

Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 9

The Trade of the Estuary in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Whilst the historical record is largely silent between the mid seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, a considerable amount of information on the trade and produce of the Kingsbridge Estuary in the period between the 1790s and 1820s is to be found in the works of the contemporary antiquaries and topographers Richard Polwhele (1793-1806)¹, Abraham Hawkins (1818)², Daniel and Samuel Lysons (1822)³ and the agriculturists Robert Fraser (1794)⁴ and Charles Vancouver (1808)⁵.

Corn, Barley and Malt

During this period the area around the estuary was particularly noted for its production of corn, barley, malt and cider. According to Polwhele in 1793, more corn was shipped from Kingsbridge 'possibly, than from any other port in Devon Shire'. Robert Fraser, whose observations on Devon's rural economy were recorded for the benefit of the Board of Agriculture, was unstinting in his praise for the good husbandry of the area.

The district of South Devon, which is around Kingsbridge, at Salcombe, and from thence to Dartmouth on the one hand and to Modbury, is remarkable for its produce of barley, which is exported from Salcombe in quantities hardly to be credited. The whole of this country abounds with hills and narrow vales, all of which are highly cultivated. I am fully convinced, that in point of the practice of cultivation, the labour and care of manuring their lands, there are no people in any district of England of equal extent, where there is so much good husbandry as in the south of Devon.

Food shortages throughout the country during the late 1790s and early 1800s meant there was a ready market for the products of this good husbandry and shipping reports in local newspapers contain many references to Salcombe ships carrying corn, barley and oats to ports such as Exmouth, Plymouth and Liverpool. In 1801-2, for example, barley was shipped by the Salcombe sloops *Elizabeth and Mary*, *Sally* and *Three Brothers* to Exmouth, to Liverpool by the brig *Ceres* and to Chester by the brig *Gibraltar*.

During the food shortages of the late 1790s the use of grain for distilling malt, 'which consumes large quantities of wheat and all barley', was prohibited.⁶ However, from the start of the nineteenth century, numerous malthouses, as Hawkins observed, had 'been erected in the vicinity of Kingsbridge in consequence of the extensive cultivation of barley in the neighbourhood.' And from Lysons we learn that 'a great part of the barley is now malted in the county: the quantities exported in the year 1820 from the port of Dartmouth (in which Salcombe is included) were 5548 quarters of barley, and 7180 quarters of malt.'

Lime Kilns

The high agricultural productivity of the area owed much to the care with which farmers manured their land using either sea sand or lime. Sea sand was dredged from the Bar and carried in barges to the banks of the Estuary to be mixed with mud and dung. In the mid-1770s up to 32 barges, each worked by two men and with a capacity of 100 horseloads, were engaged in dredging on or near the Bar in the summer months.⁷ By 1818 there were no more than four, as by this time farmers were increasingly using lime to improve their fields.

As many as 27 lime kilns are believed to have been built on the banks of the Estuary, most of them in the nineteenth century.⁸ Lighters brought limestone from Plymouth and Torbay, whilst sloops and other coastal craft brought culm (anthracite dust) from South Wales. Vancouver noted, in 1808, that 'Brixham fishing boats were built much larger than formerly, on account of their finding a number of freights, during the summer months, in the culm trade' and it is likely that this applied to fishing boats built at Salcombe.

Cider

In addition to corn and barley, the Estuary parishes were also well known for the production of great quantities of good cider. The trade, which had developed in the early seventeenth century, was flourishing in 1793 when Polwhele observed that 'the cultivation of apple trees has been much attended to here of late years, the merchants of London having sent agents to buy up large quantities of cider and ship off for the

capital, which has raised the price considerably'. And, according to Vancouver in 1808 'every valley through the South Hams, is more or less occupied with orchards, and which are much celebrated for the excellence of the cider they produce. Beside what was shipped last year in other places in the Kingsbridge River, the quantity sent from Salcombe was 700 hogsheads.' The Devonshire hogshead contained 63 gallons. In 1822, according to the Lysons brothers, large quantities of local cider were being exported to 'London, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Sunderland, Leith, Swansea, Liverpool, and thence by the canals into Yorkshire, &c'.

Cider offered for sale was liable to duty and could be seized in default of payment. One local worthy who ran foul of the excisemen was Richard Balkwill of Yarde, near Malborough, whose family was to become the leading shipowners in Salcombe and Kingsbridge. Balkwill had had 80 hogsheads seized and, claiming that the cider was for private consumption, he mounted a campaign to get them back. After a long struggle with the Treasury in which he was supported by two Devon MPs, his 80 hogsheads were eventually released together with a further 107 belonging to other local farmers. Balkwill sent a suitably decorated boat to Sutton Pool at Plymouth to reclaim them. As a tribute to the two MPs a banner was flown from the masthead inscribed 'Sir T. D. Acland, Bart. and E. P. Bastard Esq., The Guardians of Our Rights.'⁹ When the vessel arrived at Kingsbridge, some of the cargo was transferred to a boat on wheels, which had been rigged and decorated by a Salcombe shipwright, the remainder was loaded onto 45 wagons and carts. The convoy then moved off in a procession through the town escorted by the local cavalry. In the celebrations that followed 157 of the total 11,780 gallons of cider were consumed, a large sheep was roasted and the jolly townsfolk danced in the streets.¹⁰

Woollen cloth

In medieval times, the South Hams had been noted for its wool production and Kingsbridge for the production of woollen cloth. In 1793 cloth was still being manufactured in Kingsbridge but only on a very small scale. However, the trade received a tremendous boost during the French wars between 1793 and 1815 because of the demand for woollen uniforms. In 1798 Walter Prideaux and John Roope, the lessees of the Town Mills, converted them into a cloth factory and, at the turn of the century, John Layers erected a manufactory for making serges close to Duncombe's bridge. The trade declined again after the Napoleonic Wars and in 1822 Lysons' noted that, whilst about 400 pieces of serge had previously been made weekly at Kingsbridge, this had reduced to 100 pieces a week. 'Flustrings (a cloth used in fishermen's coats), army cloths, and

blanketings', were also made at Kingsbridge, 'the former are chiefly for home consumption and for Newfoundland'.

Hawkins in 1818 described the town's other manufactures: 'Hair also is in this place worked into mattresses, etc. and hemp into cordage, lines, twine, sacks etc. for the purposes of husbandry, ship-owners, merchants, and others, by Mr. Richard Bonker, whose late father, Mr. John Bonker, established the present rope walk on the lower quarter of the West Backlet in the year 1783.'

Slate

Slate had been exported from the Estuary since medieval times and the trade was still continuing in 1818. According to Hawkins, slate was 'dug out of two neighbouring quarries, the one in the parish of West Alvington, called Century; and the other in the parish of Buckland Tout Saints. Prior to the American war, much of the slate was carried to Holland; but this traffick necessarily ceased when the Dutch joined the combined powers against Great Britain in 1781, and has not since been revived.'

Fishing

With regard to Salcombe, Hawkins noted that 'crabs, lobsters, oysters, prawns, scallops, and fish of the Devonshire coast in general, may be regarded as the legitimate staple commodity of the place. The scallop is at times more abundant in this harbour perhaps than anywhere else. The plaice likewise, caught in these waters, and on the coast between Dartmouth and Bigbury bay, possesses a firmness and flavour that almost characterize a distinct species.' At is at this point that Hawkins condemns the Salcombe's fishermen for neglecting their trade to indulge in the more lucrative business of smuggling (*see Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 8*).

Hawkins makes no mention of the pilchard or Newfoundland cod fisheries but, from the Lyson brothers, we learn that 'there has been for some years an extensive pilchard fishery at Burriland in Bigbury bay [Burgh Island where the remains of the Huer's hut still stand]. Large quantities were taken here, and at two adjoining stations, called Challaborough and the Warren. They are cured on the spot, and sold to the Cornish merchants. About four years ago, so large a quantity was taken in the bay as produced about £7000, but the fishermen have not since had a successful season. In Start Bay there is also a pilchard fishery, but not on so extensive a scale'.

Sources

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- 9 Plymouth Telegraph, Feb 26 1818.
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Old Council Hall, Market Street, Salcombe, Devon, TQ8 8DE

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