

Margaret M. Condon, Evan T. Jones and Glenys Phillips, (eds.), ‘Bristol 1465-6: Particulars of Account of Thomas Gibbes and Robert Strangways, customers, 28 November 1465 to 14 May 1466: Introduction’ (University of Bristol, Research Data Repository, 2019)¹

Text and Comment

Throughout Edward IV’s first decade (1461-70) the holders of the office of customer of Bristol changed frequently. Several were subsequently re-appointed a later date, sometimes more than once. The beginning and end dates of this ledger are both determined by such changes. The incoming customer in November 1465 was Robert Strangways. He had previously served, first with Thomas Gibbes and then with John Senecle, from the beginning of the reign until Michaelmas (29 September) 1464. He had long experience even prior to 1461, since he had been repeatedly appointed customer of the port under Henry VI. Strangways replaced John Senecle by letters patent of 20 November 1465. He was again replaced in May 1466, this time by Thomas Herbert; but would be re-appointed as customer one last time for the Spring of 1468.² Gibbes too had slipped in and out of office between 1460 and 1468, although his service was less interrupted, and he was customer both before and after the dates of this account.³ The short accounting period (in this case five-and-a-half months) and the lack of obvious points of reference to the regular accounting calendar, are thus not unusual.

The account of 1465-6 is a rich resource for patterns of ship size, use, and ownership, including aristocratic ownership of ships in the mid-fifteenth century. These themes have been briefly discussed in the introduction to the Bristol particulars of account for Michaelmas to November 1465, and more extensively elsewhere. They are not, therefore, repeated here.⁴

In one respect the ledger for 1465-6 is different from all other surviving Bristol particulars of the second half of the fifteenth century. From 31 January 1466, denizen imports and exports were recorded primarily under the ‘et socii’ formula. So, rather than listing *all* the owners of the goods loaded on a ship, the account declares that most wares were the property of a named merchant ‘et socii’ (and associates). It is generally unwise to read too much into the use of this term when found in the particular customs accounts. In some cases the ‘associates’ could be formal business partners of the first merchant but there are sixteenth-century examples of a customer recording the names of two or more merchants together in what appears to be simply an act of administrative convenience. For example, in March 1544 the customer of Bristol recorded the entry of 120 tons of iron on the *Trinity* of Bristol under the name of ‘John Smyth & socii’. Yet John Smyth’s own business ledger indicates the iron

¹ The National Archives, UK [TNA], E122/19/4. This transcription is an output of the ‘Cabot Project’ (University of Bristol 2009-), funded by Gretchen Bauta, a private Canadian benefactor. The account was transcribed from photographs by Glenys Phillips, then an M.A. student at the University of Bristol, and then further edited against the manuscript. Glenys Phillips has since successfully completed her degree.

² Customer of Bristol 1449-56 and 1458-60, TNA, E356/20, rots. 30r-31d, 32d; E356/21, rot. 31r; for 1461-4, 1465-6 and 12 February to 16 April 1468, *Cal. Fine Rolls 1461-1471*, pp. 5-7, 70-2, 146, 148, 198, 200; TNA, E356/21, rots. 31r-32d, 33d.

³ TNA, E356/21, rots. 31r-33r; *Cal. Fine Rolls 1461-1471*, pp. 70-72, 129-30, 198-200. Not in office Michaelmas 1463-4, or 8 February to Michaelmas 1467.

⁴ Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), ‘Bristol 1465: Particulars of Account of Thomas Gibbes and John Senecle, customers, 29 September to 28 November 1465: introduction’ (University of Bristol, PURE, 2016) <http://hdl.handle.net/1983/ba60788a-89e1-492f-a826-3db8a7e17332>; Ralph A. Griffiths, ‘Sailing the Severn Sea in the Mid-Fifteenth Century’ and Evan T. Jones, ‘The Shipping Industry of the Severn Sea’ in Evan T. Jones and Richard Stone, eds., *The World of the Newport Medieval Ship: Trade, Politics and Shipping in the Mid-Fifteenth Century* (Cardiff, 2018), pp. 95-114, 135-60.

belonged to eight merchants, besides himself, none of whom were business partners.⁵ The situation in 1465-6 was more complicated, however, being the product of a complex financial arrangement.

The particular customs account names one of four merchants, along with their 'associates' as the apparent owners of consignments being shipped. In each case the entry is followed by the name of a factor, or agent, who was said to be acting for them. The four merchants were William Canynges, John Shipward, John Gaywood and Robert Baron. In the first of these unusual entries, all four merchants are recorded together. On 16 December 1465 the *Trinity* of Minehead entered from Ireland carrying fish: their 'factor' being the shipmaster. The date was originally omitted, and may not be the true one – especially since it *precedes* the date of the patent to the four merchants discussed below. We can be sure, however, that the lading was part of the same complex arrangement as the later entries, since the clerk originally entered that 'by writ of the king' no subsidy was due.⁶ All four merchants are named again on 31 January 1466 apparently importing fish, Irish linen cloth and shorlings on the *Trinity* of Waterford from Ireland. Having recorded all four merchants in full on these two occasions, it seems that the clerk felt it sufficient, on subsequent occasions, to name just one of the four, encompassing the other three under the 'et socii' formula. On some of the larger ships all four appear in succession, with a different factor assigned to each. On small fishing boats the 'attorney' or 'factor' was frequently the shipmaster. On larger vessels, the factor was often an English or Irish merchant familiar from other Bristol customs accounts. 'Aliens', that is, foreigners who did not have denizen status, were never included as their factors, but paid full customs dues in their own names, even on ships otherwise carrying goods for the four 'associates'.⁷ Read literally, the customs accounts imply that the great bulk of Bristol's trade in 1466 was undertaken by a named group of four merchants, who were employing a diverse range of men as factors to trade to a wide variety of places. This would be both deeply improbable and at variance with Bristol's trade in all other years.

The four men were all prominent Bristol merchants. William Canynges is the best known, and almost certainly the wealthiest, Bristol merchant of the later middle ages. John Shipward and Robert Baron feature regularly in the accounts, shipping goods in and out of the port. John Gaywood appears less often but was still a noteworthy figure in Bristol, serving as bailiff of the city in 1460 and sheriff in 1467.⁸

The mystery of these entries was solved long ago by Eleanor Carus-Wilson, albeit they had misled some earlier historians.⁹ As she observed, but did not elaborate on, the entries reflect a repayment of a loan to the king by the four named merchants who were to recoup their debt via the customs collected at Bristol. As such, the true owners of the goods were the men listed as 'factors'. A striking instance of this is the voyage of the *Anthony* of Bristol to Iceland in April 1466. John Shipward and associates are named as the merchants, with John Forster as factor. Forster (Foster), however, was the owner or part owner of the *Anthony*, one of the larger ships in Bristol's marine, and regularly freighted her for a summer voyage to Iceland. Indeed

⁵ E. T. Jones, *Inside the Illicit Economy: Reconstructing the Smugglers' Trade of Sixteenth Century Bristol* (Ashgate, 2012), pp. 89-92.

⁶ TNA, E122/19/4, fo. 5v.

⁷ See for example the *James* of Guipúzcoa, entering 23 March 1466. The alien merchants in this ledger were Spanish and Portuguese. There are no French or Breton ships or merchants.

⁸ James Sherborne, *William Canynges 1402-1474* (Bristol, 1985); Clive Burgess, 'William Canynges (1402-1474)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004); Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed), *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar* (Camden Society, 1872), pp. 42. 44; Josiah C. Wedgwood, *History of Parliament 1439-1509: Biographies* (London, 1936), p. 765.

⁹ E. M. Carus-Wilson, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the later Middle Ages* (Bristol Record Society Publications, Vol. 7, 1937), p. 296; E. M. Carus-Wilson, 'The overseas trade of Bristol in the fifteenth century', in E. Power and M. M. Postan, *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (London 1933), pp. 236-7.

in February 1466, in conjunction with the Bristol merchant John Swancote, he obtained the king's licence for just such a voyage, showing at the same time letters of safe-conduct from the King of Denmark, Iceland's overlord. The Danish safe-conduct was for a four year period; the English licence was for a year only, but would be renewed each year to 1470, with the exception of 1468.¹⁰ It is thus possible to conclude that, in 1466, the *Anthony* was freighted, not with the goods of John Shipward and his associates, but the goods of John Foster.

The terms of the debt repayment are specified in letters patent of 20 December 1465. These state that Canynges, Shipward, Gaywood and Baron were granted the privilege of shipping goods free of tonnage and poundage to a total value of £322 10s 8d of duty. 'Tonnage' was a specific duty that was only applied to wine, amounting to 3s. per tun, while 'poundage' was an *ad valorem* duty equivalent to one shilling in the pound. Poundage was applied to any merchandise that did not pay specific duties. The main exceptions to the levy of poundage were wine, wool, woolfells and 'cloth of assize', a type of English woollen cloth that was subject to the ancient custom of 14d. per cloth.¹¹ So, while the four merchants could claim remission of duties on a wide range of goods shipped through Bristol, they were not able to claim remission on all types of merchandise. On the other hand, the letters patent allowed for the use of deputies and factors, provided they were denizen.¹² This clause provides the key to understanding the account. Since the four men were prominent merchants, they could have recouped their loan back gradually by claiming remission on the duties applied to their eligible shipments over a period of years. However, to ensure that their loan was paid back as quickly as possible, it seems that they came to an arrangement whereby eligible goods would be listed in their name, with the true owners being recorded as factors. This was not fraud: the Exchequer would have been well aware what was happening, particularly given that a copy of the letters patent had been enrolled among the memoranda of one of the Exchequer's chief accounting officers. The arrangement may, however, be described as an accounting fiction of which there are numerous other examples throughout the period in this and other ports, although few are quite so striking. Another fiction, discussed below, was offered at the time as an explanation of the grant itself.

The repayment of the loan explains a number of features of the account. The very first entry for the group of four merchants, on 16 December, has two references, both deleted, to a writ of the king; and, although the merchandise is valued in the normal way, the customer or his clerk originally entered 'nichil', that is, 'nothing' against subsidy paid. At some time before audit the nichil was deleted and the subsidy charge or 'onus' entered in the hand of the ledger. These entries of nichil and their amendments to 'onus' and an amount of subsidy conventionally calculated at 12d in a pound sterling continue throughout the account for all entries for these four merchants and their factors. As already noticed, the use of alien factors, and certain types of goods, were excluded from the grant. So, both alien trade, and exports of cloth of assize, were dutiable at normal rates without remission and are thus recorded in the particulars in the normal way. Lastly, asterisks appear against all mentions of *pelles ovium non lanute* (sheep skins without wool) and lambskins. It seems likely these were added by a clerk in the exchequer, while checking that woolfells subject to specific duties were not being claimed for.

The reason for this grant of privilege lies in the cash-straitened circumstances of Edward IV's first reign. The period was characterised both by high levels of genuine borrowing and by 'fictitious loans'. The latter are identifiable in records of the Exchequer of Receipt by the use of the term *mutuum per talliam* (loan by tally). This indicates that the

¹⁰ Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, pp. 136-7. The omission of 1468 is probably due the deterioration in relations between the two nations following the murder by Englishmen of Iceland's governor.

¹¹ Aliens paid higher rates.

¹² TNA, C76/149, m. 8; enrolled also E159/243, Recorda, Hil. 6 Edw IV, rot. 2 and E159/243, Brevia Directa Trin. 6 Edw. IV, rot. 12d. Images at <http://aalt.law.uh.edu/> IMG 601, 805, 806 under reference.

Exchequer had cancelled a third-party payment drawn, or ‘assigned’ on local sources, since the money had not been forthcoming. The most common reason for this was that the available income from the local source (e.g. customs collected in a port) was insufficient to cover all the assignments allocated to it. The Exchequer resolved this problem by an accounting fiction, entering as of record that the named beneficiary of the original assignment had loaned the same sum *to* the Crown – albeit he would usually have had little choice but to accept the further deferral of payment. Both genuine and ‘fictitious’ loans were often to be paid back through the assignment of future revenues from Crown customs or tax receipts.¹³ In the particular context of Michaelmas term 1465-6 (October 1465 to March 1466) Anthony Steele estimated that genuine loans totalled over £24,000 for the term, and fictitious loans over £2,000. Fictitious loans were resorted to both to deal with short-term cash flow problems and to address more fundamental failures of income. We can see this in action in the arrangements made this term to repay the very substantial genuine loans made by the Treasurer, Lord Rivers, to the Crown. Failed assignments of over £1,000, mostly charged on the customs of London and Southampton, and then recorded as ‘loans by tally’, were still being substituted as late as 1472, when Rivers was paid in cash in partial repayment of the Crown’s debt.¹⁴ The Bristol customs were not exempt from this process. Entries on the Receipt Roll 1465/6 represent the proceeds of more than one local accounting period. But at least two assignments, totalling £53 6s 8d, chargeable on the revenues collected by Gibbes and Strangways, failed, including £20 payable to the king’s sister. In addition, a further £100 of assignments that resulted in ‘fictitious loans’ were originally chargeable against unnamed Bristol customers. While Thomas Gibbes seems to have successfully collected his ‘reward’ (i.e. a discretionary payment or bonus paid in addition to his salary) of £46 13s 4d for the period he served as customer with John Senecele (Michaelmas 1464 to November 1465), his fellow customer for that account did not. A tally assigned on the Bristol customs, payable to Senecele for the same amount, resulted in yet another entry of ‘mutuum per talliam’. This fictional and involuntary loan was scheduled for repayment in 1467.¹⁵ Thomas Gibbes did not escape scot free. His name appears on 8 March 1466 as a genuine lender to the Crown in the sum of 100 marks (£66 13s 4d).¹⁶ So, while he received his fee on time, it seems he was later induced to assist the king.

Within this broader picture, the letters patent for the Bristol merchants is itself a literary construct. Its origin lay in an acknowledged debt of £322 10s 8d to Bartolomeo Schiati of Lucca for the purchase by Robert Cousin, keeper of the king’s Great Wardrobe, of silks and other stuffs for the king’s use.¹⁷ The patent stated that Schiati was indebted in the same sum to Canynges, Shipward, Gaywood and Baron, and that at the request of Schiati and Cousin the Bristol merchants should be granted the customs privileges (already recited) in order to discharge this debt. Given that Italian merchants had little dealing in Bristol’s trade, it seems likely that Schiati was only indebted to the Bristol men in the sense that they had taken on the Crown’s debt. The king owed money to an Italian merchant and the four Bristol merchants had been asked or been forced to pay the debt. For the Bristol merchants, repayment of their loan by means of customs exemptions on goods shipped through their local port rather than an assignment on other forms of revenue had certain advantages. It was more likely to secure repayment, and to do so in a shorter timescale. Rather than the uncertainty of collecting money *from* the Crown’s officers, they would be able to retain money that they would otherwise owe

¹³ A. Steele, *The Receipt of the Exchequer 1377-1485* (Cambridge, 1954), pp. xiii-xv, 285-96, 325-69.

¹⁴ Steele, *Receipt of the Exchequer*, pp. 290-3; TNA: PRO, E401/888, 889, especially 10 March 1466.

¹⁵ This too may have remained unpaid since in 1473 it was still being pursued as a debt by the administrator of Senecele’s will: TNA, E159/250, Brevia Directa, Eas 13 Edw IV rot 2d.

¹⁶ TNA, E401/888, 889.

¹⁷ Cousin was appointed keeper 4 April 1465. This, despite the loss of the Great Wardrobe records for the reign, suggests a relatively recent transaction: *Cal. Patent Rolls 1461-1467*, p. 436.

to the Crown, until the loan was repaid. Repayment of loans through customs remissions, or via receipts from customs, was not uncommon. Similar arrangements were made throughout the reign for repayment of loans made to the Crown by Italian merchants such as Gerald Canigiani. Closer to home, a similar agreement was used to pay for the hire of five Bristol ships and their mariners' wages for vessels impressed for the French war of 1475.¹⁸

Canynges and his fellow merchants were obliged by the terms of their patent to furnish the port's customers with a written indenture for customs retained in hand on each occasion that such retention arose. However, the one extant indenture, which arises from the following accounting period, suggests that they may have supplied a single receipt to cover the whole sum retained within the period of account.¹⁹ By the end of this period of account (14 May 1466) the four men had, according to the customers' account signed off by the Exchequer's auditors, retained in hand £77 14s on subsidy due on 518 tuns of wine imported by themselves or their factors, and £104 13s 9 ¼ d by way of poundage on goods valued at £2093 13s 1d. This meant the Bristol customers paid nothing into the Exchequer at the end of their account, albeit they had sufficient cash in hand from petty customs and from subsidy not subject to retention that they were able to pay their own fees and the fees and rewards of three royal justices whose salaries were assigned on the revenues of the port.²⁰ The next Bristol account runs from 14 May to 29 September 1466. Neither the ledger nor the controlment survives, but the final account after audit shows that Canynges, Shipward, Gaywood and Baron retained in hand a further £7 1s 9d due on the import of wine, and £133 15s 11d from merchandise subject to poundage and valued at £2675 17s 9d. Once these exemptions had been totalled and allowed, the Crown's debt to the four merchants was fully discharged.²¹ The full debt was thus paid back within nine months of the issuing of the letters patent.

The ledger preserves the details of Bristol's trade for the period which it covers – that is, of ships entering and leaving the port, and of goods shipped. On the other hand, the assignment of the revenues may have encouraged the clerk in the customs house to amalgamate the entries of a number of different merchant 'factors' in the record. For instance, when the *Mary Redcliffe* left for Bordeaux in October 1465, she was carrying cloth belonging to thirty-four merchants, including John Canynges, son of William Canynges. Such a diverse range of merchants was not unusual for a great ship. Yet, on the ship's return on 12 February 1466, all the goods on board were listed under the names of just two factors: John Canynges and William de la Fount, with William Canynges himself 'et socii' recorded as carrying 118 tuns less a hogshead of wine, John being the factor.²² In reality it seems likely that his consignment included much wine that belonged to other merchants.

The tendency to amalgamate entries this year is also apparent in the entries from Ireland. In most years, a typical entry for a ship coming to or from Ireland would record a number of merchants importing or exporting small consignments. This year, by contrast, most

¹⁸ TNA, E159/253, Recorda Eas 16 Edw IV, rot. 15; Images at <http://aalt.law.uh.edu/> IMG 181, 182 under reference; noticed Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, p. 146.

¹⁹ Below, n. 18. The indenture survives only as an enrolled copy.

²⁰ TNA, E356/21, rot. 32d; E 372/313 Adhuc Res London; E368/239, States and Views, Mich 6 Edw. IV, rots. 8r, d. The Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's record of the audit values the goods at £3093 13s 1d; but in this instance the enrolled account, rather than the memoranda roll, has the correct figure.

²¹ TNA, E356/21, rot. 33r; E368/239, States and Views Hil 6 Edw IV, rot. 2r, and contd. Images at <http://aalt.law.uh.edu/> IMG 650, 657 under reference. The entry includes the text of a single indenture drawn up between the four merchants and Thomas Gibbes and Thomas Herbert as customers 3 October 1466, acknowledging that the merchants had retained in hand £140 10s 2 ¾ d by way of tonnage and poundage since 14 May 1466 in full satisfaction of the larger sum. The sharp drop in wine imports should be read merely as a seasonal variation – the account began and ended outside the main wine season.

²² TNA, E122/19/3, fos. 5v-6r; E122/19/4 fo. 10v.

Irish shipments record only a few ‘factors’ importing consignments that are far larger than normal.

If the accounts are to be used as a source for analysing trade patterns this year, the main point to be borne in mind is that, while the record of the ships, masters and goods are probably as accurate as in a normal year, the information relating to the merchants is misleading.²³ While some of the goods listed under the names of William Canynges, John Shipward, John Gaywood and Robert Baron would certainly have belonged to them, they would not have been the true owners of most of these wares. And while the listed ‘factors’ were almost certainly the true owners of at least part of the consignments recorded under their names, in many cases they would have been only one of the owners.

Note: The data from this account was used by the authors of *The World of the Newport Medieval Ship*, who refer to what was, at the time, an unpublished draft dataset.²⁴

Editorial Practice

The transcription into Microsoft Excel follows the pattern set by Evan Jones for his ESRC funded project on Ireland-Bristol trade in the sixteenth century.²⁵ These conventions are summarised in the introduction to the account for 1461. In particular, surnames and ships’ names follow the manuscript; quantities of any particular commodity have, as far as practicable, been standardised to a single unit, calculated if necessary to two decimal places. Wine and cloth of assize have been notionally valued at £4 and £2 respectively, unless specifically valued in the manuscript. All entries in italics, including extensions of abbreviations, have been supplied by the editors.

The presence of editorial comments is marked by a red triangle in the upper corner of any cell, and appears on mouse hover. Comments on discrepancies in value/quantity have been attached to the ‘commodity’ where they are more clearly visible.

²³ There are a number of accounting and clerical errors, including mismatches between quantities of goods shipped and subsidies due. These, however, involve fairly trivial sums and do not seriously affect the overall patterns of trade.

²⁴ Evan T. Jones and Richard Stone, eds., *The World of the Newport Medieval Ship: Trade, Politics and Shipping in the Mid-Fifteenth Century* (Cardiff, 2018), pp. 135-160.

²⁵ Databases at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Ireland/datasets.htm> (accessed 29 January 2014); these were reformatted and published with indexes and abbreviated glossaries as Susan Flavin and Evan Jones, *Bristol's Trade with Ireland and the Continent 1503-1601* (Bristol Record Society, vol. 61, 2009). Editorial conventions are repeated at pp. xxii-xxv.