

# THE BLAKENEY AND CLEY PORT BOOKS

*By Richard Kelham*

*The port books represent one of the major sources for the historian interested in pre-19th century trade. They purport to be a record of all dutiable goods imported or exported, or sent coast-wise, over the period 1565 to 1780. Considering that at various times just about every commodity that could be traded could also be taxed, these records should give a pretty comprehensive overview of England's ship-borne trade. But do they? This article presents some thoughts on this question and includes some extracts from selected port books. It is intended that some complete transcriptions will be included in future issues of the Journal.*

Before considering the usefulness and accuracy of the port books, a brief discourse on the organisation of the customs service might be useful. As far back as the 14th century the coast of England was divided into 19 areas, each based upon a principal trading town, or head port. The Port of Yarmouth consisted of the quays at Yarmouth plus all the creeks and harbours (known as outports) between Woodbridge and Blakeney. There were resident customs officers only at those ports which were traditionally associated with overseas trade – merchants were expected to use only those ports where a customs officer was to be found.

This somewhat imperfect system was investigated by the Marquess of Winchester, author of the Customs Act of 1559 to regulate the creeks, who arranged a general inquiry into the state of customs cover in the outports in 1565. As the inquiry was entrusted to local commissioners it should come as no great surprise that they reported all was well. The commissioners who inquired into the Port of Yarmouth contented themselves with the suggestion that the Blakeney customs house be removed to Cley, which it duly was – more than a hundred years later.

Each head port had three patent officers, so called because they were appointed by 'letters patent under the Great Seal' (in other words, their job was in the gift of some powerful nobleman), these being the Customer, the Controller and the Searcher. Of the normal establishment, the Customer was signatory of all warrants, writs and other such documents, though the Controller, whose role was to be a check on the Customer, was generally considered to be his equal. They would each have half of the seal used to authenticate the cockets and certificates that a ship master needed to show that the goods he carried had been duly customed or bonded. They usually kept separate copies of the accounts, which were expected to tally the one with the other – and usually did in all but the odd detail.

Those outposts with a customs house had their own establishments, usually consisting of a Collector and a range of lesser officers with splendid sounding titles such as Waiter and Searcher, Sitter in the Boat, Tide Surveyor, and Coal Meter, among others. Most of these appointments were in the control of the patent officers at the head port, many of whom were not above charging a fee for their patronage: the Bacon papers<sup>1</sup> show the Searcher of Yarmouth selling the office of Deputy Searcher at Blakeney for £10, a sum equal to the Customer's salary from the Crown in the 16th century.

By the 18th century, though the civil service was still unreformed, salaries had risen. In the 1770s Peter Coble, the Controller at Cley, was paid a quarterly salary of £10; Thomas Humphrey, the Waiter and Searcher, was paid £8 15s plus £2 10s for his horse, while Samuel and Francis Starling (Tidesman and Boatman respectively) were paid £6 5s each. In all, the Cley establishment in 1779 numbered 8 men (and a horse) with a combined salary of £62 10s per quarter.<sup>2</sup> They were expected to augment their meagre stipends by charging fees for the issue of cockets and certificates, by taking commission on coal metered and rewards for contraband seized. They could also claim for expenses incurred, the cost defrayed by the sale of confiscated goods and equipment (by way of comparison, an agricultural labourer would have been paid about £5 a quarter – with no extras). Being so poorly paid and so far from the prying eyes of government it should not be too surprising if customs officers found merchants' bribes more appealing than the King's salary.

As to the accuracy of the port books, the percentage of trade that, for one reason or another, failed to find its way into the customs records cannot be estimated with any degree of accuracy – and indeed must have varied widely from area to area and time to time, depending on the effectiveness (or venality) of the customs officers. The amount of trade conducted from small boats with muffled oars landing at remote beaches in the dead of night will never be known, though one can be sure that then, as now, that seized by the preventive officers represented only a very small percentage. Most of the big merchants eschewed this trade, preferring instead to fiddle the system from the comfort of their own warehouses. Some indication of their success can be seen from a comparison (undertaken by Neville Williams for his seminal work on East Anglian trade in the 16th century) between the Yarmouth Customer's records for 1587-8 and those of the local Water Bailiff collecting harbour dues on behalf of the Borough. Taking shipments in foreign vessels as an example, Williams found 4 entries in the Customer's record but no less than 42 in the Water Bailiff's record for the same period.<sup>3</sup> Other discrepancies noted were of lesser magnitude, but always it was the Bailiff who recorded the higher number. The moral seemed to be that the Crown was fair game, but woe betide anyone trying to cheat on his local community. Unfortunately there was no Water Bailiff at Cley so such a check on unrecorded shipments cannot be made. Nor can we be sure how many shipments were under-recorded, though my own feeling is that there was less corruption in the 18th century than in the 16th, as studied by Williams, when corrupt practice seemed to be endemic.

Merchants trading coastwise had to enter a bond that their cargo was not for export, and the customs at the port of embarkation would issue a certificate to show that the bond had been paid. Understating the size of cargo loaded for such journeys was, it seems, not uncommon, especially when the merchant was expecting a 'storm' to blow his ship off course and into a foreign port (sometimes the 'storm' was a French privateer). That way, even if his (undervalued) bond was forfeited, the merchant could still show a good profit, and could usually appeal for his bond to be returned once duty had been paid.<sup>4</sup> In the normal course of events the bond would be redeemable when the shipmaster returned with his certificate duly endorsed by the customs at the unloading port.

Similarly for overseas trade the customs would issue a cocket to the master to show that the relevant duties had been paid before departure. Understating the size of cargo

for overseas trade was of more obvious advantage (reduced customs paid) though there was always the risk of an uncorrupted customs officer, or one of the multitude of informers, discovering the discrepancy. Certainly some of the recorded voyages from Blakeney and Cley appear to show ships leaving harbour with rather less than their maximum load on board, though it would be wrong to jump to any conclusions in such cases: it could be that there was no further cargo available, for instance.

With these caveats in mind, we can turn to the transcriptions of the actual port books. The 'date' column on the overseas pages represents the date of the cocket, whereas the date on coastwise pages usually refers to the date of entry of the certificate. In both cases this should not necessarily be taken as the date of sailing. The entries are separated into quarters, representing the quarterly returns made by the customs officers, in the order Lady Day, Midsummer, Michaelmas and Christmas.

Of the various measures used the Newcastle chalder, originally a measure of volume, had by the middle of the 18th century become accepted as a measure of weight of 53 cwt. Just to add to the confusion, the London chalder was reckoned as half that: 26½ cwt; oh, and there were still 36 (heaped) bushels to a chalder. Contemporary documents, local newspapers, etc, refer merely to 'chalders' without any qualification which leads one to assume that there was, at least in Norfolk, a general acceptance of what a chalder was; other authorities state that it was the measure used in the port of origin that mattered, which seems logical enough. When applied to real world cargoes the sloop *Active* typically carried 25 chalders of coal<sup>5</sup> (equal to 66 tons 5 cwt if the Newcastle measure is taken) which seems a reasonable load for a vessel estimated at 70 tons burthen, this being the figure quoted when it was put up for auction at the King's Arms, Blakeney, in June 1780.

The grain was still measured by volume, the quarter being equal to 8 bushels or 32 pecks. Unfortunately there have been over the years many variations in the size of the 'standard' bushel, not least depending on whether the contents were heaped, level or shaken down or not, and so on, though by the end of the 17th century the law<sup>6</sup> stated that corn was to be measured by the 'Winchester bushel stricken'. This applied until weights and measures were properly reformed in 1835. Those of you interested in this wonderfully arcane subject should obtain a copy of the magisterial work *The Weights and Measures of England* published by the British Museum; though you may need to take out a second mortgage to pay for it. The various corn and coal measures, scales and beams etc, used by the customs officers at Cley were kept in a warehouse called the Tackle House rented for that purpose. Until 1754 this storage space had been rented at 10s per annum from a merchant by the name of Framingham Jay, who lived in the house now called Mill Leat. In that year he sought to increase the rent to 30s. As the Tackle House was liable to flooding the local officers were authorised<sup>7</sup> to move their tackle to new premises owned by Mr Wortley<sup>8</sup> where, though the rent was still 30s, the flood risk was minimal.

What do the port books actually tell us? Assuming that by this date (mid 18th century) the level of fraud had dropped to below 10% of the total volume of trade, and bearing in mind that there can never be direct evidence to substantiate this or any other figure, the port books give us an indication of the nature and volume of trade passing through the creek (outport) known as Blakeney/Cley,<sup>9</sup> the names of the local merchants, the master mariners and their ships. Taken in isolation, and having entered the caveat

about possible fraud against the Crown, they give us only the raw data but with information from other sources a wider picture emerges. For instance, the port books tell us that a typical cargo for the sloop *Active* (just to stick with a vessel we have met before) was 350 quarters of barley. What did that represent in monetary terms? The price of grain fluctuated widely depending on the quality of the harvest but a figure of around 18s per quarter was perhaps typical of the wholesale price in the 18th century and would give a value of £315 for such a cargo as dispatched – not much less than the value of the vessel carrying it. By contrast, the value of a cargo of coal was perhaps one tenth of that figure.

What use are the port books? At the risk of sounding clichéd they are valuable pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of history. On their own they tell us little, but taken in conjunction with other data they can help to build up a more comprehensive view of the social, and above all, economic history of an area. As an example it is generally accepted that one of the reasons for the decline of the Glaven ports is their lack of a suitably large and accessible hinterland (Lynn by comparison had good connections by inland waterways so that its hinterland stretched to Cambridge and beyond), but just how small was the area served by the Glaven ports? It might be possible, for example, to take the grain exports, the known yields per acre, the proportion of the land actually under grain, and an estimate of the percentage of the crop sent for export (figures often available from farm records) as a means of suggesting the area that normally would have traded through the creeks of Blakeney and Cley.

Some of the Blakeney/Cley port books have already been transcribed, most notably by Kenneth Allen and Basil Cozens-Hardy, but these represent only a tiny proportion of the total. Others have used port books in their notes and publications. The BAHS Journal could therefore provide a useful service by making available more of this material to readers. It is therefore intended to include in the next issue of the Journal full transcripts from selected port books. The appendix which follows shows the kind of material which is available, omitting the various computations of duty and subsidy.

## Notes

- 1 H.W.Saunders (Ed), *The Official Papers of Sir Nathaniel Bacon*, Camden Papers, 3rd series, Vol XXVI, 1915, pp42-3.
- 2 Public Record Office Cust 96/159.
- 3 N.Williams, *The Maritime Trade of the East Anglian Ports, 1550-1590*, Oxford University Press, 1988, p43.
- 4 Eg PRO Cust 96/156, re James Watson, master of the *Thomas and William*, laden with 34 chalders of coal from Sunderland, forced overseas in Nov 1759.
- 5 Eg PRO E 190/575/4, entries for 4 May and 3 July.
- 6 Act of 22 Charles II, ch 8, 1670.
- 7 PRO Cust 96/155.
- 8 This could have been either Charles or Thomas Wortley, both of whom were or had been customs officers.
- 9 Remembering that the boundaries of Blakeney/Cley stretched from west of Morston to Mundesley.

## SELECTED ENTRIES FROM TWO PORT BOOKS

The first book is for coasting traffic outwards for the year 1740 (PRO E190/555/13). There are 64 entries in the book, and all ships are bound for London, apart from 3 for Newcastle and 2 for Sunderiand.

The second book is for overseas traffic outward bound in 1750 (PRO E1 90/558/8). There are 56 records and the destination in every case is Rotterdam.

In the list below, the name of the ship is followed by the initial letter of the port of destination, and then by the name of the master and the name(s) of the merchant(s). The final column records the quantity of crops declared: all figures are in quarters and the initials represent the following:

W wheat	B barley	M malt	R rye
O oats	K buckwheat	P peas	V vetch

### Coasters outwards 1740 (Selected)

Feb 5	<i>Thomas &amp; Susan</i>	L	James Leake	Thomas Hooke	40W 250B 10P
Feb 25	<i>Rose in June</i>	L	John Farthing	Robert Nurse	350B 5R
Apr 5	<i>Mayflower</i>	L	Richard Murland	Thomas Temple	120B 20P
May 20	<i>Thomas &amp;, Susan</i>	L	Thomas Hooke	Samuel Browne	200B 100M
Nov 21	<i>Happy Return</i>	L	Robert Cutting	Framingham Jay	210B 200
Nov 28	<i>Two Sisters</i>	L	Moon Chaplin	William Wells	5W 300B 70M 10P
Dec 9	<i>Thomas &amp; Deborah</i>	L	John Mussett	Thomas Temple	85W 200B 60M

### Overseas outwards 1750 (Selected)

Jan 9	<i>Thomas &amp; Deborah</i>	R	John Mussett	William Temple	44W 42R 390W
Feb 1	<i>Prosperous William</i>	R	Moon Chaplin	William Mann	350M
				William Hipkins	187M
				William Garrett	84M
Mar 15	<i>Happy Return</i>	R	Thomas Potter	William Temple	75W 515M
Jun 23	<i>Yarmouth</i>	R	Robert Howard	William Mann	399M
Sep 22	<i>Ellis</i>	R	John Taylor	Charles Brettingham	42W 174B