

MEAD HOLE AND SHOESFLETE.

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THE exhibition of documents in the Public Record Office relating to Hampshire, arranged for the Field Club's visit on May 25th, 1948, contained two which solved a minor problem of local topography. One of these is a map of the coast round Portsmouth dated 1587 (P.R.O. reference, M.P.F. 134); west of Wootton there is marked on the N.E. coast of the Isle of Wight a place named "Meadesole." The other, undated but Elizabethan, marks the same place, spelt Meade Hoale, at what is intended to be the same spot. The map is not accurate enough for the place to be located from it alone; but the name shows that it was a creek (for which "hole" is the local name), and as the only such between Wootton and Cowes is that in Osborne Bay now called King's Quay on the Ordnance maps, I at first concluded that this inlet was once called Mead Hole. But on Speed's map of 1611 both the creek called Shoeflet, identified by the author of the *V.C.H.* account¹ with the "Soflet" of Domesday, and Mead Hole are marked. Possibly Mead Hole may have been the small bay $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile N.W. of Shoesflete, where now is Barton Hard. During the Middle Ages the creek of Shoesflete seems to have been used occasionally. In that valuable collection of "curiosa," the Calendar of Inquisitions (Miscellaneous),² there is an account of the doings of a certain John Fox who bought a sarplar and a pocket of wool in the Isle of Wight and stored it in the house of Walter Gessich near Shoesflet, until he could buy more wool and take it to the staple at Winchester or Chichester. While John Fox was away wool-gathering there came to Shoesflet a ship of Normandy with a certain Roger de London on board. The ship had come from Southampton and called at Shoesflet, so we are told, to buy victuals. Roger landed, went to Walter Gessich's house and claimed the wool as his own, but could not get possession of it, "because it had been placed there not by him but by the said John, who had forbidden its delivery to anybody in his absence, and because it had been arrested by the escheator on suspicion that the intention was to export it without paying custom." Roger was arrested, and the commission of enquiry which followed reported the above facts, but unfortunately not the sequel.

There are many things in this unconvincing story which need explanation. Why did John Fox take his wool to Shoesflet? He had brought it thither from Newport, and one would have expected

1. *V.C.H.*, Hants, V, 183.

2. Vol. III, 1937, No: 173 (A.D. 1355).

him to store it and ship it from there, rather than incur the additional cost of four miles land transport. Why did the ship not take on board victuals at Southampton and what sort of victuals did they expect to find on sale at this little haven? Strangest of all, how did Roger know about the wool at all, and what was he proposing to do if he obtained delivery of it? The ship was presumably returning to France, and Roger was presumably going there. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*; but after nearly six centuries John and Roger are no longer merely obscure (or shady) characters, but an infinitesimal part of English history, and they must pay the penalty of their fame. It seems probable that the whole affair was a badly organised attempt at smuggling. Shoesflet was, I am convinced; a "smugglers' hole," well known as such, to which outward bound ships resorted in the hope of picking up an illicit cargo. John Fox had probably made a date there with Roger, but failed to keep it. Perhaps he had heard about the arrest of his wool, and was lying low. Walter Gessich, who must have been "in the know," probably invented the story about his instructions not to deliver up the wool, in order to try and cover his accomplice; for the arrest of the wool was quite enough in itself to prevent him handing it over to Roger. This is pure speculation of course. All parties concerned may have been upright and honest men—except Roger, who must then have been guilty of attempted theft. We shall never know, unless some day someone discovers another relevant document in the P.R.O. or elsewhere.

Nearly two centuries passed before the neighbourhood emerges again from its obscurity. The year 1572 is celebrated in Southampton history as that in which James Parkinson, captain of the Queen's Majesty's Castle of Calshot, had conference with Raynolde Howse, Mayor of Southampton, touching certain misdemeanours committed in the town of Southampton by the said captain's men, who had been imprisoned.³ This action, perfectly legitimate as far as we are able to judge, brought to a head the latent conflict between the captain and the town. For some time past the captain had been in the habit of holding up merchant ships at the entrance of Southampton Water, and extorting goods from them before allowing them to pass. By so doing he was reversing his role, which should have been to protect such vessels from attack by the pirates, who infested even these home waters. When, therefore, the two protagonists met face to face, high words ensued. The captain told the mayor that if he had been in the town at the time the mayor would never have imprisoned the captain's men. The mayor denied this, and the captain retorted that he would then have cracked the mayor's crown. The mayor's reply cast doubts upon the captain's character and a lively exchange followed.

3. The facts will be found in the Book of Examinations and Depositions (Southampton Record Society, 1914), pp. 1-10. I have modernised most of the spelling.

"Then said the said captain unto the said mayor 'Thou alehouse knave,' and the said mayor, coming toward the said captain, the said captain drew his dagger and foyned at the said mayor." The mayor called the serjeants, and the captain took evasive action towards the house of Mr. John Caplyn (which was just behind Holyrood Church, where Messrs. Lankester's iron foundry now stands), and from that position of relative security repeated his threat to the mayor, whose "ale-house knave's pate" he promised to crack when they next met.

The mayor then proceeded to take depositions from those who had inside knowledge of conditions at Calshot. They were most revealing, and just the kind of evidence (we may believe) that the mayor wanted. One of the most helpful depositions was that of John Solton, a Southampton baker, who in 1570 had been hired by the captain to go to Calshot and bake biscuits there. For some reason the biscuits were allowed to lie "untyll yt was moystie, and they sent yt to Meade Holle, to the men of warre there, as this deponent understandeth, and yt was so evyll yt was sent backe agayne." While he was there he observed various happenings. Packs of Spanish wool, spices and sugar arrived by night and were taken to a farm. One of the stables at Calshot was packed full of such wool. Passing ships were shot at, searched and from them were taken "such things as they thought good." Sugar coming from "Meadeholl" from the men-of-war there was sold to one John Brodocke of Southampton; and the deponent was shown cochineal which also came from "Meadeholle," and much wine and oil which the captain had taken "from such ships as passed and (which was) had from Meadhole." He ended his deposition by expressing his disgust with the language and behaviour of the soldiers. "He heard such swearing and such ruffianly tricks amongst them that he was weary of his life to be amongst them, and would not come there amongst them (again), if he might have a great living."

In view of these allegations it is not surprising that a few years later⁴ a Southampton fishmonger described his barrel of eels as "no Mead Holle goods nor thief-stolen." Mead Hole had evidently developed into a clearing-house for smuggled and stolen goods of every kind. The presence of men-of-war there is significant. Presumably they were stationed there for the very purpose of preventing such traffic; but those who know their history will not be surprised to find the role again reversed. Mead Hole was six miles nearer than Calshot to the open Channel, and the men-of-war there could therefore take their pickings from the merchant ships before they reached the captain of Calshot. But there was, as always, a difficulty in disposing of the goods; for customs'

4. Book of Examinations, etc., p. 35 (1577).

officers or their agents were in all the small ports on the mainland. Calshot Castle, however, was ideally situated for such a purpose, being exclusively occupied by the military authority ; and placed as it was on the end of a shingle-spit projecting out a mile from the land, was free from close observation. Its captain constituted himself the official receiver of stolen goods supplied by the navy, and this may in fact have been at least as profitable as his own ventures in piracy. One wonders how the business was financed, for it can hardly have been out of the captain's salary. The story of the biscuits suggests one possible method ; and the same deponent from whom so much evidence was obtained also stated that the captain made gun-carriages at Calshot which he sent to the men-of-war at Mead Hole "sythens the Queen's proclamation was set forth to the contrary."

The records of Southampton provide many examples of piracy on the open seas by the ships of the navy, directed not only against foreign ships but even occasionally against those very English ships which they were employed to protect. One wonders whether this practice may not have contributed substantially to the decay of Southampton which began about this time. There were of course many other factors involved ; but the risks run by ships which had to run the gauntlet by Mead Hole and Calshot before they could reach the haven where they would be safe must surely have discouraged peaceful trade.