Medieval Trade & Warfare

Roger Barrett

Salcombe and Kingsbridge: Settlement Origins

It was not until 1244 that the first known reference to Salcombe appears in medieval documents[1]. Thereafter, the settlement in the 'salt coomb' or salt valley, remained obscure until the late fourteenth century and a further five hundred years were to pass before it achieved any form of administrative status. Unlike Dartmouth, Salcombe was never a borough and Professor Harold Fox, writing about the evolution of the fishing villages on the South Devon coast described it as 'a forgotten settlement'.

> Here was a port with a fleet of respectable size both in the fourteenth century and the seventeenth, a place important and wealthy enough to attract the unwelcome attentions of a Breton and Norman force in 1403. Yet in terms of lordship and institutions it was a forgotten settlement. It was not a Domesday manor; it was not a separate vill for taxation purposes; it had no ancient parish church; it straddled manorial boundaries; its inhabitants at first had no courts or other formal institutions of their own[2] [See also *Appendix 1*].

An absence of formal institutions means a general absence of written records, and it is for this reason that no satisfactory account of Salcombe's early history has ever been written. The early history of Kingsbridge, however, is better documented, although uncertainty still remains about its origins. The place name was mentioned as early as 962 in an Anglo-Saxon charter of King Edgar and is believed to refer to the bridge between the royal estates of West Alvington and Chillington. The town's situation, at the centre of the fertile South Hams and at the head of an important estuary, made it an ideal site for settlement. Kingsbridge is not recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086, and until recently it was considered that the town was founded in the early thirteenth century.[3] However, it is now believed that a planned urban burgh (a fortified town) was established in the tenth century on the spur of land which rises above the bridging point (underlying the present Mill Street).[4]

Soon after the Conquest, part of the royal estates came into the possession of the Abbots of Buckfast and a charter to hold a market in Kingsbridge was obtained in 1219 with the town becoming a borough in 1238. Together with its neighbour, Dodbrooke (the Domesday 'Dodesbroch'), Kingsbridge became an important collecting point and trading centre for the farming communities of the South Hams.[5]

Which Portlemouth?

From the many references in medieval documents to the 'ships of Portlemouth' (the port at the mouth of the river), it has long been held that East Portlemouth, and not its opposite neighbour Salcombe, was the centre of shipping and shipbuilding activity in the estuary until at least the early to mid-fifteenth century. However, one historian, Tony Collings, has argued that the references to Portlemouth are in fact to the manor of West Portlemouth which lay on the Salcombe side of the estuary to the south of Malborough.[6] Although now no more than a farm, West Portlemouth, at the time of the Devonshire Lay Subsidy of 1332, enjoyed greater prosperity and had more taxpayers than its eastern namesake. Professor Harold Fox is also of the view that the 'ships of Portlemouth, which were pressed into royal service, almost certainly came from Salcombe: the town lay close to the manor of West Portlemouth.'[7] (See *Appendix 1* for more information about the status of Salcombe and Portlemouth in the medieval period.)

A further possible explanation is that Portlemouth was a generic name for all the ports and harbours in the Kingsbridge Estuary. In the *New Maritime History of Devon, Volume One*, it is stated that the names of river mouths were often used for groups of ports in medieval customs records.[8] Indeed nearly all the ports in South Devon bore the suffix -mouth e.g. Axmouth, Ottermouth, Exmouth, Teignmouth, Dartmouth, Portlemouth and, of course, Plymouth.

Medieval Devon. Extract from a map in Vol. I of 'The New Maritime History of Devon'. The caption reads: 'The names of river mouths shown in capital letters are those often used for groups of ports in the customs records'

In addition the naval historian N.A.M. Rodgers, has referred to the medieval administrative convention of grouping the ports of an estuary together under a single name, and to the fact that the obligation imposed on ports by the Crown in time of war to provide ships was, in many cases placed on a 'syndicate' of seaports.[9] This explanation, whereby Portlemouth refers to all the ports and harbours in the Kingsbridge Estuary may well be the correct one. The convention, however, was not consistently applied as sometimes both Portlemouth and Kingsbridge are mentioned in medieval documents.

During the fourteenth century, ownership of the rights over the Estuary foreshore were transferred to the royal Duchy of Cornwall, which possesses them to this day. They included all the land covered by the water at high tide, with the right to charge dues on anything that floated, moored, was beached, or anchored, as well as tolls on cargoes imported or exported. These dues were known as 'petty customs', to distinguish them from the great customs that went to the crown.[10] From the fifteenth century, the harbours of the Estuary came within the jurisdiction of the Exeter and Dartmouth Customs district and the 'King's Customs' were collected by an officer at Dartmouth.

Medieval Trade in the Kingsbridge Estuary

Poor or non-existent roads in the medieval period meant that most goods were transported by boat around the shores of the estuary and the adjacent coast, and this led to the growth of a flourishing coastal trade at Kingsbridge at the estuary head – a trade that persisted until the coming of the railway in 1893.

In the town, the abbots built corn mills and developed it as an outlet for corn and wool from their estates. The Abbey had strong trading links with the continent, especially with Florence, and it is possible that some of its wool and cloth exports were shipped through the port.

A major export trade was that of local slate. Lying at the head of the estuary, Kingsbridge dominated the rich quarries of blue slate and building stone in the area.[11] Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, thousands of tons of roofing slates and stone from quarries in Charleton, Stokenham and South Pool parishes were transported by Kingsbridge and Portlemouth ships to ports along the coasts of southern England.[12] In 1483 five great barges supplied stone to face the square tower at Dartmouth Castle at a cost of £5 16s 8d.[13] Other notable buildings supplied from South Devon quarries included Windsor Castle and the Mont-Saint-Michel Abbey in Normandy.[14]

Fishing clearly took place within the estuary, but it was the rich fishing grounds off the coast that formed the basis of an important coastal trade for Portlemouth ships. In the late middle ages the South Devon fishing grounds were the richest in the county and large

cargoes of fish are known to have been sent to the port of Exeter.[15] As fish was usually the sole commodity carried to Exeter by Portlemouth shipmasters, it is likely that they were involved in sea-fishing themselves.[16] Exeter's fish imports from South Devon and Cornwall grew substantially in the 1390s and into the fifteenth century, with hake, pilchard, herring, cod and ray accounting for the bulk of the trade.

In the early fifteenth century another trade, in which Portlemouth ships played a role, was in carrying pilgrims to the shrine of St. James of Compostella.[17] Pilgrims could only be carried by licensed ships and in 1434, Roger Broke master of the *John* of Portlemouth was granted a licence on 3rd February to carry sixty passengers and on 18th May, forty passengers to Corunna.[18] South Devon ships and mariners, especially those from Dartmouth, played a prominent part in the Bordeaux wine trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, albeit on a much reduced scale after 1453, when Gascony was lost to the English crown. Between 1372 and 1386 Dartmouth sent at least 79 ships to Bordeaux. The contribution made by Kingsbridge estuary ships was much smaller, with Portlemouth sending only one ship of 26 tons.[19] By the fifteenth century the references are to Salcombe not Portlemouth ships and so, in 1448-9, we learn that Dartmouth sent fourteen ships to Bordeaux, Plymouth eight and Salcombe one.[20] Like the fruit trade in, which Salcombe ships were to play a major role in the nineteenth century, this was a carrying trade for other ports, such as Bristol, London and Hull.

Salcombe ships were still engaged in the wine trade in 1538 for in that year the *Mary* of Salcombe, carrying a cargo of wine, was saved from being wrecked by one William Tele of Rye. The Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports ordered that Tele be rewarded with six tuns of wine from the ship, but this was disputed by the London merchants who owned the cargo.[21]

In the 1490s about two-thirds of the tin produced in Cornwall and Devon was exported from Devon ports, particularly Dartmouth and Exeter and, in 1493, Salcombe was one of the ports through which Walter Enderby and Roger Holland were licensed to export 400 blocks of tin. [22, 23] The design of South Devon ships evolved during the late middle ages and by the 1480s, the skeleton-built carvel ship was well established. A customs report of 1481 noted the movement of fifteen Devon carvels, of which one belonged to Salcombe and one to Kingsbridge.[24]

Portlemouth Ships in the King's Service

*Edward I
(Dean and Chapter
of Westminster)*

The ships 'of Portlemouth' – be they from the east or west of the 'port's mouth' or from the estuary as a whole – were summoned by royal writ on at least eight occasions during the fourteenth century to help fight the King's enemies in Scotland and France.

In November 1302 Edward I, the 'Hammer of the Scots', ordered 'the bailiffs and good men of Dertemouth, Portelmuth and Bery (Bigbury) to send two ships furnished with men and necessaries to Newtown-by-Ayr in aid of his Scotch expedition, 'so as to be there by the feast of the Ascension, ready to set forth against the Scots at the king's wages'[25]

Whilst the services of the ships supplied to Edward I were paid for by the Crown, his son Edward II required ports to send ships at their own expense to aid his doomed Scottish campaign. When, in 1310, Dartmouth pleaded that it was too poor to do so, a writ was sent to the bailiffs of Totnes, Brixham, Portlemouth and Kingsbridge ordering 'you who are the chief towns of the said port' to help.[26]

In August 1326, Edward II, threatened with an invasion from France by his estranged wife, Queen Isabella the 'She-Wolf of France', ordered the ports of the south-west, including *Dertemuth* and *Portelmuth* to send every ship over 50 tons to join his fleet at Portsmouth.[27] In September Isabella made a successful landing on the Suffolk coast and began a campaign which ended with her husband's murder and the succession of their son as Edward III.

In June 1328, Edward III, one year into his reign and under the domination of his mother and her lover Mortimer, issued a decree from Evesham ordering all ships over 40 tons burthen to be brought back to their ports. The mayors, bailiffs and communities of the ports, including *Portlemue*, were required to provide these ships with men and victuals, arms and other necessaries and to be ready to provide a defence against malefactors assembled on the coasts of Normandy and Poitou to aggrieve and rob merchants and other subjects of the king.'[28] Ten years later, in 1338, Edward III, now

*Edward III
(from Cassell's History of
England 1902)*

firmly secure on his throne, issued a proclamation to the bailiffs of ports, including *Portlemue,* which was aimed at stamping out acts of piracy against foreign merchants
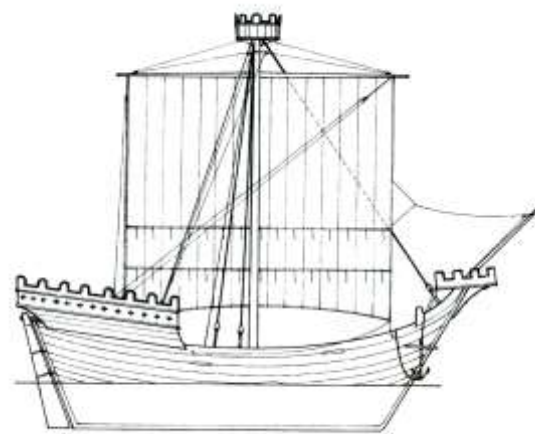
under his royal protection.[29] In 1342, at the start of the Hundred Years War with France, a disputed succession in Brittany led the king to send a large fleet to support one of the rival claimants. Edward followed with more ships later in the year. One of the fleets numbered 119 vessels and of these Dartmouth sent twelve ships and one barge and Portlemouth, twelve barges and one balinger.[30] Developed originally for the Basque whale fishery, balingers could be as large as 50 tons and able to carry a useful cargo. Barges were originally clinker-built, oared vessels, smaller than the galley, but by the fifteenth century they were often larger than the balingers.[31]

After the king and his troops had disembarked at Brest, many of the ships deserted, leaving them 'in very great peril'. Two of the deserters were from Portlemouth: *la Saveorescog*, Adam Norais, master and *la James*, Richard Heyward, master. And so, in June 1338, the bailiffs of *Portilmuth* were ordered to arrest and 'detain the ships, the masters, and the mariners thereof with all the goods and things therein, until further order'.[32]

In 1346 Edward assembled a vast fleet to transport his army to France for the great campaign of Crecy. According to the roll of Calais, Dartmouth sent 31 ships and 757 men; Portlemouth, five ships and 96 men; Plymouth, 26 ships and 603 men; and Yealm, two ships and 48 men.[33]

Two years later, in 1348, two ships sailed into the harbour of Melcombe Regis in Dorset, (now Weymouth), carrying with them the Black Death from Europe. The

and after-castles and a fighting top, from a manuscript of 1330 (British Library)

pestilence quickly spread into Devon, with successive epidemics wiping out over half the population.[34] As a precaution against the spread of disease, ships entering a port were placed in quarantine for forty days (*quaranta* being Italian for forty). It is likely that Quarantine Bay, between Frogmore and South Pool Creeks, takes its name from this period.

The Breton Raid 1403

Although England was officially at peace with France between 1389 and 1415, private warfare and piracy continued unabated. Men, such as John Hawley of Dartmouth, were regularly accused by the French, Flemings and Castilians of flagrant piracy and it was probably the 'spoilations' of Devon seamen that led to regular reprisal raids from across the Channel. On 10 August 1403, a Breton and Norman force, under the Count de la

Marche, landed near Plymouth, and meeting with very little resistance sacked and burned the town, killing or carrying away the townsmen for ransom. They then went on and raided Salcombe.[35] Two years before the raid, a stone Chapel-of-ease., dedicated to St. John the Baptist, had been built in the town, indicating a well-established community.[36]

The following account of the raid is recorded in James Wylie's *History of England under Henry the Fourth*, published in 1884.

> The marauders next visited a small island named *Salmue*, or *Salmouth*, probably in the entrance of the wide estuary called the Kingsbridge River, which was defended by a strong castle called Salcombe. This little island they plundered likewise, and then turned their vessels homeward. But in re-crossing the Channel, about the middle of September, they encountered a furious gale, and only escaped to St. Malo with the loss of twelve vessels and their crews.'[37]

Wylie added a footnote which indicated that '*Salmue* must certainly be looked for in the neighbourhood of Dartmouth for, John Hawley of Dartmouth is commissioned to impress 'from Seaton to *Zalme*'[38]

Another account of the raid can be found in the *Chronicles of Jehan de Wavrin* (1398-1474).

> Sir Jacques de Bourbon, Count of La Marche, accompanied by his two sons, Louis and John, with them twelve hundred knights and esquires... ravaged Plymouth with fire and sword. After this he went with all his company to a little island called *Salmue* which was destroyed in like manner; but at the taking of the latter were several new knights made, namely, the two brothers of Count Louis of Vendome, and John of Bourbon, the eldest son; with them several gentlemen of the company. Afterwards, when the Count of La Marche, with all his army, had sojourned three days overrunning the whole island, fearing the English, who were preparing on all sides to attack him, like a prudent man he departed, for if he had remained there one day more he would never have departed without a fight.[39]

Assuming Salcombe was indeed the location of the raid, the question arises: where was the 'small island' and the 'strong castle'? Historians and archaeologists have established conclusively that the present Salcombe castle (Fort Charles), or what remains of it, is of Tudor origin.[40] No evidence has been uncovered for earlier fortifications on the site, although Anne Born referred to 'a local tradition, still extant at the present time, that the castle is of Saxon origin. Richard Polwhele in his *History of Devonshire* writes of Salcombe Castle: This has been attributed to the Saxons'. Abraham Hawkins briefly reiterates this; and the *Victoria County History* lists Salcombe Castle in Malborough parish as a homestead

moat'.[41]

The little island that 'they plundered likewise' suggests an island large enough to have movable goods or livestock worth plundering. This would rule out the only islands near the entrance of the estuary: the rocky platform – an island at high tide – on which Fort Charles, the Tudor castle, stands and the 'Island' at North Orestone which, after centuries of land reclamation, is now incorporated into the area around Island Street. Perhaps the marauders mistook one of the tongues (or 'hams') of land projecting into the estuary between the tidal creeks, for an island?

Maritime Lawlessness in the Fifteenth Century

In 1418, while Henry V was away fighting the French, his brother the Duke of Bedford, ordered an inquiry into the seizure of a 156 ton, Spanish ship, the *Notre Dame*, by certain squires and yeomen residing in the manor of South Huish near Salcombe. Laden with 'wines and other merchandise of the King's enemies', the ship had put into the port of Portlemouth and, after anchoring in a bay off the 'Bolt Nose', the crew had surrendered themselves as prisoners. It comes as no surprise to learn that, rather than handing the cargo over to the authorities, the men, bearing familiar local names such as Fairweather, Sture, Wakeham, Lidstone, and Michelmore, kept it for themselves.[42]

Maritime lawlessness and disorder was again rife during the War of the Roses in the mid-fifteenth century. One of those to profit from the collapse in political authority was Thomas Gille, merchant and ship owner of Kingsbridge 'whose ships were at sea from the mid-1430s through to the 1450s, plundering friend and foe alike. In January 1440 one of his vessels, the *Christopher* of Dartmouth, of 320 tons, attacked an English ship, the *George* of Wells (Norfolk), of 120 tons, at Start Point, sinking the vessel after plundering it of goods valued at £600.'[43] (Other ships that Gilles owned were the *Anthony* and *Katherine* in 1436, the *Anthony* and the *Young Gille* in 1451 and the *St. Mary* of St. Andrews in 1453.[44]

Appendix 1: 'Which Portlemouth?'

An extract from Professor Harold Fox's book *The Evolution of the Fishing Village,* quoted at the beginning of this paper, refers to Salcombe as a forgotten settlement.[2] Professor Fox went on to conclude that:

> Salcombe was recognised by the Crown to some degree because some of the ships
> `of Portlemouth' which were pressed into royal service almost certainly came from

Salcombe: the town lay close to the manor of West Portlemouth. Part of the town came to be reckoned as a separate manor but, like Exmouth, it was very much of a boundary settlement, the built-up area spilling over into the territory of the Domesday manor of Batson. Ecclesiastically, Salcombe was a chapelry, license for a chapel having been granted in 1420: *Dunstan, ed., Register, vol. 1, p. 6.* Salcombe either escaped royal taxation or was subsumed within the combined payment for the vills of Batson and Bolberry. The relatively high sum paid by those vills could possibly indicate inclusion of some of the urban area of Salcombe. The place was not, therefore, taxed separately, despite having a market.

T. Collings in his article, *Which Portlemouth?* also questioned the accepted view that medieval references to shipping at Portlemouth refer to East Portlemouth. [6]

In the Devonshire Lay Subsidy of 1322, the ten tax-payers at East Portlemouth, contributed a total of 7s 2d; this is suggestive of little more than subsistence agriculture. Across the water the communities were wealthier; although Malborough was not mentioned as such, of its constituent manors, at Sewer and West Portlemouth seventeen taxpayers paid a total of 19s 4d, and at Batson and Bolberry another seventeen paid a total of 24s 0d.' The average payment on the west side of the harbour was higher than the maximum paid on the east side, and this is indicative of wealth being created, associated with the market having been established within Malborough parish. Conceivably one of the fairs was held at Salcombe and survived into the nineteenth century, albeit with a change of date, to become that referred to by the Lysons brothers as being held `at Whitsuntide for trinkets, sweetmeats, &c. There seems to be no documentary support for those who have taken the medieval references to shipping at Portlemouth to refer to East Portlemouth, and have inferred that it subsequently declined with activity shifting to Salcombe.

Such decline as East Portlemouth experienced was not until the later nineteenth century, when the Duchess of Cleveland instigated a policy of evicting the more humble tenantry and demolishing their cottages in order to raise the social tone of the parish. This is attested to by the census figures, which record a decline in the number of houses between 1871 and 1881 from 82 to 61, and of population from 387 to 302.

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