

SOME ASPECTS OF THE EAST KENT WOOL TRADE IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

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IN attempting to assess the economic importance of Kentish ports during the Middle Ages, historians have relied to a considerable extent upon details of the actual numbers of vessels and men supplied from time to time for expeditions overseas. This is certainly a rough guide to the amount of local shipping available, but it takes no account of foreign vessels using the ports. For more precise information we must turn to other contemporary sources.

The outstanding feature of English medieval trade was the exportation of wool to the continent, mainly to Flanders. With the levying of an export duty upon this wool, the trade became an important source of revenue, and from the accounts which were drawn up by customs officials at the ports we are able to gather a good deal of knowledge as to the extent of the trade and the methods by which it was carried on.

It was not until 1275 that the English customs were put on a proper national basis and systematic accounts began to be kept.¹ Unfortunately a considerable number of these early account rolls for Kent, as well as for other parts of the country, have been lost or destroyed; nevertheless, the ones analysed in this article, which are all that remain for the thirteenth century, contain more detailed information than do those of the following century, and for that reason form a valuable introduction to a study of the trade.

We may consider the documentary material for Kent under the following heads :

- (1) Total amounts of wool, wool-fells and hides shipped from each port.
- (2) Vessels employed.
- (3) Activities of individual merchants.

¹ Gras, *Early English Customs System*, p. 59.

(1) Tables I to IV give summaries of the goods shipped from the various ports, and we can see immediately that Sandwich held a position of outstanding importance. The map on the next page illustrates this fact in perhaps an even more striking way. Because it covers a different period from the rest, the Romney account must be considered separately, but in any case the part played by Romney in the trade was so insignificant as not to call for more than passing mention.

TABLE I.—WOOL.

Period.	Sandwich.	Dover.	Rochester.
Easter 1289-Easter 1290 ¹ ..	224s. 5½cl. ⁴	23s. 3¼cl.	11s. 41cl.
29th July 1294-Mich. 1295 ² ..	56s. 12cl.	—	—
Mich. 1295-Mich. 1296 ² ..	68s. 46cl.	—	7s. 12cl.
Mich. 1296-Mich. 1297 ³ ..	109s. 9½cl.	—	—
Mich. 1297-24th January 1298 ³ ..	83s. 8½cl.	—	—

¹ Customs Accounts 124-1a.

² Customs Accounts 124-2. All the entries fall within the fiscal year—Mich. 1294-Mich. 1295.

³ Customs Accounts 124-3. Although the annual total for East Kent is sometimes given under Sandwich, there are grounds for suspecting that such totals do include amounts shipped from the other ports.

⁴ A sack contained 52 cloves of 7 lb.; 224s. 5½cl. would therefore weigh approximately 728½ cwt.

TABLE II.—WOOL-FELLS.

Period.	Sandwich.	Dover.	Rochester.
Easter 1289-Easter 1290 ..	1686	14	27
29th July 1294-Mich. 1295 ..	2605	—	—
Mich. 1295-Mich. 1296 ..	5884	—	800
Mich. 1296-Mich. 1297 ..	8563	—	—
Mich. 1297-24th January 1298 ..	3573	—	—

TABLE III.—HIDES.

Period.	Sandwich.	Dover.	Rochester.
Easter 1289-Easter 1290 ..	—	—	—
29th July 1294-Mich. 1295 ..	12038	—	—
Mich. 1295-Mich. 1296 ..	760	—	1000
Mich. 1296-Mich. 1297 ..	2988	—	—
Mich. 1297-24th January 1298 ..	37	—	—

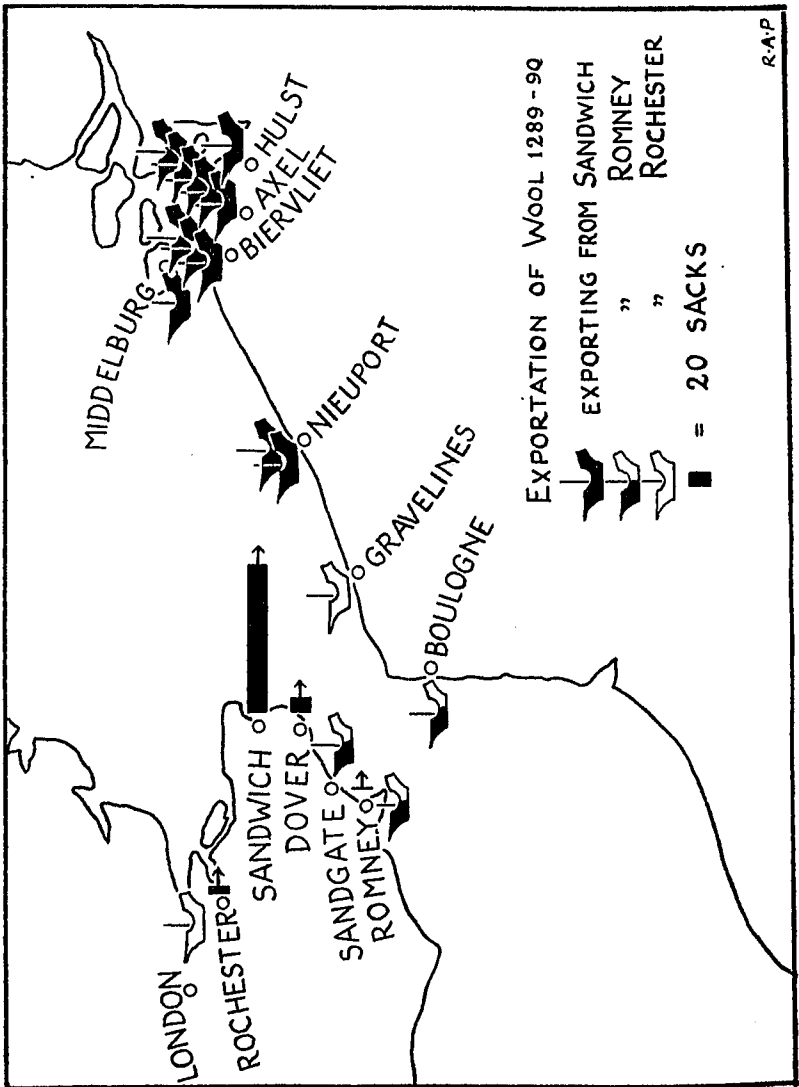


TABLE IV. (ROMNEY ONLY.)¹

Period.	Wool.	Wool-fells.	Hides.
14 Ed. I (1286-7) ²	7 lb. ³	—	—
15 Ed. I (1287-8)	1½s. 16 lb.	—	—
16 Ed. I (1288-9)	10 lb.	256	—
17 Ed. I (1289-90)	—	317	—
18 Ed. I (1290-1)	1 s. 5 lb.	744	—
19 Ed. I (1291-2)	1½s.	166	—

¹ Customs Accounts 147-11a.

² The account begins at Easter 14 Ed. I.

³ A merchant exporting from Romney paid the same duty on 1 lb. of wool as merchants in the other ports paid on one clove.

One will also notice that the annual totals fluctuated appreciably, owing very largely, no doubt, to the unsettled political conditions which characterised the last decade of the century. Strained relations with France resulted in widespread piracy and this tended seriously to dislocate England's commercial relations with the Low Countries.¹

The actual number of ship-loads of wool and hides exported during the course of a year was rather small, as one might expect. From July, 1294, to January, 1298, a period of forty-two months, there were only fifty sailings, slightly more than one per month. This scarcely gives the impression of activity which one usually associates with the medieval wool trade, but although the sailings on the whole were slightly more frequent during Edward II's reign in the following century, yet they were certainly not as frequent as is often supposed.

(2) Now let us turn to details of the vessels employed at Sandwich, Dover and Rochester. In order to show at a glance the relative importance of native and alien shipping I have arranged the exported goods in four categories as set out in Tables V and VI.²

¹ *V.O.H. Kent*, Vol. II, pp. 256-8.

² These totals must only be considered as approximate since no distinction was made in the accounts between English and alien merchants. Their names have been taken as the main criterion.

TABLE V.¹

Year.	Wool exported by English merchants in		Wool exported by Alien merchants in	
	English ships.	Alien ships.	English ships.	Alien ships.
1289-90 ..	7½ sacks.	253 sacks.	—	5 sacks.
1294-5 ..	35 sacks.	30 sacks.	—	—
1295-6 ..	—	98½ sacks.	—	—
1296-7 ..	45 sacks.	53½ sacks.	17½ sacks.	21½ sacks.

¹ To simplify comparison the wool-fells (300 fells = 1 sack) have been added to the sacks of wool in each case here and in Table VII. Figures are given to the nearest half sack.

TABLE VI.

Year.	Hides exported by English merchants in		Hides exported by Alien merchants in	
	English ships.	Alien ships.	English ships.	Alien ships.
1289-90 ..	—	—	—	—
1294-5 ..	8725	1974	1339	—
1295-6 ..	—	1760	—	—
1296-7 ..	1286	1702	—	—

Although there was considerable fluctuation from year to year, yet the tables emphasise two important features of the Kentish wool trade at that period, viz. that the bulk of the exporting was carried on by English merchants but that the carrying trade was largely in the hands of aliens.¹ Even when aliens shipped wool on their own account the quantities concerned were very small compared with the large-scale shipments of English merchants. Details of shipments by English merchants in alien vessels are given in Tables X and XI.

We can now examine the data from a slightly different standpoint, by working out a series of averages as shown in Tables VII and VIII.

¹ This was not typical of England as a whole. Alien merchants were much more prominent at East Coast ports but were practically absent from ports in the South-West at this time (see Gras, *op. cit.*, *passim*).

TABLE VII.—WOOL.

Year.	Total Wool.	Total sailings.	Average cargo.	Total shipments	Average shipment.
1289-90 ..	265½ sacks.	18	14½ sacks.	23	11½ sacks.
1294-5 ..	65 sacks.	7	9½ sacks.	9	7 sacks.
1295-6 ..	98½ sacks.	9	11 sacks.	24	4 sacks.
1296-7 ..	137½ sacks.	22	6½ sacks.	50	3 sacks.

TABLE VIII.—HIDES.

Year.	Total hides.	Total sailings.	Average cargo.	Total shipments	Average shipment.
1289-90 ..	—	—	—	—	—
1294-5 ..	12038	8	1505	15	100
1295-6 ..	1760	3	587	5	117
1296-7 ..	2988	6	498	10	50

A better idea of the actual sizes of the cargoes carried may be drawn from Table IX.

TABLE IX.

Cargo.	1289-90.	1294-5.	1295-6.	1296-7. ¹	1297-8.
over 40 sacks ..	—	—	—	2	—
31 to 40 sacks ..	2	—	—	2	1
21 to 30 sacks ..	4	—	1	2	2
10 to 20 sacks ..	5	2	3	3	—
under 10 sacks ..	7	5	5	16	3

¹ Including goods seized (presumably for non-payment of duty) during June 1297, and listed in a separate account. They have not been included in the other tables, except Table X.

The largest recorded cargo of wool and wool-fells in the accounts with which we are here concerned consisted of 55 sacks 41 cloves, together with 1,625 fells, exported in a vessel named "Pilgrim" of Hugheslus on June 22nd, 1297. Reckoning a sack of wool to weigh 364 lb., this gives a total weight of roughly 10 tons. A cargo of this size was, of course, shared by a number of merchants, as shown in Table X.

The annual totals of hides exported varied considerably, as Table III has shown. Usually hides were shipped with

TABLE X.

Merchant.	Wool.	Wool-fells.
James Peny & partners	25s. 49cl.	—
William de Brochulle	20s.	400 ¹
" " (" pro Nicholas Barrok ")	—	75 ¹
John Bosse	4s. 4cl.	—
Richard de Hikeling	3s. 20cl.	—
John de Hideneye	2s. 20cl.	500 ¹
Thomas de Shelving ²	—	350
Henry de Snaxton	—	300
	55s. 41cl.	1625

¹ Skins shorn of their wool.

² One of the collectors of customs at Sandwich on wool, wool-fells and hides.

TABLE XI.

Merchant.	Wool.	Hides.
Thomas le Blak	11s. 38cl.	—
Hamon de Snaxton		—
Thomas de Shelving	7s. 18cl.	—
James Peny & partners	—	2665
Stephen Bron	—	800
Adam ate Cherche		1300
Geoffrey de Arundel		—
	19s. 4cl.	4765

wool or fells, but occasionally they were exported separately. A good example of a mixed cargo is given in Table XI, the vessel concerned being "La Plentee" of Sandwich.

We may now consider the vessels employed in the trade from the point of view of the ports whence they came. The map gives a representative idea of the position regarding East Kent, and from it we may infer that the large majority of the vessels belonged to ports lying either in or very close to the main lines of communication between Kent and Flanders.¹ Among the vessels whose ports are definitely

¹ One port, Hugheslus, has not been identified and so does not appear on the map. I suspect that it was a Dutch port, in which case the inference already drawn from the map would be emphasised. Three vessels from Hugheslus exported wool from Sandwich during that fiscal year. The port of origin of the one vessel exporting from Dover is not given in the accounts.

given in these particular accounts there is but one exception, the "St. Marie" of Bayonne.

During the whole period, of the sixty-four different vessels engaged, eighteen belonged to English ports and forty-one to alien ports, the ports of the remaining five vessels not being mentioned. Curiously enough, although the sea passage was so short only four vessels are recorded as having exported more than one cargo and no vessel exported on more than three occasions. The movements of "Le Iserbac" of Cacche,¹ which made three crossings, are given in Table XII.

TABLE XII.

Date.	Merchant.	Wool.	Wool-fells.	Hides.
Feb. 1296	Thomas de Shelfing ..	7s. 12cl.	—	—
	John de Godinton ..	—	300	—
	Totals	7s. 12cl.	300	—
March 1296	Hamon de Snaxton ..	4s. 12cl.	460	—
	Thomas le Blak ..	5s. 50cl.	—	—
	Thomas de Shelfing ..	2s. 20cl.	860	—
	Totals	12s. 30cl.	1320	—
June 1296	Walter le Draper ..	5s. 18cl.	—	—
	Hamon de Snaxton ..	4s. 43cl.	—	—
	Thomas le Blak ..	2s. 28cl.	—	—
	Gilbert (.)	1s. 36cl.	—	—
	Geoffrey de Arundel ..	—	100	100
	Walter le Taverner ..	—	—	480
	Robert Monyn ..	—	—	100
	Totals	14s. 21cl.	100	680

(3) There was very little uniformity about the way in which customs accounts were drawn up, and one seldom finds consistency even within one account. In the rolls with which we are concerned the towns of origin of the merchants listed are not always given, but from those that are we notice that Sandwich merchants, and especially the customs officers themselves, played a prominent part.

¹ I have not been able to identify this port unless it be Cats on the island of Nd. Beveland.

The following are definitely stated to be merchants of Sandwich: Thomas de Shelfing & John Peny (customs officers); Thomas de Shelfing, Junior; James Peny; Thomas le Blak; Stephen Bron; Adam ate Cherche; Walter le Draper; Gilbert Feron; Hamon de Snaxton; Walter le Taverner.

Some idea of their share in the trade may be gained from Table XIII which sets out the amounts exported annually by them, together with the percentages which these amounts bore to the yearly totals in each case.

TABLE XIII.

Total.				Shipped by Sandwich Merchants.		
Year.	Wool.	Wool-fells.	Hides.	Wool.	Wool-fells.	Hides.
1289-90 ..	259s. 28½cl.	1727	—	204s. 3cl. (79%)	1686 (98%)	—
1294-5 ..	56s. 12cl.	2605	12038	42s. 18cl. (75%)	80 (3%)	7733 (64%)
1295-6 ..	76s. 6cl.	6684	1760	53s. 6cl. (70%)	4910 (73%)	1560 (89%)
1296-7	109s. 9½cl.	8563	2988	51s. 36cl. (47%)	6516 (76%)	530 (18%)

Although these merchants belonged to Sandwich they made use of alien shipping on a large scale. During those four complete years, for example, Thomas de Shelfing exported over 200 sacks of wool and over 7,000 wool-fells, but of those amounts only 7s. 18cl. were carried in an English vessel ("La Plentee" of Sandwich). The remainder was exported in vessels from Arnemuiden, Axel, Bayonne, Biervliet, Cacche, Hugheslus, Middelburgh, Nieuport and Slipedam. Thomas of Shelfing seems to have had a number of associates,¹ and together they were responsible for shipping no less than 179 sacks 19 cloves of wool and 1686 wool-fells in 1289-90. This represents about 70 per cent. of the total

¹ There is no clue in the accounts as to the precise meaning of the phrase "et socii sui" used in this connection.

quantity exported that year. There are numerous examples of joint shipments by two or more English merchants, and two cases in which one merchant acted as agent for another.¹

Merchants from the other Kent ports were not numerous; five belonged to Dover and two to Faversham. Of the Dover merchants, one, the Prior of Dover, appears only as a wool smuggler! When the duty on a sack of wool was raised from 6s. 8d. to £2,² smuggling must have increased on a large scale, for in the one account of smuggled goods which we have of this period over 200 sacks were exported without paying duty. This naturally makes us suspect that the totals which have been set out above may not represent the full extent of the trade, but in any case the goods smuggled in 1297 had all been shipped by Kentish merchants. Their inclusion, therefore, would merely raise the percentages in Table XIII and strengthen our main conclusion regarding the share of local merchants in the trade.

It has been pointed out that the shipping engaged in the Kentish wool trade was drawn from a rather limited area. This is also true of the merchants concerned, and in fact during the whole period under consideration, only one alien merchant came from the south, Bernard de Pimbo de Bayonne. This is a little surprising, for we know from other sources³ that there was a great influx of Spanish and Mediterranean merchants into East Kent ports before the end of the century.

The foregoing gives us some idea of the space relations and trade associations of East Kent in what may be called the early days of the wool trade as we know it during the later Middle Ages. As a local study it does not pretend to give any idea of the relative importance of the region in the trade of the country as a whole, but it throws a little

¹ Walter the Taverner on behalf of Richard Prest de Dover and William de Brochulle on behalf of Nicholas Barrok. The goods in each case were seized for non-payment of customs duty.

² The rates were as follows:
Easter 1289-Easter 1290: 6s. 8d.
29th July 1294-Mich. 1297: £2 0s. 0d.
Mich. 1297-24th January 1298: 6s. 8d.

³ e.g. Custom Accounts 124-5 (Mich. 1299-Mich. 1300).

light upon the economic activities of a group of ports whose political significance has hitherto been allowed to overshadow other factors in their development and decay.

POSTSCRIPT.

Since the above was written I have come across details for the year Easter 1287-Easter 1288 which support the conclusions stated, although it is interesting to note the appearance of a Genoese Galley in which 21s. 33cl. of wool were shipped, and vessels from Bayonne and Ordiales (North Spain). Apart from these the vessels engaged were all drawn from the area shown on the map. Sandwich merchants exported over 60 per cent. of the wool accounted for during the year.

Some of the more important totals are given below for purposes of comparison with the foregoing Tables.

TABLE IA.

	Sandwich.	Dover.	Rochester.	Total.
Wool	205s. 34cl.	12s. 28½cl.	23s. 21cl.	241s. 31½cl.
Wool fells ..	983	—	—	983
Hides	15	—	—	15

TABLE VIIA.

	Total Sailings.	Average Cargo.	Total Shipments.	Average Shipment.
Wool	23	10½s.	29	8½s.

TABLE IXA.

	over 40s.	31-40	21-30	10-20	under 10
Cargoes ..	—	2	3	5	13