

1275 the first customs duty was imposed on exports of wool the returns revealed London and Boston as dominating the trade, with other south- and east-coast ports participating to a lesser extent and Bristol virtually not at all. Bristol merchants did, it is true, deal in wool – indeed they could hardly have failed to do so, situated as they were in the midst of a wool-growing region – but most of the wool they handled must have been shipped elsewhere, as from Southampton, in so far as it was not used at home.⁹⁴

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

The fourteenth century saw no physical expansion of the city's bounds. Yet it was then that Bristol came to play a major part in England's export trade and acquired a status superior to that of any other English provincial town. For it was this century that saw the spectacular growth of the English textile industry and the beginning of the transformation that was to change England from being a supplier of raw wool to the more highly developed industrial regions on the continent into being herself the leading woollen-manufacturing region of Europe. In and around Bristol, as indeed all over England, the industry had been established long before this. Woad for dyeing had been imported from Picardy in the twelfth century and throughout the thirteenth century the trade continued to flourish; in 1281 the Picards entered into an agreement with Bristol dyers about the pricing of woad,⁹⁵ and in 1295, when Edward I confiscated all the goods of French merchants in England, the large quantities of woad found in the possession of eleven Picards at Bristol suggest that dyers in the hinterland as well as in the city were being supplied through Bristol.⁹⁶ Weavers were to be found in the old town, but there were probably still more of them in the suburb across the Avon; there they had their own chapel, dedicated to the weavers' saint, St Katherine, in the Temple church. There too fullers, or tuckers as they were called in the west country, abounded, particularly in Tucker Street, which at least by the thirteenth century was called the Street of the Fullers (*vicus fullonum*).⁹⁷

How much cloth was produced in and around Bristol in the thirteenth century there is no means of discovering, but certainly the town was not then specially celebrated for its cloth, as were Lincoln, Stamford and Beverley. The returns of the New Custom, imposed on aliens only in 1303, reveal a small trickle of alien cloth exports, but only with the imposition in 1347 of the Cloth Custom, payable by native as well as alien shippers, is any quantitative estimate of the whole export trade possible. By then an immense impetus had been given to the English industry by Edward III's wartime diplomatic policy, which at times closed the English market to Flemish cloth and stopped all export of wool to

Flanders, and still more by his wartime fiscal policy which, by increasing more than sixfold the export duty on wool, burdened the foreign manufacturer with heavily increased costs. Hence while Flemish looms were idle and workers unemployed an expanding English industry was absorbing large numbers of immigrants, some of them entrepreneurs bringing their own workpeople with them.⁹⁸ Bristol, with its long established industry and its ready access to plentiful supplies of wool, was clearly one of the growth points. There Thomas Blanket and other enterprising newcomers had set up miniature factories on their own premises, installing looms and hiring weavers and other craftsmen to work for them. For this they were fined and otherwise molested, until they succeeded in obtaining a royal writ (1339) which reminded the mayor and bailiffs of the special privileges offered in 1337 to any foreign clothworkers who settled in England.⁹⁹

In the first returns of the Cloth Custom Bristol stands revealed in the mid-fourteenth century as easily the predominant port for the export of English woollens, for her recorded export in the depressed years immediately following the Black Death, averaging seven hundred and fifty-five cloths annually, amounted to some sixty per cent of that of all England.

Equally striking is the remarkable expansion of her trade through the late fifties and sixties and the fact that almost the whole of it was in the hands of English merchants. By the late fifties the average had risen to two thousand five hundred and fifty, and by the late sixties to over five thousand cloths, while in one year nearly eight thousand cloths were shipped from her port, as compared with only some three thousand from London.¹ Bristol's principal market, apart from Ireland, was still Gascony, and the conspicuous success of her export drive in the fifties and sixties must in large part be attributed to the rapidity with which the province then recovered from the devastating effects of war, pestilence and famine. Wine shipments from Bordeaux, which had fallen to an average of only some fourteen thousand tuns a year, whereas before the war they had often exceeded ninety thousand, rose to nearly forty thousand tuns in 1364–7, and with the profits from their sales wine growers had money to spare for new clothing from England.²

Thus the late fifties and sixties proved a period of outstanding prosperity for Bristol. Its pre-eminence in the rapidly developing trade in English cloth, which in due course was wholly to supersede that in raw wool, was as yet unchallenged; consumer demand in its principal markets was brisk, and the Low Countries industry, the only serious competitor there, was in full decline.³ Its population had undoubtedly been much reduced by the Black Death of 1348–9 and subsequent visitations of the plague, and the city had clearly reached the limits of its physical expansion for some time to come. But if the burgesses were fewer in number they were not less affluent or successful, while the manual workers were benefiting from a significant rise in real wages.⁴ Moreover, with a tax

⁹⁴ Carus-Wilson and Coleman, 36 sqq. Very few Bristol merchants were among those licensed to export wool in 1271–3, and the quantities for which they were licensed were relatively small: *Cal. Pat.* 1266–72, 554 etc.; *ibid.* 1272–81, 14 etc. The Italians were buying much wool in Ireland as well as England in the late-13th century, but see GRB i, 97, for a complaint in 1295 that wool, hides and other goods from Ireland 'go round the land' (*circueunt terram*) instead of coming to Bristol for export as hitherto. For Flemish merchants with wool at Bristol see *e.g.* *Cal. Pat.* 1247–58, 390 and above n. 51; and for a Bristol merchant sending wool to Southampton, R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society*, 179. For an exceptional year, when the Italians deserted Southampton for Bristol (1339–40), see A. A. Ruddock, *Italian Merchants and Shipping in Southampton 1270–1600* (1951), 34.

⁹⁵ *Cal. Close* 1279–88, 221, and see above p. 6.

⁹⁶ PRO E101/126/7; see Carus-Wilson (3). Part of this trade with Picardy (and with the Low Countries) may well have been conducted through Southampton: the woad confiscated at Bristol belonged to the same Picard merchants as that confiscated at Southampton. Cf. *Cal. Pat.* 1216–25, 54, for woad to Bristol from Southampton.

⁹⁷ PRO SC 6/851, E 372/121 sqq., and E 352/70 sqq. (Dr Sharp's MS transcripts and notes); cf. GRB i, 100 and 77 re the tax on weavers '*citra aquam Abone*' in the town rental. For the dedication of St Katherine's chapel in (?) 1299 see N and T, ii, 142.

⁹⁸ Carus-Wilson (4), 239–44; Carus-Wilson and Coleman, 1–2, 194–5 (for details of export duties on wool and cloth); Carus-Wilson (2), 402–3, 414–15. For other examples of immigrants at this time see *Cal. Pat.* e.g. 1330–34, 161, 413; 1334–38, 500; 1338–40, 13.

⁹⁹ *Foedera* etc., ed. T. Rymer (1739–42) II, pt II, 1098; and see *Cal. Pat.* 1330–34, 39. For the importance of the cloth industry in 14th-century Bristol, see the prominence given to its regulation from the earliest recorded town ordinances (1346) in the LRB (e.g. vol. II, ordinances for weaving, 2, 6, 40, 59; fulling, 7, 10, 14, 75, 141; dyeing, 6, 38, 81, 89, 170; spinning and combing, 29).

¹ Carus-Wilson and Coleman, 75–8; Carus-Wilson (4), 247–50.

² Carus-Wilson (4), 248 sqq.; James, *Wine Trade*, 9, 32, 23–4; R. Boutruche, *La crise d'une société: seigneurs et paysans du Bordelais pendant la guerre de cents ans* (1947), 198–9, 207. No figures for wine import into England are available for these years.

³ H. van Werveke, 'Essor et déclin de la Flandre' (*Studi in onore di Gino Luzzatto*, Milan 1949, 158); Ph. Wolff, 'Un chemin de Flandre', *Le Moyen Age* (1946), nos. 3–271.

⁴ See the Bristol fullers' ordinances of 1346, where wage rates of 3d. 2d. and 4d. are altered in a later hand to 4d. 3d. and 6d. respectively (LRB II, 12), and for the increase in real wages generally, E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins (*Economica*, Aug. 1951, 195 sqq. and Nov. 1956, 296 sqq.).

paying population of over six thousand (excluding clerics) in 1377 Bristol was second only to York among England's provincial towns.⁵ It is not surprising that it was at this time that the merchant Robert Cheddar (twice mayor in the early sixties) amassed the fortune that caused him to be remembered a century later as the richest man ever in Bristol,⁶ and that wealth was accumulated for major building projects such as the almost complete rebuilding of St Mary Redcliff from the transepts westwards – a work traditionally accomplished by 1376 and attributed to the elder William Canynges, merchant and five times mayor between 1372 and 1390.⁷ It was at this time, too, that another 'famous merchant and burgess of Bristol', Richard le Spicer, founded the chapel of St George close to the Guildhall, with a fraternity of merchants and mariners attached to it, and built for himself the fine hall-house on the Back with which his name was long associated.⁸ Bristol Bridge, too, received the citizens' attention; it was most probably then that the shops and houses on each side of the Bridge were built, and the chapel of the Assumption across the middle of it.⁹ Such was the prestige of Bristol in these years that she then aspired to a status that no other provincial town could boast: in 1373 she was created a county in her own right, with an elective sheriff and shire jurisdiction and a council of forty to be chosen by the mayor and sheriff with the assent of the community. The new County of Bristol, carved out of the two counties of Somerset and Gloucestershire, included all Bristol's suburbs, with much land beyond them to north and south, and extended down the Avon and into the Bristol Channel as far as Steep Holm and Flat Holm. Henceforward burgesses were freed altogether from attendance at the shire courts of Gloucester or Ilchester, while Redcliff was finally integrated with Bristol and the long and often acrimonious disputes over jurisdiction with the lords of Berkeley were brought to an end.¹⁰

Bristol's prosperity continued into the later years of the century, despite a depression in the seventies. Cloth manufacturing was expanding in her hinterland and quantities of woollens were coming in for export from towns far afield like Coventry and near at hand like Bath, while clothiers were also setting up business in the countryside; it was in the seventies, for instance, that the first clothmakers established themselves

in Castlecombe.¹¹ Hence Bristol's distributive trade grew with increasing demands up-country for dyes and other imported wares. Increased sales of cloth in Portugal after the establishment of the English alliance, and in the Toulouse region, whence English dyers were now drawing the bulk of their woad,¹² doubtless contributed to a significant, though not spectacular, rise in exports. Though there was no new suburban development, new houses were going up on hitherto empty land in Bristol, and the demolition and rebuilding of parish churches went on apace into the early fifteenth century.¹³ Thomas Knappe, for instance, shipowner and five times mayor between 1387 and 1404, left money towards the rebuilding of St Nicholas and also himself built and endowed the beautiful chapel of St John the Evangelist on the Back, where mass was to be said daily at 5 a.m. for merchants, mariners, craftsmen and servants.¹⁴ Walter Derby, another shipowner and five times mayor, gave liberally to the work of rebuilding St Werburgh which was in progress when he died in 1385, and also to all the existing almshouses of Bristol, while John Barstaple built a new almshouse close to Lawford's Gate, dedicated to the Holy Trinity and St George. Within Temple Gate was John Spicer's almshouse, founded probably by the John Spicer who was mayor in 1352, and close to All Saints there already existed another almshouse whose foundation went back possibly to the thirteenth century.¹⁵

Thus during the fourteenth century Bristol's role in the economy of England had radically changed. She was now herself an important industrial city and focal point of a rapidly developing industrial region, while her port was one of the principal outlets for what was now becoming England's major export – manufactured woollens. At the same time she had become virtually a self-governing commercial city, ruled by her leading merchants, from among whom her mayors were almost invariably chosen. The feudal and military influences that had once played a part in shaping her destiny, leaving an indelible mark on her topography, had now become of no account; economic forces were henceforth to be the determining factor.

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

In the course of the fifteenth century, while the once famous trade in raw wool shrank almost into insignificance, England's cloth exports as a whole doubled, despite a severe depression in mid-century, and the West of England industry went from strength to strength as the Stroud valley and West Wiltshire became celebrated for their fine quality woollens and brightly-coloured Somerset and Devon kerseys became increasingly popular at home and on the continent.¹⁶ But Bristol was not to share fully in this leap forward. For her, so far as oversea trade was concerned, the century was largely one of frustration and disappointment, despite certain daring new ventures, and these setbacks coupled with the fact that population generally remained depressed by recurrent outbreaks of

⁵ The Poll Tax returns of 1377 give 6,345 (*cf.* York 7,248): C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (1969 edn), 165–6. In 1334 Bristol's lay wealth was accounted for tax purposes as greater than that of any other provincial town; her assessment was 35 per cent higher than that of York, more than twice that of Lincoln and Norwich, three times that of Boston, and more than four times that of Southampton: W. G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (1971), 176. No reliable estimate can be made of her pre-Black Death population or of her total population in 1377.

⁶ Carus-Wilson (4), 250–51; and (1), 141.

⁷ *Ricart*, 36; this entry is in a later, probably 17th-century, hand. Other late 14th-century church building included the tower of the Temple church, the tower of St James (built at the cost of the parishioners in 1374 (N and T, ii, 30), the belfry of St Werburgh, the rebuilding of St John the Baptist, traditionally by Walter Frampton (*Wm Worc.* 87), and probably that of St Nicholas (N and T, ii, 159). For bequests towards such work see Wadley, *Wills, passim*, e.g. 12, 31, 54 (Temple); 7, 12, 53, 62 (St James); 9, 10, 11 (*bis*), 21 (St Nicholas).

⁸ *Wm Worc.* 143; Worcester describes the fraternity as '*dignissima*', and Spicer as '*famosum mercatorem et burgensem Bristol*'. The beautiful roof of the hall of his house, part of the screens, and the finely carved main door, were still to be seen in the late 19th century (illustrations in N and T, i, 174). Richard Spicer was mayor three times in the third quarter of the century. Mayoral dates in *Ricart* need amendment for this and earlier periods, though proving substantially correct for the late 14th and the 15th century when checked against contemporary records. See J. Latimer in *BGAS* xxvi (1903), 108 sqq. The date given in *Ricart* relates in each case to the calendar year after the feast of Michaelmas when new mayors were sworn in.

⁹ GRB ii, 202: two shops newly built on the Bridge of Avon 1374; this is evidently the document referred to by Seyer, ii, 40. *Wm Worc.* 120 (dedication of the chapel 4 Feb. 1362); and *ibid.* 27, 108, 116. Seyer (ii, 35 sqq.) carefully discusses the evidence for the date of the buildings.

¹⁰ *Charters* (1), 118 sqq.; for the boundaries *ibid.* 142–65. For the final incorporation of Temple Fee, the Priory of St James, St Augustine's and the Castle Fee see below pp. 14, 17.

¹¹ Carus-Wilson (5), 198, and (7), 160. Coventry merchants were trading actively through Bristol, sometimes in their own ships: Carus-Wilson (1), 193; (4), 243 n. 3, 258, and *cf.* 7, 8, 129.

¹² Carus-Wilson and Coleman, 80 sqq. and 142; Carus-Wilson (4), 255 sqq.; Ph. Wolff, *Commerces et Marchands de Toulouse, c. 1350–1450* (1954), 118–21; Carus-Wilson (3), 103–4, and Wolff, *op. cit.* n. 94.

¹³ See e.g. grant of vacant land in Worship St on condition of building a house there within 2 years, and a lease of vacant land near Aylward's Gate on condition of building a house there within 3 years: GRB ii, 215, 217 (1390–91).

¹⁴ Wadley, *Wills*, 68; *Wm Worc.*, 111, 115, 135; Worcester describes the chapel as '*decens*' and Knappe as '*magnificum virum mercatorem et burgensem Bristol*'.

¹⁵ Wadley, *Wills*, 15; *Wm Worc.*, 90–91; Dugdale, *Mon.*, vi, 774; Tanner, *Notitia Mon.*, 483; Clay, *Medieval Hospitals*, 85, 291; N and T, ii, 116. For John Barstaple (d. 1411), whose memorial brass is in the hospital chapel (rebuilt) see Carus-Wilson (1), no. 31. For Spicer's almshouse see Wadley, *Wills*, 57 (1398), 109, 124, 145; W. A. Sampson, *BGAS* xxxii, 86; BAO Deeds PIT/Aa 12 (2) for a deed of 1345. For All Saints, see BAO All Saints Deeds CSN 2, Wadley, *Wills*, 145, 155 etc., and below Appendix II.

¹⁶ Carus-Wilson and Coleman, *passim*, for wool and cloth export figures; Carus-Wilson (5), *passim*; (2), 417–20; (6), 7–8, 18–19; (7), 133–4.