

THE TRADE OF THE PORT OF FAVERSHAM, 1650-1750

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IN the value of its trade, the size and number of its ships, and the geographical extent of its commercial connections the port of Faversham has never achieved more than minor importance, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the total volume of its traffic placed it among the leading ports of Kent, and in certain branches of the coasting trade it had few rivals anywhere in England. In the following paragraphs an attempt is made to trace the development of Faversham in the period 1650-1750, using the series of Port Books in the Public Record Office.¹ These documents, although they contain very detailed lists of vessels and cargoes entering and leaving the port, cannot be accepted at their face value as a comprehensive record of the trade of Faversham Creek; and before describing their contents it will be necessary to ascertain whether any other landing places besides Faversham itself were included in the books, and whether there were any kinds of maritime trade which were omitted from them.

The Customs port of Faversham, as delimited by an Exchequer Commission of 1676,² included a considerable portion of the Kentish coast, stretching from Milton in the west to the North Foreland in the east, but not all this coast was covered by the Faversham port books. The trade of Margate was always recorded in the Sandwich books³ and the Commissioners were almost certainly mistaken in extending the limits of Faversham as far east as the Foreland, while Milton, which seems to have been an independent Customs port at least until 1670,⁴ continued for another century to keep a separate set of port books, recording not only its own trade but also that of Conyer, Upchurch, Rainham and Otterham. Four places remained within the limits of the port of Faversham—Reculver, Herne, Whitstable and Faversham itself. Of these the last two were well-known landing places of some importance, but the status of the others is uncertain. Hasted's description of Herne in 1772 as the centre of a flourishing coastwise trade seems to have been true of earlier times, for ships belonging to Herne

¹ Exch. K.R. Port Books, 661-728.

² Exch. K.R. Special Commissions 6266.

³ See J. H. Andrews, "The Thanet Seaports, 1650-1750," *Arch. Cant.*, Vol. LXVI, pp. 37-44.

⁴ Milton had its own Collector of Customs in 1670 (Calendar of Treasury Books, 1669-72, p. 585).

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were frequently recorded in the Faversham port books and in 1702 its farmers, hoymen and fishermen considered their bay important enough to need guns for protection against the French.¹ Reculver was described as a "seatown, well frequented by hoymen and fishermen,"² but neither its trade nor its shipping was mentioned in any of the Kent port books of this period. Unfortunately the Faversham books hardly ever distinguish between the trade of these various places. One book of coastwise exports for the first nine months of 1656 gives separate lists for Whitstable and Faversham,³ and the five coast books covering the period 1676-80 specify incoming ships landing their cargoes at Whitstable, but otherwise the ports can be distinguished only by assuming that ships belonging to Whitstable traded from Whitstable and that ships belonging to Herne traded from Herne. In the case of outgoing coasters, at least, this seems a warrantable assumption, but in many port books the ships are not described as belonging to *any* port, while much of the inward traffic was carried in ships belonging to places outside Kent altogether. Despite these difficulties, it is at least certain that the port of Faversham, in the technical sense of the word, was by no means identical with the town and harbour of the same name; it included three ports in the topographical sense of the term—Faversham, Whitstable and Herne.

It seems certain that some branches of the coasting trade escaped notice in the Faversham port books. In 1702 it was enacted that Customs officers should no longer enforce the system of cocquets and bonds for vessels carrying farm produce, other than wool, to London from places within the North Foreland,⁴ as cargoes authorized by cocquet were the only cargoes listed in the North Kent port books of this period, all traffic covered by the Act immediately disappeared from the books of Faversham, Milton and Rochester. Thus nearly all the coastwise exports of Faversham passed unrecorded throughout the eighteenth century, except for one brief interval between April and December, 1741, when the old method of authorizing the coasting trade of the Thames Estuary was temporarily restored. In addition to these changes, it appears that some Faversham trades were never recorded at all during the century under review. There is known to have been a substantial traffic in fruit and faggots to London from Faversham, Milton and Rochester, but these commodities were hardly ever mentioned in the port books. The merchants handling them claimed exemption from the tonnage duty on coasters imposed in 1694, appar-

¹ State Papers, Domestic, Anne, 1/35.

² G. Miège, *The New State of England under their Majesties King William and Queen Mary*, 1702, p. 117.

³ Exch. K.R. Customs Accounts 232/18.

⁴ 1 Anne c. 26. This Act seems soon to have been taken to apply to almost all the coastwise trade of North Kent except in coal and wool.

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ently because of the very small size of the boats employed and the short distances involved;¹ and it seems likely that they were exempted on similar grounds from cocquet fees and therefore omitted from the port books.

With these omissions and limitations in mind, we may now examine the contents of the Faversham trade statistics. Perhaps their most striking feature was the inconsiderable volume of foreign commerce. Faversham was a fully-fledged Customs port, with two legal quays for the unloading of foreign merchandise, but almost all its small foreign trade was contributed by the local oyster fishery. Kentish oysters were reported in 1709 to be produced in an area twenty miles long and seven miles wide, stretching from the North Foreland to Sheerness,² but most of the fishing was done among the creeks west of Faversham in a region quite distinct from the modern oyster beds at Whitstable. The oyster trade was measured in terms of the "wash," which seems to have been equivalent to twenty bushels. Exports from Faversham increased rapidly from less than two hundred wash per year in the mid-seventeenth century to nearly a thousand in the eighteenth. Throughout this period Holland, and especially the port of Zieriksee, was the chief destination, taking more than four-fifths of the total, although a small trade to the North Sea ports of Germany developed after 1700. Apart from the Dutch wars of the seventeenth century, frost was the most serious enemy of the oyster fishery; in the 1740s, for example, exports dropped almost to nothing and the beds had to be restocked with oysters imported from Cancale in France.

Apart from the export of oysters, Faversham's foreign trade was very small, and grew even smaller during the period under review; in the late seventeenth century a little wine was imported from France or Spain and the Dutch oyster boats sometimes returned with cargoes of pantiles or bullrushes, but by the middle of the following century one or two shipments of Norwegian timber usually comprised a whole year's foreign import trade. This lack of overseas commerce was chiefly due to the close proximity of London. Whatever farm produce from North Kent found its way overseas did so only after being shipped first to the capital, and the position of Faversham on one of the principal highways of the kingdom enabled the town to obtain foreign commodities easily by road; in 1737, for example, a local farmer starting an experimental vineyard imported his vine cuttings not through the port of Faversham but by way of Calais and Dover.³

Although London drained away most of Faversham's foreign trade,

¹ Hargrave MS. 222, f. 274.

² Journals, House of Commons, Vol. 16, p. 356.

³ Isaac Minet's *Inland Letter Book*, 1737-41, 21st November, 1737. Access to this volume was kindly granted by Miss Susan Minet.

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its coasting trade was greatly stimulated by proximity to the metropolitan market. In the second half of the seventeenth century about three hundred coasters left the port each year, and of these usually less than ten were bound for ports other than London. In 1683 London imported 316 cargoes from Faversham, more than were imported from any other English port except Newcastle.¹ The eighteenth-century port books, as we have seen, are incomplete, but one record has survived for 1728,² when only Newcastle, Sunderland and Ipswich sent more ships to London than Faversham. The figures for the Kent ports were as follows:

Shipments to London, 1728

Rochester	135	Deal	34
Milton	132	Dover	65
Faversham	353	Folkestone	10
Sandwich	238	Hythe	9

The individual contributions of Faversham, Whitstable and Herne to the coasting trade cannot be established with certainty. In 1701 32 ships, totalling 888 tons, belonged to Faversham, and 33, totalling 701 tons, to Whitstable and Herne.³ Of the 289 shipments exported annually in the last decade of the seventeenth century, 56 were carried in Whitstable ships and 48 in Herne ships; in 1741, the only year after 1702 for which there are full records, there were 44 Herne ships and 40 Whitstable ships in a total of 237.

As might be expected from Faversham's location in the belt of fertile loams and brickearths which lies along the northern edge of the North Downs, corn was the principal constituent of its outward coasting trade. In the second half of the seventeenth century average annual exports of corn and malt amounted to nearly 15,000 quarters, of which more than 6,000 quarters were wheat, about 4,000 quarters oats and the rest barley and malt; exports of beans and peas amounted to more than 2,000 quarters a year. It is interesting to notice that ships belonging to Herne, which presumably served the region of heavier clay soils in the neighbourhood of the Blean Forest, carried very much smaller quantities of barley and malt than the ships of Faversham. Almost all these corn exports went to London.

The Faversham hop trade affords an interesting confirmation of Defoe's account of the Canterbury hop grounds. "The great wealth and increase of the city of Canterbury," he wrote, "is from the surprising increase of hop grounds all round the place; it is within the memory of many of the inhabitants now living, and that none of the

¹ T. S. Willan, *The English Coasting Trade, 1600-1750*, 1938, Appendix 2.

² W. Maitland, *The History of London from its Foundation to the Present Time*, 1756, Vol. II, p. 1263.

³ Admiralty: Letters from Customs Commissioners, 29th January, 1702.

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oldest neither, that there was not an acre of ground planted with hops in the whole neighbourhood, or so few as not to be worth naming."¹ Faversham's exports in 1656-85 were little more than 100 bags per year, only a small fraction of the amount shipped from Maidstone in the same period. By 1689-1701, however, exports had risen to 750 bags per year, and in the nine recorded months of 1741 they exceeded 2,000 bags. The whole of this trade was with London: the port books do not confirm Defoe's statement that Kentish hops were sent straight to Stourbridge Fair in Cambridgeshire without passing through London.²

Raw wool, the third important agricultural export of North Kent, was produced in large quantities on the rich alluvial pastures along the coast, and in the case of Faversham these supplies were supplemented by wool brought from as far afield as Romney Marsh.³ Like the export of hops, this trade enjoyed a substantial increase in the late seventeenth century, until Faversham, with an average annual export of nearly 2,000 bags, had become the chief wool-exporting port of England. After about 1715, however, the trade stagnated and even declined: by the 1730s the English wool trade was dominated by Rye, in Sussex, whose exports had grown to nearly double those of Faversham.⁴ It is interesting to notice that this shift in the centre of the legitimate wool trade corresponded with an opposite movement in the overseas "owling" of wool. By the second decade of the eighteenth century, dragoons and Riding Officers had done much to suppress the smuggling trade of Romney Marsh, but along the coast between the Swale and the North Foreland illegal trade was still on the increase and in 1718 the most notorious of the wool smugglers was a resident of Herne Bay.⁵ Between eighty and ninety per cent. of Faversham's legitimate wool exports were shipped to London; the rest went chiefly to Colchester until 1729, after which Exeter began to take about an eighth part of the total.

Two local industries, copperas and gunpowder, contributed to Faversham's coasting trade. The Whitstable copperas works, well-known from late eighteenth-century records, seem to have been in operation throughout the century preceding 1750. In the first nine months of 1656 Whitstable shipped 225 tons of copperas, Faversham

¹ D. Defoe, *A Tour through England and Wales*, 1724 (Everyman's Library), Vol. I, p. 118. The estimate of 6,000 acres under hops quoted by Defoe was exaggerated. In 1724-32 the average area of hops in the Canterbury district was 3,700 acres (Treasury Board Papers 271/23).

² Defoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 82.

³ W. Symonds, *A New Year's Gift to the Parliament, or England's Golden Fleece Preserved*, 1702, p. 28.

⁴ Lists of English ports exporting wool, 1715-19 (Colonial Office C.O. 390/8c) and 1739-43 (Treasury Various (T.64) 278, 280, 281).

⁵ Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, 1715-18, p. 417. See also Defoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 112, 123.

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only 27 tons; total exports in 1656-1701 averaged 375 tons per year, most of which were carried in Whitstable ships, but in 1741 only 181 tons were exported. Shipments of gunpowder often exceeded a thousand barrels per year, but it seems that this traffic was not always fully recorded, for in 1673 the Faversham Customs officers protested that "great quantities of powder are also weekly exported hence without cocquet or security under pretence of His Majesty's goods, but whose it is or where it goes we are not able to give any account."¹ Faversham's export trade owed little to the manufactures of Canterbury, which despatched most of its woollens, worsteds, silk and paper to London by road.

Coastwise imports to Faversham were of three kinds—the coal trade, the trade in butter and cheese, and the London trade in general merchandise. Imports of coal from Newcastle and Sunderland steadily increased, except in the wartime years of 1689-1713, from 1,053 chaldrons per year in 1671-80 to 2,498 chaldrons in 1741-50. In 1676-80, which unfortunately is the only period for which separate records are available, about a third of the total coal imports were landed at Whitstable. Butter and cheese were supplied by the Suffolk ports of Aldeburgh, Woodbridge and Ipswich; in the second half of the seventeenth century average annual imports amounted to nearly 800 firkins of butter and more than 5,000 cheeses. Faversham imported an annual average of 68 cargoes from London in the period 1656-88—more than any other Kentish port. Nearly every London cargo included a great variety of manufactured goods of both foreign and English origin, especially wine, sugar, linen, leather, glass, metal manufactures, groceries, spirits and oil, but the largest single item was combed wool for the Canterbury worsted industry, which amounted to several hundred bags a year in the peak period of the 1670s and in one or two years even exceeded the export of raw wool. In the eighteenth century imports were smaller—less than 200 bags per year—and after 1738 they ceased altogether.

Whitstable, as the nearest harbour to Canterbury, was the natural port for this inward traffic in wool and general merchandise, but it seems to have remained unimportant until the eighteenth century. Richard Blome, writing in 1673, described it as "the best port town (next to Faversham) for Canterbury,"² but in 1676-80 only 13 cargoes a year were landed there, most of them Newcastle coal, while Faversham imported no less than 93 cargoes annually. Fifty years later, however, Defoe described the trade of Canterbury without mentioning Faversham: at the time of his visit, coal and timber were brought to

¹ Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1673, p. 277.

² R. Blome, *Britannia, or a Geographical Description of the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 1673, p. 131.

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the city via Sandwich and Fordwich, heavy goods from London via Whitstable.¹ In 1726 at least one hoy began to make regular weekly voyages between Whitstable and London, the hoyman collecting goods at Canterbury and presumably unloading his return cargoes there.² The increase in the traffic between Canterbury and Whitstable which seems to have occurred at this time may have hastened the deterioration of the road joining the two places, which was seriously in need of repair in 1736.³

Herne seems to have taken no part in the Canterbury trade: almost all its traffic was composed of exported agricultural products.

¹ Defoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 119. .

² *Kentish Post*, 31st August-3rd September, 1726.

³ Journals, House of Commons, Vol. 22, pp. 544, 549. 9 Geo. II. c.10.