Harthacnut', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6th Ser. xx (1960), 191-193.
(3) Information supplied by Mr. Dolley; J. D. A. Thompson, *Inventory of British Coin Hoards* (1956), pp. 51-52, no. 134, *Anglo-Saxon Coins*, ed. R. H. M. Dolley (1961), pp. 248, 263.
(4) *Vita Wulfstani*, ed. R. R. Darlington, *Camden Soc.*, 3rd Ser. xl (1928), **43-44**.

(1) *Domesday Book* (1783), i. 163b. *Cf. Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, ed. H. A. Cronne, *B.R.S.*, xi (1946), 14-41 for the Domesday evidence and an excellent survey of early Bristol.
(2) *Gesta Stephani*, ed. K. R. Potter (1955), p. 37, *Gesta Pontificum* (Rolls Series, 1870), p. 292.
(3) *Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, pp. 62-64.
(4) *Pipe Roll Society*, xvi (1893), 40, 84, 88-89, xviii (1894), 71.

acknowledgement of the part they played in Dublin's economy.[1] The intention appears to have been that Dublin should become a dependency of Bristol, but no constitutional link followed.

Henry II's charter to Bristol (1155) and that of his son John (c.1188) include several provisions of economic interest, though none was unique to Bristol. [2] Freedom of toll, passage and custom throughout England, Normandy and Wales was a highly prized grant. The burgesses received confirmation of 'all their reasonable gilds' which we are told had existed in the time of Robert, earl of Gloucester (1122-47). 'Strangers'—either aliens or English merchants who were not burgesses of the town—were at some disadvantage in their trading for none might buy hides, corn or wool except from a burgess. Later, we know, Bristol did an active business in hides; there is evidence of corn exported to Wales in the twelfth century and of Carmarthen sending wool to Bristol early in the thirteenth century. [3] Strangers were also forbidden to keep a tavern on board ship and were excluded from selling cloths retail (pannos ad decisionem) except at fair time. Bristol had two fairs in the twelfth century, one belonging to the priory of St. James and the other to the king. It is likely that the town was already a considerable cloth mart.

By the thirteenth century port facilities had become inadequate to the needs of an expanding economy. Radical and expensive changes were forced upon the town, and the decision to create a new channel for the Frome across St. Augustine's Marsh was a momentous event in port development. According to fifteenth-century tradition Bristol's first quay was on the Avon just above the bridge. Yet few ships can have been able to navigate the bridge and lighters must have been employed downstream for lading and discharging cargoes. Below the bridge the tidal drop was rapid and the river bed was stony, but by the thirteenth century, and perhaps before, the men of Bristol and of Redcliffe were building quays there. This 'ancient custom' was reported by a jury of towns-men in 1221, who said that neither the king nor the neighbourhood had suffered damage, the arrival of ships had not been impeded, and the quays were likely to improve the river. [4] Obviously the old quay was too small and inconvenient; a new harbour was necessary. So the townsmen embarked upon a major work of civil

(1) *Bristol Charters 1155-1373*, ed. N. D. Harding, *B.R.S.*, i (1930), 6-7.

(2) *Ibid*, pp. 2, 8-13.

(3) Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera* (Rolls Series, 1868), vi. 68, *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum* (1833), p. 353b.

(4) J. Leland, *Itinerary*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (1907-10), v. 90-91. *Antiquities of Bristow*, ed. J. Dallaway (1834), pp. 32, 60, 124, *Pleas of the Crown for Bristol* 1221, ed. E. J. Watson (1902), p. 147.

engineering, which may have taken seven years to complete. Sixteenth-century tradition had it that the cost was £5,000, a large sum of money.

On 27 April 1240, after digging had already started, Henry III ordered the men of Redcliffe to help the burgesses of Bristol who 'for the common good of the whole town of Bristol as of your suburb have begun a trench in the Marsh of St. Augustine (so) that ships coming to our port of Bristol may enter and leave more freely and without impediment.' [1] A month earlier part of the abbey marsh had been acquired for this purpose. [2] At this time St. Augustine's Marsh extended from Brandon Hill and Kingsdown eastwards towards the town; the canons had reclaimed some land on its western edge which was bounded by a ditch which ran from a barn (grangia) on the north down to the Avon. In the deed of transfer a strip of land beyond the ditch was reserved to the abbey; east of this strip lay the marshland transferred to the town.

The area of marsh involved requires careful attention as it supplies the key to an important topographical problem, the course of the Frome before its diversion. Two answers have found favour. One was written in the later fifteenth century by William Worcester who recorded Bristol tradition on this matter. His description became the orthodoxy of Bristol history until 1821-23 when Samuel Seyer published his distinguished *Memoirs of Bristol*, in which he attempted a substantial modification of what Worcester had written. [3] His ideas have been followed by most subsequent writers. Although Worcester is sometimes hard to understand, with respect to the Frome he is clear. Before its diversion, he says, the river flowed from Frome Gate Bridge past the east end of St. Stephen's church along Pill Street and the south side of Baldwin Street, joining the Avon below the bridge. [4] Seyer, however, decided that 'the current through Baldwin Street was formed artificially as a town ditch' and that 'the *natural* current of the Frome must have been through the marsh', i.e. some distance to the south of Baldwin Street.

Seyer reached his conclusion by means of several arguments, only one of which requires criticism here. This is the text which he used of the deed transferring marshland to the town. In this the eastern limit of the abbey marsh was said to extend *'usque ad marginem portus Frome'* (as far as the bank of the port of the

(1) *Bristol Charters 1155-1373*, pp. 18-19.

(2) *Great Red Book of Bristol* (*G.R.B.*), ed. E. W. W. Veale. *B.R.S.* 4 vols. (1933-1953). The deed is in i. 89-90.

(3) S. Seyer, *Memoirs of Bristol* (1821-23), ii. 14-28.

(4) Dallaway, *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 138-139, 153.

Frome). It was thus necessary for Seyer to postulate a course whereby the marsh acquired by the town had the river as a continuous boundary. Unfortunately, however, Seyer's text was defective. The copy of the deed in the *Great Red Book* contains seven vital words which were unknown to Seyer. The latter text grants marshland to the town not only *'usque ad marginem portus Frome'* but also elaborates the grant with the words *'versus Fromam et versus mariscum ville Bristollie'* (as far as the Frome and as far as the marsh of the town of Bristol). Thus it is clear that the abbey marsh was bounded both by the Frome *and* by the town marsh. These additional words undermine the basis of Seyer's argument and are sufficient to rehabilitate the statements of Worcester.

We may now try to establish what the eastern boundaries of the abbey marsh were. The first *(usque ad marginem portus Frome)* can be identified with the right bank of the river on its course below Frome Gate Bridge to St. Stephen's church. (The abbey barn may have been near the bridge.) By the church the river flowed away from the abbey marsh and in 1240 it was clearly navigable as the words *portus Frome* and the name Pill Street imply. A pill was a small harbour, and when a house was built in Pill Street in the fifteenth century it was necessary to dig to a depth of 47 feet before the foundations could be laid; in the soft ground the remains of a little sailing boat were found. As the volume of water carried by the river cannot have been great, we may presume that only small craft could use it.

Beyond the right bank of the Frome as it flowed along Pill Street and Baldwin Street to its confluence with the Avon lay the town marsh. [1] This, as we have seen, also served as a boundary for the abbey marsh; we may suggest that they joined along a line running from St. Stephen's south to the Avon. By 1240 the reclamation and settlement of the town marsh had made some progress, as can be established by reference to deeds of the period. The church and parish of St. Stephen are of particular interest in this context, for the church had been built outside the town wall to serve a population which had settled in part of the town marsh which has come to be known as St. Stephen's Marsh; here on land which was probably subject to periodic flooding lay Scadepuddle Street (later Marsh Street). Near at hand was Baste Street (later Back Street); this lay in Avon Marsh, and was attached to the parish of St. Nicholas. [1]

When the great channel across the marsh was at last finished the water of the Frome was diverted to form a waterway which became the main anchorage for centuries to come. Here was a fine new harbour, spacious and convenient compared with the old quay above the bridge; and when the tide ebbed ships could lie on mud which (in Leland's phrase) was 'soft and oozy' compared with the harsh Avon. On its eastern bank adjacent to the town The Quay was built, where the ocean-going ships might be seen. After The Quay was finished, Bristol Bridge was rebuilt and the old port above the bridge ceased to operate. Below the bridge, however, on the stretch where private quays were made earlier in the century The Back was built, which became an alternative anchorage to The Quay. The volume of goods handled there was never at great as on The Quay, and it appears to have been used mainly by coasting ships.

Wine dominated the maritime commerce of thirteenth-century Bristol. The trade must have been old, but there is no reference to it before the charter of 1155 and we know nothing of early sources of supply. Before 1200, it has been suggested, the bulk of Bristol's wine may have come via La Rochelle from the vineyards of Anjou and Poitou. Gascon wine is first mentioned in John's reign, but may already have been familiar for many years. [2] By the reign of Henry III Bristol's links with Bordeaux and Bayonne were close, and although wines of Anjou remained common, Gascon was more favoured by the town's numerous customers, among whom the king was the largest. In November 1238, for example, Henry III, hearing that wine was in good supply at Bristol, ordered the purchase of 100 tons, preferably Gascon. Later, in 1281-82, 247 tons were sent for Edward I's use to Gloucester, Worcester, Evesham, Cirencester, Quenington and Down Ampney, transport costs amounting to £46. [3]

During Edward's reign we first have evidence of the volume of Bristol's wine imports, and very impressive it is. The king had the right to levy 3d on every ton imported to Bristol by merchants who did not come from towns which had received an exemption; Gascon merchants were the most important unprivileged group.

(1) *Cartulary of St. Mark's Hospital, Bristol,* ed. C. D. Ross, *B.R.S.,* xxi (1959), nos. 129, 130, and Bristol Archives Office, Bristol Deeds, 5139 (185) have early references to Baldwin Street. I am grateful to Miss E. Ralph for help with deeds relevant to this problem.

(1) *Trans. Bristol and Gloucs. Arch. Soc. (B.G.A.S.),* xliv (1922), 123, *ibid,* lviii (1936), 226 ; Bristol Deeds, 00566 (1) has Baste St. 'in marisco Abone in suburbio Bristollie'. *Cf. Bristol Deeds,* ed. F. B. Bickley (1899), no. 32.

(2) Y. Renouard, 'Les Relations de Bordeaux et de Bristol au Moyen Age', *Revue Historique de Bordeaux,* n.s. vi (1957), 101ff.

(3) *C.C.R. 1237-42,* p. 113. Dr. M. Sharp has generously allowed me to use her transcriptions for her forthcoming edition of The Accounts of the Constables of Bristol Castle. My facts on the wine trade under Edward I are derived from these.

A remarkable series of accounts of the constables of Bristol Castle records receipts from this toll and shows the tonnage which paid duty; often exempt tonnage is also recorded. In 1275-76, for example, duty was paid on 2,055 tons, ten years later the total import was 2,787 tons. The 1280s were clearly a most vigorous decade, and during eight years (for five of which exempt tonnage is not stated) nearly 18,000 tons are known to have been imported. By 1292-93 tonnage had increased in 3,862 (of which 1,348 tons did not pay duty); this is Bristol's highest known import in the middle ages. But war with France intervened in 1294 and brought the trade to a standstill; only one ship, carrying 142 tons, arrived in 1294-95, and in the next two years no ships came. Such was the hazard of a trade based primarily on Gascony, for endless arguments about English rights in the duchy might easily degenerate into periods of warfare, during which imports suffered. From 1297 the trade began to recover and by 1306-07 again exceeded 3,000 tons; the 1,436 tons which paid duty were carried by 28 ships.

The fortunes of Bristol's wine trade between 1307 and the outbreak of the Hundred Years War with France in 1337 are obscure. Indeed between 1306-07 and 1350-51 we have no figures for total imports, although after 1322 the volume of alien shipments is usually known. During the first half of the fourteenth century there was a notable decline in alien trade. In 1333-37 their average annual import was only 287 tons, whereas in 1322-23 alone it had been 1,500 tons; by the late 1340s their contribution had ceased to be important. Alien imports were subject to pronounced fluctuations and judging by the prisage returns of the king's butler, this was also true of denizen trade. In 1327-30, for example, a period when imports were recovering from a short war with France, an average of twelve ships liable to prise reached Bristol. By 1333-36 the number had risen to twenty, and in 1340-43 (mainly a time of truce after three years' fighting) it was as high as thirty. [1]

After wine, woad is the import most frequently mentioned in thirteenth-century records. This important trade was dominated by the Picard merchants of Amiens, Nèsle and Corbie, whom we have already observed in Bristol in Henry II's reign. The regularity of their visits is shown by a reference to the 'customary places' which they used as warehouses. By the reign of Edward I Irish cloth was imported in quantities sufficient to occasion mention in the constables' accounts. We also read of Bristol ships sailing to Oléron for salt, and a royal purchase of Spanish yew for bowstaves in the

1280s suggests some trade with Spain. In March 1309 three ships from Portugal arrived on one day carrying figs and raisins to the value of over £350. [1]

Little is known of Bristol's exports at this time. There are references to wool shipped by merchants of Flanders and Brabant and by local men, but when customs returns became available (1279), Bristol emerges as an insignificant exporter of wool. Although she had easy access to supplies of best quality wool, the town lay away from the main shipping routes of exporters. [2] After 1303, when the 'new custom' was established, we occasionally have details of alien exports other than wool. In 1303-09, for example, their main exports to Gascony were cloth, hides, lead and salted fish. The quantities involved were small, and in 1306-07, when, as has been seen, more than 3,000 tons of wine, most of it from Bordeaux and Bayonne, were imported, the three vessels which sailed to Gascony with alien shipments carried only 13 cloths, one tun of lead, horseshoes, a little fish, and corn to the value of about £190.10.0. [3] Allowing for English participation (as yet untaxed) in the Gascon trade, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Bristol's Gascon imports vastly exceeded her exports in value.

At the outbreak of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) Bristol was the wealthiest provincial town in England and, although we have no indication of the size of her population, presumably one of the largest. After London she was probably the biggest wine importer in the land, but as yet no dominant export had appeared. Within a generation a dramatic change had occurred and it is to Bristol's emergence as a cloth port that we must now turn. This was the outstanding feature in the development of her overseas commerce in the fourteenth century.

Bristol had long been the centre of a flourishing cloth industry, but unless denizen exports (uncustomed and therefore unknown in size) were very much larger than seems likely, production was mainly for the home market. Alien exports were certainly tiny, amounting to only 220 cloths between April 1303 and August 1308. At this time foreign merchants trading in cloth with England were mainly importers, shipping about 12,000 cloths a year to ports among which Bristol does not feature. By 1333-36 this total

(1) M. K. James, 'The Non-Sweet Wine Trade of England in the 14th and 15th Centuries' (unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1952), pp. 340-342.

(1) C.C.R. 1279-88, p. 121-122, C.P.R. 1232-47, p. 311; N.S.B., Gras, Early English Customs System (1918), pp. 354-358. The reference to Spanish yew is in a Constable's account for 1284-87.

(2) Evidence of Bristol's wool trade before 1279 can be found in the calendars of letters patent and close. The Staple Courts Books of Bristol, ed. E. E. Rich, B.R.S., v. (1934) is valuable for Bristol as a wool staple.

(3) Gras, op. cit., pp. 350-352.

had dropped to some 7,000 cloths a year, and it is possible that English exports were increasing. [1] After 1337 imports by aliens declined to a level of insignificance; a heavy export duty on wool had given English manufacturers a lasting advantage in both home and overseas markets over Flemish and Italian producers, who relied heavily on English wool supplies. Exports by denizen merchants were first taxed in 1347, and from Michaelmas of that year until Michaelmas 1348 4,423 cloths were shipped by them from English ports. But it is impossible to place this figure in perspective, for nothing is known of what had gone before, and the arrival of the Black Death in July 1348 probably curtailed trade in the last months of the exchequer year. Bristol seems to have been badly affected by the plague and our earliest figure of her total export—900 cloths loaded by denizens on nine ships in 1348-49—should probably be viewed against a background of economic dislocation. [2] In the next year 838 cloths were exported in six ships. But whatever may have been happening before 1347, there can be no doubt that cloth exports after 1353 dwarfed any earlier achievement. By 1355-60 average annual export had risen to 2,550 cloths, 30% of the national export, and by 1365-70 to 5,151 cloths, 40% of the national export. The call on outward bound shipping was now greater than it had ever been and for the first time Bristol was a major export centre. Bristol at this time was the leading cloth port of the realm and there can have been few ships leaving The Quay and The Back for foreign ports which did not carry cloth. [3]

But after almost twenty years of expansion, the trade experienced a setback. This cannot be measured precisely, but it appears to have been considerable. In 1369 (after nine years of peace) war began again; French armies made inroads into Gascony, and in the Channel French and Spanish fleets were often a danger to merchantmen. The 1370s illustrate the mutability of fortune in medieval foreign trade. For this reason it is difficult to generalise over extended periods; the scene was never static, a trend was rarely long sustained. In the years 1380-1400 Bristol's advance was resumed, but progress was now modest. Exports in the 1380s were only 3.5% higher than they had been in the 1360s and in the 1390s only 6.5% higher. Bristol's share of the national export was now smaller than it had been. London and other ports

(1) *Ibid.*, pp. 346-359, *M.M.V.*, p. 242 n. 2, H. L. Gray, 'The Production and Exportation of English Woollens in the 14th Century', *E.H.R.*, xxxix (1924), 16.

(2) C. E. Boucher, 'The Black Death in Bristol', *B.G.A.S.*, lx (1938), 31-46.

(3) Statistics of wool exports from 1279 and of cloth exports from 1347 are in *England's Export Trade 1275-1547*, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman (1963): Gras, *op. cit.*, pp. 419-422, 429-431.

shipping to Northern Europe had increased their trade rapidly, while Southampton, after London the second cloth port of England, throve on outlets in Italy.

It is interesting to study Bristol's cloth exports in one year of the later fourteenth century. During 1390-91 7,017 cloths were exported, and of these the destinations of 5,605 can be studied in detail. They were carried by 83 vessels. The following table shows the number of ships and cloths sent to different markets: [1]

TABLE A: CLOTH EXPORTS FROM BRISTOL,
Mich. 1390 - Mich. 1391

Destination	Sailings	Cloths
Gascony	16	1,941
Portugal	17	1,886½
Ireland	29	1,161
Spain	5	195
La Rochelle	6	151
Unstated	4	147½
Prussia	1	69
Brittany	3	40
Zeeland	1	9
'France'	1	5
Totals	83	5,605

It can be seen that few ships sailed to continental ports north of La Rochelle, and 1390-91 was no exceptional year in this respect. Bristol's overseas ties were mainly with the south, with Gascony, Spain and Portugal. As yet trade with Spain was held back by her alliance with France. Portugal, it seems likely, was taking a significant share of Bristol's cloth soon after 1350, and by 1378-82 was receiving nearly 25% of the total export. [2] It is not surprising to find Gascony as Bristol's biggest market, and the size of the Irish trade is not unexpected.

During the half century when cloth exports were increasing, Bristol's imports are poorly documented. Something is known of alien business, but before 1400 denizen trade in wine and other imports (as well as exports other than wool and cloth) was taxed only intermittently by subsidies of tonnage and poundage. Information, therefore, is scarce. Bristol's total wine import, for example,

(1) *Overseas Trade*, pp. 190-203. More than 250 exporters are named in this account.

(2) V. M. Shillington and A. B. W. Chapman, *The Commercial Relations of England and Portugal* (no date), p. 15.

is only recorded for approximately six years between 1350-51 and 1402-03. National figures are also scarce, and it is hard to assess the course of a trade notoriously subject to fluctuations. As we have seen, imports of 2,000-3,000 tons of wine a year (and sometimes even more) were not uncommon for Bristol under Edward I. The national import is only known for one year before 1350 (about 14,800 tons in 1300-01), but it is possible that totals in the region of 20,000 tons were not infrequent before 1337. [1] The general effect of war with France after this date was a contraction in the trade and it is unlikely that imports between 1350 and 1400 often approached 20,000 tons. Certainly, in the fifteenth century a national import in excess of 10,000-12,000 tons was exceptional. Thus it is against an uncertain background that the evidence of Bristol's wine trade in the second half of the fourteenth century must be considered. In 1350-51, for example, when Bristol imported 1,265 tons out of a national total of 9,005 tons trade was not good: in the year from 1 November 1371, when England imported only 5,998 tons and Bristol's share was 985 tons, trade was clearly bad. [2] The 1370s seem to have been a bleak decade. Yet in 1383-84 (a year of truce) national imports were in the region of 17,000 tons, and in the 12 months following 28 November 1386 —fighting had begun again but naval policy was vigorous—they rose to 19,600 tons. Bristol's share as fourth importer after London, Southampton and Sandwich was 2,154 tons. Somewhat later, between 23 May 1388 and 24 June 1389, trade dropped to 1,434 tons. [3] A truce in 1389 brought an end to war with France for the rest of the century. Bristol importers may be presumed to have benefited from this respite, but on the whole it seems unlikely that they were doing as much business as their predecessors had done a century earlier.

Yet even if Bristol's wine trade under Richard II was lower — perhaps substantially lower — than it had been in Edward I's time, it is likely that the port was more active in the later fourteenth century than it had ever been before. If wine imports were smaller than they once had been, there was compensation in the fact that cloth had given exports a significance and a value which they cannot have had before 1350. It is unlikely that other exports had grown substantially, but imports other than wine had almost certainly done so. Shipments of woad and oil, for example, were probably larger than they had ever been.

Ships of many ports and several countries frequented Bristol in the later fourteenth century. English vessels predominated, but on The Quay and The Back one might see ships from Gascony, Portugal and Spain mingling with those of Ireland and Wales and, less frequently, with craft from Brittany, Normandy, Flanders and Prussia. Bristol merchants did not hesitate to freight their cargoes on foreign ships, and aliens often used English carriers. Early in the century, for example, before Gascon merchants lost their valuable share of wine imports, they regularly employed English ships.

No medieval returns (of a kind occasionally found in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) of shipping owned by individual ports are known, but 'particulars' of customs and naval accounts show that in the reign of Richard II Bristol shipowners possessed an impressive number of vessels. For example, between 3 November 1378 and 27 May 1379 a minimum of thirty can be found, [1] and in 1390-91 as many as 37 Bristol ships may have carried cloth overseas. But medieval conservatism in the naming of ships creates difficulties here; there are, for example, six *Maries*, four *Katherines* and three *Gracedieus* in the 1390-91 account, and although each appears with a different master, we cannot be sure that the master had not been changed between voyages and the same ship counted more than once.

The size of ships was measured by their carrying capacity of tons of wine; these 'measurements' were often only approximate estimates. Owing to the wide range in tonnage of Bristol ships, no concept of an 'average-sized ship' is worthwhile. It is, however, interesting to mention the tonnage of the bigger ships. *The Catherine* of 300 tons, which served in a naval expedition of 1388, is the largest known Bristol vessel of Richard II's reign, but ships of 200 tons or more were not uncommon—three served in a fleet in 1379—and those of 100 tons and above might regularly be found. [2]

No comparison between Bristol's shipping resources in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be attempted here; it is indeed doubtful whether extensive enquiry would lead to a significant conclusion. For much of the fifteenth century, as will be seen, trade was poor and the stimulus to invest in shipping reduced. The case of John May who about 1450 built a ship costing over £500 and was then 'for lak of good' obliged to sell off a

---

(1) M. K. James. 'Fluctuations of the Anglo-Gascon Wine Trade during the 14th Century', *Econ H.R.*, 2nd Ser. iv (1951), 175-176.

(2) A. Beardwood, *Alien Merchants in England 1350-1377* (1931), p. 180. The import of 1371-72 was carried by 16 ships, including six of Bristol; Public Record Office, E.101/80/22.

(3) P.R.O., E.356/5 mm. 24, 25d. 26d.

(1) This figure is derived from *Overseas Trade*. pp. 180-189, and P.R.O., E.101/182/6.

(2) P.R.O.. E.101/39/1, 40/40.

quarter share may not have been untypical. [1] With some interesting exceptions the largest Bristol ships of the fifteenth century appear to have been comparable in size to the biggest vessels of Richard II's reign, but one has the impression that by 1450 there were rather more ships of 200–300 tons to be found. [2] *The Mary and John,* which belonged to William Canynges (d. 1474), was an unusual ship of 900 tons which had cost £2,665 to build. Canynges was a notable shipowner, whose fleet, according to William Worcester, at one time comprised 10 vessels, including, in addition to *The Mary and John,* one of 500 tons, another of 400 tons and seven of 220 tons or less. Worcester also has an incomplete list of Bristol ships in 1480; the names and tonnage of ten are given and more than twelve others are mentioned. The largest were *The Trinity* of 360 tons and *The Mary Grace* of 300 tons; eight were of 200 tons or less, including five of 100 tons or under. [3] About this time larger ships began to lose favour, and it seems indicative of this change that of 18 or 19 ships in the port in January 1513 only one was larger than 130 tons. [4] It should be stressed, however, that most medieval ships trading from Bristol were smaller, and often much smaller, than those we have mentioned.

But vessels which sailed to distant ports had no monopoly of the Avon. Sadly, we do not know a great deal about the boats, trows, cobles and shouts which came down the Severn, or the little coasters which crossed from South Wales or came up channel from Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. Trade up and down the Severn was important for both Bristol and the river counties. Obstructions to navigation were a repeated source of complaint, and on one occasion (1464) the Commons in parliament complained that these and the overgrowth of towpaths were damaging to seven shires. [5] Bristol was a focal point for a wide area; foodstuffs grown in the rich areas watered by the Severn helped to feed her population, while cloth from Coventry, Ludlow and elsewhere was sent overseas. Some of this had been dyed with woad imported through Bristol, and oil from the port had been used in its manu-

(1) G. V. Scammell, 'Shipowning in England c. 1450-1550', *T.R.H.S.,* 5th Ser. xii (1962), 115.

(2) *Overseas Trade,* p. 101 *et passim. Cf.* D. Burwash, *English Merchant Shipping 1460-1540* (1947), p. 82ff.

(3) *Overseas Trade,* pp. 139-140, 155-156. Worcester says that Canynges employed 800 sailors and 100 'workmen, carpenters, masons, etc.'

(4) *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII,* I i. 724, no. 1577 names eighteen ships; Scammell (*loc. cit.,* p. 114) has nineteen ships owned by twenty men. M. Oppenheim, *History of the Administration of the Royal Navy* (1896), p. 89 gives the tonnage. By 1572 only four of fifty-three Bristol-owned ships were of 100 tons or over; *C.S.P.* (Domestic). *Addenda 1566-79,* p. 441.

(5) *Rotuli Parliamentorum,* v. 569-570.

facture. Other imports as well as local manufactures found their way by river and land to the Midlands and the Welsh Marches.

The coasting trade with Wales and the south-west is also poorly documented; it did not pay national customs and only one account of local tolls, from which many were exempt, has survived (1437). A famous passage in William Worcester describes the throng of Welsh ships on The Back (later to be called Welsh Back); he names more than a dozen ports and creeks between Chepstow and Haverfordwest which sent vessels. [1] Several engaged in modest overseas trade on their own account, and it is not uncommon to find Chepstow, Tenby and Milford ships bringing small amounts of customable goods to Bristol.

Chepstow was in the Bristol customs area; this extended up the Severn past the 'creeks' of Frampton and Berkeley to Gloucester, and thence down the estuary past Gatcombe to Chepstow; west of the Avon it stretched to the estuary of the River Axe. Responsibility for these 'member ports', whose trade was small, was a burden to the customs officials at Bristol. In the late fourteenth century the crown became restive about opportunities for smuggling at Chepstow, and when the customers responded to orders to be more efficient, there was a protest in parliament about the way they were interpreting their duties. [2] Iron from the Forest of Dean was perhaps Chepstow's main export to Bristol, but timber and food also played a part. Glamorgan sent ships from Cardiff, Newport, Neath and Swansea, but of greater importance were the merchants of ports from Carmarthen to Milford. Large quantities of cheap Welsh cloth, for which there was a useful market in Spain and Portugal, were brought to Bristol. Welsh hides were valued by Bristol's leather-workers. The fishermen of Tenby and Milford supplied herrings, and Welsh craft brought a steady flow of fish in small cargoes from Ireland. In return Bristol sent foreign products and her own manufactures. Similar cargoes went down channel and were exchanged for tin from Padstow or cloth from Barnstaple. Boats from St. Ives, Ilfracombe and Minehead brought fish from Ireland as well as their own catches. There was also trade with Bridgwater, which sent cloth to Bristol for export overseas.

The administration of the medieval port was neither extensive nor complex, but regulations were necessary for the convenience of shippers and the advantage of burgesses and lesser men; the fiscal interests of king and town necessitated revenue collectors. Before

(1) H. Bush, *Bristol Town Duties* (1828), pp. 17-25. Dallaway, *op. cit.,* p. 111.

(2) *C.C.R. 1389-92,* pp. 528-529, 532, 542; *Rot. Parl.,* iii, 330.

the fourteenth century we know little, but we learn from an undated custumal of the thirteenth century that the maintenance of 'kayum ante naves' was a charge on the Gild Merchant. [1] In the fourteenth century, when the invaluable series of town ordinances enrolled in the *Great Red Book* and the *Little Red Book* begins, the mayor and his elected advisers, Common Council, emerge as responsible for the running of the port. From 1373 Common Council numbered forty members, and as these were mainly drawn from men who had interests in foreign trade, they brought to the task of port control personal interest and experience. All the mayors of Richard II's reign, for example, engaged in foreign trade and at least half of them were shipowners. [2]

The boundaries of Bristol, as defined by the famous charter of 1373 which granted county status to the town, extended down the Avon and included an area of the Bristol Channel between Steepholm to the west and Avonroad to the north of the river mouth. [3] Off Portishead was the important anchorage of King-road, where incoming vessels waited for wind and tide and where goods might be transferred to lighters. Here in October 1484 'the greatest flood and the greatest wind at Bristol and in the country thereabouts that ever was seen' played havoc with shipping. [4] Three miles up river at Hungroad near Pill ships might often be seen lying on the mud at low water, and cargoes might be unladen on to smaller boats. The twisting course of the river, complicated in places by rocks and awkward winds, made it difficult to navigate; by the fifteenth century, if not before, pilots controlled by the town were available. In 17 Henry VIII (1525-26) one John Tilling, mariner of Shirehampton, was dismissed from his office of *Towing and Lodemanship*. [5] It had been his duty to bring vessels 'from the port of the said town called Kingrode unto Hungrode or to The Quay of the said town and from the same Quay to Hungrode or Kingrode forsaid'. With power to appoint deputies Tilling had received 'all such fees and sums of money for the exercising of the same office as of old time hath been used and accustomed'. The reference to 'towing' shows that some ships preferred not to hazard the use of their sails.

The mayor and council were responsible for two necessary port facilities, a supply of planks and a crane. In 1346 the crown had

(1) *Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, p. 67.
(2) *Cf.* P.R.O., E.101/33/31, 41/22.
(3) *Bristol Charters 1155-1373*, pp. 152-154.
(4) *Ricart's Kalendar*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, *Camden Soc.*, n.s. v (1872), p. 46.
(5) Bristol Archives Office, Ordinances of Common Council, 04272 f. 8v. I am grateful to Mr. P. McGrath for this reference. Lodemanship means pilotage.

Top: Penny of Aethelred II, 'Last Small Cross' type (?1009-?1017), struck at Bristol by the moneyer Aelfwerd. Original (19 mm.) Stockholm Museum.

Bottom: Silver Penny of Cnut, 'Quatrefoil' type (?1017-?1023), struck at Bristol by the moneyer Aegelwine. Original (19 mm.), Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.
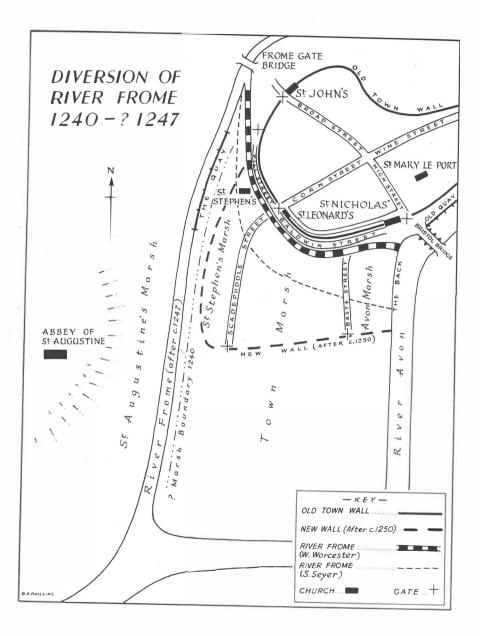
Common Seal (reverse) of the burgesses of Bristol, perhaps late thirteenth century. (Bristol Archives Office).

Seal of the Admirality Court of Bristol, established 1446. (Bristol Archives Office).

Extract from Ordinance establishing Guild of Sailors, 14 September 1445. Little Red Book of Bristol, fos. 150-152v, (Bristol Archive Office).

DIVERSION OF
RIVER FROME
1240 - ? 1247

KEY

OLD TOWN WALL	....
NEW WALL (After c.1250)	— — —
RIVER FROME (W. Worcester)	████
RIVER FROME (S. Seyer)	— · — · —
CHURCH ██	GATE +

R.A. PHILLIPS

the *officium plancagii* at its disposal, but by the early fifteenth century it was controlled by mayor and council, who in 1409 made a life grant to two merchants in return for an annual payment of 26s. 8d. [1] There is no evidence of a crane before 1475 when Alice Chester, a merchant's widow, built one on The Back at a cost of £41 'for the saving of merchants' goods both of the town and of strangers' ' and presented it to the town. A year or two later (1476-77) Common Council ordained charges for its use. [2] The handling of goods and their carriage within the town required a labour force, and merchants sometimes remembered the hard-working porters and wine-hauliers in their wills. One group of porters who appear to have been specialists were the salt-carriers, for whose services a scale of charges was established in 1351. [3]

The Quay, The Back and the 'commune grounde' by The Quay were often cluttered by dumps of goods, and judging by the repetition of ordinances against this, the council had difficulty in enforcing its will. Timber appears to have been a particular nuisance; 'grete wodde called Berkley wodde' and 'grete housse-holde wodde' had to be landed on The Quay and stacked 'beyond the Tower'. Wood for domestic fuel was discharged on The Back. In concern for cleanliness it was ordained that rubble and dung might only be thrown in the marsh or at fixed places on The Quay. [4]

An interesting rule of 1477-78 forbade anyone 'to break or cause to be broken any ground in any place about and within the town of Bristol to make any ship' without license of the mayor. The ordinance suggests that some 'yards' were only temporary, but a passage in Worcester shows that shipbuilding and repairs were concentrated near Marsh Gate and close to the Frome beyond the western end of The Quay. [5] Many sailors lived in Marsh Street. These men—'maistres and mariners off shippes longgyng to the Porte of Bristowe'—are shadowy figures, but in 1445 they peti-tioned that they might found a fraternity to support a priest and twelve poor sailors to pray for them 'when passing and labouring on the sea'. This was established by civic ordinance at the Hospital

(1) *C.P.R. 1345-48*, p. 167, *Little Red Book of Bristol (L.R.B.)*, ed. F. B. Bickley (1900), ii 44-46. The earliest known receipts from plankage are found in the 1530s. The sums involved were small, e.g. £3 9s. 0d. in 1532-33; Bristol Archives Office, Mayor's Audits, 04026 (1), f. 155. Miss D. M. Livock kindly drew my attention to this evidence.

(2) *Ibid*. Minutes of All Saints Parish, f. 142, *G.R.B.*, iii. 114-115.

(3) *Bristol Wills*, ed. T. P. Wadley, *B.G.A.S.* (1886), p. 27 *et passim, L.R.B.*, ii. 35-36

(4) *G.R.B.*, i. 133, 142, ii. 148, *L.R.B.*, ii. 28-29,

(5) Dallaway, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

of St. Bartholomew. Later a chapel was built adjacent to Marsh Street. [1]

Numerous ordinances were issued to prevent forestalling (buying up food before it reached the town) to ensure fair prices. In 1449-50, for example, it was ordered that grain sent down the Severn should be discharged only at the town. A boat which disregarded the regulation was forbidden to lade merchandise or coal in Bristol for a year. In September 1474 Common Council ordered that wheat might only be shipped out of the town from The Quay and with the mayor's approval. The sale of fish was also subject to close regulation. [2]

A recurrent theme of medieval urban legislation was control of the activities of non-burgesses, whether English or foreign. In 1462-63, for example, at a time when relations with France and Spain were difficult, the procedure for foreign ships arriving under safe-conducts was defined. They had to anchor at Kingroad until their papers had been examined and other formalities completed. Then, after receipt of a license from the mayor, they might sail to Bristol, where merchants and crews (all of whose names had been recorded) were subject to the ancient practice of hosting. All strangers' goods had to be stored and sold under supervision at Spicer's Hall on The Back. [3] In 1467 it was ordained that the price of meat oil, train oil, wool and wax sold to strangers should be determined by the officials of a Fellowship of Merchants; these officers were to be elected annually by mayor and Common Council. This ordinance appears to mark a new departure, the creation of a merchant organisation with certain delegated powers under town control. Its terms of reference were limited and nothing is known of its activities. [4] In 1500 'a Company or Fellowship of Merchants separate and distinct from every other company of handicraftmen' was established. This was much more ambitious in its scope and was intended to control port activity in a variety of ways. Again it is uncertain whether the body ever became effective. [5]

Revenue officers and their deputies were familiar figures about the port, collecting national customs and local tolls and charges. Little need be said of the royal officials; they were usually local men and often merchants of substance. Their duties were exacting; working from the Customs House on The Quay they handled large sums of money. In the 1490s, for example, the average annual receipt from Bristol customs was about £1,450. When the government was strong their activities might be closely supervised and if rumour reached the king that smugglers were active, the officials were sternly reprimanded. The scale of medieval smuggling at Bristol is uncertain, but more than once concern was expressed about reports of illicit activities in the Severn. In Bristol itself the customers were required to proclaim that goods might be laded only on The Quay and The Back and only between sunrise and sunset. Searchers were employed to watch for evasions, one of whom complained to the king in the fifteenth century about the difficulties of his job. 'In youre port', he said, 'the tydes of the see fallith bi course of kind every houre of the nighte aswell as in the day at whiche seasouns the merchauntes secheth with all their crafte and witte to conveye their goodis uncustumed . . .' [1]

The customers also received help from the two bailiffs of the town and from two waterbailiffs. The bailiffs, elected annually from Common Council, were usually men of wealth; in 1499 they absorbed the powers and assumed the title of the sheriff. As chief executive agents of the town government they had many duties which were not concerned with the port. They had a staff of assistants and in 1451 there is reference to their 'leet constables and servants' on The Quay and elsewhere. [2] The waterbailiffs were lesser men, who first appear in the thirteenth century with the titles of *servientes marine* or *custodes maritime*. [3] The crown reserved the appointment of one waterbailiff to itself until 1499, choosing minor servants of the royal household who employed deputies; [4] the other was appointed by the town. Interpretation of the division of responsibilities between these officials is made difficult by the fact that the town records mainly refer to only one waterbailiff. It seems likely, however, that most if not all duties were shared.

---

(1) *G.R.B.*, iii. 113-114, *Dallaway*, op. cit., pp. 40, 140-141, *L.R.B.*, ii, 186-192.

(2) *G.R.B.*, i. 132, ii. 150.

(3) *Ibid*, ii. 57-60, 62-63.

(4) *Ibid*, iii. 82-84. An ordinance of 1462-63 required the supervision of transactions in strangers' goods at Spicer's Hall by 'the wardens of merchants (appointed) for the time being by the commandment of the mayor'; *ibid*, ii. 63.

(5) J. Latimer, *History of the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol* (1903), pp. 26-35; P. McGrath, *Records relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers, B.R.S.*, xvii. (1951), pp. ix-xii.

(1) *C.P.R. 1354-58*, p. 41, *C.P.R. 1429-36*, p. 468, *G.R.B.*, iv. 90-91.

(2) *Ibid*, i. 133-134.

(3) *C.C.R. 1279-88*, p. 6, *C.P.R. 1317-21*, p. 514.

(4) The king's waterbailiff received 26s. 8d. a year for the robes of two sergeants. The worth of the office was unknown by the crown in 1457 (*G.R.B.*, ii. 70-71), but in 1471 Richard Craford, a royal yeoman, surrendered his appointment to the mayor and commonalty in return for an annuity of £6 13s. 4d.; *Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, pp. 55, 186-187. Despite a reference in 1457 to the right of the king's waterbailiff to hold a court in Bristol as in certain other royal ports, I have found no evidence that he in fact did so.

In the reign of Edward III the main duties of the town water-bailiff (there is no mention of his colleague) are defined by his oath on appointment. He undertook to escort all merchants importing goods to the customers, to watch by day and night to prevent evasions and to attach all uncustomed goods and present them to the customs collectors. He was also required to take all importers to the receivers of Murage and Quayage. (1) The latter was first granted in 1317. The rates, from which burgesses of Bristol and other privileged towns were exempt, were modest and perhaps inadequate for their purpose. Each ship paid 3d. and smaller craft $1\frac{1}{2}$d.; tolls on goods included 2d. on a ton of wine, a quarter of woad or a sack of wool, and a $\frac{1}{2}$d. on a quarter of wheat, ten gallons of oil or a millstone. Between 1317 and 1339 Murage and Quayage were collected by burgesses who do not appear to have held other civic office. By the fifteenth century the bailiffs were responsible and it appears to have been the duty of the water-bailiffs to make presentment of every vessel reaching the port to them. (2)

Another function of the waterbailiffs was the making of attachments or distraints on instruction from the mayor and bailiffs or when ordered to do so by a court. In 1488 a scale of fees for these services was laid down; the waterbailiff or his deputy was to receive 4d. for arrests or attachments made on The Quay or The Back, and larger sums for ones at Rownham, Hungroad and Kingroad. If he travelled further 'then he might take for his labour in that behalve resonably after the distaunce of the places and the jeopardy of the matier and as the plantif and he can agree'.(3) The waterbailiffs might also exercise control over shipping movements at times when the king restricted sailings, and the exaction of the king's prises on fish, wheat and salt brought to the port belonged to the office.

The duty to make presentment of all shipping arrivals presumably gave the waterbailiffs some responsibility in the collection of the royal toll or local custom, which became a town receipt when the borough was farmed. It was charged on goods brought into the town by land and water, but like Murage and Quayage was subject to numerous exemptions. The custom is first mentioned under Edward I, but was undoubtedly already ancient. Receipts amounted to a large proportion of town revenue. (1) We do not know who were acting as 'customary collectors of the petty custom' in 1331, but by the mid-fifteenth century the bailiffs were receiving the toll. An ordinance of 1449 required the Steward of the Tolsey Court, over which the bailiffs presided, to be good and true to them and 'attendaunt for the boke of tolle and custume langyng to the town of Bristowe and notified in the Tolsey'. (2) It is possible that the toll was actually paid in the Tolsey, for a post-medieval ordinance stipulated that the Keeper of The Quay should allow no vessels to depart 'without a token . . from the Tolsey that they have made their entry'. (3) A fifteenth-century ordinance expressed the fiscal interest of the bailiffs in all ships entering the port; it stipulated that no master should discharge goods or 'break any bulk' before the bailiffs had inspected his ship. (4)

The Keeper of The Quay, to whom reference has been made, and his colleague, the Keeper of The Back, do not appear until 1518-19, but their offices were not new. The keepers were subordinates of the sheriffs and their duties were in part at least connected with the collection of toll and probably of Quayage. A proposal to reduce their modest fees was countered by the argument that 'true and sufficient men' were needed to 'occupy the same offices and to make true reckoning concerning the tolls, customs and other charges wherewith the same officers (have) been and ought to be charged'. A clear indication that The Quay was much busier than The Back is found in the estimate in 1519 of the annual profits and advantages coming to each. The figure for The Quay (£66 13s. 4d.) was more than four times larger than that for The Back (£16). (5)

We may now consider the fortunes of Bristol's overseas trade in the fifteenth century. In cloth there was no advance on the average annual export of 1390-1400 (5,668 cloths) until 1490-1500, and for many years trade was much lower. The period 1400-20 with an average export of 2,680 cloths, was depressed, but there followed three decades of substantial prosperity and in 1440-50 the average annual export reached 5,109 cloths. By this decade

---

(1) *L.R.B.*, i. 52.

(2) *Bristol Charters 1155-1373*, pp. 56-59. Receipts from Murage and Quayage for the years 1317-39 are printed by Bush, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-93. Misappropriation had been alleged; *cf. C.P.R. 1354-58*, p. 128, *L.R.B.*, i, 154.

(3) *G.R.B.*, iii. 35-37, iv. 124. The waterbailiff was a sergeant of the Tolsey Court.

(1) In 1288-89 the king's toll accounted for £94 14s. 5d. out of a total receipt of £180 0s. 4¼d.; in the war year of 1296-97 the toll brought in £40 9s. 8d.

(2) *L.R.B.*, i. 28-29, *G.R.B.*, i. 122.

(3) Printed without date by Bush, *op cit.*, p. 99.

(4) *G.R.B.*, i. 143; *cf. ibid*, ii. 54.

(5) *Select Cases in the Star Chamber*, ed. I. S. Leadam, *Selden Society*, xxv (1910), p. 142 ff.

London and Southampton had greatly increased their lead over Bristol with average exports of 19,200 and 9,950 cloths. The years 1450-70 were again disappointing and during the 1460s exports may have averaged little more than 2,000 cloths a year. The later 1470s, however, saw a great recovery and between 1477 and 1490 (1484-85 excluded) exports averaged 5,444 cloths. Finally in the 1490s they reached 6,515 cloths; this was Bristol's most successful cloth decade between 1347 and 1547. The average annual national export was now some 60,000 cloths of which Bristol was shipping about 11%.

The volume of the wine trade also varied considerably. During the century the national import is only known to have exceeded an average of more than 10,000 tons a year in the decades 1410-20 and 1440-50; Bristol's share only exceeded an annual average of 2,000 tons in 1440-48 and 1490-1500. These years are reminiscent of, though a quarter to a third below, the distant peak years of Edward I's reign. The port had long been accustomed to reduced imports, but in the numerous years when shipments were little more than 1,000 tons, merchants can hardly have thought that trade was thriving. The years 1455-70 were gloomy, but, as with cloth, the last quarter of the century saw a recovery with an annual average import of 1,517 tons between 1477 and 1490 (1484-85 excluded) rising to one of 2,199 in the 1490s. During the century Bristol was usually the first provincial wine port and in the last decade was shipping 24% of the national import of non-sweet wines.

Poundage valuations at the end of the century also show a great improvement, but these figures need careful handling. Until 1422 cloth exports were subject to poundage and it was only in 1437, after several periods of exemption, that cloth was finally freed. Thus the valuations for most years prior to 1437 are not comparable with those of later date. After 1437, however, valuations, which appear to have become standardised and to have borne little relation to market prices, may be used as a rough basis of comparison from year to year. In the decade 1440-50 the customers' valuation averaged £11,047; this dropped to £5,748 in 1460-65 and recovered to more than £14,000 (nearly 10% of the national total) in 1490-1500. [1]

(1) E Power and M. M. Postan, *Studies in English Trade in the 15th Century* (1933), pp. 333-335 give Bristol's poundage valuations and wine imports (combined totals of non-sweet and sweet wines) for the period 1402-1482. From 1477 to 1500 my averages are for non-sweet imports only and are derived from Dr. James's thesis and from Dr. P. H. Ramsey, who has kindly allowed me to use his transcriptions of the enrolled customs accounts for Bristol in Henry VII's reign. Bristol's sweet wine trade under Henry VIII was minute, and this was presumably true in the previous reign also; G. Schanz, *Englische Handelspolitik* (1881), ii. 133.

The most active decades, therefore, of the fifteenth century port were the fifth, the ninth and the tenth. The last of these saw more cloth exported than ever before, and wine imports and poundage valuations were also high. It is indeed likely that the 1490s saw the overseas trade of medieval Bristol at its peak. But if we look at the fifteenth century as a whole there had been no growth comparable to the rise of cloth exports in the second half of the fourteenth century. Unless wine imports and the value of goods subject to poundage were both substantially higher after 1400 (thus compensating for declines in cloth exports) than they had been between 1350 and 1400—and this seems unlikely—the overseas trade of Bristol during the greater part of the fifteenth century was operating below, and sometimes far below, the best years of the later fourteenth century.

Annual totals and poundage valuations of imports and exports were of course made up by cargoes of many ships trading with several countries and carrying a variety of goods; they also represented the investments of many people. The details behind the summaries of enrolled accounts can on occasion be gleaned from the 'particulars' of accounts drawn up by local customs officials. One such account survives for the period 29 September 1479 to 3 July 1480. An analysis of certain of its contents reveals a number of points which are characteristic of port activity in the later middle ages. The account records 124 arrivals and 60 departures of ships carrying customable goods. [1]

TABLE B: Ships carrying customable goods

29 September 1479 — 3 July 1480

	Arrivals	Departures
Ireland	62	31
Gascony	17	7
Spain	6	8
Portugal	5	4
Brittany	3	1
La Rochelle	3	3
Caen	2	—
?Harfleur	—	1
Calais	—	1
Iceland	—	2
Madeira	—	1

(1) *Overseas Trade*, pp. 218-289.

	Arrivals	Departures
?Genoa	—	1
Flanders	1	—
Tenby	9	—
Haverfordwest	1	—
St. Brides	1	—
Chepstow	9	—
Milford	2	—
Minehead	2	—
'Taunton'	1	—
	124	60

Bristol ships were prominent among the many using the port in these months. They were, however, in a minority, a maximum of 23 being responsible for 24 arrivals and 20 departures. It is possible that there had been some decline since the later fourteenth century in the share of local ships in the carrying trade. In 1390-91, for example, thirteen of sixteen vessels freighted to Gascony with cloth and four of the five which sailed to Spain were of Bristol, whereas in 1479-80 only eight of the twenty-four sailings to and from Gascony, and five of the fourteen trading with Spain were from the home port; the latter figure is broadly typical of the Spanish trade at this time. [1]

The high proportion of Irish sailings (50%) is striking, and as arrivals exceeded departures by two to one many ships which had come from Ireland must have left without cargoes. The incoming traffic, despite the numerous ships involved, was valued at only about £2,500, of which 90% consisted of fish. [2] By comparison one ship from Lisbon brought in goods to the value of more than £1,000 in March 1480, and cargoes from Gascony, Spain and Portugal were commonly worth hundreds of pounds.

Cloth inevitably dominated exports. During 1479-80 4,736 broadcloths (or their equivalent in other varieties) were shipped of which 2,200 (excluding other varieties) appear in the account. Details of their export to the leading markets, together with the customers' valuation of other exports, follow:

(1) G. Connell-Smith, *Forerunners of Drake* (1954), pp. 34, 42.

(2) *Cf.* A. K. Longfield, *Anglo-Irish Trade in the 16th Century* (1929), pp. 213-215 for valuations of imports from Ireland in 1504-05.

TABLE C. Exports to Ireland, Gascony, Spain and Portugal, 29 September 1479 — 3 July 1480

Destination	Sailings	Broadcloths	Other Exports
Spain	8	950	£66.18.8
Ireland	31	492	£449. 8.9
Portugal	4	441	£20. 0.0
Gascony	7	315	£31.10.0

The order of importance of these markets is the reverse of that of 1390-91 (Table A). We are uncertain how far these figures are typical of the later fifteenth century, but the pre-eminence of Spain at this time has been established. Since 1466 this trade had grown fast and by the last quarter of the century Spain had become Bristol's most valuable overseas market. Here lay the main factor in the recovery and increase in trade at the end of the century. In 1492-93 Bristol sent 58% of her cloth export (3,283 cloths) to Spain; Ireland, Gascony and Portugal had ceased to absorb the proportions of the trade which they had done a century earlier. The low value of other exports emphasises the extent to which cloth occupied the centre of the scene. Miscellaneous exports to Gascony usually included fish and tanned hides and sometimes coal and corn. Corn and beans were occasionally sent to Spain as were tin and lead; fish and hides were regular exports. Portugal's imports in 1479-80 consisted entirely of cloth with the exception of one consignment of lead; but corn and fish as well as other goods might also be sent. Ireland's imports included salt, iron, alum, and metal and leather manufactures. [1]

The imports recorded in these months are generally typical of the period. Wine was still the most valuable commodity, although 1479-80 was a moderate year for the trade. But wine did not bulk so large among imports as cloth among exports. Table D shows the volume and sources of wine and the customers' valuations of other imports from Gascony, Portugal and Spain. Details of shipments from Spain in 1492-93 appear in the last column and show the great increase in Spanish trade towards the end of the century. [2]

(1) *M.M.V.*, pp. 13-64 gives a more detailed survey of Bristol's fifteenth century trade with these countries.

(2) Connell-Smith, *op. cit.* pp. 208-209.

TABLE D. Imports from Gascony, Portugal and Spain, 29 Sept. -
3 July 1480, and from Spain, 29 Sept. 1492 - 28 Sept. 1493

	Gascony	Portugal	Spain	Spain 1492-93
Wine	816 tons	206 tons	197 tons	746 tons
Woad	£2,447.10.0	£4.10.10	£424	£3,042.3.1
Iron	£94		£285	£1,641.6.0
Oil		£923	£169	£1,282
Sugar		£426	£100	£28
Wax		£208.10.0	£20	£105
Soap			£62.10.0	
Fruit		£190.13.11	£4	£45.18.4
Salt		£83.6.8		
Other Goods	£31.6.2	£86.10.6	£114.6.8	£351.3.7
Total Value (exc. wine)	£2,572.16.2	£1,922.11.11	£1,178.16.8	£6,495.11.0

Gascony, it can be seen, still occupied her traditional role as main supplier of wine, but since the French reconquest in 1453 trade had often been difficult, and Bristol importers, long familiar with the wines of Spain and Portugal, had been grateful to increase their supplies from these countries. When relations with France improved after 1475, Gascony was no longer so pre-eminent as of old, and in 1492-93, for example, almost a third of Bristol's import came from Spain. It may be noted that the import of commodities in common demand and of cargoes vital for industrial use was more valuable than trade in luxuries. [1]

The two Bristol ships which sailed to Iceland (February 1480) deserve a brief mention, for voyages to the 'costes colde' were often rewarding during the fifteenth century. The trade was complicated by constant diplomatic difficulties and the need for licenses from Norway, but Bristol merchants were not easily deterred. Iceland's great export was fish, particularly dried cod; in return Bristol sent flour, honey, butter, salt, assorted metal goods and often linen from Brittany or Flanders. [2]

On 15 July 1480, about five months after these voyages to

Iceland, another Bristol ship sailed from Kingroad for the Atlantic with a less conventional objective, the 'island of Brasylle'. It returned nine weeks later without finding its legendary goal, which was thought to lie in the uncharted seas west of Ireland. A year later, two more ships, *The Trinity* and *The George*, renewed the search. These were the first of a number of exploratory voyages made from Bristol between 1480 and 1500, of which the best known is that of John Cabot in 1497. His landfall on the coast of North America, whence he hoped to find a route to tropical Asia with its rich spice trade, had been made possible by the financial backing of Bristol merchants and the navigational experience of Bristol sailors. The main concern of earlier enterprises appears to have been the discovery of new fishing grounds. [1]

The number of men (together with a few women) who shipped goods between September 1479 and July 1480 is impressive: about 250 individuals traded with Gascony, Spain and Portugal alone, and there is no reason to believe that the period was exceptional in this respect. The range of value and frequency of activity varied enormously; the port, it is clear, drew its vitality from the enterprise of traders operating on widely different scales and was by no means the preserve of big men. Only a small proportion are likely to have derived their livings primarily from foreign trade. One group of importers, numerically large but economically insignificant, appears to have been sailors using their *portage* (cargo space allotted instead of wages). The values of their individual shipments were tiny. The considerable number of men who traded to several markets in a larger but nevertheless modest way is of greater interest. John Monmouth may be quoted as an example. He sent 6½ broadcloths to Spain in two shipments, and from Spain imported two tons of wine and iron valued by the customers at £5; oil to the value of £2 and two tons of wine were shipped by him from Portugal; woad valued at £15 and rosin worth £1 13s. 4d. came from Gascony. (Monmouth also imported fish and hides valued at £25 10s. 0d. from Ireland). Men engaged in transactions of this order were responsible for much of Bristol's foreign commerce. Finally there was a group of about thirty-five whose ventures with Gascony, Spain and Portugal involved investments, on a rough estimate, of more than £100. [2] Here again there were contrasts. Thomas Spense, for example, shipped goods

(1) A. R. Bridbury, *England and the Salt Trade in the later Middle Ages* (1955), has a good survey of Bristol's salt trade.

(2) *Overseas Trade*, p. 65 et seq, *M.M.V.*, pp. 98-142.

(1) J. A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery, Hakluyt Society*, 2nd Ser. cxx (1962), 19-83.

(2) *Cf.* H. L. Gray's 'average prices' of broadcloths exported (£2) and tons of wine imported (£4) in the period 1446-82; Power and Postan, *op. cit.* pp. 7-9, 14. But estimates of this kind are fraught with difficulties.

only twice, comprising sugar valued at £184, almonds at £1 13s. 4d. and woad at 13s. 4d. Most other members of this group were handling goods worth roughly £100-£200 but their ventures were more frequent. Two men, John Esterfield and Henry Vaghan, stand out as magnates among their class. Vaghan, for example, laded his goods in nearly thirty ships. He sent broadcloths to Gascony (47), Spain (42) and Portugal (38); he imported wine from Gascony (53 tons) and Portugal (4 tons) together with oil, almonds and iron from Spain, oil from Portugal, and iron and woad from Gascony. His imports other than wine were valued by the customers at nearly £200. In conclusion one may mention the insignificance of alien merchants in this account. This was indeed always the case after about 1350; Bristol's commerce was dominated by Englishmen.

During the last twenty years of the fifteenth century Bristol exported more cloth, imported more wine and handled more goods subject to poundage than any other provincial port. A decline in Southampton's vital Italian trade had caused her to yield the lead in shipments of cloth and goods subject to poundage which she had held since at least 1400. London, on the other hand, had increased her position of national dominance and in the 1490s was handling more than 60% of the national cloth export. After 1500, however, Bristol was unable to maintain her recent level of activity and at a time when the national cloth export was increasing, her annual averages were lower in each decade between 1500 and 1540 (and in the years 1540-47) than they had been from 1480 to 1500. Wine imports also declined.

Ships and the sea shaped the economy of medieval Bristol in numerous ways. Her wealthiest citizens were those who had prospered by venturing their capital overseas, and from their number the governing class of the town was drawn. Day by day goods from overseas and others destined for shipment abroad changed hands, and the town was the goal of many who had travelled long distances to buy and sell. Clothworkers who made up a substantial proportion of the town population, leather and metal workers, less numerous but important, were all dependent in some degree on foreign markets as outlets or as sources of supply. Sailors, shipbuilders and port workers were significant in the population. When foreign trade was weak less money circulated and all must have been aware that business with, let us say, Gascony or Spain was poor. Yet it is impossible to see the effects of port activity on the prosperity of the town in precise

economic terms. The economy of Bristol was never exclusively that of her port nor, judging by a comparison with Southampton, a major port but a much smaller town, could foreign trade alone have maintained a population of Bristol's size. Unfortunately the scale and productivity of the numerous crafts cannot be measured quantitatively like cargoes of cloth and wine. Relatively little is yet known, for example, about Bristol's cloth industry, but it was clearly thriving long before exports were of consequence. Nor can we estimate the volume of exchanges unrelated to foreign commerce.

In 1500 certain English towns—London, Norwich, Salisbury and Exeter, for example— were notably larger and wealthier than they had been a century earlier. It is unlikely that this was also true of Bristol. The fortunes of her maritime commerce in the fifteenth century do not suggest an increase in wealth or employment from this source until near the end of the century, and against the limited and short-term advance of the two last decades must be set earlier years of disappointment. If there was progress in the town's economy during the fifteenth century it can only have been in industry and in internal trade. But here the evidence available is limited. A tentative approach may perhaps be made by reference to estimates of population, but it must be stressed that the materials on which these are based are inadequate and that experts have differed. The poll-tax returns for Bristol in 1377 record 6,345 inhabitants of fourteen years of age and over; to this figure children under fourteen, clergy, beggars and tax-evaders must be added. J. C. Russell, who did not allow for the last three categories, decided upon a population of about 9,500. More recently a total of about 12,000 has been suggested. If the latter figure is preferred it would appear that Bristol's population declined between 1377 and c. 1550, for estimates of 9,500-10,000 in 1524 and 10,500 in 1545 have been made. [1] On the other hand, if the estimate of 9,500 in 1377 is adopted some modest progress had occurred by 1545. Obviously all these figures must be approached with caution and their value as economic signposts is uncertain. One thing, however, is clear; in the case of some towns the application of similar methods of calculation to comparable evidence shows undoubted and substantial growth of a

(1) J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (1948), p. 285, and (for criticisms of Russell) J. Krause, 'The Medieval Household: Large or Small?', *Econ. H.R.*, 2nd Ser., ix (1957), 425-430. E. M. Carus-Wilson, endorsing Krause's views, has suggested the figure of 12,000 in 1377; *Expansion of Exeter at the Close of the Middle Ages* (1963), p. 5. The estimate for 1524 is by W. G. Hoskins ('English Provincial Towns in the early 16th Century', *T.R.H.S.*, 5th Ser. vi (1956), 5.); the 1545 estimate is Russell's (*loc. cit.*).

kind which cannot be argued for Bristol. By the early sixteenth century Bristol had lost the provincial lead in wealth to Norwich and the gap which once had separated her from other important towns had, in varying degrees, been narrowed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

Hon. General Editor: PATRICK McGRATH
Assistant General Editor: PETER HARRIS

The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages was first published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association in 1965 and was the thirteenth in a series of pamphlets on local history. It has been out of print for some time, and the Bristol Branch is very glad to have the opportunity of making it once more available to readers.

As this second edition has been reproduced by a photographic process, it was not possible to make any revisions or alterations. Mr Sherborne would like to make the following corrections: on p.4 the reference to "fifteenth-century tradition" is mistaken. It is doubtful whether imports and exports were in fact handled above the bridge. On p.6, line 37, the word 'has' should read 'had'. The Ordinance of 1467 (p.18) refers to meat oil (i.e. edible oil), wood oil, iron and wax. The brief reference to Bristol's thirteenth-century import of woad (p.4) may be amplified by Miss Carus-Wilson's article, 'La Guède Française en Angleterre: un Grand Commerce du Moyen Age'. *Revue du Nord, xxxv* (1953), pp.89–105.

Twenty-five pamphlets have now been published, some of which are at present out of print. A full list is given at the end of the pamphlet. Pamphlets may be obtained from most Bristol booksellers and are on sale at the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building and in the Senate House.

1. *The Bristol Hotwell* by Vincent Waite (out of print).
2. *Bristol and Burke* by P. T. Underdown 10p.
3. *The Theatre Royal; the first seventy years* by Kathleen Barker. Third edition 20p.
4. *The Merchant Adventurers of Bristol in the Fifteenth Century* by E. M. Carus-Wilson (out of print)
5. *The Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* by Walter Minchinton. 17½p. (out of print).
6. *Thomas Chatterton* by Basil Cottle. 10p.
7. *Bristol and the Slave Trade* by C. M. MacInnes. 15p.
8. *The Steamship Great Western* by Grahame Farr. 12½p. (out of print).
9. *Mary Carpenter of Bristol* by R. J. Saywell. 12½p.
10. *The Chartists in Bristol* by John Cannon. 12½p.
11. *The Steamship Great Britain* by Grahame Farr. 20p.
12. *Ferdinando Gorges and New England* by C. M. MacInnes. 12½p.
13. *The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages* by J. W. Sherborne 25p.
14. *The Theatre Royal: Decline and Rebirth 1834–1943* by Kathleen Barker (out of print).
15. *The Bristol Madrigal Society* by Herbert Byard 15p.
16. *Eighteenth Century Views of Bristol and Bristolians* by Peter T. Marcy. 15p.
17. *Early Bristol Quakerism, 1654–1700* by Russell Mortimer 15p.
18. *The Industrial Archaelogy of Bristol* by R. A. Buchanan. 15p.
19. *Captain Thomas James and the North West Passage* by C. M. MacInnes. 15p.
20. *The Anti–slave Trade Movement in Bristol* by P. Marshall. 17½p.
21. *Sebastian Cabot and Bristol Exploration* by David Quinn. 25p.
22. *The Romans in the Bristol Area* by K. Branigan. 20p.
23. *Prehistoric Bristol* by L. V. Grinsell. 20p.
24. *The Medieval Churches of Bristol* by M. Q. Smith 20p.
25. *John Whitson and the Merchant Community of Bristol* by Patrick McGarth. 20p.