

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**The Society of Merchant Venturers and the Port of Bristol
in the 17th Century**

by P. V. McGrath
1953, Vol. 72, 105-128

© The Society and the Author(s)

THE SOCIETY OF MERCHANT VENTURERS AND THE PORT OF BRISTOL IN THE 17TH CENTURY

by PATRICK MCGRATH

THE history of the port of Bristol in the 17th century stands in marked contrast with the melancholy record of the port during a great part of the 19th century. On the one hand, there was a spirit of enterprise and progress which enabled Bristol, particularly in the post-Restoration years, to ride high on the tide of national prosperity; on the other, there was a tragic mixture of ineptitude and lack of vision that made a backwater of what had once been a great port. It is true that the development of Bristol was conditioned in considerable measure by its situation and by the economic prosperity of the areas which it served, and that the problems of the 19th century were far greater than those of the 17th; but these facts alone do not explain the contrasting histories of the two periods. If in the 19th century the quiet waters of the new Floating Harbour became a symbol not of progress but of stagnation, much of the blame must be placed on the Bristol Docks Company which for so long misused its monopoly under the approving eye of a lethargic corporation; and if in the 17th century the story was very different, much of the credit must go to the Society of Merchant Venturers which was awake to the needs of a growing port and which gave an energetic lead to the municipal government.

The work of the Society of Merchant Venturers in developing the port of Bristol in the 17th century has not received the emphasis it deserves, partly because the records relating to the subject have not been studied systematically and as a whole, and partly because the admirable John Latimer, who had access to them, did not make use of all the available material and did not present a comprehensive picture of this part of

the Society's work. The purpose of this article, which is based primarily on an examination of all the Society's 17th-century records, is to show how important and how varied was the contribution made by the Merchant Venturers to the growth of the port. The extent and nature of that contribution changed from time to time and it was not until after the Society had obtained a formal lease of the wharfage duties in 1661 that it reached its full development, but the close relationship between the Merchant Venturers and the port was established much earlier, and it is necessary to begin by examining the way in which it came about.

The ultimate responsibility for maintaining and developing the port, conserving the river, licensing the pilots, and regulating the shipping rested in the hands of the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council, but that closed corporation of about forty members was not unwilling to delegate many of its duties. When it first began to do so is not certain. In 1601, it granted to twenty-four merchants the right to collect the port dues known as anchorage, cannage and plankage. The grant was for eighty years at a rent of £3 6s 8d a year, and the lessees undertook to provide sufficient planks for the discharge of merchandise and to be responsible for seeing that the slip at Hungrood was kept clean.¹ This lease, however, may well have been a renewal of an earlier one, for in 1577 'the proctors of St. Clements Chappell' held the same duties at the same rent,² and St. Clement's Chapel was the property of the Merchant Venturers and was used as their hall. Thus the merchants already had some financial interests in the port before the 17th century began. The duty of anchorage at this time was levied only on strangers' ships. Cannage (or keyage) and plankage were charged on all vessels, and were payments made for the use of the quay and for the planks required in loading

¹ Bristol Record Office: C.T.D. 00352 (3) and 00352 (5).

² Bristol Record Office: Mayor's Audits 04026 (10), pp. 206, 272. See also J. Latimer, *The History of the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol*, p. 63.

and unloading ships.¹ The income from these duties was not large in the early 17th century. In 1617-18, for example, it was only £25 4s 6d², and in 1619-20, £31 17s 7d.³ In return, the merchants had to maintain an adequate supply of planks and to make them available at the quays.⁴ They also paid a salary of £2 a year to the keeper of the slip at Hungrood.⁵

Another early link between the merchants and the port was found in the duties of tonnage and poundage which were levied at the rate of 1½d in the ton on goods and 1d in the pound on seamen's wages. The proceeds were used for the upkeep of the Society's almshouse for poor mariners, for the wages of a schoolmaster for poor mariners' children, and for the salary of a curate at Shirehampton who held services in the chapel there which seamen could attend without going too far from their ships anchored in Hungrood. The first definite mention of these duties seems to be in 1595,⁶ but they are then referred to as being an established custom in the port, and their origin is earlier. Indeed, it is probable that they date back to 1445 when a Gild of Mariners was established in Bristol and masters and sailors were required to make payments for the support of a priest and twelve poor mariners.⁷ These duties helped to link the merchants with the port, but their financial value was small. In 1617-18, for instance, the income from tonnage was only £21 10s 6d and from poundage, £3 18s 9d⁸;

¹ The rates are included in a list of duties issued in June 1620 which is to be found in the Merchant Venturers' *Book of Trade* and which was printed as Appendix II to *The Deposition Books of Bristol*, vol. I, edit. H. E. Nott (Bristol Record Society's Publications, vol. VI). See also J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 16, 17.

² *Book of Trade*, Edmund Browne's Account, 1617-18.

³ *Book of Trade*, Edmund Browne's Account, 1619-20.

⁴ See, for example, *Book of Trade*, General Account, 1610-11: 'more paide for CCC foote of ii ynches ½ planckes for the more better discharge and re-charge of shipping 001 16 00' and 'more paide for rent of a house to keepe the planckes in and for portradge of them in and out at tymes 001 14 04.'

⁵ See, for example, *Book of Trade*, General Account, 1610-11.

⁶ *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1595-97, pp. 105-6, 5 October 1595.

⁷ *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, edit. F. B. Bickley, Bristol, 1900, II, 186-92.

⁸ *Book of Trade*, Edmund Browne's Account, 1617-18.

and the figures for 1618-19 were £23 2s 4d and £5 1s 8d.¹

The existing connections between the merchant body and the port were greatly strengthened in the first decade of the 17th century when the corporation created a new duty of wharfage. This was first imposed in 1606 on the goods of non-freemen coming into the port of Bristol,² but in 1607 it was extended to include the goods of freemen as well.³ Wharfage money was to be used for the repair of the Back and the Quay which were alleged to be in great decay in spite of £1,500 recently spent on them.⁴ Now the Society of Merchant Venturers, which had been incorporated by royal grant in 1552, had recently been reorganised by the corporation,⁵ and Latimer suggests that the real purpose of the new duty was to put the Society on a sound financial basis.⁶ In view of what happened, this seems likely, but it is not at all certain that the corporation intended to make a gift of all the wharfage money to the Merchant Venturers. Nevertheless it is significant that William Fleet, the collector of wharfage appointed by the City on 8 July 1606, was also collector for the merchants, and in the patent appointing him, one of the purposes of the duty was stated to be the repayment of money lent by the Chamber to the Bristol Adventurers.⁷ Some wharfage money was certainly paid into the Chamber between 1606 and 1611,⁸ but after 1611 there were no further payments. When the earliest surviving accounts of the Merchant Venturers begin in 1610-11, the Society was collecting the money for its own use, and it is evident that by a quite informal arrangement the Merchant

¹ *Book of Trade*, Edmund Browne's Account, 1618-19.

² Bristol Record Office: *Common Council Proceedings*, 1598-1608 p. 116. John Whitson was appointed collector of the duties.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴ *Book of Trade*, p. 43. The word quay was spelt *key* in this period but the modern spelling has been used in this article.

⁵ On 31 December 1605.

⁶ J. Latimer, *Merchant Venturers*, p. 43 ff.

⁷ *Book of Trade*, p. 45.

⁸ £11 3s 2d in 1606; £50 in 1607; £50 in 1610; £40 in 1611. Bristol Record Office: *Mayor's Audits* 04026 (15), pp. 72, 136; 04026 (16), pp. 12, 76.

Venturers had acquired what was to be their main source of revenue for the rest of the century.

There was some uncertainty about the legality of the new imposition, and in 1607 Common Council instructed the Bristol M.P.s to get counsel's opinion and to apply for royal letters patent authorising the duty.¹ Latimer thought that the royal consent was probably obtained, but there is no evidence of this, although in 1625 the Privy Council implicitly recognised the legality of wharfage when it gave full support to the Society against a ship owner who refused to pay the increased rates.² Nevertheless in 1637 Commissioners came to Bristol to enquire into certain duties alleged to have been collected illegally since the beginning of James I's reign. The investigation was clearly concerned with the wharfage duties. The Society was required to produce its books before the Commissioners, but one of the wardens, Edmund Arundel, refused to do so and offered determined resistance. The Commissioners broke into the Merchants' Hall and seized some of the records,³ but in the end the enquiry on this point petered out, and the legality of wharfage does not seem to have been challenged again until the 18th century.

Before 1661 the Society's own position with regard to the duties was not entirely satisfactory, for the Merchant Venturers had no formal lease of them and retained the money only by tacit consent of the corporation. An attempt to obtain a definite grant in 1623-24 met with no success.⁴ The Society, however, continued to receive the revenue and on occasions took it upon itself to make temporary increases in the rates without apparently obtaining official sanction from the city.⁵ The fact that members of the Society usually held the key

¹ Bristol Record Office: *Common Council Proceedings*, 1598-1608, p. 135.

² *Book of Trade*, p. 169; *Acts of the Privy Council*, 1623-25, p. 485.

³ P.R.O., S.P./379, nos. 1 and 3.

⁴ Merchant Venturers' Records: *Book of Charters*, 1, 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*: *Book of Trade*, p. 80; *Book of Charters* 1,97; *Hall Book* 1,73.

positions in the city government and generally constituted a majority of Common Council no doubt helps to explain why such arrangements could be made without difficulty.

The duty of wharfage was levied at varying rates on all goods coming into the port. Receipts from it naturally varied with the volume of trade, and although they constituted the Society's main source of income they were not in fact very large before 1660. In 1611-12, for example, they amounted to only £69 11s 1d¹ and in 1619-20 to £107 7s 10d.² There are a number of gaps in the Treasurer's Accounts before 1660, and it is impossible to calculate the total receipts for the whole period, but from the Society's Wharfage Books, which begin in 1654, it appears that the average yearly income for the years 1654-60 was just over £200.

In the period before the Restoration, the Society undertook no major works in connection with the port, and the building of two docks by Robert Aldworth, one of its most prominent members, was a piece of private enterprise, not a corporate activity of the Merchant Venturers. A proposal by which the Society was to make itself responsible for constructing a new dry dock came to nothing.³ The times were not propitious for big developments financed by the Merchant Venturers, for the Society faced many difficulties under the early Stuarts and it was not a rich organisation. A great deal of money had to be spent in fighting London monopolies, in resisting interference by the central government, and in backing expeditions against pirates and Turkish corsairs. The disturbances of the Civil War and the Commonwealth did not make the position easier. Nevertheless, even in these years, the Society carried out a number of important duties in connection with the port. From time to time it organised surveys of the river;⁴ it set up

¹ *Book of Trade*: General Account, 1610-11.

² *Book of Trade*: Edmund Browne's Account, 1619-20.

³ Bristol Record Office: *Common Council Proceedings*, 1608-27, p. 140; J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 88.

⁴ See, for example, *Book of Charters* 1.43, 45, 51.

a number of mooring posts to assist shipping¹; it exercised a measure of control over the graving dock in the Marsh²; and it regularly paid a man to look after the slip at Hungroad.³ As will be seen, it was responsible for recommending suitable persons to be employed as pilots; and it made a number of regulations to ensure the safety of shipping in Kingroad and Hungroad. During the whole of the period it maintained an almshouse, paid a schoolmaster to teach sailors' children, and provided for a chaplain at Shirehampton. Such services were of considerable value to the port, and if they were not spectacular, it must be remembered that a good deal of money had to be spent in defending the commercial interests of Bristol, and that from the point of view of the trade of the port, this money was well spent. All the time, the Society's interest in the port was growing, schemes for expansion were already being considered in the years immediately before 1660,⁴ and the way was being prepared for the great developments after the Restoration.

In 1661 the Society at long last got from the corporation a formal lease of the duties which hitherto it had collected only by virtue of a private arrangement. In an agreement dated 28 September the Mayor and Commonalty granted a lease of the wharfage dues, and at the same time renewed the lease of anchorage, cannage and plankage, for a term of eighty years at an annual rent of £3 6s 8d. This rent had previously been paid merely for the anchorage, cannage and plankage duties, so that in fact the corporation gave the Society the right to collect wharfage without paying any additional rent. On the other hand, the lessees undertook to make a new quay from the Lower Slip to Aldworth's Dock and to make a road for coach and horses from Rownham Passage to the Hot Well. The

¹ Merchant Venturers' Records: *Treasurer's Book* 1,6, 7; *Hall Book* 1,252, 271.

² *Book of Trade*, p. 81.

³ See the accounts in the *Book of Trade* and the *Treasurer's Books*.

⁴ *Hall Book* 1,251 (1654).

corporation agreed to pay £100 towards the cost of this work.¹ Latimer states that the consent of Common Council to these concessions 'appears to have been coolly dispensed with,'² but this is a mistake, for the corporation had set up a committee to discuss the matter with the merchants on 18 May 1660³ and had in principle approved the proposed lease on 9 April 1661.⁴ The Society had in any case long been collecting wharfage, and it now formally assumed important responsibilities which Common Council was quite willing to delegate to a body which had the greatest interest in developing the port.

Before we examine the work undertaken by the Merchant Venturers after the Restoration, it is necessary to mention two other important agreements. On 2 April 1681 the Mayor and Commonalty leased to the trustees of the Merchant Venturers the Great Dock in the Marsh near the house of John Romsey, and also another smaller dock between the Great Dock and Gibb Taylor⁵; and on 25 July 1690, when plans were already well in hand for a further extension of the quay, a new agreement was drawn up by which the Society was given a lease of wharfage for eighty years in return for a payment of £200 and a yearly rent of £6 6s 8d. The indenture stated that the Society had already been at considerable expense in obtaining royal consent to the inclusion among the free quays of the city of a quay made near Aldworth's Dock and had furthermore undertaken to make another new quay 462 feet long from Aldworth's Dock to Hobb's Yard in the Marsh. Permission was also given to remove a market house and other buildings near Aldworth's Dock in order to widen the quay.⁶

¹ For this lease, see Bristol Record Office C.T.D. 00352 (6). There is another copy in the records of the Merchant Venturers.

² J. Latimer, *Merchant Venturers*, p. 165.

³ Bristol Record Office: *Common Council Proceedings*, 1659-75, fo. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.* 9 April 1661.

⁵ Bristol Record Office: *Bargain Books*, 1672-81, 04335 (6), fo. 135; Merchant Venturers' Records: *Book of Charters* II, 142. The dimensions of the docks are described and the Society was authorised to deepen the docks if necessary.

⁶ Bristol Record Office: C.T.D. 00352 (4). There is another copy in the Merchant Venturers' Records.

The amount of money available for improving the port depended to a considerable extent on the revenue received from wharfage and other port dues, and in the post-Restoration years the Society took steps to increase this source of income. On 11 April 1661, when plans were already being made to extend the quay, it doubled the wharfage rates,¹ and the increased duties remained in force until 25 December 1664.² In 1667, the Society decided, apparently on its own authority, to impose a new duty of wharfage on the outward-bound goods of those who were not members, and it also decreed that all barques coming from south of Barnstable and from north of Tenby should be liable for wharfage both outwards and inwards.³ Hitherto coastal shipping had been completely exempt from the duty. The new duty of *wharfage outwards* was not in fact enforced till 25 March 1668,⁴ after which date it was regularly paid by non-members on goods bound for overseas ports. The attempt to impose the duty on coastal shipping was not successful at this time. There were certain legal difficulties and some differences of opinion among the lawyers whose advice was asked.⁵ In 1700, however, Bristol obtained an act for the preservation of the rivers Avon and Frome, and in the same year the Justices of the Peace, exercising the powers given them by the act, ordered the payment of a number of duties which affected coastal shipping as well as ships bound for overseas ports.⁶

Another source of revenue which became of some importance in the latter part of the century was the duty of anchorage. Originally this seems to have been paid only by foreigners, but in March 1670 the Society, acting on the authority given it by Common Council, decided that the rate should be 5s on every native ship and 6s 8d on every foreign ship.⁷ On the

¹ *Hall Book*, I, 328.

² *Ibid.* 359.

³ *Ibid.* 403.

⁴ *Ibid.* 417.

⁵ *Hall Book*, II, 290-4, 296, 298, 300; *Hall Book*, III, 146.

⁶ See p. 127.

⁷ *Hall Book*, I, 456.

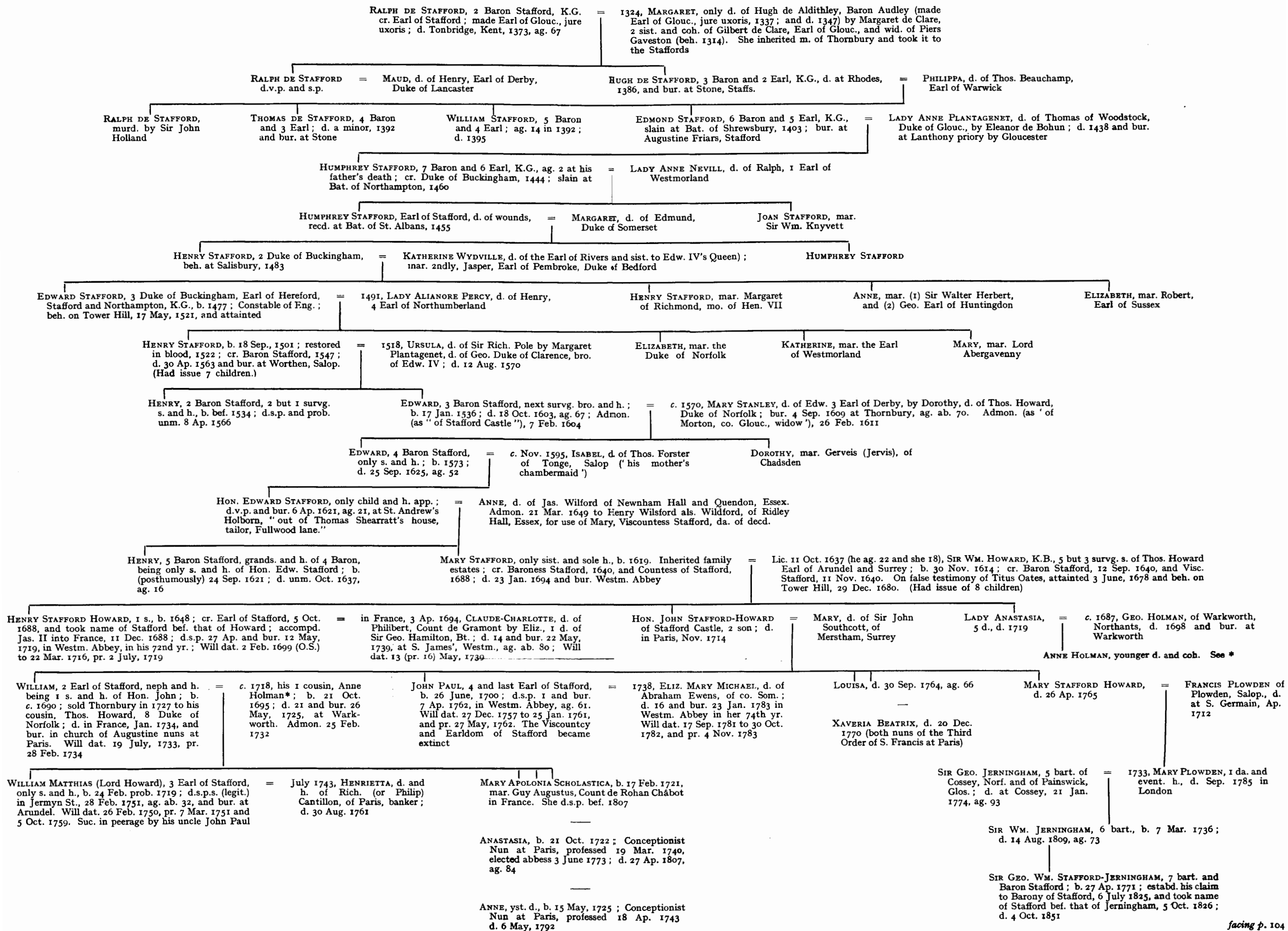
other hand, the duties of cannage and plankage are not found in the later accounts, and tonnage and poundage also disappear from the records.

The Wharfage Books kept by the Society's agents make it possible to calculate how much income was received from the wharfage duties. The books are missing for the last six years of the 17th century, but the accounts from September 1660 to September 1694 show that the duties brought in a total of £13,551 19s 2½d, an average income of just over £400 a year as compared with £200 a year for the period 1654-60. The anchorage receipts from 1679 to 1694 amounted to £856 15s 0d, an average of nearly £60 a year. Now these duties were the Society's main source of income and much money had to be spent on other purposes than the development of the port. Nevertheless, the Society now had available considerably greater resources than in the earlier period. Expansion of commerce rather than any really significant rise in the duties on shipping was in the main responsible for this happy state of affairs which made possible important extensions of the quays and big improvements in the facilities of the port.

The chief places for loading and unloading goods in Bristol were the Back and the Quay. With the growth of trade these were found to be inadequate, and as early as 1654 the Society had been considering an extension of them.¹ Nothing was done at the time, but, as has been seen, one of the conditions on which the lease of wharfage had been granted in 1661 was that the Society should build a new quay between the Lower Slip on the existing quay and Aldworth's Dock. In the years 1661-63 the Merchant Venturers spent at least £714 2s 4d on this work and on building a road from Rownham to the Hot Well.² Further expenses were incurred later, for the work was defective and the Society's records for the year 1677-78 state briefly 'This yeere the new key fell into the River, and was

¹ *Hall Book*, 1,261.

² *Treasurer's Book*, II, fo. 17. The total may have been more as it is not always clear from the accounts whether or not payments for labour and materials should be debited to the account for the quay.



ordered to be replaced at the charges of the Hall.¹ In July 1678 the Treasurer was instructed to borrow a sum not exceeding £200 to pay for the repairs, and in October it was decided that the new quay should have a slip.² In the records for the year 1679-80 there is a note 'This yeere the key was rebuilt.'³

The need for further development soon became clear and at the end of 1680 the Society set up a committee to treat with the Mayor about enlarging the quay.⁴ Intermittent discussions and negotiations were carried on in the following years, and eventually on 10 November 1687 another committee was instructed to treat with the corporation about building a new quay below the market house at Aldworth's Quay.⁵ In May 1688 a letter was sent to Edward Colston, Thomas Cole and other Bristolians in London asking them to apply to the Treasury for permission to enlarge the quay three hundred yards down the river from Aldworth's Quay in accordance with an agreement lately made between the Society and the corporation.⁶ The Society's petition to the Treasury early in 1690 stated that the existing Quay was too small and that there was all the more need to enlarge it since Hungrood, which had in part supplied the deficiency, had of late years become spoiled and almost useless. A new quay would result in a much quicker turn round of shipping, would make unnecessary the existing practice by which ships often had to load and unload over other ships, and would cut down the expenses of the customs officials, since it would no longer be necessary for vessels to wait seven or eight days with tidesmen and other officers on board before beginning unloading.⁷ The petition was approved, and the Society, which had in March 1690 made a new agreement with the corporation, was able to go ahead

¹ *Book of Charters*, I, 205.

² *Hall Book*, II, 127, 131.

³ *Book of Charters*, II, 209.

⁴ *Hall Book*, II, 166.

⁵ *Hall Book*, II, 339.

⁶ *Ibid.* 359.

⁷ P.R.O., T 1/8, no. 17.

with its building plans.¹ The project was expensive, for in addition to the cost of labour and materials, it was necessary to purchase certain property which had to be pulled down in order to widen the quay. Most of the Society's limited capital was tied up in the manor of Clifton, and the building was financed to a considerable extent by loans raised on the Society's seal. In June 1690, for example, £400 was borrowed, and in October 1692 another £600 was taken up.² Between 1690 and 1693 approximately £2,000 was spent on the actual work in addition to various other expenses related to the scheme.³ Another £500 was required for a further extension of the new quay in 1700.⁴

The Society of Merchant Venturers was responsible not only for developing the port but also for maintaining and improving the existing facilities. Its accounts show regular payments for repairing and cleaning the Back and the Quay, and although the sums spent were often small, they could on occasions be considerable. Thus £125 was spent on pointing and pitching the Quay in 1674-75⁵ and £54 19s 8d for work on the Back in 1698-99.⁶ The slips on the river also received constant attention. Work on the Tower Slip cost over £30 in 1667,⁷ and another £20 was spent the next year.⁸ When the new quay was built, the Tower Slip was considered to be no longer necessary and the Society ordered it to be made even with the other parts of the quay. At the same time, the Mayor was urged to appoint fit persons to look after the new slips on both sides of the river.⁹ The Society also offered to make at its own expense a new slip near the Gibb, but this was one of the

¹ Bristol Record Office: C.T.D. 00352 (4). There is another copy of the agreement in the Merchant Venturers' Records.

² *Hall Book*, II, 446, 502.

³ This estimate is based on figures found in the Society's *Treasurer's Book* and *Beadle's Book*.

⁴ Merchant Venturers' Records: *Beadle's Book*, 1686-1709.

⁵ *Treasurer's Book*, II, 32.

⁶ *Beadle's Book*, 1686-1709.

⁷ *Treasurer's Book*, II, 22.

⁸ *Treasurer's Book*, II, 23, 24.

⁹ *Hall Book*, III, 28.

few occasions when the corporation did not see eye to eye with the Society, and the offer was rejected.¹

Another service which the Society provided was the setting up of new cranes to handle the growing trade. The great crane on the Back of Bristol belonged to the corporation. *Adams's Chronicle* gives an interesting account of how in August 1634 this crane, which had stood there before the memory of man, was taken down since its base and woodwork were much perished. A new crane was then erected at the cost of George Partridge, a cooper, who spent over £100 on the work and who was given a lease of the profits for three lives at £8 a year. The great upright beam of the crane was set 9 feet into the ground and it had four strong braces fastened to it mortised into strong timber. The timber was covered with clay to prevent it perishing and then walled in with hot lime and sand.² The corporation crane could not by itself meet the needs of the port, and additional cranes were erected by the Society. The order for one such crane was given in October 1664,³ and when further extensions of the quay were made from 1690 onwards, new cranes were also provided.⁴ In 1692 it was ordered by the Hall that an artist should be employed to inspect the cranes in London with a view to making similar ones in Bristol.⁵ Whether an artist was in fact employed does not appear from the records, but new cranes were built and let to Henry Daniel, a member of the Society, in May 1693.⁶ He was dismissed in 1696 and the cranes were then let out at a rent of £44 a year. In 1697,⁷ the Hall ordered that a longer neck should be provided for the lesser crane at Aldworth's Quay,⁸ and the next year a committee was appointed to settle the crantage rates.⁹

¹ *Common Council Proceedings*, 1670-87, fo. 137v.

² *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol*, Bristol, 1910, p. 239.

³ *Hall Book*, I, 357.

⁴ *Hall Book*, II, 256.

⁵ *Hall Book*, II, 498.

⁶ *Hall Book*, III, 70.

⁷ *Ibid.* 72.

⁸ *Ibid.* 91.

⁹ *Ibid.* 119.

The Society also undertook a number of miscellaneous duties in connection with the port and the river, and these are reflected in its accounts. On occasions the Master was instructed to view defects in the river and to take with him suitable persons at the Hall's expense.¹ Obstacles to navigation had sometimes to be removed, and we find the Treasurer making payments for such items as taking up a tree that lay in the river and raising a lighter sunk in Hungroad.² From time to time money was spent on clearing away dangerous rocks and loose stones, and on one occasion the Society entered into a contract with Joseph Horne, a coal miner of Barton Regis, to remove the rocks known as the Leads. The Society undertook to provide $4\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. of iron and $\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. of steel to help make the tools and promised to pay £10 when the work was half finished and another £60 when it was completed.³ Buoys were also provided to mark sands and dangerous places in the river, and a number of mooring posts were set up and maintained at the Society's expense.⁴

Navigation of the Avon was a tricky business, and if the natural disadvantages of the port were to be overcome it was essential that the pilots who handled the larger vessels should be efficient and under proper control. The appointment of pilots seems to have been in the hands of the corporation from an early date in virtue of the charter giving it conservancy of the river, but the Society of Merchant Venturers was also very interested in the matter both from the point of view of the competence of the pilots and the rates which they were allowed to charge. It is not known when the Society first took a hand in their appointment. As early as 1621 it sought to insert in its charter a clause giving it wide powers over mariners undertaking the charge or governance of ships belonging to the port,⁵ and although on this occasion it seems to have been

¹ *Hall Book*, I, 430.

² *Treasurer's Book*, II, 27, 33.

³ *Hall Book*, II, 241, 242, 254.

⁴ *Hall Book*, II, 70; *Treasurer's Book*, II, 32; *Hall Book*, III, 130.

⁵ *Book of Trade*, p. 85.

specially concerned with the rates charged by trowboatmen, it may also have been thinking of the pilots. The earliest surviving reference to the corporation appointing a pilot on the recommendation of the Merchant Venturers seems to be in 1623 when the Society certified that George Bryan mariner was of the sufficiency and experience in the art of navigation to conduct boats from Kingroad to Hungroad,¹ but the records do not suggest that there was anything novel about this procedure which no doubt began earlier. The method of appointment was for the Society to get a certificate from competent judges that the applicant was suitable and to recommend him to the Mayor and Aldermen. The pilot elect was then sworn in by the corporation. One early record of the trade testing of a pilot survives in the Bristol Record Office, and in the Society's books there are preserved the names of a considerable number of mariners who were recommended to the corporation. In one case the appointment was made, as it were, for distinguished conduct while on active service, for Roger Romsey was recommended for his readiness in weighing ships lately in distress in the river.² Although the appointment and dismissal of pilots was nominally in the hands of the Mayor and Aldermen, the Society no doubt exercised the real control. Thus in November 1684 the Hall ordered that John Horne should be dismissed unless he showed good cause to the contrary,³ and when Captain Earle complained against a pilot called Kindness for several abuses in exacting fees, it was decided that the offender should be summoned before the Mayor and Aldermen and that he should be dismissed unless he gave a satisfactory explanation. He came to the Hall and made 'some plausible excuse' and it was decided that he should continue for the present but that on the next offence he should be dismissed.⁴

¹ Bristol Record Office: *Common Council Proceedings*, 1608-27, p. 111.

² *Hall Book*, II, 482.

³ *Hall Book*, II, 247.

⁴ *Hall Book*, III, 119, 120.

Other illustrations appear in the records showing the disciplinary powers and control which the Society exercised over the river pilots. When in 1647 the pilots at Hungrood petitioned for an increase in the wages of the towboatmen who brought ships up to Bristol, the Society made certain concessions, but ordered that the remaining rates should stay as they were, and also gave instructions that the pilots must bring ships in one by one as they arrived unless there was good reason to the contrary.¹ Some years later we find the Society sending a warrant to the pilots at Hungrood to put up posts in the ancient places to act as seamarks.² When a Haven Master was first appointed at the Society's suggestion in 1670, the pilots were required to obey his orders regarding the mooring of ships,³ and when the Haven Master was dismissed in 1676, the Society set up a committee to act as a check on the several pilots 'regarding their wages and elce.'⁴ Twelve years later the Society was responsible for another regulation which the pilots seem to have disliked but which in the end they had to accept. This required all pilots to give bond of £50 for the faithful discharge of their duty and to undertake to assist all ships in distress.⁵ One of the original 17th century bonds is preserved among the records of the Merchant Venturers. It stated that the pilots received great benefits by fees and perquisites and that in return for these benefits the signatory had undertaken to help all vessels and had agreed not to bring vessels of over 60 tons up to Bristol without licence from the Mayor.⁶ In 1690 the Society petitioned the corporation to make bylaws for the better regulation of the pilots,⁷ and six years later it set up a committee to draw up proposal to be submitted to the Mayor and Aldermen.⁸ A detailed schedule

¹ *Hall Book*, I, 96.

² *Hall Book*, I, 105.

³ Bristol Record Office: *Common Council Proceedings*, 1659-75, p. 206.

⁴ *Hall Book*, II, 105.

⁵ *Hall Book*, II, 247, 254.

⁶ There is a copy of the bond in *Hall Book*, II, 249, 250.

⁷ *Hall Book*, II, 461.

⁸ *Hall Book*, III, 70.

of the wages of pilots and their assistants was drawn up by the Merchant Venturers early in the 18th century and was confirmed in Quarter Sessions.¹

The increased volume of shipping coming to Bristol in the later 17th century made it necessary to improve the administration of the port, and in 1670 the Merchant Venturers requested that the corporation should appoint a Haven Master. The Society recommended John Jones as a fit person for the post and undertook to pay his salary of £20 a year.² The elaborate regulations defining his duties were no doubt primarily the work of the Society. He was empowered to direct all shipping to appropriate anchorages and to give instructions concerning the laying of anchors. Owners, master and pilots were required to obey his orders, and he could hire men to remove ships which anchored without his permission. Small vessels, and ships which had unloaded, could be removed to make room for larger vessels. The Haven Master was also required to enforce the ancient regulations by which ballast might not be transhipped unless a port sail was put up to prevent anything falling into the river, and ballast was to be taken only in the places fixed by him. Fire precautions were to be observed and no ship was to come up to Bristol until the tide was sufficiently high to prevent it fouling the cables of other vessels. Once a month the Haven Master was to send in a report of ships anchoring for more than twenty-four hours and the Society of Merchants was permitted to lay a duty not exceeding 6s 8d on every such ship.

The first appointment to the office of Haven Master was not a good one and in October 1676 John Jones was summoned to the Hall to answer 'such things as should then be objected against him' and the office of Haven Master was discontinued as 'needless and impertinent.'³ For a time the Society entrusted the control of the pilots to a committee,⁴ but in 1679 it once

¹ Bristol Record Office 05056, 10v., et seq.

² *Common Council Proceedings*, 1659-75, p. 203; *Hall Book*, I, 457.

³ *Hall Book*, II, 102.

⁴ *Hall Book*, II, 105.

again found it necessary to appoint a Haven Master. The post was given to Captain William Davis of Shirehampton and the salary was now increased to £30 a year payable by the Society from the anchorage money.¹ A committee of the Hall was to give him instructions from time to time, and a year later elaborate regulations were drawn up for shipping using the port.² Masters were to take special precautions regarding fire and to maintain adequate crews on board, especially on Sundays. No rubbish was to be thrown into the river, and the Haven Master and pilots were to examine the roads every spring. The Haven Master was to decide where ships should anchor, and the pilots were to exercise special care to prevent damage. Captain William Davis was regularly paid £30 a year up to 1695. After that there are a number of smaller payments to him in the Treasurer's accounts, and the last entry seems to be a payment of £20 in full of all salary in 1699.³ By that time the Society already had in hand further plans for the organisation of the port which will be considered later.

Shortly after the appointment of a Haven Master, the Society created yet another officer in the port who was known as the Warner. He was not given a salary but his patent under the Society's seal allowed him to collect fees from those to whom he gave warning of the arrival of shipping. The post was given to one Peter Dee,⁴ but the experiment was not successful. Peter Dee proved to be negligent and unsatisfactory, demanding fees in cases where he had not in fact given notice of arrival, and as he was also 'of profligate life and conversation' he was dismissed.⁵ Captain William Davis the Haven Master took over his duties and presumably his fees.⁶

The Merchant Venturers were also interested in the porters who worked on the quays and docks and who carried goods about the city, for their wages formed an important item in

¹ *Hall Book*, II, 154.

² *Book of Charters*, II, 157.

³ *Treasurer's Book*, II, 69.

⁴ *Hall Book*, II, 12. 19 July 1671.

⁵ *Hall Book*, II, 176.

⁶ *Hall Book*, II, 179.

the merchant's overheads, and a well-regulated labour force was necessary for the efficient running of the port. When the porters sought incorporation as a separate body in 1671, they presented their petition to the Society of Merchant Venturers as well as to the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council, and the Society no doubt had a hand in drawing up the elaborate ordinances governing the porters.¹ The porters were to wear smocks and were to carry a distinctive badge with the city arms. They had a Master and two Wardens and they were assigned by name to particular points in the city. There were for instance thirty-nine of them at the Quay, forty-one at the Back, twenty-five at the High Cross, seventeen at Bridgend, and a smaller number elsewhere. A scale of charges for various journeys and for particular commodities was also laid down. There was a disciplinary code governing swearing, quarrelling, absence from duty and refusal to work at the specified rates. Again in 1699 when Common Council had received a number of complaints against the Master and Company of Porters for making extravagant demands, and against the merchants for not paying for the labour, the matter was referred to the Master of the Society. In due course, the Society submitted a new wage schedule which was approved by Common Council.²

Another appointment in which the Society had an interest was that of the keeper of the Graving Dock in the Marsh, where ships were repaired. As early as 1621 we find the Merchant Venturers granting authority to John Hughes mariner 'now grown in years and not able to take pains for his living into forreigne parts' to keep the graving place and to take the fees authorised in the schedule.³ There are few references to the Society's control later, but it evidently retained some authority over the dock for in 1696 it authorised William Hannam to officiate there during the sickness of William Steele.⁴

Throughout the period, the welfare work for sailors and their

¹ Bristol Record Office: C.T.D. 04369 (1), pp. 21-26.

² *Common Council Proceedings*, 1687-1702, fos. 181, 181v.

³ *Book of Trade*, p. 81.

⁴ *Hall Book*, III, 85.

dependents was continued and expanded. By 1650 there were nineteen places in the Merchants' Almshouse¹ and towards the end of the century Edward Colston and the executors of Richard Jones made provision for the upkeep of twelve more mariners and mariners' widows on condition that the Society provided rooms for them.² The left wing of the almshouse was built in 1696 and further additions and alterations were made in 1699.³ In that year the Master opened a subscription among the members, over £600 was collected and the Society made up the balance of the £700 required for the rebuilding.⁴ In addition, the records contain a great many references to pensions, gifts and loans to decayed or disabled sailors and to their widows and dependents. Particular attention was given to ransoming the many unfortunate mariners who had fallen into the hands of the Turks. The free school for mariners' children was also maintained and there are a number of references to the appointment of a schoolmaster and to repairs to the school. In the early part of the century the Society paid a man to instruct poor mariners in the art of navigation,⁵ but this elementary technical education does not seem to have been continued.

By the end of the century the Society of Merchant Venturers had already done a great deal to improve the port of Bristol, and it is yet further evidence of its initiative and enterprise that it did not rest satisfied with what had been achieved and that at its General Court on 10 November 1699 it instructed the Master and Wardens to apply to the Mayor and Common Council to procure an act of parliament 'for the repairing and preserving of the river by such methods as shall be thought fitt.'⁶ This resulted in 1700 in 'An Act for the better Preserving the Navigation of the Rivers Avon and Froome, and for

¹ T. J. Manchee, *The Bristol Charities*, I, 25.

² *Hall Book*, III, 45.

³ Bristol Record Office: *MS. Calendar*, no. 07831.

⁴ *Hall Book*, III, 144, 176.

⁵ *Treasurer's Book* I, 6 ; *Book of Trade: Treasurer's Account*, 1618-19.

⁶ *Hall Book*, III, 159.

Cleansing Paving and Inlighting the Streets of the City of Bristol.’¹ The preamble stated that as a result of quarrying above and below Bristol, stones and rubbish were wilfully or negligently thrown into the river and being carried down by the tide made shelves and hills under water and on the side of the river. Moreover, glasshouses and copper and lead-smelting works erected recently below Bristol and as far up the river as Hanham were producing great quantities of ashes, cinders and filth which were often thrown into the river, and much of the filth from the streets of Bristol was dealt with in the same way, so that the Avon was in danger of being choked up. In addition, much damage to shipping had resulted from ‘the Obstinacy Wilfulness and Carelessness of Pilots and Masters’ who came to anchor at inconvenient places and at undue times of the tide. Various penalties were imposed on offenders, and the magistrates were given wide powers with regard to cleansing the streets of Bristol. The conservancy of Bristol was extended from Tower Hartz above Bristol Bridge up to Hanham Mills and the conservators were empowered to appoint officers ‘for the Preservation of the said Rivers, and Regulation and Government of all Pilots, Masters of Ships and other vessells.’

The Act gave the corporation a blank cheque the details of which were naturally filled in by the Merchant Venturers who were the experts in this matter. The Society drew up lengthy regulations which were submitted for approval to the Justices in Quarter Sessions.² The Justices who gave their approval were with two exceptions members of the Society so that the business was merely a formality.

The first set of orders concerned the officers of the port whose number was increased and whose duties were defined. John Homar was appointed Haven Master and was required to give a bond of £500 for the faithful discharge of his responsibilities. He was to see that no ship went up or down river by

¹ 11 and 12 William, III, c. 23.

² Bristol Record Office: *Orders of Quarter Sessions*, 05056, fos. 5-10. 26 August 1700 and 28 September 1700.

Crockern Pill unless the two posts one above and one below Hungroad were covered with water.¹ He was given control over the mooring of ships and could move them at twelve hours' notice. All ships were to put their gunpowder on shore within twenty-four hours of mooring and no fires were permitted on board after six o'clock at night in the winter and nine o'clock in the summer except on extraordinary occasions with licence from the Haven Master. The salary of the Haven Master was fixed at £50 a year, an increase of £20 a year over that of his predecessor.

The orders of 1700 also appointed a new officer for the preservation of the river who was known as the Ballast Master. One of his jobs was to see that every one getting stones from the rocks and quarries near the river made 'sufficient stanks and hedges' to stop any stone or rubbish rolling into the water. Every one discharging ballast was required to give notice to the Ballast Master and to unload on to the Ballast Wharf or at some other appointed place. Leave might be obtained, however, to remove ballast from one ship to another: Lightermen were to get their ballast from the ledges and shelves in the river under orders of the Ballast Master or else to obtain it from the Ballast Wharf at a price not exceeding 6*d* a ton. Care was to be taken to see that no one encroached on the river or left stones about below the high-water mark. The salary of the Ballast Master was fixed at £20 a year, and the first officer appointed was James Smith who was required to give a bond of £200.

Yet another new official was the Quay Warden. Thomas Turpin was appointed to the post with a salary of £20 a year. He had control over the mooring of ships at the quay. Every ship arriving there from foreign parts was to discharge within twenty-one days, and coastal shipping and ships from Ireland were to unload within fourteen days or else be obliged to go to such places as the Quay Warden directed. Loading at the

¹ The posts had been set up as a result of an order of Common Council of 27 June 1611.

quay was to be completed by foreign bound ships within thirty days and by Irish and coastal ships within twenty-one days. Any master who put any dirt or filth on the quay was to be made to remove it at his own charge, and goods were not to be left lying about for more than twenty-four hours. No one was to careen or grave any ship in the river Frome. A bell called the Candle Bell was to be rung at six o'clock at night in winter and nine o'clock in summer after which no candle was to be lighted on any ship until light the next day. Fires were not to be lighted on ships, and pitch was not to be heated within twenty feet of the edge of the quay. Planks for discharging ships were to be distributed as the Quay Warden directed.

The Society also recommended that a crane, lighter and boat should be employed in summer to take up ledges, rocks and stones in the river, and estimated that the cost would amount to £40 a year. The charges for mooring posts would come to another £10 a year and the bellman who rang the candle bell was to have £2 a year.

The cost of all this was £127 a year, and the Society proposed that the money should be raised by certain alterations in the port dues. In future, every ship of 30 tons or upwards arriving from foreign parts or from Ireland was to pay 5s for anchorage, as it had done earlier. Vessels of under 30 tons were to pay only 2s 6d, half the duty they had paid up till then. On the other hand, every ship of 100 tons and over had to pay, in addition to anchorage, a new duty known appropriately as moorage, at the rate of 1d for every ton. The moorage duty for ships of less than 100 tons was levied at the rate of $\frac{1}{2}$ d a ton. Coastal shipping was now liable for tax and every coastal vessel of 40 tons or over coming from below the Holms had to pay 1s 6d per voyage, while those under 40 tons paid 9d per voyage. The management and collection of all these duties was in the hands of the Merchant Venturers.

The reorganisation of the port in 1700 was a fitting prologue to the great commercial expansion of 18th century Bristol and a worthy climax to the achievements of the 17th century. The Society of Merchant Venturers had received considerable

sums from the port dues handed over to it by the corporation, but it had spent a great deal in maintaining and developing the port as well as in charitable work for the sailors and in fighting miscellaneous battles to protect the interests of the merchant community. It had given good service to Bristol and had displayed an initiative and enterprise that helped to make the city one of the most important ports in the kingdom.

NOTE ON THE RECORDS
OF THE
SOCIETY OF MERCHANT VENTURERS OF BRISTOL

The chief records of the Society used in this article are:

1. The Book of Trade.
2. The first two Books of Charters, Ordinances and Acts, referred to in the notes as Book of Charters, I, and Book of Charters, II.
3. The Merchants' Hall Books of Proceedings, referred to as Hall Book, I, II, III.
4. The first two Treasurer's Books of Accounts, referred to as Treasurer's Book, I, and Treasurer's Book II.
5. The Beadle's Book, 1686-1709.
6. The series of Wharfage Books covering the years 1654-94.

Some account of these sources can be found in *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol*, edit. Patrick McGrath (Bristol Record Society's Publications, vol. xvii).

I wish to thank the Master, Wardens and Commonalty of the Society of Merchant Venturers for permission to use these records.