

A GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED¹

In the thirteenth century, the kings of England realized that a good deal of money could be made by imposing duties on merchants trading overseas.² Largely, if not universally, the monarch relied on locals to collect these duties, and in turn, required these customers to appear at the Exchequer and account for the income they had collected in his name. Of course, given the amount of money involved, the king didn't just take the customers' word for this. They had to prove that they had taken in every farthing the crown was owed, and they did so by drawing up customs accounts,³ listing all dutiable imports and exports ship by ship and merchant by merchant, with the duties charged entered into the right margin. Let's look at a typical entry.⁴

[3] Out of the ship of Lam van Passe called 'George of Antwerp' on the same day [27 Jan. 1446]

From Goyken van Lente for 500 lb. of hemp. Value 66s 8d.....customs 10d
From the said skipper for 60 measures of woad. Value 30s.....customs 4½d
From Henry Nase for 2 bales of Toulouse madder, 1 fat with
4 dozen knives, 6 dozen belts, 40 dozen shears and
haberdashery of various kinds. Value £6 10scustoms 19½d

The Exchequer clerks worked through these accounts, checking the customers' calculations line by line – entering a dot over the customs charge if everything was correct and a cross in the left margin if there was any irregularity – and summing up the crown's income page by page. It must have been stultifying work, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the customs accounts are among the most spectacularly dull administrative documents the English

¹ If you have already worked with customs accounts, you should skip to the introduction.

² In the fifteenth century, the income from such duties formed a large part of the royal income: Stuart Jenks, 'Die Effizienz des englischen Exchequers zur Zeit des Hundertjährigen Krieges' *Archiv für Diplomatik* 33, 1987, p. 337.

³ These are called the 'particulars of customs accounts' (TNA: PRO, E122) to distinguish them from the enrolled accounts (TNA: PRO, E356), which contain summaries of customs income in a particular port during a particular time under various headings, together with the customers' disbursements of royal customs income.

⁴ *infra*, p. 72.

monarchy produced in the middle ages.

However, it is precisely the mindnumbing detail which makes the medieval customs accounts so important. They put flesh on the bare bones of England's trade statistics.⁵ The enrolled account for 1445/46 tells us that foreign merchants imported and exported merchandise worth a total of £18,409 6s,⁶ but only the customs account tells us about the ship of Lam van Passe and the details of the merchandise Goyken van Lent, Lam van Passe, Henry Nase and all the others shipped in and out of London in 1445/46. With the information the customs accounts provide on shipping, merchants and merchandise, economic historians can ask all sorts of questions. Since foreign trade was largely, if not wholly the province of wealthy merchants who left their footprints all over the urban and national records, particularly because they governed the towns in England and abroad, one can trace the careers of individual merchants, follow the trade of groups of merchants, be they members of one London company like the mercers, citizens of one town like Bristol or foreign nationals like Hansards or Florentines, Genoese and Venetians. In much the same way, the information in the customs accounts on products and prices allows one to focus on one product or another, be it the English cloth, salt, furs and so forth, asking who controlled the trade, how trade volume and prices developed and so forth. Finally, the information the customs accounts provide on shipping can be analyzed to uncover shipping routes and the range as well as the patterns of shipping (in convoy or alone, seasonal variations). One can also characterize individual skippers' mode of operation (plying a regular route or trying one's luck as a tramp steamer) and even piece together a biography or two.⁷

As important as the customs accounts are, they are a comparatively recent addition to the historian's arsenal of sources. They were rediscovered not quite a hundred years ago, in 1911,⁸ and not much was made of them before Gras

⁵ These are transmitted in the Enrolled Customs Accounts, which survive from 1279/80. As of even date, the first seven volumes of the calendar for the medieval period have appeared under the auspices of the List and Index Society: Stuart Jenks (ed.), *The Enrolled Customs Accounts (PRO, E356, E372, E364) 1279/80-1508/09 (1523/24)* (List and Index Society 303, 306-7, 313-4, 319, 324), London 2004-8. The remaining five volumes will appear more or less yearly.

⁶ The enrolled account for petty customs in 1445/46 is edited *infra*, p. 206-14. The figure for miscellaneous alien merchandise is contained in § 2, p. 206.

⁷ For a thumbnail biography of Lam (or Lambrecht) van Passe see Gustaaf Asaert, *De Antwerpse scheepvaart in de XV^e eeuw (1394-1480). Bijdrage tot de economische geschiedenis van de stad Antwerpen* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren 72), Brussels 1973, p. 338-41.

⁸ Susan Flavin, Evan Jones (eds.), *Bristol's trade with Ireland and the Continent, 1503-1601. The evidence of the Exchequer customs accounts*, Dublin 2009, p. xi, citing *Royal commission on public records, first report*, appendix I, part 1, p. 45 and 47.

stumbled across them quite fortuitously when investigating the English corn trade.⁹ In the 1920s, a group of scholars working under the direction of Eileen Power at the London School of Economics studied them intensely, in the hope of demonstrating their value as evidence. Whether the customs accounts recorded real ships, real merchants and the goods they in fact shipped was open to doubt, since one of the group, Eleanor Carus Wilson, was rightly sceptical about another class of royal records, the aulnage accounts.¹⁰ The fruit of their labours was a seminal volume of essays, published in 1933, entitled *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*,¹¹ which marked out the lines of inquiry which have been followed ever since. Five of the seven articles utilized the customs accounts to great effect to discuss trade, and each of them was followed by a host of similar enquiries.

Eileen Power's analysis of the wool trade (p. 39-90) not only spawned a much more detailed study of English wool exports,¹² but also other studies of individual products like salt,¹³ furs,¹⁴ wine¹⁵ and lead,¹⁶ all of which made meticulous and systematic use of the customs accounts to ask who was involved in trading a particular product, what different types of wool, salt, furs etc. were traded, the bottoms in which they were shipped (occasionally also the sailing season), prices, the total value or volume of the trade and the share the English and their foreign competitors had in the trade in question.

M.M. Postan's contribution on the economic and political relations between England and the Hanse (p. 91-153) was followed by two more detailed studies of the Hansards in England¹⁷ and of other groups of foreigners

⁹ Norman Scott Brien Gras, *The Early English Customs System. A documentary study of the institutional and economic history of the customs from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century*, Cambridge/Mass. 1918, p. vii. Gras, p. 3-12, deals with the literature on the customs up to his time.

¹⁰ Eleanor Carus-Wilson, 'The Aulnage accounts: A criticism', *Economic History Review*, 1st Ser., 2, 1929, p. 114-23, repr. E.M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval Merchant Venturers. Collected Studies*, London 1954, p. 279-91.

¹¹ Eileen Power, M.M. Postan (eds.), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, London 1933.

¹² T.H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1977.

¹³ A.R. Bridbury, *England and the Salt Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford 1955.

¹⁴ Elspeth M. Veale, *The English Fur Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford 1966, second revised edition London 2003; Robert Delort, *Le commerce des fourrures en occident à la fin du moyen âge (vers 1300-vers 1450)* (Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome fasc. 236), 2 vols., Rome 1978

¹⁵ Margery Kirkbride James, *Studies in the Medieval Wine Trade*, Oxford 1971.

¹⁶ Ian Blanchard, *International Lead production and Trade in the "Age of the Saigerprozess" 1460-1560* (Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte Beiheft 85), Stuttgart 1995.

¹⁷ Stuart Jenks, *England, die Hanse und Preußen. Handel und Diplomatie, 1377-1474* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur hansischen Geschichte NF 38), 3 vols., Cologne 1992;

trading with England, namely the inhabitants of the Low Countries,¹⁸ Castilians,¹⁹ Irish,²⁰ Portuguese,²¹ Norwegians²² and Italians.²³ The salient feature of these works is that their authors have systematically tracked down every relevant foreigner in the customs accounts and have used them to build up a typology of the merchandise which was traded back and forth. Some, too, have used the customs accounts to analyze shipping, detailing the province of the vessels, their routes and seasonal variations in shipping.

Carus Wilson's article on the English trade with Iceland (p. 155-82) inspired analyses of English trade with Castile²⁴ and the Mediterranean,²⁵ while the immense literature on the merchant adventurers²⁶ and the English trading companies of the sixteenth century²⁷ lies beyond the scope of this essay.

Finally, Carus Wilson's article on the Overseas Trade of Bristol (p. 183-246) and Thrupp's on the London Grocers (p. 247-92) inaugurated a series of studies of the foreign trade of the urban elites of Bristol,²⁸ Exeter²⁹

John D. Fudge, *Cargoes, Embargoes and Emissaries. The Commercial and Political Interaction of England and the German Hanse, 1450-1510*, Toronto 1995.

¹⁸ N.J.M. Kerling, *Commercial relations of Holland and Zealand with England from the late thirteenth century to the close of the middle ages*, Leiden 1954; Jean de Sturler, *Les relations politiques et les échanges commerciaux entre le ducé de Brabant et l'Angleterre au moyen âge*, Paris 1936; Marie-Rose Thielemans, *Bourgogne et Angleterre: Relations politiques et économiques entre les Pays-Bas bourguignons et l'Angleterre, 1435-1467* (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Travaux de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres 30), Brussels 1966.

¹⁹ Wendy R. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian trade in the later Middle Ages*, Manchester 1978.

²⁰ Wendy R. Childs, 'Ireland's trade with England in the later Middle Ages' *Irish Economic and Social History* 9, 1982, p. 5-33.

²¹ Wendy R. Childs, 'Anglo-Portuguese Relations in the Fourteenth Century', James L. Gillespie (ed.), *The Age of Richard II*, Stroud 1997, p. 27-49.

²² Arved Nedkvitne, 'Handelssjøfarten mellom Norge og England i høymiddelalderen', *Sjøfartshistorisk Årbok*, 1976, p. 7-252.

²³ A.A. Ruddock, *Italian Merchants and Shipping at Southampton, 1270-1600* (Southampton Records Series 1), Southampton 1951.

²⁴ Childs, *Anglo-Castilian trade*, covers both English trading to Castile and Castilians trading to England.

²⁵ Stuart Jenks, *Robert Sturmy's commercial expedition to the Mediterranean (1457/8)* (Bristol Record Society Publications 58), Bristol 2006.

²⁶ This was inaugurated by an article by Eleanor Carus Wilson, 'The Origins and Early Development of the Merchant Adventurers' Organization in London', *Economic History Review* 1st Ser. 4, 1932/3, p. 147-76, repr. Carus Wilson, *Merchant Adventurers*, p. 143-82.

²⁷ For a rough overview of the monographic literature on the English companies see Jenks, *Robert Sturmy's commercial expedition*, p. 28-48.

²⁸ Eleanor Carus Wilson (ed.), *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the later Middle Ages* (Bristol Record Society Publication 7), Bristol 1937.

and York, Beverley and Hull.³⁰ In addition, these articles inspired an interest in the foreign trade of the members of the greater London companies such as the mercers³¹ and grocers.³² Common to all these studies is that the authors have trawled through the customs accounts, looking for the members of the group on which their studies are focussed and identifying the products they imported and exported. This, in turn, prompted them to determine the relative weight of individual merchants within the group and of the entire group in relation to its competitors.

If this survey has conveyed the impression that no stone has been left unturned, that would be false. While much remains to be discovered, it must be emphasized that it is essential to understand the customs accounts in the proper context. They are fiscal documents, forming one part of the procedure imposed on the customers when accounting for the crown's customs income before the Exchequer. That is the reason why all the other accounting documents relating to the London accounts for 1445/46 are published in this edition. More importantly, it is the reason for the highly technical introduction to the volume, which explains the customs system and the Exchequer's accounting procedures.

²⁹ Maryanne Kowaleski, *Local markets and regional trade in medieval Exeter*, Cambridge 1995.

³⁰ Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants. York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 38), Cambridge 1998.

³¹ Anne Sutton, *The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods and People, 1130-1578*, Aldershot 2005.

³² Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community. The Grocers' Company & the Politics & Trade of London 1000-1485*, New Haven 1995.