

**Southampton's coastal trading community:  
A tale of survival in the face of adversity, 1568-1580**

**Leanna T P Brinkley**

The Hampshire coast, and particularly the port of Southampton, has a rich historical tradition in maritime trade. From as early as the 1320s, Southampton was able to take advantage of a substantial and steady trade between the Mediterranean and London, gifted to the port as a result of its large and wealthy Italian merchant community. Yet, while Southampton has long been established as a place of significance to the upkeep of England's maritime economy, considerable improvements to London's harbour facilities in 1530 marked the beginning of a period of economic and political decline for the Hampshire coast which lasted throughout the sixteenth century.

The decline of Southampton's maritime trade during this period has been extensively explored by many noted historians. However, research in this area has tended to focus on large-scale overseas trade, a bias which has led to the local mercantile community being overlooked in favour of their wealthier Italian counterparts. While the Italian merchant community is indeed of great importance to the historical narrative of the region, this approach has served to exclude the army of small-scale coastal traders who underpinned England's commercial ventures.

In an effort to address this imbalance, this paper investigates the ways in which the smaller local merchants left behind in the trail of the Italian trade forged new connections, new rivalries and new traditions during a period of uncertainty and change. Through a number of in-depth case studies, we explore the innovative ways in which Southampton's merchant population continued to thrive in spite of wider decline in the city and investigate the impact of kingdom-wide religious, political and economic change on this specific social group.

To achieve these goals, this paper makes use of the wealth of data contained within the city's Port Books. Established in 1565, England's Port Books contain hundreds of thousands of entries of the ships entering and leaving each port, as well as details of the crews, merchants and cargos for each ship. This paper is part of a wider research project, in which large volumes of Port Book data are being entered into a relational database, enabling complex analysis of the entries and allowing identification of key mercantile groups. This data is being substantiated with additional primary source material such as wills, lay subsidies and parish records to give a deeper insight into the commercial partnerships formed during this period.

In combining statistical analysis of a large body of Port Book data with more qualitative sources, this paper offers a new perspective on one of England's most important coastal cities and hopes to show that the historical narrative of a city in decline does not necessarily mean a city in destitution.