

BRISTOL IN THE 1490s

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The commemoration of the 1497 'discovery' of Newfoundland might lead one to think that there was nothing else happening in Bristol in the 1490s. In fact, Cabot and his Bristolian hosts were living through 'interesting times', as the proverb has it.

Five hundred years ago, Bristol was the second or third largest town in England (only London, York, and possibly Norwich outstripped it in wealth and population), but was finding it difficult to maintain this position in the face of increasingly difficult economic conditions. Bristol shared in the problems besetting many of its rivals: population growth was held back by recurrent epidemics, with the result that levels of trade and demand for manufactured goods remained low, while the shortage of tenants meant that houses fell empty and soon decayed; the increasing competition from rural clothiers hit the urban textile industry, and the town's elite showed growing reluctance to volunteer for burdensome and costly civic office.

The volatile international situation caused problems for those ports which relied on international trade, and here Bristol had been particularly affected. With the end of the Hundred Years' War in 1453 England lost its Gascon vineyards, and English traders in French wine now found that they were dealing with the enemy. The import of French wine had formed one leg of Bristol's core overseas trade, the other being English cloth, exported to continental Europe in great quantities. This trade was too important to both countries to be allowed to wither away because of mere politics, but Bristol merchants now found the going much tougher. In response to this harsh climate, they sought to develop the existing trade in Spanish and Portuguese wine and other produce, and their efforts began to bear fruit in the 1490s. In this decade, cloth exports and wine imports were the highest they had been since the 1440s, and by 1500 Spain accounted for one third of Bristol's wine imports. But the 1490s was an Indian Summer before the new century brought with it a new and vicious recession.

Foreign affairs had other effects. Henry VII's renewal of hostilities with the French, and his war with Scotland, led to new demands for money, in the form of subsidies and benevolences: the latter supposedly a gift freely given from subject to king, but in reality the royal invitation to give generously was an offer no subject could refuse. In September 1491 Henry stayed at St Augustine's Abbey (now Bristol Cathedral), in order to supervise the collection of a benevolence, said to amount to £1800. Local tradition has it that the burgesses' pleas of poverty were undermined when Henry caught sight of their wives, gorgeously attired in their opulent best to impress their king. Certainly, the burgesses' pleas ring hollow if one considers the civic improvements made the previous year, when an act of parliament was secured to repave Bristol's main streets, and £20 was spent on the repainting and gilding of the High Cross: if this was in preparation for the king's visit then one can only conclude that the supposedly impecunious burgesses made the mistake of sending out mixed messages!

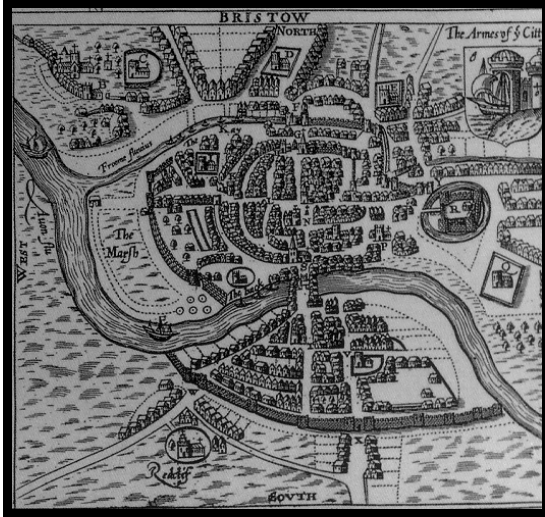
In 1495 the king's uncle, Jasper Tudor, duke of Bedford, died at Thornbury, and was buried at Keynsham Abbey. The Mayor of Bristol's Calendar records that:

the ... Maire and his brethren met with the saide Duc in Kyngeswode with ij M^l men on horsbake, all in blake gownes, and so brought his body to Keynesham, for the which the saide Maire and his brethren had grete thankes of the King.

The middle years of the decade were dominated by conflict. Taxation was one of the sparks beneath the conflagration between abbey and town in 1496. The Abbot of St Augustine's, John Newland (known as 'Nail heart' from his rebus of a heart pierced by three nails - a symbol of Christ's Passion) claimed that his abbey was exempt from the jurisdiction of the Town and County of Bristol, and should not contribute to Bristol taxes. He also maintained that the abbey and its cemetery - now known as College Green - had a special right of sanctuary. In December 1490 the mayor and his men confiscated the property of abbey tenants in lieu of unpaid taxes, and the following year Mayor John Stevens took advantage of King Henry's stay at St Augustine's to complain of the abbey's infringement of the town's

jurisdiction. Little came of this, and nor did further petitions to the royal Council yield any meaningful compromise, so in May 1496 Chancellor Morton and Chief Justice Fyneux attempted an arbitrated settlement.

They did not pronounce on the whole bundle of quarrels between town and abbey, but confined themselves to the question of jurisdiction over the Green, ruling that henceforth the mayor's officers should hold courts on the Green, sharing the profits of justice with the abbot. This was at least a symbolic victory for Mayor William Regent, and he wasted little time in implementing the decision.



On 10 June the mayor led a procession of civic dignitaries towards the Green, where he intended to hold his first court under the new dispensation. However, things did not go as Mayor Regent had planned. About an hour before he set out two of his officers made a bungled attempt to arrest one of the abbey sanctuary men, Dominick Arthur, who had fled to sanctuary after being convicted before the mayor's court two days previously. One of the officers was himself seized by the abbot's men and held captive. His colleague hurried back to relate this story to the mayor as he approached the abbey.

By the time the procession reached the Green, the abbot's men were waiting for them, and armed townsmen, abbey tenants and monks became

embroiled in a major riot. The mayor was seen to swing the civic sword around his head, shouting, according to his supporters 'Keep the peace!' until he was hoarse, but according to the abbot's men, his cry was 'now play we the men', inciting his followers to greater violence. A number of the houses surrounding the Green were damaged, and Arthur and six others were arrested. When townsmen threatened to burn down the abbey Abbot Newland appeared and a truce was negotiated: it was agreed that the court would be held by both mayor and abbot. The riot was investigated by the royal Council, but the result is not known. The following year rebellion burst across southern England, as Cornishmen marched to London in protest at the high rates of tax demanded of them to finance war against Scotland. The Cornish host was destroyed by royal forces at Blackheath in June 1497, but on their way to London they posed a dilemma for Bristol's mayor and corporation. The Mayor's Calendar relates how when they had reached Wells the leaders of the rebellion:

hauyng with them xl M^l men, sent to the Maire of Bristowe to ordeign loddgynge and vitail for xx M^l. But the Maire sent them worde that they shuld come no nere, and if they wold come ner, at their oune aduentur. And then the Maire mustred and made redy to withstond the said rebelles, and garnished the town walles with men harnessid and with gonnes, and brought shippes and botes aboute the merresse, garnished with men, artillery, and gonnes. And the said rebelles hereng of this chaunged their purpose, and toke another wey.

At the end of the decade Bristol's political elite were rewarded for their conspicuous loyalty. In 1499 Bristol was granted a new charter, which recast the town's constitution along more oligarchic lines, following the lead given by developments in London. Henceforth, Bristol was to be governed by the mayor and an inner elite of five aldermen, one for each of the five wards (Trinity, St Mary-the-Port, All Saints, St Ewen, and Redcliffe), who would double as justices of the peace; one of the aldermen was to fill the office of recorder, a senior law officer who was also expected to represent Bristol's interests to crown and parliament. The number of sheriffs was increased from one to two. The main intention of this charter was probably to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement, but in so doing it tightened the grip of the mayor and the elite on their community. The constitution established by the 1499 charter was to form the basis of Bristol's local government until the municipal reforms of the 1830s, and so it is to this decade that we can trace the roots of Bristol's own *ancien regime*.

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