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MEDIEVAL PLYMOUTH

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PLYMOUTH in the mid-twentieth century is no mean city. Plymothians are proud of it and proud, too, of its past since Tudor days.

Concerning earlier centuries, however, they are vague or almost silent. The situation challenges us: can we explain their silence, justify their silence, or fill the gap in some measure? A little can be done in all three directions.

Historians are concerned with evidence – usually documentary, but buildings, coins, dresses and jewellery also are useful. The colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, the walls of Chester and Southampton, the cathedrals in a score of towns and the castles in another score are material evidence of medieval life. Plymouth has no such evidence.

Nor is documentary evidence plentiful. We are concerned, of course, with evidence that was created, has survived, and can be interpreted. Now – apart from chronicles – evidence tends to be largely legal, financial or administrative, and the evidence-producing bodies are well known. The records of the courts, though primarily concerned with crime, throw a flood of light on the condition of life in medieval towns. The records of the monasteries deal with the extent of their possessions, their rent-rolls, their tenants' rights and grievances, their law-suits, and afford testimony for the social and economic life of their neighbourhoods. The bishops' registries reveal records of the administration of the dioceses, while the fabric rolls of some colleges or cathedrals reveal the costs of material and labour. Another useful source is the ministers' accounts (bailiffs, foresters', escheators') and, at the close of the Middle Ages, there are port books showing the arrival and departure of vessels. None of these sources of evidence affords much material for a history of medieval Plymouth, for we had neither the county court, nor bishop, nor monastery, nor indeed any document-producing body.

Nor were there local industries such as the production of salt in Cheshire, the mining and smelting of tin in Cornwall, the cultivation of flax and the manufacture of sailcloth in Dorset, all of which led to a mass of documents.

It is therefore not surprising that evidence concerning medieval Plymouth is slight. The absence of evidence, however, is not proof of an uneventful life. When the historian says "There is no evidence of [say] discontent in Plymouth in the fourteenth century" he is suspending judgment. Discontent there may have been, but no document alluding to the circumstance was created or, if it was created, it is not known to have survived.

Two conclusions impose themselves: little is known of medieval Plymouth and little is likely to be known. A third may be added: in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries Plymouth was a relatively unimportant place.

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Nor indeed should we expect it to be important. Our typical medieval town stood at a ford or a bridge where several roads converged or at the intersection of important routes. London, Wallingford, Reading, Oxford, Gloucester, Worcester, Chester, York are examples. In respect of land travel Plymouth stood on no great highway: it was a terminus.

Nor could its haven yet ensure commercial importance for the community housed on the shore of Sutton Pool. The hinterland of Plymouth demanded very little in imports and produced very little for exports. It is true that Devon had sheep and probably a surplus of wool, but the export of wool (by far our most valuable commodity) was governed by two factors: the great market was Flanders, and those ports which afforded the shortest sea transport gained most of the trade; secondly, the English Government, for its own fiscal purposes, restricted exports to ports near the Continent, and ultimately had all wool sent through Calais. Plymouth, therefore, had a twofold disadvantage. It was a poor market for imports and it was too remote from Flanders and the Hanse towns to be used extensively for exports.

Possessed, then, of no natural advantage except a haven, what kind of activity could differentiate it from a village in which agriculture is the dominant factor? The answer, I suggest, is threefold: fishing, trading, Government business in peace and war. For these there is evidence which has not been fully utilised.

That there was fishing is a legitimate inference. The rivers, still unpolluted, yielded their harvest and the monks of Tavistock, for example, valued the rights they possessed of catching salmon in the Tamar near Calstock. But herrings were plentiful in the Channel in medieval times, and orders to the Sheriff of Cornwall to buy large quantities of dried herring for transport to the English army in Gascony point to local practice.

Concerning trade, the evidence is diverse if not abundant. In the normal course of administration in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries instructions are sent from London to the bodies in charge of the ports of England concerning action to be taken – to prevent, say, the export of money or the export of horses, to arrest men coming from this or that region, to permit the export of corn for Calais and Bordeaux, to permit this or that distinguished person to leave this country with so many men and so many horses. In the early part of the period Plymouth is seldom mentioned in the lists of ports to which notices are sent. In the later part it is always in the list. It has gained full status. (Dartmouth, Exmouth and Fowey also gained in importance.)

What kind of activity marked the port? First, at times – and perhaps frequently – there was shipbuilding. Indeed, there is an instance in 1358 of a strike of shipwrights on a question of wages. A ship was being built here for the Prince of Wales by William le Venour. When the men ceased work the Sheriff of Cornwall was directed to get workmen and carpenters in Cornwall wherever he thought fit and in sufficient numbers, have them brought to Plymouth and ensure that they stayed on the work till it was completed, provided that William le Venour paid them "reasonable" wages for their work.

The nature of the peacetime cargoes which were carried without incident usually escapes mention, as one would expect. It is the captures, the wrecks, the storm-bound which are recorded, but wine was imported at almost every

port in England and wool, though mainly sent to Flanders, became a commodity of interest to Italian and Spanish merchants. In one instance imports and exports are linked. In 1364 a licence was granted for the commonalty of Plymouth to take out two thousand cloths of colour and two thousand packs of cloth from the counties of Devon and Cornwall to Gascony and Spain and other places beyond the sea and, with the money accruing from the sales, buy wines and merchandise for Plymouth.

In addition to the traders, sometimes other travellers used the port. In 1361, for example, when a convoy was being assembled for Gascony, instructions were given for a ship to be made available for a party of pilgrims on their way to Santiago. They were twenty-four in number (men and women) and had twenty-four horses.

Storms and piracy rendered medieval seafaring hazardous for the sailors and produced awkward problems for ship-owners, for port authorities, and even for governments. If stress of weather caused the captain of a foreign vessel to seek shelter at an English port, weeks might elapse before he was allowed to depart, and Plymouth's distance from London must have increased the delay. Further, the people of Plymouth might take advantage of the captain's predicament. In 1349 two Spanish ships gained refuge in the port. The authorities promptly removed what is recorded as the "beam and other instruments" – perhaps a rudimentary compass and part of the steering gear – so that the ships could not proceed to sea till orders were received from London that the parts should be restored.

In 1348 two of the King's envoys to Spain hired a Spanish ship to bring them to Plymouth. A complaint reached the King that on arrival "a great number of evildoers" boarded the ship and carried away goods.

In 1413 three Spanish ships laden with wine from La Rochelle came into the port. For some reasons the cargoes were "arrested". The information was sent to London and instructions were received to hold the ships and cargoes pending enquiry.

In 1433 a carrack of Genoa sailing down Channel put into Plymouth for shelter from a storm. Here "certain evildoers" plundered the vessel and got away with their spoil.

As for piracy, the seas bordering Western Europe were freely used by sailors of several nations (English among them, of course) and lawful trading was precarious. The English Government sought at times to suppress it: it raised a tax of two shillings on each sack of wool and one shilling on each tun of wine in order to equip a fleet to maintain a safe passage for merchantmen; it ordered that vessels proceeding to Bordeaux should sail in convoy, those from eastern ports assembling off the Isle of Wight, those from the west off Plymouth.

But many vessels could not be organised in this way, and there was little distinction between attacking a French ship in time of war, in the frequent periods of truce, and in time of peace. I have no doubt Plymothians took advantage of their opportunities for, in common with other residents in south coast ports, they had suffered at the hands of the French. In 1339 French sailors attacked the ports of Harwich, Dover and Folkestone and swept down on the coasts of Devon and Cornwall. At Whitsuntide they attacked Plymouth itself, burning boats and a large part of the town. In 1340 French privateers harried the south coast, burnt Teignmouth and came to Plymouth,

but the town was defended and little harm was done. Such attacks and the revelation of a scheme for a French invasion of England in the 1340s led to precautions all along the south coast in the 1350s. Beacons were prepared for lighting should invasion occur, and men living in the coastal areas were exempt from military service abroad in order that they might be able to resist attack on their shores.

Such circumstances and, of course, the opportunity of freebooting, probably maintained a mood in which French ships were regarded as "fair game". There are many instances in the fourteenth century and they extend into the fifteenth. (Seven incidents were quoted.)

These very miscellaneous instances point to shipbuilding, to trading, to pilgrims, to piracy and near piracy, but the clearest evidence of the port's resources lies in the large numbers of ships Plymouth could supply for Government purposes. The English kings had inherited very extensive lands in Gascony. Now, the administration of this territory, the garrisoning of its fortresses, the forwarding of supplies and, in time of war, the transport of troops and victuals, required a good deal of shipping. Portsmouth and Southampton were used as ports of departure but, from the middle of the fourteenth century, more westerly ports were used and Plymouth's importance became outstanding. For an expedition which left Falmouth in 1345 she provided no less than fifteen ships.

But Plymouth was itself the port of embarkation for a series of expeditions, reinforcements and general business in administration. It was from Plymouth that the Black Prince sailed with a large fleet in 1355, from Plymouth that reinforcements were sent to the Prince in 1356, to Plymouth that the troops and prince returned with the captive King of France in 1357. Business continued on a smaller scale, but in 1361 at least eleven ships left Plymouth for Bordeaux, and in 1362 and 1363 quite large convoys were assembled to take the Prince and Princess and household and supplies to La Rochelle when the Prince went out to govern Aquitaine.

In the next century, when Henry V was at war with France, Plymouth figured occasionally in the shipping needed for military operations in the north of France. In 1421 authority was given to take ships from Southampton, Dartmouth and Plymouth for the transport of troops serving under Edward Courtenay, and a little later for two ships from Dartmouth and Plymouth for soldiers serving under Courtenay's father, the Earl of Devon. When peace came and there was to be a great sale of ships belonging to the royal navy and its auxiliary services, notices were sent to five ports – five only – inviting purchasers to attend. Those ports were London, King's Lynn, Yarmouth, Bristol and Plymouth.

I turn to a fuller consideration of the part Plymouth played in two of the fourteenth-century expeditions. For Lancaster's expedition of 1345 Polruan furnished three ships, Fowey seven, Dartmouth nine, and Plymouth fifteen. Of these fifteen, five were called *Saint Mary Cog*, two were called *Gracedieu*, two *Godebeget*, and the others *John*, *James*, *Thomas*, *Saint Sauveur*, *Rodecog*, *Trinity*. The total number of their crews exceeded three hundred, and among the names of the masters are John Bower, William Blerals, John Hamlyn, Henry Chopin, Richard Bale, Richard Steed, Simon Garston, William Cornish.

TRANSACTIONS OF THE PLYMOUTH INSTITUTION

For the Black Prince's expedition of 1355 administrative action to recruit the army and ensure a large body of shipping at Plymouth by early July was accompanied by local preparations to ensure a camp site for the men and headquarters at Plympton Priory for the Prince.

Archers from Cheshire, Flint and North Wales, clothed in green and white uniforms, were paid in advance and set out on their journey to Plymouth. Four earls, various knights and men-at-arms from almost all parts of England also converged on the port, and by the middle of July perhaps three thousand men and several hundred horses had arrived. Very gradually scores of ships manned in all by hundreds of sailors came into Sutton harbour and the Cattewater. For a couple of months the visitors must have outnumbered the inhabitants. Their various accents and varied motives for going to France (one hundred and twenty were murderers hoping to gain pardon by military service), their needs (food, drink, fuel, shelter), their use or misuse of their spare time in Plymouth, all these are subjects for the imagination. A very serious shortage of food occurred. Purveyors had to be sent to obtain supplies from Cornwall, from Somerset and from Dorset.

The horses were valued and marked. Thousands of hurdles were provided, perhaps to make enclosures and/or to separate the horses during the voyage, and fifteen wide gangways were made to connect shore and deck.

Meanwhile ships were arriving from Weymouth and Lymington, from Hamelhoke, from Shoreham, from Rye, Winchelsea, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich. Their names, the sizes of their crews, their tonnage, are known. The *Christopher* (captain: John Clark) was chosen for the Prince.

By 8th September hurdles, horses, arms and armour, forage and food were on board. The Prince and his knights and men followed, and the expedition sailed to Bordeaux.

Such episodes (and they continued, though on a smaller scale, for years) must have increased the prosperity of Plymouth. Anyone who could supply victuals, forage, horses, clothing, had a ready market; anyone who could shoe horses, repair harness or armour, or ships, would be well paid.

Our aim was modest. We agreed that the historian of medieval Plymouth lacks evidence of the kind that many cities possess of markets and tolls, of mills and the grinding of corn, of royal visits, of petty crimes, of the building and repair of city walls. We felt, however, that the activities of the port could be sketched, especially in the fourteenth century.

Plymouth was not a border fortress like Berwick; it had no monastery, no cathedral; it was not the centre of an organised trade, nor was it a great market centre; it was not planned as were Kingston-upon-Hull and Flint; it was not fortified till the need for fortification had passed.

It was a town by a haven, higgledy-piggledy in its criss-cross of streets, with cows, ploughs and agriculture on one side and a port on the other. Ships, shipbuilding, traders, transport, pilgrims, pirates – these were its chief features. And there was rivalry with Dartmouth and with Fowey. For a few months it would be teeming with activity as armies assembled and waited for the means of leaving. Then it relapsed into quietness. When Gascony was lost its decline must have seemed probable, but within a century, explorers, pioneers, slave-dealers were hastening to the New World. Plymouth now faced in the right direction. Her great days were to begin again.