

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

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1974, Vol. 93, 156-161

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BRISTOL'S COMMERCIAL history in her golden age—the 18th century—has been well dealt with.¹ For the 17th century, however, though a great deal of documentary evidence survives, and impressive volumes of some of this have been published,² no detailed monograph on the trade of Bristol has yet appeared. The deficiency cannot be rectified in the space of a short essay: here what is attempted is to provide an approximate quantification of the fortunes of the port's trade as far as the difficult and unsatisfactory 'statistical' evidence of the period allows, and to make some comment upon it.

The picture of Bristol as the second English seaport from the Middle Ages to near modern times held popularly but also asserted by some historians needs considerable qualification. Recent assertions that the 'position of Bristol as second port in the kingdom was not challenged in the seventeenth century, for it far outstripped its nearest rivals, Exeter, Hull, and Newcastle'³ and that the 'sixteen-thirties . . . were prosperous for the port'⁴ are in line with a contemporary opinion of 1640 that Bristol was then 'the greatest town for shipping except London'. All these statements, however, require critical examination. Though Bristol's medieval significance is not disputed and its golden age in the 18th century is well attested, its claim to pre-eminence over the other provincial ports in the 16th century and the first half of the 17th is more than suspect. Judged by the customs collected on goods exported and imported (Table 1 below) Bristol was, in James I's reign, though important, less significant than Exeter or Hull. What is more, customs revenue collected at the port in 1600–1 and 1601–2 was only £1,448 and £1,926 respectively,⁵ so that the average for the years 1614–20 (£3,706) represents a higher level of activity than in the earliest years of the century. No doubt that low ebb reflects the effects of the Spanish War of 1585–1604 which is known to have devastated Bristol's trade—even though a trickle of imports from Spain, carried in neutral vessels, continued to arrive at the port.⁶ With peace in 1604 better times might have been expected, but other disasters then had a limiting effect on revival. A severe outbreak of 'plague', the eclectic name given to serious infectious diseases at the time, hit Bristol in 1603 lasting until 1605. London traders, important in the economy of the times, were prohibited in 1604 from attending Bristol fair for fear of spreading infection.⁷

In 1605 the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol was reorganized⁸ and between these post-

1. W. E. Minchinton, 'Bristol, Metropolis of the West in the Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. IV (1954); W. E. Minchinton, *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, *Bristol Record Soc.* XX (1957); W. E. Minchinton, 'The Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century' in P. McGrath (ed.), *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (1972) (originally published as a pamphlet by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.)

2. P. McGrath (ed.), *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth-Century Bristol*, *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX (1955) (consists of records from various sources, with a good but very brief introduction); P. McGrath (ed.), *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, *Bristol Record Soc.* XVII (1952).

3. G. D. Ramsay, *English Overseas Trade During the Centuries of Emergence* (1957), 161.

4. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, p. xix.

5. P.R.O. E. 190/1132/1; 1133/1. Michaelmas to Michaelmas.

6. *Ibid.*, 1132/12.

7. *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol* (1910), 178; *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1603–10, 130.

8. P. V. McGrath, 'The Merchant Venturers and Bristol Shipping in the Early Seventeenth Century', *Mariners' Mirror* XXXVI (1950), 69.

war troubles and about 1610 the city seems to have enjoyed something of a boom judging from the level of trade reached by then. This, however, was short lived, for everything points to a steady decline in the port's trade from about 1610-12 to an abysmally low level in the period 1625-9, when Britain was once more at war with France and Spain, with the deepest pit of the trough in 1628. After that there followed a partial and hesitant recovery in the 1630s.

TABLE 1
*Customs' revenue at the chief English provincial ports (£s)**

	1614	1615	1616	1617	1618	1619	1620	Annual Average
Hull	7664	8236	8511	5904	6673	7027	6798	7259
Exeter	4096	3709	3716	4427	4919	5133	5727	4533
Bristol	3599	3947	3805	3568	3384	3676	3965	3706
Newcastle	3781	3709	3269	2957	2949	3382	3128	3310
Plymouth	2316	3003	2792	3462	2646	3280	2949	2921
Lyme Regis	3010	3038	2771	2938	2207	2739	2796	2786
Southampton	2350	2604	2674	3220	2940	2725	2740	2750
Dartmouth	2294	2363	2211	3516	3360	2363	2515	2717

* Sackville (Knoles) MSS I (Old Numbers) 6351. Somewhat similar figures are to be found in P.R.O., S.P./14/108/31 and in *Bristol Record Soc.*, XVII, 184.

The evidence for these conclusions lies in the figures of certain customs duties. In 1610 the official values of goods liable to the 'new impositions' passing through Bristol amounted to some £49,500, almost exactly £10,000 less than in the previous year.⁹ If these totals are broken down they show that they embrace a decline in the value of exports from about £28,600 to £21,400 and of imports from £30,900 to £28,000.

TABLE 2
*Values of Goods Paying New Impositions at Bristol, 1611-1635**

Year	Imports	Exports	Totals
1610-11	11,150	24,148	35,298
11-12	12,020	19,237	31,257
12-13	10,036	18,431	28,467
13-14	8,172	19,113	27,113
14-15	12,931	17,314	30,245
15-16	13,192	12,453	25,646
16-17	12,596	14,642	27,238
17-18	8,749	15,661	24,405
18-19	9,217	10,211	19,828
19-20	8,675	9,552	18,227
1620-21	11,685	9,818	21,504
21-22	9,007	7,691	16,708
22-23	9,538	10,324	19,863
23-24	7,780	10,857	18,638
24-25	8,034	7,288	15,323
25-26	8,499	8,928	17,427
26-27	16,927	9,054	25,927
27-28	8,058	2,599	10,658
28-29	5,145	9,566	14,711
29-30	8,593	8,935	17,528
1630-31	7,987	8,490	16,477
31-32	12,425	10,285	22,710
32-33	12,571	12,806	25,378
33-34	11,445	14,597	26,042
34-35	19,092	10,591	29,684

* P.R.O., E. 351/797-821.

⁹ P.R.O., E. 351/795, 796. The basis of this tax was changed from 1611 so that totals for 1611 onwards (see Table 2) cannot be compared with the 1609, 1610 figures.

Table 2 shows how the valuations of goods paying these special duties varied between 1611 and 1635. It must be noted that while this evidence represents an annual series of 'statistics' longer and more complete than any other available for Bristol in this period, they are less representative of the port's total trade than the normal customs duties recorded in Table 1 (above). Some caution is thus needed in interpreting them, for new impositions were levied only on certain commodities. Indeed the shipments on which they were paid appear, very approximately, to account for only about one-third of Bristol's trade in these years.¹⁰ On the whole new impositions are more representative of Bristol's import than its export trade for they fell more heavily and widely on imports. That said, however, they do, in the case of Bristol, give a more realistic picture of export trends than they do for most ports. Though virtually the only commodities shipped out of the port liable to the duties were lead, lead ore,¹¹ and the cloth known as bays, lead and ore were certainly important items in the city's exports. Indeed apart from lead and cloth the only goods exported in any quantity at all appear to have been hops, iron and iron ore, molasses, calf skins, and wax.¹² It is true that cloth was an important factor in the Bristol's exports and that bays was by no means the chief type of cloth dealt in. There is, however, other evidence for trends in the port's trade in woollen cloth which I have dealt with in detail elsewhere.¹³ Those findings may, however, be briefly summarized here. The totals for the traditional customs duties paid on Bristol's cloth exports, together with totals for special extra duties on cloth levied for certain years (the 'pretermitted' customs duties)¹⁴ prove beyond doubt that the fortunes of Bristol's cloth trade correspond to a considerable extent with the evidence for those exports given in Table 2.

Bristol's cloth trade clearly enjoyed something of a boom down to 1612, thereafter falling gradually and erratically to its lowest level in 1628-9, expanding somewhat in the early 1630s but declining again in the later years of that decade, and never before the Civil War reaching anything like the level of the middle years of James I. Thus while Bristol had shared a respectable cloth trade in the first decade of the century with other West Country ports, like Weymouth, Lyme Regis, Exeter, Plymouth and Barnstaple, by the eve of the Civil War it had become, like all the others bar Exeter and Lyme Regis, of comparatively little significance in this major English export trade.

When Bristol's import trade is investigated the story is somewhat less disastrous, though not by any means a happy one. Despite a limited recovery in the years between 1614 and 1617 the new impositions figures show a period of depressed imports in the years before 1620. The evidence of these statistics does not stand alone. It fits well with the recorded complaints by Bristol merchants of the unfavourable state of their trade at this time. In 1620 the mayor of Bristol reported to the Privy Council that he was unable to raise from the city merchants the full contribution towards the suppression of piracy required of them. They claimed to have lost £8,000 in one year as a result of shipwrecks and piracy and that the port's shipping was consequently in a state of decay.¹⁵ In the following year in a report requested by the Privy Council a much more detailed analysis of reasons for the decay of trade was provided by Bristol. Among the factors blamed were again the depredations inflicted by pirates, the effects of war on the German and French markets, the growth of native cloth industries in Spain, Portugal, France, and the Low Countries, the prohibition (to prevent export overseas) of the transport of wool by sea from Pembrokeshire, Bristol's main source of supply, the decay of the Newfoundland fisheries,¹⁶ and the incidence of customs duties. To these reasons were added a long tirade against the monopoly of the Merchant Adventurers in the Low Countries and Germany, from which areas the Merchant Venturers of Bristol were excluded also

10. Calculated from comparison of nominal values of goods paying the normal customs (as in Table 1) with nominal values of goods paying new impositions over the year 1614-20 (P.R.O., E. 351/800-6).

11. Cf. Ramsay, 140-1.

12. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 282-3.

13. W. B. Stephens, 'The Cloth Exports of the Provincial Ports, 1600-1640', *Econ. History Review* 2nd ser. XXII (1969), 233 sqq.

14. Levied 1620-39.

15. *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1619-23, 119, 130. Cf. *Bristol Record Soc.* XVII, 176 sqq.; McGrath, *Mariners' Mirror*, 67-73.

16. For Bristol and the Newfoundland fisheries, see article cited in note 37 below.

by their own charter. It seems clear that at this time Bristol merchants were casting envious eyes on a less troubled market than their French and Spanish outlets on the Continent.¹⁷ They were to find their salvation, however, not in Europe but America.

'God miraculously preserved Bristol' from the general attack of plague which ravaged London, Exeter, and Bath so sorely in 1624-5,¹⁸ but the outbreak of war with Spain in 1625 and with France in 1627 hit at Bristol's main trading connections at a time when the port's trade was even more than usually threatened by the incidence of piracy. When in 1628 pirates seized Lundy and ravaged north Devon, Bristol petitioned the Privy Council complaining that her trade with Ireland and her returning Newfoundland fleet were both threatened, and demanding protection and the right to arm ships to defend the Severn.¹⁹ In 1626 the citizens claimed that they had recently lost fifty ships captured or wrecked, and that this together with the stoppage of trade had impoverished them.²⁰ Throughout the war years the port suffered heavily at the hands of pirates and of enemy warships.²¹ In 1628 French men-of-war allegedly committed daily spoil in the Severn,²² and in 1630 it was reported that the piratical Biscayners 'are in the mouth of the river and the Dunkirkers lie about Lands End'.²³

The very level in the import valuations in 1627 and 1628 (Table 2), on the surface difficult to explain, in fact reflects the chaotic state of affairs at this time. They do not represent normal commerce but duties levied on goods captured at sea.²⁴ Exeter's trade figures were similarly inflated in these years.²⁵ Both these western ports, and others, were attempting to offset the loss of real trade by an organized business of capturing enemy merchant shipping.

In 1627 it was claimed that Bristol was 'of such ability' that it had ten ships out on letters of marque²⁶—that is on licence to indulge in legal seizure of merchantmen belonging to hostile nations. Between 1626 and 1630, 126 letters of marque were issued to Bristol vessels,²⁷ and there are many recorded instances of prizes being brought into the port.²⁸ One ship, the *Eagle* of Bristol reputedly took prizes worth over £40,000.²⁹ Perhaps as a result of this emergency activity shipping in the port did not decline. A list of Bristol ships in 1626 detailed 42 vessels with a total tonnage of 3,559 tons.³⁰ By 1629 another survey indicated an increase to 48 ships with a total tonnage of 5,780 tons.³¹

TABLE 3.
*Values of goods paying new impositions at Bristol, 1636-40**

Year	Imports	Exports	Total
1635-6	39,632	10,280	49,912
1636-7	42,520	14,192	56,713
1637-8	48,449	8,648	57,097
1638-9	38,543	28,852	65,395
1639-40	32,746	17,620	50,366

* P.R.O., E. 351/822-6. These figures cannot be compared with those in Table 2 above, because the basis of the duties was again revised from 1635-6.

17. B. M. Hargrave, MS.321, ff. 103-7, printed in *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 140-3. See also *ibid.*, 141 note 1.
18. S. Seyer, *Memoirs of Bristol*, I (1821), 274; cf. W. B. Stephens, *Seventeenth Century Exeter* (1958), 13-14.
19. *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1625-6, 86, 91.
20. *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1625-6, 404.
21. E.g., *ibid.*, 1629-31, 43, 303, 311.
22. *Ibid.*, 1628-9, 176.
23. *Ibid.*, 1629-31, 250.
24. *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1635, 510-11; *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 207. Cf. J. W. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War* (1930).
25. Stephens, *Seventeenth Century Exeter*, 19, 21.
26. *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1627-8, 138.
27. *Ibid.*, 1628-9, 287 sqq.; 1629-31, 151 sqq., 467 sqq.
28. *Ibid.*, 1625-6, 1628-9, 1629-31, *passim*; P.R.O., SP16/353/70.
29. *Cal. S.P.D.*, 1629-31, 412.
30. McGrath, *Mariners' Mirror*, 74.
31. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 210-14.

For Bristol's trade in the 1630s we are dependent again on the new impositions returns (Tables 2, 3). These suggest the same hesitant revival for imports during the early 1630s as in exports, except that whereas exports fell off somewhat in 1635 imports inexplicably rose quite considerably. As with the export returns the import totals for the years from 1636 are on a different basis than those for previous years, but if they are examined in isolation they show that imports rose in 1637 and 1638 over the 1636 figure but diminished in 1639 and 1640. In 1638 the number of importing ships was 283,³² twenty-six more than in 1613, previously the year with highest numbers recorded.³³ This general trend in imports is exemplified to a certain degree by totals of wine, one of Bristol's main imports, brought into the port (Table 4). These show a rise over 1636 in 1637 and 1638, remaining high in 1639 falling considerably in 1640 and 1641, but still above the 1636 level and above that for years earlier in the century.

TABLE 4
Wine imports at Bristol, 1601-41

	(tons)
1601	1885*
1613	1942†
1625	1790‡
1636	1607‡
1637	2550§
1638	3219
1639	3150¶
1640	2228**
1641	[1978]††

* P.R.O., E. 190/1132/11. McGrath using 1132/12 (for same period) arrives at 1872 tons: *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 294.

† *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 294.

‡ P.R.O., E. 351/905.

§ E. 351/906.

¶ E. 351/907.

|| E. 351/908.

** E. 351/909.

†† E. 351/910. Approximate: estimated roughly from duty paid.

All this makes it clear beyond reasonable doubt that Bristol was not yet the 'metropolis of the west' and in the Civil War military operations and national economic conditions in and just after the war seriously affected its prosperity.³⁴ It was, however, destined to revive and it is from the period after the Civil War that the port's real resurgence is to be dated. Evidence for the period of the Interregnum is scant, but customs totals have been recorded showing that in 1649-50 Bristol paid more customs duties than any other provincial port and that in the following year it shared second place with Hull, Newcastle then heading the list.³⁵ The city wharfage books, beginning in 1654, give some indication that trade was then prospering.³⁶

In the last forty years of the century, following the Restoration, Bristol failed to secure an increased share in the Newfoundland fisheries,³⁷ and its trade with France was hit by embargos and wars, a fact illustrated by a level of wine imports considerably lower than that earlier in the century.³⁸ Yet Bristol experienced a considerable advance in its commercial fortunes. The basis of this development was the growth of trade with the New World in which Plymouth to a lesser extent, and Liverpool

32. *Ibid.*, 281.

33. P.R.O., E. 190/1134/3.

34. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, pp. xix-xx.

35. H. Hall, *History of the Customs Revenue of England* (1885) II, 248.

36. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, p. xx.

37. W. B. Stephens, 'The West Country ports and the Struggle for the Newfoundland Fisheries in the 17th century', *Trans. Devonshire Assoc.* LXXXVIII (1956), 8.

38. Cf. Table 4 above with table in *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 294.

increasingly shared. The very size of the post-Restoration port books compared with those of the first half of the century bears witness to better times.³⁹ From Charles II's reign began Bristol's major participation in the lucrative Virginian and West Indian tobacco and sugar trades.⁴⁰ (See Table 5.) As time went on Bristol also benefited from the recovery of Ireland the disruption of whose economy by the troubles of the mid century had grievously affected its local trade.⁴¹

TABLE 5
(i) *Number of ships trading between Bristol and America and the West Indies**

	1625	1629	1637	1638	1659	1660	1668	1679	1684	1686	1687	1700
Exporting ships	1	—	5	?	?	?	45	?	?	?	70	?
Importing ships	?	?	?	4	27	51	?	78	65	70	?	74
(ii) <i>Imports of sugar at Bristol (cwts)†</i>												
	1671		1695			1699						
	31,916		38,374			54,480						
(iii) <i>Imports of tobacco at Bristol (lbs)‡</i>												
	1671					1695						
	2,450,560					3,881,876						

* *Bristol Record Soc.* XVII, 262; XIX, 280-1. Ships to and from Newfoundland not included.

† *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, 295. Some came via Portugal.

‡ *Ibid.*, 295.

Now Bristol, with a population of over 20,000 at the end of the century, 8,000 more than at the beginning,⁴² was not only the most important western port but once more the second port of the realm. Other fiscal evidence from the later years of the century confirms this. The tonnage and poundage returns for Bristol in the years 1671-81, and 1690-4 were consistently in excess of duties collected at any other provincial port.⁴³ In 1693-4, for example, £25,792 was levied at Bristol, the next largest amounts being £9,931 at Hull, £8,216 at Exeter, and, significantly, £8,992 at Liverpool another port on the upgrade as a result of the expansion of Atlantic commerce.⁴⁴

39. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, p. xx.

40. W. E. Minchinton, *The Growth of English Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century* (1969) 53-4; Ramsay, 148; *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, pp. xxi, 228.

41. Ramsay, 144.

42. *Bristol Record Soc.* XIX, p. ix; E. Ralph and M. E. Williams, *The Inhabitants of Bristol in 1696*, *Bristol Record Soc.* XXV (1968), p. xx.

43. B. M. Stowe MS 324; P.R.O., E. 351/1050, 1064, 1068, 1079, A.O.I., 758/803; *Calendar of Treasury Books, 1689-92* (ix Pt. I), pp. ccxxii, ccxxvii, ccxxx, ccxxxiv, ccxxxviii-ix.

44. Cf. Ramsay, 161.