

Introduction

The development of the English shipping industry was a crucial factor in the expansion of England's overseas commerce and naval power from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. The rise of a large indigenous industry created employment for huge numbers of people, provided an outlet for a large proportion of the nation's industrial capital and furnished the shipping and men needed to fight the wars the Empire was built on.¹ Yet, while studies abound of naval history, maritime technology and exploration, merchant shipping, which accounted for by far the greatest part of man's activity upon the seas, has attracted little scholarly attention.² This is particularly true for the period before the 1760s, which has been studied in depth by only three historians. These are Dorothy Burwash, for her pioneering study of the late medieval industry, Dr. Scammell for his scattered contributions on the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, and Ralph Davis for his detailed analysis of the industry's growth in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³ Apart from these, a number of other historians have written on aspects of the shipping industry but, while valuable, these have all been highly circumscribed studies, which are generally based on one source and are only concerned with one particular issue.⁴

¹ Davis estimated that by the late seventeenth century as much as ten per cent of England's fixed capital was invested in the shipping industry and that between ten and twenty percent of the country's non-agricultural workforce were employed building, servicing and victualling the industry: R. Davis, 'Merchant shipping in the economy of the late 17th century', *Economic History Review*, IX (1956), p. 71. Based on rather more anecdotal evidence, Scammell has argued that it was of similar importance to the English economy of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century: G. V. Scammell, 'Shipowning in the economy and politics of early modern England', *The Historical Journal*, XV (1972). Until the mid-seventeenth century the larger merchant ships were regularly hired into the navy during crises and even after that time the ships often served in a support capacity: V. Barbour, 'Dutch and English merchant shipping in the seventeenth century', *Economic History Review*, II (1930), pp. 261-64. England's merchantmen provided the pool of skilled mariners needed to operate the navy's ships throughout the early modern period: N. A. M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain*, Vol. I, 660-1649 (London, 1997), pp. 313-16.

² R. Davis, 'Maritime History: Progress and Problems' in S. Marriner, (ed.), *Business and Businessmen: Studies in Business, Economic and Accounting History* (Liverpool, 1978), p. 169.

³ D. Burwash, *English Merchant Shipping, 1460-1540* (Toronto, 1947); G. V. Scammell, 'English merchant shipping at the end of the middle ages; some east coast evidence', *Economic History Review* Vol. XIII (1961); G. V. Scammell, 'Shipowning in England c.1450-1550', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XII (1962); G. V. Scammell, 'Manning the English merchant service in the sixteenth century', *Mariner's Mirror*, LVI (1970); G. V. Scammell, 'Shipowning in the economy and politics of early modern England', *The Historical Journal*, XV (1972); G. V. Scammell, 'The sinews of war: manning and provisioning English fighting ships c.1550-1650', *Mariner's Mirror*, LXXIII (1987); R. Davis, *The Rise of the Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth & Eighteenth Centuries* (1962).

⁴ Since Davis's historiographical review of the subject in 1978, 'Maritime History: Progress and Problems', the most significant contributions have been: W. R. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester, 1978), pp. 149-77; W. R. Childs, *The Trade and Shipping of Hull* (East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1990); W. R. Childs, 'The commercial shipping of south-western England in the later fifteenth-century', *Mariner's Mirror* LXXXIII (1997); P. Croft, 'English

Of the research carried out on the pre-modern English shipping industry, by far the most sophisticated and interesting is Ralph Davis's account of the industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In part this is because Davis had far better sources to draw on than those working on earlier periods.⁵ However, it is also because he went further in his analysis of the available sources. Most other studies have been confined to either the physical aspects of shipping, such as the size of the marine, its manning requirements, the routes operated and the technology employed, or they have been concerned with the law and institutions governing the industry. This includes the rules governing freighting practices, the remuneration of seamen and the legal status of ships. Although Davis also considered such matters, he went further by carrying out an in depth analysis of the shipping market, the finance of the industry and its operation, management and profitability. By doing this, he was able to achieve what no other historian has done, which is to understand how the industry worked from the inside. Nevertheless, while Davis's study stands out as by far the best and most thorough analysis of the pre-modern English industry, it constitutes only one study, that is based largely on London and is heavily biased towards the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. So, while invaluable, it remains a partial study and the conclusions drawn from it cannot necessarily be applied to earlier centuries, or even to all of the English industry in the eighteenth century. Given this, as Davis himself accepted, much work remains to be done in this field.⁶ Since the English shipping industry was as important as any for the establishment of Britain as the world's richest, most powerful and most economically developed nation, and the history of this industry has been little studied, further investigation of this subject requires no further justification.

Following the approach taken by Davis, this thesis will carry out an in-depth analysis of the Bristol shipping industry during the years 1539-1546. The study focuses on this period because it provides the best conjunction of sources for the shipping industry in the whole century. Of particular value is the survival of a major merchant's ledger, three hundred

mariners trading to Spain and Portugal, 1558-1625', *Mariner's Mirror*, LXIX (1983); B. Dietz, 'The royal bounty and English merchant shipping in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Mariner's Mirror*, LXXVII (1991); A. Hanham, *The Celys and their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 361-97; D. Woodward, 'Ships, masters and shipowners of the Wirral 1550-1650', *Mariner's Mirror*, LXIII (1977); D. Woodward, 'Sixteenth-century shipping: the charter party of the Grace of Neston, 1572', *Irish Economic & Social History*, V (1978).

⁵ The most valuable of these were the 'Instance Papers' in the High Court of Admiralty. This series starts in the 1630s and includes a large number of commercial records. These include nearly two hundred ships' accounts, which were submitted to the court as evidence and not subsequently reclaimed: Davis, *The Rise of the Shipping Industry*, pp. 408-10.

⁶ Davis, 'Maritime History: Progress and Problems', p. 169.

folios long, which belonged to John Smyth, one of Bristol's greatest merchant-shipowners of the sixteenth century.⁷ This is a double-entry account that contains both Smyth's trading accounts and the personal credit accounts he kept with his customers and suppliers. Although Smyth maintained this ledger from 1538-1550, the current study only covers the eight years from 1539-1546. It excludes 1538 because Smyth did not entirely change over from his old book to the surviving ledger until the spring of 1539. The study terminates in 1546 because Smyth sold his own ship, the *Trinity*, in that year and because many of his trading accounts for the later 1540s are incomplete.⁸

Apart from Smyth's ledger the study of Bristol's shipping industry during the period 1539-1546 is facilitated by the survival of four of the city's customs accounts from this period. These record all of the port's international trade for a given accounting year, which ran from the end of September.⁹ Since Bristol was the only official port for the eastern end of the Bristol Channel, the accounts list all the declared international trade for Bristol Channel and its tributaries east of Bridgwater. All goods were meant to be declared at the customs house in Bristol, where the officer recorded the name of the ship, the port it came from, the name of the ship's master and the date the ship entered or left port. They then listed the goods laded on a ship, the names of the merchants who owned the goods and the amount of customs charged on them. These accounts are extremely useful because they help to set the information received from Smyth's ledger in a broader context and make it possible to determine the size and nature of Bristol's international shipping market.

The customs accounts and John Smyth's ledger provide the two main sources on which this thesis is based. However, a number of other sources, such as the surviving commercial accounts of the Tyndall brothers (1544-45) and various state papers from this period also provide valuable additional information about the city's shipping industry.¹⁰ When combined and linked together, these sources make it possible to conduct an analysis of the Bristol industry that is more sophisticated than is possible for any other decade or other English port during the sixteenth century. Since this thesis is concerned primarily with one

⁷ J. Vanes (ed.), *The Ledger of John Smythe 1538-1550* (London, 1974).

⁸ App. 5, *Trinity* of Bristol, 20 March 1546; *Smyth's Ledger*, fos. 261, 272, 276, 282, 290.

⁹ These accounts cover the years 1541/2, 1542/3, 1543/4 and 1545/6: P.R.O. E122 21/10, 199/4, 21/12, 21/15. All of the accounts have survived in good condition, except that for 1543/4, which is heavily damaged.

¹⁰ For the accounts of the Tyndall brothers, see: J. Vanes (ed.), *Documents Illustrating the Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century* (B.R.S. Publications, XXXI, 1979), pp. 118-21.

port during a short period of time, it will not be suggested that everything that can be learnt from this study will be applicable to the rest of the English industry during the sixteenth century. However, it will provide significant new insights into the nature of England's shipping market and its shipping industry at this time. For those whose interest is primarily concerned with trade, rather than shipping, it should be noted that although chapter 2 and Appendix 5 provide information about Bristol's trade during these years, the city's commerce is only studied in so far as it helps to illuminate the nature and scale of the city's shipping industry. This thesis will not therefore concern itself with any of the more general debates about Bristol's commerce during this century, such as whether the decline of the cloth trade was impoverishing the city or whether the balance of the city's legally declared trade was shifting towards imports.¹¹ Although such long-term changes would have been important to Bristol's merchants, they provide few clues as what was happening to the shipping market, for what mattered to the shipping industry was not the value of trade but the tonnage of the goods shipped and the distance they had to be carried. Since it was perfectly possible for the demand for shipping to rise at the same time as the value of trade was falling, statistics relating to the value of trade, or the previous discussion of these statistics by historians, are of little relevance to the current study.¹²

The thesis will proceed by examining the economic conditions and characteristics of the Bristol shipping industry in the mid-sixteenth century. It will then carry out a detailed analysis of the city's shipping market during the period 1539-46. The last two chapters are concerned with the strategies Bristol's shipowners adopted to maximise the returns on their shipping concerns. Chapter 3 deals with the commercial strategies adopted by Bristol's shipowners during the period 1539 to February 1543. Chapter 4 is concerned with the deployment and operation of Bristol's ships during the 1543-46 war with France. It also examines how Bristol's shipowners maximised the benefits they received from ship ownership at this time. The conclusion sums up what has been learnt and considers relevance of the discoveries made in this thesis to the understanding of the English shipping industry of this era.

¹¹ J. Vanes (ed.), *Documents Illustrating the Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century* (B.R.S. Publications, Vol. XXXI, Kendal, 1979), pp. 25-27; D. H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700* (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 24-41.

¹² For instance, during the years 1539-46 the poor profitability of the export trade in cloth encouraged merchants to redirect at least part of their working capital into grain and lead. Since these goods were much bulkier than cloth, the demand for export freight space increased despite the poor condition of the cloth trade, which was, in terms of value, the mainstay of Bristol's export trade: see chapter 2.