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**A Fourteenth-Century Bristol Merchant**

by S. A. C. Penn  
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## A Fourteenth-Century Bristol Merchant

By SIMON A.C. PENN

Very little is known about the background and activities of medieval townsmen. One is largely reliant upon scattered references in a variety of documents if one is to build up anything resembling a reliable picture of the origins, status and interests of even the most prominent merchant. The historian of medieval urban society does not have at his disposal the ledger books of later periods which throw such valuable light upon the life and work of some of the more substantial tradesmen.<sup>1</sup> Where similar records are extant for the medieval period, however, they do allow for some interesting comparisons. The experience of Gilbert Maghfeld suggests that the 14th-century merchant, like his 16th-century counterpart, often as not tried his hand at a variety of activities within the town, as well as having many interests centred on the surrounding rural areas.<sup>2</sup> This link between town and country, in particular, may have been an essential feature in the career of the 14th-century merchant. Surname evidence, for example, suggests that a high proportion of burgesses in some of the larger towns may have been recent immigrants, and it is unlikely that they ever completely lost touch with their place of origin.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately detailed account books, such as Maghfeld's ledger, are very much the exception rather than the rule. Research into both urban and rural documents, however, can enable one to trace in some detail the career of 14th-century merchants, and suggests the extent to which they should be seen within the context of a wider region.

One such example is Robert Gyen of Bristol. Gyen came from a family of minor Somerset landowners centred on North Curry, a small market town situated some six miles east of Taunton at the southern edge of the central Somerset marshlands. The family estate does not appear to have been particularly large. It certainly consisted of moorland, pasture and tenements scattered throughout North Curry hundred, together with a messuage and a windmill. This land had been passed down to Robert by his parents, Robert and Maud. He was certainly in possession by 1338 for in that year he granted the estate to his nephew Robert and wife Christina, together with all the rents and services due from the free and villein tenants.<sup>4</sup>

The reason for this gift is almost certainly because by then Robert had left North Curry and emigrated to Bristol. Indeed, he had settled in the town at least eleven years previously. Gyen was assessed for moveable goods to the value of 25*s.* in the Bristol subsidy of 1327. This was the highest assessment for those individuals resident in the St Ewens district of the town, suggesting that Gyen was already a prominent member of the Bristol community. In fact by that time he had already entered the town's civic élite. Gyen represented the town as bailiff in two consecutive years, 1326–7 and 1327–8, and again in 1331–2 and 1333–4. In the 1340s he remained an active member of the ruling common council and was rewarded by being elected mayor of Bristol on no less than three occasions.<sup>5</sup>

Although the subsidy return suggests that Gyen was living near the centre of the town, probably in the area around Small Street, it is evident that he was also investing in property elsewhere in Bristol and the suburbs. By the late 1330s he was in possession of a tenement with an adjacent croft behind, situated on the lower slopes of Brandon Hill in the Billeswick suburb to the west of the town. This property was subsequently granted 'in free, pure and perpetual alms' to the nearby St Mark's Hospital.<sup>6</sup> Most of our information on Gyen's property investment within Bristol is, in fact, provided on those occasions when he used his property to endow

chantries in various ecclesiastical institutions. Thus, in 1335 Gyen paid 60s. for a licence to grant two messuages in the suburb of the town to a chaplain to celebrate daily service in the church of All Saints. Later, he granted four messuages and 40s. rent in Bristol, held of the king, to the master and brethren of St Mark's in support of another three chaplains. Gyen later obtained a further licence to assign the said rent and property not to St Mark's, as had been originally agreed, but to the prior and convent of Bath instead. However, this was only after he had used yet another messuage together with two acres of land and their appurtenances in the suburbs to endow St Mark's with a regular chaplain to celebrate daily mass.<sup>7</sup>

The financial capital for Gyen's property acquisitions appears to have come largely from his participation in overseas trade. In particular, Gyen was involved with the import of wine from Gascony. Throughout the 1330s and 1340s there is evidence that Gyen was regularly importing wine and other merchandise into Bristol. Most of these ventures were carried out in partnership with another prominent Bristol merchant, Roger Turtle, with whom Gyen jointly owned a number of ships. This may have been only one of a number of temporary partnerships upon which Gyen embarked in order to finance his overseas ventures. Thus, in 1336, mariners and servants were being sent by Gyen and Turtle in their ship 'la Grace Dieu' to buy wines for them in the duchy of Aquitaine. Two years later a similar expedition was set under way, this time in another of their ships, 'la Bonan' of Bristol.<sup>8</sup> Some of the journeys involved were clearly hazardous. In 1342 a commission of oyer and terminer was set up following a complaint by Gyen that two men from Mousehole in Cornwall had carried away his goods to Fowey. A more bizarre incident had taken place even nearer to home some eleven years earlier. Gyen complained that a ship 'la Mariote of Hook', which had been freighted by himself and some of his associates at Bordeaux with wines and other goods destined for Bristol, was stranded at Goldcliff in Monmouthshire. Even worse was the fact that part of the cargo had been washed ashore at various points along the coast line and had been carried away as wreckage by a number of people, including the prior of Goldcliff.<sup>9</sup>

Although such cases reveal that Gyen was sometimes handling his overseas affairs personally it would appear that, like Maghfeld, he entrusted most of his business abroad to a number of subordinate agents. To a great extent this was necessitated by the fact that he had more pressing duties at home when the wine-laden ships arrived in port. On a number of occasions Gyen held the office of deputy butler whose job it was to collect the duty of 2s. on every tun of wine imported by foreign merchants into the ports of Bristol, Chepstow and Gloucester. It was presumably in return for this service to the king that Gyen was granted the bailiwick of the sea-shore of Bristol for life in 1336.<sup>10</sup> In addition to his royal connections, Gyen also fostered links with the local gentry. Sir James Audley, Knight of the Garter and a prominent west country landowner, was a frequent visitor to Bristol. He clearly took Gyen into his trust for he had delivered to him a quantity of victuals and other goods to be kept in safe-keeping in his various houses within the town. These included large amounts of cash, linen, kitchen utensils, books and jewellery, including rings, purses, paternosters and brooches belonging to Lady Audley.<sup>11</sup>

Robert Gyen, therefore, was clearly an active member of Bristol's mid-century community, whether it be in his involvement in civic affairs, trade or as a generous benefactor to the town's various ecclesiastical institutions. His was a full life in every sense, involving no less than three marriages. However, he never lost touch with his roots. The details of Gyen's various chantry endowments make it quite clear who the chaplains were to pray for – his late wife, his father and mother and his brothers, John and William.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Gyen did far more than simply remember his family in his prayers. Throughout his career in Bristol he appears to have steadily accumulated land and property in his native Somerset. The evidence for this comes largely from

an account of the sheriff of Somerset for 1352 concerning Gyen's goods and chattels lying outside the town. The information was recorded due to the lands being taken into the king's hands 'for certain causes'. What these causes were is unknown as Gyen did not die until two years later. Whatever the reason, the record is invaluable in suggesting the extent to which a merchant, active in urban affairs, retained a close connection with the surrounding hinterland.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the property acquired by Gyen was in the immediate vicinity of North Curry itself; a tenement in Abbelake (in Long Sutton), together with the nearby manor of Kingsdon. However, a large part of his rural investment was concentrated to the north of the county, nearer Bristol. By 1352, for example, Gycn's possessions also included the manor of Clutton, the annual farm from lands in Tickenham and Knowle, just south of Bristol, and the manors of Wick and Norton Hawkfield. Gyen's income from these lands was substantial. A valor, of the same year, of all his goods and chattels in Somerset gives a total value of £167 10s. The manor of Clutton alone was worth £32 20s. 8d. Details are provided in the account of the value of its various agricultural implements, together with its substantial body of livestock including 30 hogs, 14 cows, 12 oxen, 3 bullocks, 2 foals, 2 draught animals, a steer and a bull-calf.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Gycn's investment in non-urban property represented yet another 'string to his bow'. Most of this land was probably leased out to local farmers. This would certainly appear to be the case with the land in Tickenham and Knowle. However, it is certainly possible that one of the manors in the vicinity of Bristol may have been farmed by Gyen himself. There is no evidence that Gycn held any form of office in the town after 1350. This may have been due simply to old age. Alternatively, it is not unlikely, considering the amount of land which he held in the area, that he may have left Bristol and retired to the life of a farmer for his last few years.

Despite following a successful career in trade as a Bristol merchant, therefore, Gyen retained links with his native Somerset. Although he continued to hold land in the area around North Curry, Gyen appears to have used his wealth to build up a whole new sphere of landed influence in a small area just south of Bristol itself. Furthermore, this does not represent the full extent of his investments. In Gloucestershire, the manors of Berwick and Olveston were both farmed out to Gyen, together with the advowson of Olveston church received as a grant from the prior and convent of Bath.<sup>15</sup> By the time of his death in 1354 he had broadened his horizons further still. In the town of Oxford he held in fee two solars, a shop and a vacant plot worth 13s. 4d. a year, together with two acres of meadow. This may well have been the consequence of some trading connection. That can surely be the only explanation for the fact that Gyen also held land in the south of the country, namely in Wolverton, Hampshire.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, the amount of information which can be gathered on the activities of a single 14th-century merchant cannot rival that which could be provided by an extant ledger book. However, this does not render the exercise worthless. It is clear from the evidence discussed above that the provincial merchant of the 14th century was more than just a wealthy 'townsman'. He may have originated from a non-urban background. Wealth which he acquired by trade was just as likely to have been invested in agriculture as in urban real property. He may even have returned to the land once his career as an international merchant came to an end. For Robert Gyen, and probably many like him, there was no dichotomy between town and country. They were both an integral part of his life.

### Notes

1 . For example, J. Vanes (ed), *The Ledger of John Smythe, 1538-1550*, Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts JP 19 (London 1974).

2. M.K. James, 'A London merchant of the fourteenth century', *Econ Hist Rev* 2nd Ser 8 (1956), 364–376.
3. See for example, P. McClure, 'Patterns of Migration in the late middle ages: the evidence of English place-name surnames', *Econ Hist Rev* 2nd Ser 32 (1979), 167–182; S. Penn, 'The origins of Bristol migrants in the early fourteenth century: the surname evidence', *TBGAS* 101 (1983), 123–30.
4. *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells* 1, Historical Manuscripts Commission 1907 (1907), 410, 411.
5. *Gloucestershire Subsidy Roll, 1 Edward III, 1327* (Middle Hill Press n.d.); L. Toulmin Smith (ed), *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar by Robert Ricart*, Camden Soc n.s. 5 (1872), 33, 34; J. Latimer, 'The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar: its list of civic officers collated with contemporary legal mss', *TBGAS* 26 (1903), 122–5; F.B. Bickley (ed), *The Litle Red Book of Bristol* 1 (Bristol 1900), 25, 20.
6. C.D. Ross (ed), *Cartulary of St. Marks Hospital Bristol*, Bristol Record Society Publications 21 (1959), 62–3.
7. *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1334–8, 183; 1348–50, 46–7; 1350–4, 179; Ross, op. cit. 31, 63–4.
8. *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1334–8, 230, 279; 1338–40, 1.
9. *Ibid.* 1340–3, 587; 1330–4, 139.
10. *Ibid.* 1327–30, 180, 418; 1330–4, 14, 77, 196–7; 1334–8, 226; James, 'A London merchant', 364.
11. M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307–1399* (Oxford 1959), 252; *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous III, 1348–1377* (1937), 36–7, 42, 289.
12. For example, *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1348–50, 46–7.
13. P.R.O., E199 39/31; see also *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1350–4, 279.
14. *Ibid.*, mm. 1,16.
15. *Ibid.*, m. 19; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1343–5, 264.
16. *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous III*, 264; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1354–8, 530; P.R.O., E199.39/31 m.18.

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