

## THE CUSTOMS SYSTEM IN SOUTHAMPTON IN THE MID-FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

*By the middle of the 15th century a well-organised system for the collection and recording of local and national customs and other tolls already existed in Southampton. A close reading of three documents generated by the officials who administered it, has been used to permit an understanding of, and an insight into, the system at work. A further article will investigate the inter-relationship of foreign and inland trade.*

### BACKGROUND

Southampton and its trading connections have been a focus of interest for historians ever since c. 1770, when Dr John Speed wrote *The History and Antiquity of Southampton, with some conjectures concerning the Roman Clausentum*, (Southampton Rec. Soc. 8, 1909). Subsequent works have followed which focus on specific aspects of Southampton's history. The Southampton Record Society was formed in 1905, and was followed in 1950 by the Southampton Records Series. Publications of both bodies 'provide a collection of edited urban source materials virtually unrivalled in Britain' (James 1983, xiv). The town records include a remarkable series of Brokage and Port Books, which permit a detailed insight into the trading activities of the 15th-century port, several of which have been edited (see Appendix I). For instance, in 1960 Olive Coleman edited *The Brokage Book of Southampton 1443–4*, volume iv of the Southampton Records Series, and in 1961, H S Cobb edited *The Local Port Book 1439–40*, volume v. A wealth of information is provided by both editors in their invaluable introductions to these editions, to which reference has been made in this paper.

More recently in 1993, Elisabeth Lewis edited under one cover, the Brokage, Port and Royal Customs Accounts for the year 1448–49. It is through a close reading of these two local and one national Customs Accounts edited by Lewis, that this essay demonstrates how the collection of local and national customs was administered in a 15th-century port while making particular reference to Southampton.

### *The Value of Customs Accounts to the Historian*

In the mid-15th century the south coast port of Southampton was a vital link between England and the Baltic, France, Iberia, Italy and the Low Countries. Subsequently historians have recognised the value of using local evidence from Southampton for wider application. In 1963 Carus-Wilson and Coleman demonstrated how local statistics, derived from national customs accounts, could help to establish a general view of England's export trade. They produced export figures for wool and cloth for individual ports and for the whole of England. Figures from Southampton were among those used. Similarly in 1975, A R Bridbury demonstrated the contribution which local evidence can make to a national survey and referred to the foreign and overland trade of Southampton (Bridbury 1975, 80).

However, the value of Customs Accounts has been questioned repeatedly by historians and was discussed by M Bonney. According to Bonney (1992, 20), it was E Power and M M Postan who first used Customs Accounts in the 1930s. They questioned the reliability of them as a source, in light of evasion of customs duty and the corruption of officials. It was some thirty years later that E M Carus-Wilson and O Coleman used figures

from the Enrolled Accounts when conducting their examination into the export of wool. Bonney points out that while acknowledging the value of Customs Accounts as a source which could indicate general trends, they had reservations arising from gaps in evidence and periods when customs collection was farmed out. T H Lloyd, exploring the involvement of alien merchants in the export of wool and cloth, largely agreed with this opinion. H S Cobb, editor of both *The Local Port Book of Southampton 1439-40* and of *The Overseas Trade of London*, believed the duty payable to be so negligible that evasion was pointless and had found insufficient evidence to believe that officials were corrupt (Bonney 1992, 20). While Bonney believed that 'customs records should not be underrated' (Bonney 1992, 20), clearly an awareness of the limitations and pitfalls associated with them is useful and it is while keeping this in mind, that they have been used to throw light on the way the collection and administration of customs took place in the mid-15th century port of Southampton.

#### *The Origins of Local and National Customs*

According to Cobb (1958, 213), the first references to local port customs were made in the 11th century and concerned tolls levied on ships and goods at Billingsgate. He asserts that the main feature of local customs (*custuma ville*) was that they were 'levied on all goods brought into or taken out of a town, irrespective of their provenance or destination' (Cobb 1958, 214). Gras believed that it was probably on the local system of town customs that the national customs system was based (Gras 1918, 21).

A form of semi-national customs had existed in England before the introduction of the Ancient Custom in 1275, but it was from the latter that the main features of national customs were derived. A duty levied on wool and hides, it was payable by both native and alien merchants. The New Custom of 1303 established a system of import and export duties for alien merchants (Gras 1918, 257). Subsequent introductions were made, such as the 1347 cloth custom applicable to both English and foreign merchants, with the result that by the second half of the 14th century a structured national customs system was being effectively ad-

ministered, which accounted for one half of total royal revenue (Carus-Wilson & Coleman 1963, 2).

By the middle of the 15th century, the administration of customs within a port had become quite sophisticated. However, the collection and administration of local and national customs remained separate with different officials in control. While in some ports, such as Bristol and Sandwich, the Crown retained involvement in the administration of local customs, in others, such as London and Southampton, local officials had been given the right to collect them when they were granted their fee farms (Cobb 1958, 214).

The collection of national customs was the responsibility of royal officials who were known as 'customers'. Certain ports, at strategic intervals around the coast, acted as 'head ports', or administrative centres, through which the chief exports of wool and cloth were channelled. It was the duty of the customers, working under a controller who was probably based in London (Lewis 1993, 221), to record the arrival and departure of ships, the names of their masters, the commodities carried, the names of the merchants and the amount of duty payable in both the head ports and the lesser ports which came under their jurisdiction. Customers recorded this information in Particular Accounts, which were either in book or roll form. From the Particular Accounts, summary accounts were produced in the port and sent to London annually for audit purposes. Examples of both particulars and summaries survive among the records of the King's Remembrancer of the Exchequer, class E122. In London, clerks of the Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer used the summary accounts to compile annual statements for each port. Located today in the Public Record Office, London, these have become known as the Enrolled Customs Accounts, class E357, and contain the total quantities of imported and exported goods, amounts of custom due, as well as the total value of other goods which were subject to *ad valorem* rates. They do not contain details of ships, masters or cargoes. *Ad valorem* duties, or duty paid in proportion to the value of goods, developed, while payment in kind declined (Cobb 1961, xix). In the fifteenth century the general duty was 3d in the £1 and was paid on goods for which there was no specific amount set down in the Oak Book.

The Oak Book or Paxbread of Southampton is one of the early town books which recorded old rules and ordinances, and provided a written reference when reliance on the spoken word was diminishing (Studer 1910, vi). Cobb was of the belief that *ad valorem* duty was used more in Southampton than anywhere else for which records of that time still exist (Cobb 1961, xix). However, the value of goods on which the duty was calculated did not necessarily reveal the true value, but was the value to which both parties were able to agree.

### THE SOURCES – THREE RECORDS OF CUSTOMS

Southampton was the 'headport' within its locality. It had jurisdiction over the coastline from Hurst in the west to Langstone in the east, and entitlement to receive custom on all merchandise entering or leaving ports within these limits, with the exception of Fareham (Cobb 1961, lii). While royal customers were responsible for national customs within the port, control of local customs had rested with local officials since 1199, when Southampton had been granted its fee farm. Responsibility for the collection of local customs lay jointly with the broker at Bargate and the water bailiff in the port. At member ports, custom was collected either by appointed officials or by farming out for a fixed sum (Cobb 1961, lii). According to Cobb (1958, 219), the '15th-century Southampton customs system was more highly developed, both in its administration and the range of its customs duties and special tolls, than any other local customs system for which evidence has survived'.

Since custom was collected by three separate officials, three documents exist recording their work, namely the Brokage Book produced by the broker, the Customs Book the record of the royal customers, and the Port Books produced by the water bailiff.

#### *The Brokage Book*

The collection of Brokage Books held in the Southampton Archives Services are unique to

Southampton and in consequence Southampton is the only town for which a daily record of overland trade exists. In 1448–49 the Bargate broker was Peter Grute. It was his duty to collect petty customs at Bargate. As broker he was a town official, important enough to be included with the mayor and bailiffs in the list of town officials (Coleman 1960, xii). The broker held office for more than one year, sometimes for a lengthy period, and was assisted in his work by a clerk. Indeed, Lewis (1993, viii) believes the Brokage Book to be the work of the clerk, with only the emendations, introductory heading and final summing up being in the hand of P Grute; examination of the text confirms this view. The entries were written up at the end of the year and run chronologically from Michaelmas 1448 (September 29) to Michaelmas 1449. They record the amount of customs paid at Bargate as well as two other tolls collected there, pontage and brokage. Pontage was a one penny toll levied on all vehicles entering or leaving the town through Bargate, the proceeds being used for the maintenance of bridges and ditches. While pontage did feature in other towns, brokage was unique to Southampton. It was a fee originally levied for arranging the haulage of goods, and varied according to the distance to be travelled. Lewis (1993, vii) suggests that by 1448 responsibility for these arrangements probably no longer lay with the Bargate broker, but that the toll continued to be levied since it was a good source of income for the town.

#### *The Port Book*

The Petty Customs Book 1448–49, or Port Book, as it is more often referred to, like the Brokage Book and others in the series, is in the safe custody of the Southampton Archives Services, but unlike the Brokage Book is not unique to Southampton. Other places possess Port Books or their equivalent. The Port Book is a detailed account, which shows the amount of local customs and other tolls, such as cranage, anchorage or wharfage, paid on goods entering or leaving the port. Compiled in all probability by the clerk to the bailiff, whose duty it was to collect the dues, the book would have been written up at the end of the year from rough

returns. It covered the same period as the Brokage Book.

The bailiff for 1448–49 was John Dun and, like the broker, he was assisted by a clerk. Dun received the annual wage of £6 13s 4d (Cobb 1958, 219). According to Lewis (1993, ix), ‘amendments, sum totals and the final account are almost certainly in the hand of John Dun himself, but the actual entries were probably made by the clerk or maybe clerks, since the work reveals evidence of three hands’. Again a detailed inspection of the document confirms this opinion.

By the 15th century it had become customary for Italian merchants who frequented the port, to settle their accounts annually at the end of a year, in arrears. As a result, it was convenient for details of the Italian trade to be entered in one book, namely the *Liber Alienigenus*, while local, coastal and Baltic trade was recorded in another, the *Liber Communis*. The *Liber Communis* for 1448–49 has not survived. As a result the Italian trade dominates the records for this year, since it is that with which the surviving Port Book is concerned. But while the influence of Italian shipping was considerable, the role of coastal and Baltic shipping should not be forgotten. The national Customs Accounts and Brokage Books do, to an extent, supply some lost information, and by looking at the *Liber Communis* 1435–36 (Foster 1963) and for 1469–71 (Quinn 1937), it is possible to gain an insight into the types of data which have been lost. These accounts show ships from local ports such as Bosham, Chichester, Langstone, Portsmouth, and from others further afield such as Barfleur, Delft, Guernsey and Portugal. A boat from Fowey carried tin while another from Looe entered with fish. But these are only a few of the many commodities mentioned in the *Liber Communis* which help to emphasise that Southampton was the receiver of a large number of goods arriving from various ports, both near and far. It is regrettable that the *Liber Communis* for 1448–49 no longer exists.

#### *The Royal Customers Particular Account*

It is impossible to produce visual evidence of the royal customers account, reference E122/141/31, since it was reported missing in the Public Record

Office, Chancery Lane, in April 1995. E A Lewis (1993, 221) describes it as a volume measuring 30 cm by 21.5 cm with a paper cover bearing the inscription written in an 18th- or 19th-century hand, ‘27–28 Hen. VI Portus Suthampton – Custum’. In 1993 it was in good condition, despite a small hole in folio 11 and with faded ink on folios 22–6. The text covers folios 1–26 with the final ten remaining blank. The Customs Book starts on 31 December 1448 and therefore does not correspond exactly with the Port and Brokage Books. Carus-Wilson and Coleman (1963, 9) believe the most likely reason for accounts to start at a date other than Michaelmas, was due to a change of official in the port. The first entry in the Customs Book concerns the arrival of the carrack of Nichus Gentyle on 31 December 1448 and runs through to the last day of September 1449, but ends with two entries for 22 January 1449 which are out of sequence. Entries are therefore essentially in chronological order. The Customs Book shows the arrival and departure dates of boats and carracks, it identifies the owner of goods as indigenous or alien, and details the amount of national customs due.

#### PAYMENTS AND EXEMPTIONS

Alien and denizen merchants feature in all three texts; it is they who pay the custom or who are exempt from it. While national customs permitted few exemptions (Carus-Wilson & Coleman 1963, 2), local customs accounts show evidence of five main groups of people exempt from local customs in Southampton (Coleman 1960, xv–xvi):

- i burgesses of Southampton;
- ii burgesses from other towns who had gained freedom from paying tolls by grant of royal charter prior to 1199, the year when Southampton had been granted the right to levy tolls, examples being Marlborough and Winchester;
- iii burgesses or places who, by agreement with Southampton, had total or partial remission, for example, Bristol, London, Salisbury;
- iv certain noblemen and their tenants;
- v certain religious houses and their tenants.

In the case of Salisbury, complete exemption was probably not given, since it would have incurred considerable loss of revenue to Southampton due to the high volume of trade which took place. But Salisbury men had specially reduced rates drawn up in 1329, which were recorded in the Oak Book. Hence, Richard Bulke of Salisbury paid custom of 2d on one pipe of wine on 8 July 1849 (Lewis 1993, 195), while Thomas Arnold of Cirencester paid 8d on two pipes, i.e. 4d a pipe (Lewis 1993, 194). Clearly the Salisbury man was paying half-rate as was Nicholas Lange, merchant of Bristol, when he paid 4d custom on two pipes of wine on 4 July (Lewis 1993, 194). Bristol merchants enjoyed partial remission, too.

The Oak Book contains a list of nearly sixty towns under a heading 'List of Boroughs Free of Toll'. Cobb maintains that this 14th-century list has been misjudged when edited, and that the original purpose was not to show freedom from toll. He is led to this opinion since a few of the places mentioned were not free at the time it was written. The list does, however, form the basis of a subsequent list which was designed specifically for that purpose. The original, if used with full awareness of the limitations, can be useful in identifying towns free from toll in Southampton (Cobb 1961, xxvi) (see Appendix II).

The Port Books record all the goods on which local custom was due. Local custom was paid only once and was paid by all alien merchants and by all denizens who were not exempt. While many burgesses were free, they still had to pay local customs when handling the goods of merchants who were not free. Conversely Italian merchants did not pay when handling the goods of any exempt person. While many denizens were free of local custom, they still feature in records as payers of special tolls. For instance, everyone paid crantage which was levied on goods measured in tuns, pipes and hogsheads. Freemen of other places, however, paid both wharfage and crantage. But, since wharfage dues were relatively small, they often went unrecorded if no custom was due. Wharfage was levied on goods which were measured in, for instance, bales or lasts and which were brought to the quay.

### *Revenue Generated*

According to Coleman (1963-4, 4), in the middle of the 15th century the volume of trade was greater than at any other time in the Middle Ages, and in Southampton the major part of corporation income came from local tolls. The water bailiff generally accrued £200-£300 a year and the Bargate broker £60-£80 (Coleman 1963-4, 4). By the 15th century most custom was paid at the port, whether the goods were entering the town by land or sea. However, Table 1 shows that during a quiet week in the port, week 14, the water bailiff collected less custom and less total revenue than the Bargate broker. While he collected considerably less than the royal customers and his port counterpart in week 15, in week 40 he surprisingly surpassed even the royal customers in total revenue. While the amounts collected at Bargate were not impressive, they represent a steady and significant contribution towards the annual payment of the £200 fee-farm. At Bargate, the broker indicated 'per mare' in his book when custom had already been paid in the port, but the Port Book shows no reciprocal action where custom had previously been paid at Bargate (See Table 1).

### THE SYSTEM AT WORK - COMBINED USE OF THREE SOURCES

Since the combined use of all three documents enables certain commodities to be traced from their arrival in port to their final destination, it is possible to observe the system at work. It is possible to identify to whom the goods belonged, how much custom was paid, where they were going and who took them there. While it is impossible to trace one nett of cotton, since it is indistinguishable from so many others, it is possible to trace a commodity which is more noteworthy. For example, on 10 June the Port Book shows that Raphaell de Trappana had 16 pots of quicksilver brought ashore in the boat of John Bedale, for Galias de Negro (Lewis 1993, 70). He paid local customs of 2s 8d and wharfage of 2½d. The Customs Book indicates that Raphaell was an alien, and that, as owner of the goods, he paid £48 duty to the royal customers (Lewis 1993, 248). The Brokage Book

Table 1 Customs and other tolls collected in Southampton

		£	s	d	£	Total	
						s	d
<i>Week 14: 30 December 1448 – 5 January 1449</i>							
Brokage Book	Brokage		4	10½			
	Custom (local)		1	2½			
	Pontage		1	5		7	6
	*Per mare [5]						
Customs Book	Custom (national)				1073	2	8
Port Book	Anchorage		3	4			
	Custom (local)			8			
	Wharfage			½		4	0½
<i>Week 15: 6 January – 12 January 1449</i>							
Brokage Book	Brokage		12	7½			
	Custom (local)		9	7			
	Payment for market stalls			4			
	Pontage		3	7		1	6 1½
	*Per mare [8]						
Customs Book	Custom (national)				1173	1	0
Port Book	Anchorage		3	4			
	Crantage		11	11			
	Custom (local)		13	4 10½			
	Wharfage		1	11 11½		15	12 1
<i>Week 40 : 30 June – 6 July 1449</i>							
Brokage Book	Brokage		7	3			
	Custom (local)		19	1½			
	Pontage		2	6		1	8 10½
	*Per mare [1]						
Customs Book	Custom (national)				1	3	4
Port Book	No entries						
<i>Week 41 : 7 July – 13 July 1449</i>							
Brokage Book	Brokage		8	0			
	Custom (local)		12	4			
	Pontage		3	4		1	3 8
	*Per mare [2]						
Customs Book	Custom (national)				8	10	0
Port Book	No entries						

\* Per mare – the term used to indicate that custom had already been paid in the port.  
 [] denotes number of entries recorded in Brokage Book 'per mare'.

shows the sixteen pots of quicksilver passing through Bargate in John Eyr's cart, on Monday 16 June, bound for London on behalf of Galias de Negro (Lewis 1993, 189). The same book shows that custom was paid at the port. John Eyr who was travelling with three wagons, had entered the town with wool on which he paid 3d pontage, and was charged brokage of 2s and pontage of 3d when he left.

A scenario such as this shows that goods were being assessed for duty and other tolls in the port. At Bargate, the broker collected duty on any goods which had changed hands in the town, or for which custom had not been paid in the port, as well as brokage and pontage. The 2s brokage reflected the distance to be travelled, and the 3d pontage the number of wagons passing out through the town gate. Royal customers recorded the actual owner of the goods and the amount of duty payable to them.

## CONCLUSION

A detailed study of the three documents, relating to Southampton for the year 1448–49, has demonstrated that officials were administering a well-organised system for the collection of customs and other dues. It has shown where payments were made and to whom. It has revealed those who paid the dues and those who were exempt from them. But above all, it has emphasised the degree of sophistication which both the system of administration and the recording of local and national customs had reached in Southampton, in the mid-15th century. A further article will investigate the relationship of the accounts and demonstrate what can be deduced from one such account in the years when, as usual, the others are missing.

## APPENDIX I

*Fifteenth Century Brokage and Port Books held by the Southampton Archives Services (unless otherwise indicated documents run from Michaelmas to Michaelmas)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Brokage Book</i>	<i>Port Book</i>
1426–27	–	Liber Alienigenus and Communis Ed.**
1429–30	–	Liber Alienigenus and Communis Ed.**
1430–31	† (9 Oct – 20 Sept)**	–
1431	† (2 Jan – 30 Sept)**	–
1433–34	–	Liber Alienigenus and Communis ***
1435–36	–	Liber Alienigenus <sup>†</sup> and Communis Ed. **
1438–39	–	Liber Alienigenus and Communis **
1439–40	Ed., partially duplicated **	Liber Alienigenus and Communis Ed.**
1440–41	† **	–
1443–44	† Ed. **	–
1445–46	† **	–
1447–48	**	–
1448–49	Ed. **	Liber Alienigenus Ed.**
1449–50	(7 Oct – 28 Apr) 2 Books **	–
1450–51	–	Liber Alienigenus and Communis **
1454–55	–	Liber Alienigenus and Communis **

1455-56	-	Liber Alienigenus **
1455-56		Liber Communis **
1456-57	duplicate **	-
1457-58	-	Liber Alienigenus and Communis **
1458-59	‡	-
1459-60	-	Liber Alienigenus (8 Oct - 11 Feb) and (17 Nov - 23 Sept) **
1459-60		Liber Communis **
1460-61	**	-
1461-62	† *	-
1462-63	† *	-
1464-65	*	-
1465-66	duplicate**	-
1467-68	*	-
1468-69	‡	-
1469-70	† **	Liber Communis partial Ed. (11 Dec - 17 Sept)**
1469-70		Liber Communis (30 Sept - 27 Sept)**
1470-71	(30 Sept - 30 Oct)*	Liber Communis Ed. (Apr - Sept)**
1470-71		Liber Alienigenus Ed. (Dec - Feb)**
1474-75	† **	-
1477-78	(30 Sept - 16 Jun)**	Liber Alienigenus Ed.**
1478	(17 Jun - 29 Sept)**	
1479-80	† (8 Oct 79 - 19 Oct 80)*	-
1480-81	-	Liber Alienigenus Ed.**
1480-81	-	Liber Communis **
1482-83	(30 Sept - 9 Apr) Book I 29 Aug - 29 Sept Book II	Liber Alienigenus and Communis**
1484-85	-	Liber Alienigenus and Communis**
1488-89	**	-
1491-92	**	-
1492-93	(10 Oct - 30 Sept)**	-
1493-94	(1 Oct - 28 May)**	-
1494-95	† (1 Oct - 30 Aug)**	Liber Alienigenus and Communis**°
1499-1500	-	Liber Communis**

*Legend:* † probable year; ° entries appear to be mixed; ‡ incomplete; - document has not survived; \*\* also on micro film; \* also partly on micro film; Ed. document has been edited

## APPENDIX II

*A list of Boroughs Free of Toll as given in The Oak Book of Southampton c. A.D. 1300* Transcribed and edited by P. Studer\*

(Given in order of appearance in the Oak Book)

Southampton	Maldon
Norwich	Portsmouth
Shrewsbury	Chichester
London	Dunwich
Bristol	Bedford
Wycombe	Retford
Newcastle-on-Tyne	Godmanchester
Lancaster	Reading
Colchester	Haverford
Worcester	Marlborough
Ipswich	Scarborough
Nottingham	Bath
Canterbury	Stafford
York	Wallingford
Wells	Beverley
Hereford	Droitwich
Yarmouth	Burford
Gloucester	Torksey
Coventry	Harwich
Rolleston	Hull

Let it be enquired by what king, in what year of his reign, and on what day these towns and others below written were freed of toll:

The Chapter of Holy Trinity, Chichester; Oxford; Andover; Basingstoke; Devizes; Weymouth; Plymouth; Dartmouth; Bridport; Guildford; Bramber; And all the honours of England.

Leffton ..(?) Kenton .. (?) In Devonshire; Waterford In Ireland.

Lynn Regis; Mundford half hundred .. (?) Salton (co. Yorks?).

\*Cobb (1961, xxvi) is of the opinion that 'the Editor of the Oak Book misleadingly interpolated the heading "List of Boroughs free of Toll" into the original text at this point'. Cobb basing his argument on the fact that the list includes places that were not then free, questions the original significance of the list. He does acknowledge that it follows the order of free towns in the Old Rates Book fairly closely, and for this reason the list is included here. The Old Rates Book 'provided a rough guide of values of goods normally imported and exported' as an aid for customs officials (Stephens 1973, 75).

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