

Bristol and the Atlantic trade in the eighteenth century

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Introduction

Favoured with a long history of maritime commerce and a westward geographical outlook, Bristol played a significant role in the exploration, colonisation and trade of the New World from the time of the Cabot voyages onwards. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Bristol's main commercial interests in the Atlantic were the search for the Northwest Passage, involvement in the fisheries off Newfoundland and New England, and early trade connections with the Chesapeake and the Caribbean. Between 1660 and 1700, trading links with the colonies grew apace and helped Bristol and England to gain access to a wider commercial world.¹ But it was during the eighteenth century that Bristol became a bustling gateway of empire trading with all the British colonies in North America and the West Indies, with the slave coast of West Africa, and with the Atlantic wine islands and the Iberian peninsula (which were integral parts of the transatlantic shipping network).² Burgeoning

¹ On these developments see especially C. M. MacInnes, *Bristol: A Gateway of Empire*, chs. 1–6; 'Bristol and Overseas Expansion' in C. M. MacInnes and W. F. Whittard, eds., *Bristol and its Adjoining Counties* (Bristol, 1955), pp. 219–30; Patrick McGrath, ed., *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth-Century Bristol* (Bristol Record Society's Publications, 19, 1955); 'Bristol and America, 1480–1631' in K. R. Andrews, Nicholas P. Canny and P. E. H. Hair, eds., *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic, and America 1480–1650* (Liverpool, 1978), pp. 81–102; David H. Sacks, *Trade, Society and Politics in Bristol circa 1500–circa 1640* (New York, 1985), pp. 401–17; *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450–1700* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991); and G. D. Ramsay, *English Overseas Trade during the Centuries of Emergence: Studies in Some Modern Origins of the English Speaking World* (London, 1957), pp. 134–51.

² Previous studies which discuss aspects of Bristol's eighteenth-century Atlantic trade include MacInnes, *Bristol: A Gateway of Empire*, chs. 7–14; W. E. Minchinton, 'The Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century' in McGrath, ed., *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 127–60; *Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*; 'The Slave Trade of Bristol with the British Mainland Colonies in North America, 1699–1770' in Roger Anstey and P. E. H. Hair, eds., *Liverpool the African Slave Trade and Abolition* (Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, Occasional Series, 2, 1976), pp. 39–59; Pares, *West-India Fortune*, ch. 9; David Richardson, 'The Bristol Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century' (University of Manchester MA thesis, 1969); *The Bristol Slave Traders: A Collective Portrait* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, pamphlet no. 60, 1985); and Morgan, 'Bristol Merchants and the Colonial Trades'.

oceanic commerce helped to develop wealth and prosperity in the Bristol mercantile community. It was a major impetus behind the investment of merchants in banking in the city after 1750 and in their participation in various industrial enterprises. It also enabled many of them to acquire country estates, fine Georgian town houses and urban residences among the terraces and crescents of Clifton.³

Bristol's increasing commercial connections with North America and the West Indies reflected a similar shift in the overall pattern of British overseas trade. Though English domestic exports and retained imports both quadrupled in value during the eighteenth century, the transatlantic sector expanded while trade with Europe experienced relative decline. In 1700–1, English colonies in the New World accounted for 11 per cent of the value of English exports and for 20 per cent of imports. By 1772–3, they took 38 per cent of exports and were the source of 39 per cent of imports. By 1797–8, North America and the Caribbean received 57 per cent of British exports and supplied 32 per cent of imports. Many re-exported goods also consisted of colonial commodities.⁴ British exports sent across the Atlantic were mainly finished manufactured wares, while imports from the Americas were dominated by sugar, tobacco, rice, coffee, naval stores, dyestuffs and other products increasingly in demand with British and European consumers.

Bristol was not the only west-coast outpost to benefit from this 'Americanisation' of British foreign trade. The economic development of Liverpool, Glasgow and Whitehaven was also stimulated to varying degrees by the same phenomenon. Though the metropolis nearly always accounted for around two-thirds of the value of exports and imports in English transatlantic trade during the eighteenth century, and also dominated overseas commerce as a whole, the west coast outports reduced the relative share of London's visible trade and shipping activity by the time of the American Revolution.⁵ They also contributed to the relative commercial decline of Bristol. In 1700 Bristol was the third largest town

³ C. H. Cave, *A History of Banking in Bristol from 1750 to 1899* (Bristol, 1899); W. E. Minchinton, 'The Merchants of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century' in *Sociétés et groupes sociaux en Aquitaine et en Angleterre*, Fédérations Historiques du Sud-Ouest (Bordeaux, 1979), pp. 185–200.

⁴ For overviews of these changing trade patterns see Ralph Davis, 'English Foreign Trade, 1700–1774', *ECHR*, 2nd Series, 15 (1962–3), 285–303, and *The Industrial Revolution and British Overseas Trade* (Leicester, 1979).

⁵ W. E. Minchinton, ed., *The Growth of English Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1969), pp. 33–42; Christopher J. French, "'Crowded with Traders and a Great Commerce": London's Dominion of English Overseas Trade, 1700–1775', *The London Journal*, 17 (1992), 27–35. The rise of Glasgow in the half century before 1776 means, of course, that London had a lower share of British, as distinct from English, transatlantic trade during the eighteenth century.

in England and the second largest port; by 1800 she was ranked fifth among towns and ninth among ports.⁶ Bristol was not seriously challenged by Whitehaven, which was prominent in Atlantic trade only in the 1740s before fading away (largely through lack of an extensive hinterland for the collection and distribution of consumer goods).⁷ But Glasgow and Liverpool provided stiffer competition. Glasgow outstripped Bristol and all other British ports in the tobacco trade between the 1740s and the late 1770s, and rose to become a thriving commercial city in the eighteenth century largely because of expanding overseas trade.⁸ From small beginnings in 1700, Liverpool rose to become the leading British outpost a century later. Liverpool overhauled Bristol in the volume of overseas trade conducted at both ports in the 1740s, in the shipping tonnage owned at British ports in 1751, and in population size in the late 1780s.⁹

The chief aims of this book are to analyse the commercial organisation of Bristol's Atlantic trade during its 'golden age' in the eighteenth century, and to examine the performance of Bristol as a port in an international trading world that was becoming more sophisticated, specialised and complex. This is not virgin territory. Historians have examined various themes relevant to my investigation: the place of Bristol as 'metropolis of the west' in the eighteenth century; her role in the Atlantic slave trade; the contribution of the Society of Merchant Venturers to the port and trade of the city; the development of the port of Bristol; the main characteristics of the Bristol merchant community; the nature of the sugar trade and the sugar market at Bristol; and the main trends in Bristol's overseas trade.¹⁰ The reasons why eighteenth-century Bristol experienced relative decline as a port have also attracted analysis. It has

⁶ Minchinton, ed., *Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p. ix.

⁷ J. V. Beckett, *Coal and Tobacco: The Lowthers and the Economic Development of West Cumberland, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 108, 120, 121, 143; J. E. Williams, 'Whitehaven in the Eighteenth Century', *EcHR*, 2nd Series, 7 (1956), 393–404.

⁸ See especially, among a large literature, Jacob M. Price, 'The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707–1775', *WMQ*, 3rd Series, 11 (1954), 179–99; T. M. Devine, *The Tobacco Lords: A Study of the Tobacco Merchants of Glasgow and their Trading Activities, c.1740–1790* (Edinburgh, 1975); W. R. Brock, *Scotus Americanus: A Survey of Sources for Links between Scotland and America in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1982), ch. 3.

⁹ P. J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 35–6, 39–40. See also F. E. Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey: An Economic History of a Port, 1700–1970* (Newton Abbot, 1971), chs. 2–3, and Paul G. E. Clemens, 'The Rise of Liverpool, 1665–1750', *EcHR*, 2nd Series, 29 (1976), 211–25.

¹⁰ See especially the studies listed in note 2 above plus the following: W. E. Minchinton, 'Bristol – Metropolis of the West in the Eighteenth Century', *TRHS*, 5th Series, 4 (1954), 69–89; David Richardson, ed., *Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade to America*, 3 vols. (Bristol Record Society's *Publications*, 38, 39, 42, 1986–90); McGrath, *Merchant Venturers of Bristol*, chs. 6, 8–10; Alan F. Williams, 'Bristol Port Plans

been suggested that sluggish improvement of port facilities placed strain on Bristol's shipping by the late eighteenth century; that some leading merchants at the port had complacent business attitudes; that Bristol and her hinterland suffered from lack of industrial development after 1760 comparable to that of south Lancashire; that canal construction in the north Midlands after 1770 helped to channel export goods to Liverpool rather than to Bristol; that Bristol was over-committed to West India trade by 1800; and that heavy port dues drove shipping away from Bristol.¹¹ These points, however, have never been analysed with reference to the full range of sources available on Bristol's Atlantic trading connections in the eighteenth century, or with close attention to the entrepreneurial practices of merchants in the city. This book seeks to redress the situation.¹²

The discussion below falls into seven topical chapters. Chapter 1 traces the chronological development of Bristol's Atlantic trade during the eighteenth century, with particular attention to periods of war and peace. It analyses the commercial problems experienced by Bristol merchants from the 1740s onwards and examines the pressures placed on port facilities at Bristol by an increased volume of shipping. Chapter 2 looks at the characteristics of the vessels used in Bristol's transatlantic trade – their size, armaments, manning, place of build and place of ownership. It also considers the varied productivity trends for ships trading with Virginia and Jamaica. Chapter 3 explores the nature of shipping patterns to show that, by mid-century, Bristol merchants increasingly favoured regular, direct routes instead of multilateral voyage patterns. The remaining chapters concentrate on four major trades. Chapter 4 investigates the structure and organisation of the export trade. It highlights various business problems including over-extension of credit, lack of full remittances, difficulties in the supply network, and problems in filling up space on board ship on outward voyages. Chapter 5 is devoted to the problems

and Improvement Schemes of the Eighteenth Century', *TBGAS*, 81 (1962), 138–88; I. V. Hall, 'A History of the Sugar Trade in England with Special Attention to the Sugar Trade of Bristol' (University of Bristol M.A. thesis, 1925); Ronald H. Quilici, 'Turmoil in a City and an Empire: Bristol's Factions, 1700–1775' (University of New Hampshire Ph.D. dissertation, 1976), chs. 4–5. For an assessment of MacInnes' work see Alan F. Williams, 'Bristol and C. M. MacInnes: The Canadian Dean of Gateway of Empire', *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1 (1986), 307–17.

¹¹ Minchinton, 'Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century', pp. 153–8; *Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. xv–xvi; Williams, 'Bristol Port Plans and Improvement Schemes', pp. 138–88; McGrath, *Merchant Venturers of Bristol*, pp. 150–67; Corfield, *Impact of English Towns*, pp. 41–2; William Hunt, *Bristol* (Bristol, 1895), pp. 208–9.

¹² For an overview of the main argument advanced in this book see Kenneth Morgan, 'Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century', *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), 626–50.

experienced by Bristolians in the slave trade: a falling share in the slave markets of the Americas from the 1730s onwards, high shipping costs, and diversion into privateering activity during wartime. Throughout the book special attention is given to the West Indies and the Chesapeake, the two most lucrative regions in the Atlantic basin for Bristol merchants. Thus chapters 6 and 7 conclude the book with an examination of the contrasting fortunes of the Bristol sugar and tobacco trades with regard to levels of imports and customs duties, marketing, and business organisation.

My analysis draws on an extensive range of manuscript and printed sources on Bristol's Atlantic trade plus printed material on Liverpool, Whitehaven and Glasgow. I have cast my net as widely as possible: whatever its deficiencies, this book is based on all the relevant data I could find for Bristol for the entire eighteenth century. For this period, Bristol has better surviving statistics on shipping and trade than any other British port. This study therefore draws on quantitative material included in the Port Books, Wharfage Books, Ships' Muster Rolls, Colonial Naval Officers' Returns and Mediterranean Passes.¹³ Other documents proved more elusive to track down. The Bristol customs records were burned in the Reform Bill riots of 1831. The in- and out-letter books at the other end were similarly destroyed along with the London Custom house in 1814.¹⁴ Bristol itself contains relatively few merchants' business records – the material is much thinner, for instance, than for eighteenth-century Philadelphia merchants.¹⁵ Very few merchants' ledgers, articles of partnership or balance sheets are still available for Bristol merchants. Tantalising glimpses of what was once, but no longer, in existence are given in some surviving sources.¹⁶ What still survives sometimes turns up in unexpected places: the only relevant documents in private possession that came to light during my research were found in Kintyre, Scotland; and the fullest merchants' papers for Georgian Bristol are deposited in Melbourne.¹⁷

Fortunately, much useful documentation on the activities of Bristolians engaged in Atlantic trade can be gleaned from archives in Great Britain, Europe, the West Indies, the United States, and Australia. This

¹³ The data given in these sources are outlined in the appendix, pp. 225–9.

¹⁴ Rupert C. Jarvis, ed., *Customs Letter-Books of the Port of Liverpool, 1711–1813* (Chetham Society's Publications, 3rd Series, 6, Manchester, 1954), p. v.

¹⁵ Cf. Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986).

¹⁶ E.g. the merchants' papers listed in PRO, T 79/30 and in ACRL, List of Deeds in the possession of Henry Bengough, Apr. 1818, Acc. B4942.

¹⁷ See entries in the bibliography of manuscript sources under MacNeal of Losset, by Campeltown, and the University of Melbourne Archives.

information is fairly sparse for the period before 1740 but abundant thereafter.¹⁸ It is also fuller on some aspects of Atlantic trade than on others (as will be apparent from my discussions of the Bristol sugar and tobacco markets). Much of the primary material has been under-researched by previous historians, perhaps because it requires extensive digging in archives. But I hope that my book demonstrates the veins of gold that can be uncovered. My aim is to interweave material from these various sources into an analysis that will interest historians of eighteenth-century Britain, of Colonial American history, and of business and maritime history. Throughout emphasis lies on the entrepreneurial decline of Bristol merchants in the eighteenth century and the interdependence of the Atlantic trading world of that era.¹⁹ If the book contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interrelationship between different economic sectors in a century when Britain became the centre of an Atlantic economy, it will have succeeded.

¹⁸ Transcripts of selected documents will appear in Kenneth Morgan, ed., *Bristol's Transatlantic Commerce in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol Record Society's *Publications*, forthcoming).

¹⁹ On the latter theme see Jacob M. Price, 'What Did Merchants Do? Reflections on British Overseas Trade, 1660–1790', *JECH*, 49 (1989), 267–84.