

This is the first in an occasional series in which a document relating to the history of Bristol and its region is reproduced and discussed. The aim is to provide discussion points, not to provide the last word on the issues raised. If you have a document that you would like to discuss - or would like discussed - please let us know.

A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY BRISTOL ORDINANCE CONCERNING ALIENS

Item, It is agreed, ordained and assented by Philip Mede, Mayor of Bristol, William Spencer, Sheriff, and all the Common Council of the said town at the council of Bristol held in the Guildhall of the said town the last day of May, in the year of the reign of King Edward the fourth after the conquest the second [1462], that for as much that divers and many of the crafts and occupations of weavers daily receive and put in occupation of the said craft strangers, aliens and others not born under the king's obeisance, and for their singular profit ...divers merchants and others to bring in to this town of Bristol people of divers countries not born under the king's obeisance but rebellious, which have been sold to them as it were heathen people, and through the continuance thereof in default of correction it hath caused that such strangers and aliens beeth greatly multiplied and increased within the town, and that the king's liege people born within this said town and other parties of this his realm be vagrants and unoccupied, and may not have their labour for their living, that therefor from this day forward no manner person of the craft of weavers within this town of Bristol set or put any such stranger or alien to work in the occupation of the said craft of weavers, nor in anything thereto belonging or pertaining [penalty of 6s. 8d. for infringements of the ordinance]. Provided always and except that this act stretch not to any person or persons that was or were made apprentice to any burgess within this said town of Bristol before the feast of Christmas last passed, and at that time they being in their apprenticeship.

Great Red Book of Bristol, ff. 130v-131r (spelling modernised)

By 1462 England had experienced three years of civil strife between the Yorkist and Lancastrian branches of the extended royal family - the first part of what would become known as the 'Wars of the Roses'. Edward IV emerged triumphant from this struggle. Bristol at this time was among England's leading provincial port towns, with the production and export of cloth and the import of wine the most obvious foundations of its economy. Bristol's trade had suffered a serious blow with the loss of English possessions in France at the end of the Hundred Years' War. By 1453 all but Calais had returned to French rule. Most serious for Bristol, English territorial losses included the Gascon vineyards. South-west France was also an important market for Bristol cloth and a major exporter of woad, essential to the town's dyeing industry. The loss of France brought about a major short-term dislocation in Bristol's overseas trade. Trade with France continued, but it was now on the basis of dealing with an unfriendly power, rather than with subjects of the English king. By 1462 the great expansion in trade with Spain and Portugal was still in the future. Bristol's textile

trade was also put under pressure by a mid-century trade slump and by increasing competition from London entrepreneurs and rural clothiers. While Bristol continued to be a significant centre of cloth dyeing and the buying and selling of textiles, its days as a major producer of raw cloth were numbered.

The Document

This is one of the town ordinances recorded in The Great Red Book, so named from the red leather cover with which it was originally bound. The book was primarily a record of ordinances (town bye-laws) made by the mayor and common council, the governing body of later medieval Bristol. The book is part of the collection of the Bristol Record Office. It has been published, in several volumes, by the Bristol Record Society, and the extract is based on the text as edited for the Society.

Interpretation

The ordinance notes that weavers had been employing 'strangers, aliens and others not born under the king's obeisance' to such an extent that native Bristolians found themselves unemployed. While 'strangers' could refer to anyone who was not a burgess of Bristol, 'aliens' is more specific, and its meaning is amplified by the words following it: the target is clearly those who were not subject to the king of England - foreigners, in other words. Who such people might be was not always clear. Twenty-two years earlier, the Irish could be included as liable for a tax on aliens living in England, despite the king's claim to lordship over Ireland. Lordship was also claimed over Scotland and France, but Scots and French (all French, after 1453) were consistently treated as aliens: the crucial point here being loyalty - unless they could demonstrate otherwise, it was assumed that natives of lands ruled over by foreign kings were loyal to them, rather than to the king of England. However, aliens could acquire letters of denization, whereby they formally transferred their loyalty. Wales was well on its way to the assimilation into the English state achieved under Henry VIII in the 1530s, despite the revolt of Owain Glyn Dwr at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and there seems to have been no question of the Welsh being treated as aliens, although the anti-Welsh legislation revived during the revolt remained on the statute book.

These aliens, we are told, were being brought over by merchants, for their own profit. The phrase, 'which have been sold to them as it were heathen people', suggests that these aliens were being bought and sold like slaves. While Bristol's involvement in the African slave trade to any significant degree was at least a century in the future, merchants trading with the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean would have been familiar with slavery. Whatever was meant by this phrase, we should probably be wrong to interpret it as meaning that Bristol merchants bought heathen slaves for sale as cheap labour to the weavers. Rather, it is probably a rhetorical device to express concern and disapproval of the practice of importing foreign labour. Given that this labour had to be transported, and that the merchants and others conveying it had to be recompensed, we are probably not discussing cheap, unskilled labour, of which there was an abundance in and around Bristol. However, even if skilled, once in Bristol they may have constituted a more malleable, less expensive source of skilled labour than their English counterparts in the same way that some modern migrant workers have to endure poorer conditions of employment than those with equal or inferior qualifications from within the host community. Alternatively, if these are experienced

clothworkers, perhaps the issue here is not that they were undercutting native labour, but that they had superior skills to the natives, and were therefore in greater demand.

Where might these aliens have come from? They are described as 'rebellious', indicating that their allegiance is not just to another sovereign authority, but to one contested by the king of England. As indicated above, this actually covers most of England's neighbours, so doesn't help us too much in answering this question. If they were skilled clothworkers, one obvious possibility is that they came from Flanders, under the lordship of the duke of Burgundy. Flanders was the leading centre of cloth production in northern Europe, and the British Isles has played host to several waves of Flemings seeking enhanced economic opportunities or shelter from political turmoil or religious persecution. Flanders' economic decline had set in the fourteenth century, but Flemish migrants had appeared in the British Isles long before that. Flemings were settled in Pembrokeshire, for example, as part of the Anglo-Norman conquest of South Wales. Fifteenth-century London had a significant Flemish community which was often the target of xenophobic violence. Bristol may have had its own equivalent, although there was little Bristol trade with Flanders, but more research is needed to clarify this point. Bristol certainly had significant Irish and Welsh communities. The aliens alluded to in the document are unlikely to be Welsh, but they might be Irish. Those Irish living outside the areas controlled by the English in Ireland - those literally living 'beyond the pale' - were often referred to as the 'rebel' Irish, irrespective of individuals' actual attitudes towards English rule, and so the use of the word 'rebellious' could be relevant here. Bristol burgesses of Irish origin suffered official discrimination in the 1450s, and this ordinance might perhaps be seen as another aspect of this policy. On the other hand, could 'rebellious' have been applied to the French, perhaps even to the Burgundians (nominally the duke of Burgundy owed allegiance to the king of France - which the king of England claimed to be)? The Burgundians' renunciation of their alliance with the English in the 1430s engendered bitter recriminations and violence against Flemings living in England.

As the product of a policy designed to protect the jobs of Bristolians, this document may be seen as the companion to an ordinance of the previous year. The 1461 ordinance of weavers observed that many weavers put their wives, daughters and maidservants to work at their looms, or hired them out to work at others', by the which many and divers of the king's liege people, likely men to do the king service in his wars and in the defence of this his land, and sufficiently learned in the said craft, go vagrant and unoccupied and may not have their labour to their living.

Therefore no weaver was to employ his daughters or maidservants in this capacity, or hire them out, and while weavers' wives could continue in their employment, subsequent generations of women were barred from practising the craft. Any weaver caught breaking this ordinance was to be fined 6s. 8d. for each offence. The king is unlikely to have depended overmuch on weavers to fight his wars, and the real problem which this ordinance sought to address was of course unemployment in the textile industry. The urge to protect male employment by discriminating against women has a long history.

The ordinance ends with the qualification that aliens who had already embarked upon apprenticeships under Bristol masters could continue in them. Once again, this clause does not suggest that the immigrants were all unskilled cheap labour, since

apprenticeships cost money, and represented a considerable investment in training. A successful apprenticeship was also a route into full citizenship as a burgess. This was far from automatic, but through apprenticeship it was at least theoretically possible for aliens to enter the mainstream of elite Bristol society.

This 1462 ordinance is a fascinating document that raises many questions. Some of the issues it raises have resonance today, when foreign competition for British jobs, 'economic migrants' and the smuggling of asylum seekers are major news items.

Further Reading:

The Great Red Book of Bristol was edited by E.W.W. Veale and published as vols. 2, 4, 8 & 16 of the Bristol Record Society. The best published study of medieval Bristol merchants remains E M Carus-Wilson, *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (1st edn 1954, 2nd edn Methuen, London, 1967), which also contains useful essays on the cloth trade. D H Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700* (University of California Press, 1991) has an informative first chapter. For an illustrated introduction to later medieval Bristol, see P Fleming & K Costello, *Discovering Cabot's Bristol: Life in the Medieval and Tudor Town* (Redcliffe, Bristol, 1997). A good introduction to aliens in fifteenth-century England is provided by R.A. Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI* (Ernest Benn, London, 1981), chap. 8.