

Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 2

Tudor and Stuart Trade and Shipping

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John Leland's Survey in the 1540s

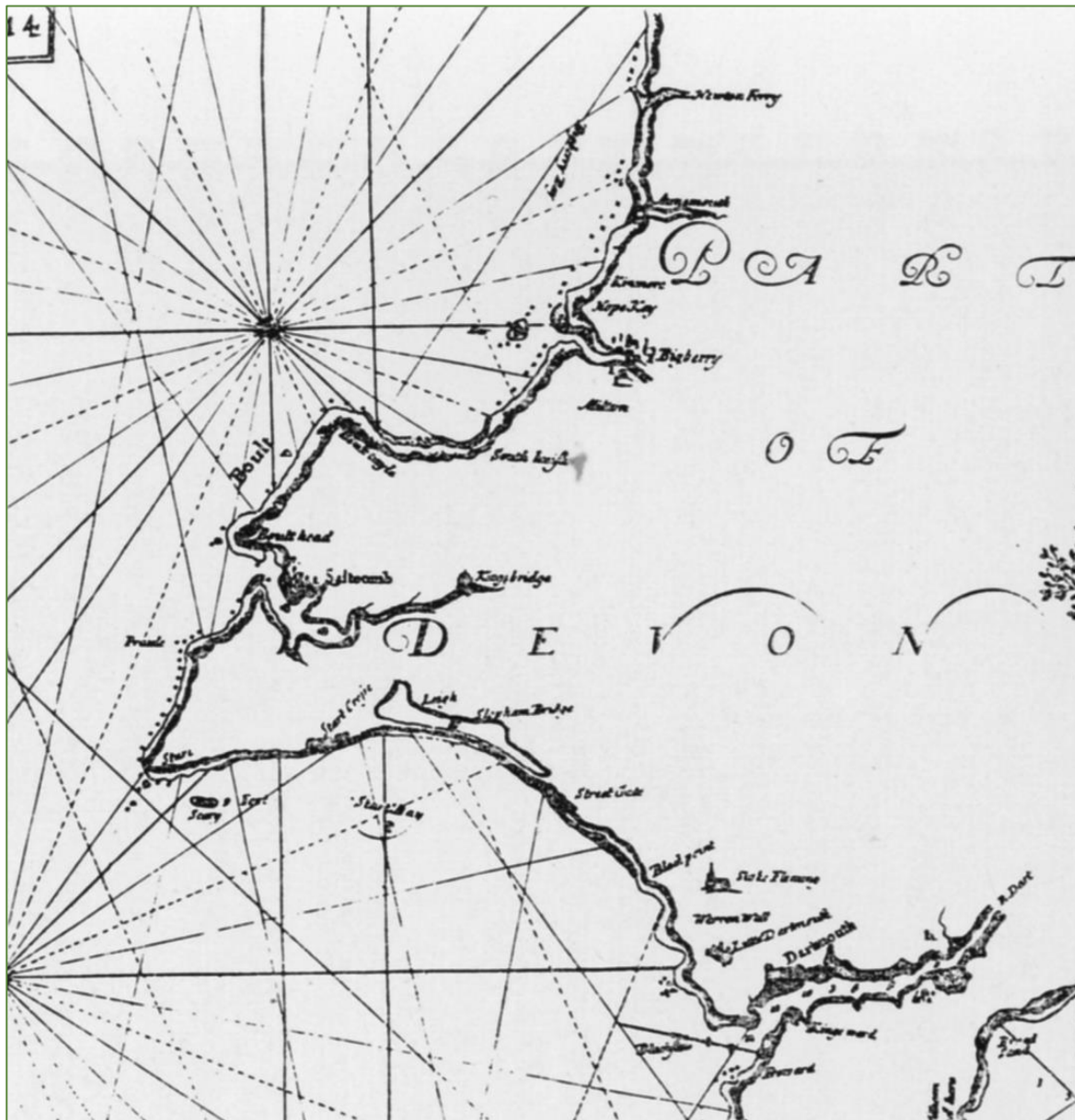
Between 1534 and 1543, Henry VIII sent the antiquary John Leland throughout England to make a topographical survey. Journeying through Devon in the early 1540s, Leland visited Salcombe which he described as a 'fisher town' and, Kingsbridge – 'once a pretty town':

Saultcumbe Haven, somewhat barrid and having a rok at the entering into it, is about a seven miles west-south-west from Dertmouth and, aboute half a mile withyn the mouth of this haven belonging to the privilege of Dertmouth, is Saultcombe a fisshar toune. The est point of Saltcombe Haven is a great foreland into the se caulled the Sterte [Start Point]. Hilton [Ilton] Castelle, belonging to Courteney of Poudreham, is about a mile above Saltcomb on the same side of the haven. And a three miles upper at this Haven Hedde is Kingesbridg, sumtyme a praty [pretty] town."¹

Salcombe Castle

Leland refers to the rock at the entrance to Salcombe Haven – this was probably the Blackstone – but makes no mention of a castle, other than Ilton Castle further up the estuary. Salcombe Castle, which stands on a rocky platform commanding the mouth of the Estuary, was built after his visit. The castle (which was altered in the Civil war and re-named Fort Charles) was one of the chain of coastal defence forts built by Henry VIII to provide protection against French and Spanish raiders. It comprised a half-round tower, and a larger U-shaped bastion with six or seven gun ports facing seawards. No documentary information is available about its early history, and the only clue to its date of building is a list published in 1553 of church goods sold at the time of the

Reformation. This reveals that in 1544 the incumbent of St. Winwalloes at Portlemouth sold church plate to contribute to the parish's share of the cost of a bulwark at Portlemouth and Salcombe.²



*Survey of part of the coast of South Devon
(Grenville Collins, Great Britain Coasting Pilot 1693)*

Tudor and Stuart Fisheries

John Leland described Salcombe as a 'fisher town', and fishing was to remain the principal economic activity here and in the adjacent coastal parishes throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fish, when smoked, pressed and pickled, provided a

cheap and easily preserved source of protein for local communities in an era of frequent harvest failures, as well as a valuable commodity for export to Catholic countries.³

An analysis of shipping movements in and out of south-western ports at the end of fifteenth century confirms the dominant role played by fishing in Salcombe's economy.⁴ Of the 37 movements recorded at Salcombe between 1498-99, 29 originated from Breton ports, two were from Normandy and the remaining six from South Devon and Cornish ports. The ships arriving from Brittany would have carried salt for Salcombe's burgeoning fish trade, as well as canvas for the sails of its fishing fleet.

Particularly important in the economy of the South West was the pilchard fishery. At the end of the summer, great shoals of pilchards, the mature sardine, arrived off the South Devon coasts and 'offered themselves to the fishers' nets'.⁵ At Hope Cove, for example, it was claimed that in 1583, 900,000 pilchards were caught by just five men.⁶ A survey conducted in 1566 of the coast's inshore fishing nets established that Salcombe had more seine nets than any other fishing community in South Devon.⁷ Of a total of 88 seine nets, Salcombe had eleven, the adjacent communities in the estuary four, and along the coast from Hope Cove to the Erme, there were a further seven. Brixham, Dartmouth, Newton Ferrers and Plymouth each had only one.⁸ The fish were taken to cellars (store houses) along the shore where they were cleaned, salted and either dried in the sun or pressed in layers into straight-sided barrels known as hogsheads.

The fish trade was severely disrupted in time of war, and in October 1585, for instance, the owners of ships in Salcombe joined others along the Devon coast in a petition to the Justices of Devonshire, 'praying them to procure, from the Council, licence for them to transport their fish into France and Italy, notwithstanding the restraint'.⁹

Salcombe remained an important centre of the pilchard fishery throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods. Customs receipts for the year 1644-5 taken by the Royalist governor of Salcombe, Sir Edmund Fortescue, amounted to £5,000 and, according to Abraham Hawkins writing in 1818, 'pilchards, it appears, made a considerable export from this harbour at that period, as a great number of the vessels which cleared out from hence, are mentioned to be freighted with that fish'.¹⁰

In addition to local inshore fishing, Salcombe men were also active offshore in the herring fishery. In the 1580s, they sailed each year to Padstow on the north Cornish coast and remained there for up to ten weeks, renting cellars for their tackle and victuals. Two of the men involved were Robert Reynolds, master of the *Margaret* of Batson (Salcombe), and Henry Evans, master of an East Portlemouth vessel.¹¹ In the early seventeenth century Salcombe fishing boats were catching herring in Irish Waters. A petition dated 1623, claimed that a total of 400 Devon ships annually fished for Irish herring and another undated petition provides details of the outlay they incurred. 'Each

of their boats carried six men and cost £16 for the salt, nets, and victuals. Once in Ireland they hired a drover, a small boat used for trawling nets. They had to pay custom as well as tithes (of one twentieth of the fish).¹²

After the discovery by John Cabot of the rich cod-banks off the coast of Newfoundland in 1497, a small number of west country-fishing boats had spent the summer months fishing there. For many years they were outnumbered by boats from Portugal, the Basque country and from Brittany but after 1583, when Sir Humphrey Gilbert claimed Newfoundland for the Crown, English ships started going out to the Banks in considerable numbers. By the early seventeenth century 10,000 sailors, many of them from Devon, were employed in the Newfoundland fisheries. The ships left in spring, carrying fishermen and supplies and returned in the autumn with their dried and salted cod, which was sold at home or in continental markets, particularly in Spain, Portugal and Italy.

In Devon the towns chiefly involved were Exeter, Topsham, Dartmouth, Totnes, Torbay, Salcombe, Barnstaple, Bideford, and Appledore. Dartmouth alone sent out 70 or 80 vessels each year between 1613 and 1623, most of these going straight from the Banks to the Mediterranean.¹³ Salcombe's involvement was on a much smaller scale, perhaps only one or two ships going out each year. In the early 1600s a Salcombe merchant named Gilbert Bryce entered into a bond with another merchant from Southampton to deliver fish on the return of a ship from Newfoundland. The ship, the *Sweet Rose* of Salcombe, 40 tons, Robert Asherman master, was on a fishing voyage and was due to return directly to Salcombe.¹⁴

In 1607 the English sea captain James Davis, on a voyage from Plymouth to Virginia, via the Azores, 'saw but one saile, being a ship of Salcombe bound for Newfoundland'¹⁵

Shipping in the Estuary in Tudor Times

In the Elizabethan period a number of surveys were carried out of ships and mariners in the ports of the realm. The first was in 1560 when Devon possessed eighteen vessels of 100 tons and upwards: five belonged to Plymouth, five to Dartmouth, four to Kingswear and one to Salcombe.¹⁶ A survey of 1568 produced similar results but with the additional information that Salcombe's 100 ton ship could carry 6 topmen. These were crossbowmen and engineers, placed in the battlemented tops to annoy the enemy in battle.¹⁷



Hulk on an 'angel' coin of Henry VII (Lloyd Laing)

A survey in 1570 which recorded the number of mariners mustered in the county listed Salcombe with 56, South Huish 23, Chivelstone 18, Portlemouth 12, Charleton 10 and South Milton 7. The figure for Plymouth was 86 whilst Dartmouth only returned 28. No figure was given for Kingsbridge.¹⁸

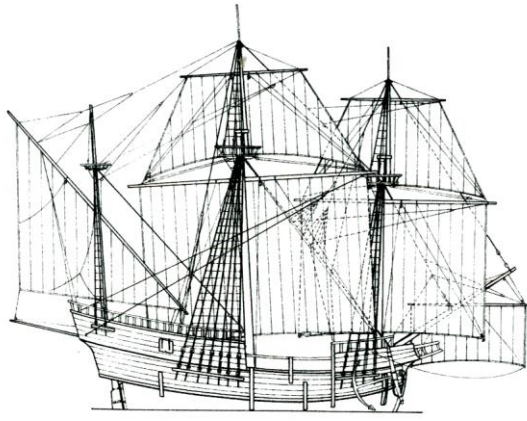
In 1572 Thomas Colshill, Surveyor of the Port of London, carried out a survey of Devon's merchant ships. Of the 130 Devon vessels listed Salcombe had five with a total tonnage of 150. The largest was a 40 ton ship. Dartmouth had 8 ships between 60-100 tons and 24 under 60 tons, giving a total tonnage of 1,015. Although Salcombe's 'fleet' was clearly much smaller than that of Dartmouth, it matched those of Exmouth, Teignmouth, Torbay and Bideford.^{19, 20} None of the surveys between 1560 and 1572 made reference to Kingsbridge but in 1576 the town's name appears in a 'List of ships newly built since the year 1571'. Of the ships over 100 tons, three belonged to Plymouth, two to Exmouth, and one to Kingsbridge.^{21,22}

John Leland's description of Kingsbridge as a 'sometime pretty town' suggests that that the town was in decline when he visited it in the 1540s. The dissolution of Buckfast Abbey, previously the town's main landowner, in 1539 affected local trades such as wool and cloth and the general decline in the trade of West Country ports, following the loss of Gascony in 1453, may also have had an impact on the trade of the estuary, albeit on a much smaller scale than that suffered by nearby Dartmouth. In 1521 Dartmouth was described as being in 'great ruin and decay' and revival only came after 1580 when the town benefited from the growth in the Newfoundland cod trade.

In the late 16th century the estuary's trade was boosted when Dartmouth was visited by plague and the port's shipping worked out of Salcombe and Torbay. Christopher Blackoller, the customs collector at Dartmouth, seeing an opportunity to line his pockets, neglected to send a deputy to take charge at Salcombe. Instead he 'hoped merchants might send him word of what they owed - in fees to himself as much as duties to the Crown. It was a highly convenient arrangement. Long after the plague had gone, Dartmouth vessels were still crowding into Salcombe.'²³

Salcombe Ships and Mariners in the Early Stuart Period

In the early seventeenth century, two surveys were conducted of South Devon ships and mariners. The 1619 Duke of Buckingham Survey may have been undertaken in preparation for a punitive expedition against Algerine pirates in 1621, whilst the 1626 Sir James Bagg Survey was compiled during the war with Spain and France.²⁴ The 1619 survey lists the names of the 5 mariners (shipmasters), 100 sailors, 5 shipwrights and 2 'coopers of the sea' from Malborough Parish (which included Salcombe). Only 8 sailors



*A full-rigged English merchant ship, 1532
(Veres László)*

are listed from Kingsbridge, whilst East Portlemouth was home to 2 mariners and 16 sailors. The total for all those in maritime occupations in the estuary parishes was 205 (compared with 446 in Dartmouth and 278 in Plymouth). Many of the prominent Salcombe mariners of the nineteenth century bore the same surnames as those listed in the 1619 survey and many are familiar in the area today.

In 1619 Salcombe accounted for 20 of the 247 ships (8%) owned in South Devon, compared to Dartmouth and Torbay's 93 ships (38%) and Plymouth's 57 (23%). Salcombe's 20 ships were the *Tyrall* of 130 tons, 6 ships between 40 and 50 tons, 1 bark of 30 tons and 12 barks of 20 tons.²⁵

By 1626 Salcombe's fleet had increased to 27 (14% of the South Devon total), although none of the ships were over 50 tons burthen. Total tonnage was 915 compared with 600 in 1619. James Bagg's Survey lists the names of all 27 ships. They include:

Prosperous, Desparacon and Elizabeth – 50 tons

George, Rebecca, Joahne, Abigaile, Elianor, and Nicholas – 45 tons

Philip and Jane, and Patience – 40 tons.

A further seven ships were 30 or 35 tons, six were 20 or 25 tons and three were between 14 and 19 tons. The survey also lists the names of 27 Salcombe shipowners, foremost of which were John and William Soullocke and John and William Yabsley, as well as 23 mariners and 75 sailors in Salcombe and Malborough. In addition to Yabsley, they include familiar local names such as Cookworthy, Cranch, Fairweather, Luccomb (later Luckham or Luscombe), Lidston and Weekes.²⁶

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