

Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), ‘Bristol circa 1470: Particulars of Account of unknown customers, small fragment: Introduction’, (University of Bristol, Research Data Repository, 2019)¹

Text and comment

This small fragment is one of a number of previously unknown particulars of account for Bristol customs discovered in the course of work on the Cabot project. Its shape is approximately triangular, and it comprises about 20 per cent of a page of a customers’ ledger.² It seems not to be a part of any other extant Bristol particulars of account, and in purely statistical terms, it has little value. However, wider lessons can be drawn from it concerning the reconstruction of missing information. For this reason, the document is discussed first in Bristol context. It is then analysed in the abstract, to suggest how information can be reconstructed, and the limits on reconstruction, in the hope that this is useful to students of the records of this and other ports. For this reason, the introduction is accompanied by photographs of the recto and verso of the document. These were taken under plain light. Ultraviolet light was used as a research tool to enhance the legibility of individual words in order to compile the spreadsheet.

A Bristol ledger

Familiarity with the format of late medieval Bristol customs accounts meant that this fragment, despite its small sample size and severe damage, could be recognised as a Bristol customs account. Because it records duties paid, it can be identified as ledger emanating from Bristol’s customers. The controller did not enter this information, although, like the customers, he did record the value of goods paying poundage. Cloth exports, and Irish agricultural imports, are both typical of Bristol’s late fifteenth century trade. The cloth in this account is evidenced by the payment of customs rather than subsidy, even though the commodity description is lost; and the Irish trade is directly but imperfectly preserved in the entries of lading. The fragment includes some alien trade, probably Breton. Only four names are preserved in their entirety. Two, Walter Stevens and the shipmaster John Livered, do not appear in any other extant account. The crucial name is that of the Anglo-Irish merchant Walter Lyncoll. He appears regularly in Bristol accounts from 1461 to 1483, and his death in October 1484 provides the terminus *ad quem* for the document.³ Graunt is a common merchant surname, but a Peter Graunt is noticed only in 1473 and 1487.⁴

On this very limited evidence, it is impossible to date the fragment precisely. However, an approximate five-year date range can be suggested, based on handwriting. The fragment has a particularly square and regular hand, and employs a distinctively looped and calligraphic capital ‘W’. Empirically, the hand could lie anywhere between about 1460 and the end of the century. What matters here, however, is the local practice of Bristol’s customs house. Both

¹ The National Archives, UK [TNA], E122/176/23 (part). In 2015 new folders were made within the bundle by Margaret Condon, working in conjunction with the TNA’s conservation department, to facilitate use of the documents within the larger bundle and help protect them. The fragment has been placed in folder 15 within the bundle. This transcription is an output of the ‘Cabot Project’ (University of Bristol, 2009-2016), funded by Gretchen Bauta, a private Canadian benefactor. This transcription is an output of the ‘Cabot Project’ (University of Bristol, 2009-2016), funded by Gretchen Bauta, a private Canadian benefactor. We are indebted to Professor Wendy Childs for her generous assistance with Iberian personal names.

² It measures approximately 213 x 97 mm.

³ TNA, PROB11/7, fos. 66r-v (will); see also C4/9/10. Particulars of the 1460s use the colloquial ‘Watkyn’, but he is Walter in his will, which is in English. His widow, Isabel, was trading in 1486-7.

⁴ TNA, E122/19/10, fo. 18r; E122/20/7, m. 19d.

calligraphic features are found in ledgers of 1469 and 1470. The other distinctive letter, the 'P' of these accounts and the fragment, is of similar shape, but in 1469 and 1470 has a central dot; the double-line 'P' is present in 1472. The accountants of 1469 are Richard Walwyn and Daniel Sheldon; in 1470 they are Walwyn and Richard Drewes; and in November 1472 Walwyn had only just been replaced. A 'W' similar to that of the fragment appears in the heading of Walwyn and Nicholas Warynges' account of 1471, but the general forms of that account are otherwise looser. Whilst an argument based on handwriting does not constitute proof, in default of other evidence the accounts either side of 1470 provide the nearest match within extant Bristol ledgers of the quarter-century 1461-85. Within the period from Michaelmas 1467 to December 1472 the possible dates could be narrowed further, taking into account extant documents, and the fact that the fragment shows a total of 12s 7³/₄d customs additionally paid by aliens on goods subject to poundage. This eliminates eight accounts, but still leaves no reasonable prospect of dating the fragment.⁵

The fragment as an essay in reconstruction

Local practice in the way the customers' particulars were recorded could vary hugely, even down to the employment of a ledger or a roll format. Two things were, however, common across all ports. Merchant names were entered on the left, and the amounts of customs, tonnage, and poundage due were written on the right of the folio or membrane. In consequence if, as is the case with this fragment, an outside corner of a ledger page survives undamaged, then recto and verso can be established.

MERCHANT STATUS: even where all merchant details are lost, the basic differential between denizen and alien can be inferred with confidence from duties paid, other than for wine. For other goods, aliens paid subsidy in addition to customs on cloth, or customs in addition to subsidy on goods subject to poundage. This information has been used to establish merchant status for the recto of the fragment, since the left hand of this page is lost. However, between 1467 and 1489 it is not possible, in most years, to distinguish Castilian merchants paying at denizen rates, and native denizen, unless merchant information survives.

CLOTH: Broadcloth, or 'cloth of assize' paid customs at a standard rate of 14d per cloth for denizens, and 2s 9d for aliens. Half-length 'dozens', and half-width 'straits', paid pro-rata; kerseys were generally calculated at three to the whole cloth. The 'cloth of assize' was the accounting unit used by the Exchequer, and frequently by the customers themselves, whatever the actual length or width of the cloth. This means both that 'cloth of assize' can be assumed as the commodity, and the quantity being exported can be calculated, from the total of customs paid, even if all other information is missing. This formula has been used for the first entries on the fragment.

VALUE: Value can generally be established from customs and subsidies, even where all other information is missing. As in other accounts, cloth of assize has been assigned a notional value of £2 per cloth. All other goods (apart from the Staple goods of wool and hides, which were seldom exported Bristol in the fifteenth century) paid subsidy: either the tonnage of 3s per tun of wine paid uniformly by both denizen and alien, or an *ad valorem* duty of 12d in the pound sterling, with aliens paying an additional 3d in the pound customs on most goods. In most instances the conversion is straightforward. For example, subsidy paid of 16s 8d converts into

⁵ The possibilities are April 1468 to August 1469, November 1469 to August 1470, Michaelmas 1471 to Easter 1472, and September to October 1472. There are no enrolled accounts for the period Michaelmas 1471 to November 1472. However a controlment survives for April to September 1472.

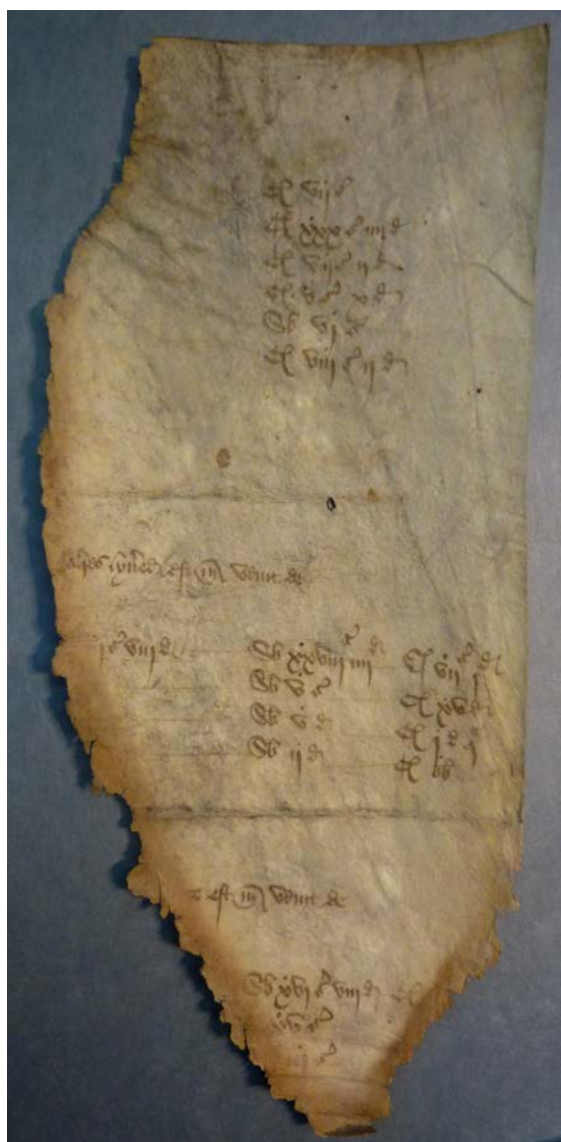
a commodity value of £16 13s 4d [entry 11]; 5d subsidy is 8s 4d [entry 9]. But caution needs to be used. If a ship is incoming or the direction of travel unknown, and the subsidy paid is divisible by three shillings without indication of merchant status, then the commodity could be wine. For example, [entry 12], which is an incoming ship, shows subsidy paid of 15s – but this could either be on goods valued at £15 shipped by a denizen, or for 5 tuns of wine imported by either a denizen or an alien. For this reason, the value has been entered as zeros, indicating unknown. For the same reason, subsidy of 9d and 18d should also give pause for thought, since respectively they can indicate 15s of value or a hogshead of wine, and 30s or a pipe of wine, although neither is an example present in the fragment.

On the verso of the fragment, 10s can be given as the value of the three mantles shipped by Walter Stevens, since the quantity is known and Irish mantles were consistently valued at 3s 4d the piece. Only ‘ma’ is legible in the document, but this is sufficient, in context, to establish the commodity, and the quantity is clear. Other entries on the verso are too imperfect to fully describe the commodity or extrapolate a value. On the recto, it is possible to suggest the 6s subsidy paid by a merchant on the ship carrying cloth might be for six pieces Welsh cloth, valued at £6, and that the alien paying 5d subsidy (value 8s 4d) might have been importing one ton of salt [entries 5 and 9]. But without details of quantity and unit this suggestion remains no more than a guess.

If the fragment had been a controlment, and similarly damaged, it would have been possible establish only that a ship was carrying cloth of assize, quantity unknown, and the value of the mantles. Other values, and merchant status, would have remained obscure.

Photographs of the document

Recto (front)



Verso (back)

