HISTORY**EXPLORER**

Smuggling's heyday

Dr Evan Jones visits **Bristol** to explore the city's thriving trade in illicit goods during the 16th century and reveals a very different type of smuggler to the 19th-century stereotype

Standing on the banks of the river Avon near Hung Road in Shirehampton, watching the occasional pleasure boat chugging by, it is hard to imagine that what is now a tranquil stretch of water was once a bustling hub of Bristol's trade in illegal goods. But, says Evan Jones, senior lecturer in economic and social history at the University of Bristol, the city was a major focus for smuggling during the 16th century, and its profits lined the pockets of some of Bristol's best-known merchants.

Bristol's location – some six miles up the river Avon from the Severn Estuary – played a key part in its thriving illicit trade. By law, goods had to be loaded on the Quay (now St Augustine's Reach) and the Back (now known as Welsh Back). Here, ships engaged in smuggling would declare some of their export cargo before sailing down river to Avonmouth on the river Severn. There – or from creeks, pills and havens along the Severn estuary – the ships would meet with river barges and load up with illegal goods before sailing out to sea on the ebbing tide.

Smugglers operated long before the Tudor period, with late medieval merchants specialising in the illegal export of highly taxed raw wool. Yet, according to Jones, it was during the 1520s that the trade in illicit goods became a large-scale and highly organised business, beginning with the export of foodstuffs.

Concerned that its ability to raise revenue from overseas trade was not keeping pace with inflation at home – and worried that rising food prices would lead to rioting – the crown came up with new ways to extract money from overseas traders. One was to prohibit them from exporting foodstuffs without a licence to do so.

"Licences that allowed merchants to legally export foodstuffs such as grain were incredibly expensive, and could add as much as 50–60 per cent to the cost of goods," explains Jones. "This gave merchants a huge incentive to smuggle, particularly when the same laws were introduced on leather exports in 1538. And smuggling was a highly lucrative trade: Bristol account books from the period reveal that, in the early 1540s, merchants could make up to 150 per cent profit on the illicit export of foodstuffs, and 80 per cent on leather."

Today, a replica of John Cabot's ship, the *Matthew* – commemorating the 1497 voyage of discovery to North America – is moored in Bristol's floating harbour. But, says Evan Jones, even this famous vessel was involved in smuggling, with "informations" given to the exchequer in 1498 and 1500 claiming the ship had been transporting uncustomed goods.

Reaping the benefits

Popular perceptions of smuggling, mainly a product of the 19th century, conjure up images of rowing boats pulling into dark coves at night, but the illegal trading of goods was, in fact, a relatively open business during the Tudor period, involving some of Bristol's most famous merchants. And the fruits of their profits can still be seen in the city today.

John Smythe, a pillar of Bristol's commercial community, part-financed the Ashton Court estate, just outside the city, in 1545, with the proceeds of his smuggling activities. His descendants enlarged, rebuilt,

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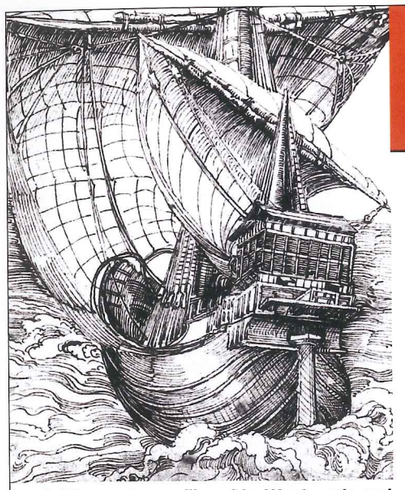
"The Ashton Court estate is a testament to Bristol's lucrative smuggling activities"

DR EVAN JONES

The Ashton Court estate, just outside Bristol, was purchased by wealthy merchant John Smythe in 1545, a man heavily involved in the city's smuggling activities



A 16th-century sailing ship. Wool, grain and wine were all smuggled by sea at this time

remodelled and reconstructed the site over the following 400 years, only relinquishing the estate in the mid-20th century. The 850-acre site, now owned by Bristol City Council, is open to the public and is a testament to Bristol's lucrative smuggling activities. Similarly, Bristol Grammar School, founded in 1532 by wealthy merchant brothers Robert and Nicholas Thorne, is also partly a product of the trade.

With all this smuggling taking place, how did the crown attempt to combat the problem? In theory, the authorities employed customs officials to police the ports and collect revenue. Yet in practice, says Jones, the role was wide open to abuse.

"The job of preventing ships from being loaded or unloaded illicitly fell to the searcher," he says. "The trouble was, the only way you could acquire this job was by purchasing it from the lord treasurer of England." And, since the position offered little by way of wages, and the searcher had to pay his various clerks and deputies from his own pocket, the only way to make money from the job was to accept bribes from the merchants, and allow their ships to pass through unchallenged.

"It's easy to think of the Tudor monarchs as being all-powerful," says Evan Jones. "But in reality the reach of the crown was very limited. It was left to local elites to police the trade – and, if these men were corrupt, then there was little that the crown could do about it."

The money that some were prepared to pay for a role within customs was staggering. In Bristol, during the 1590s, William Cecil – Elizabeth I's chief advisor and lord treasurer – was offered £300 for the post of searcher. At a time when an ordinary man would earn somewhere in the region of £10 a year, this was an incredible sum of money – perhaps equivalent to around £750,000 today.

Merchants were also heavily involved in the appointment of customs officers, often using their political influence to make sure the right sort of man was given the job – someone who would remain favourable to them.

"The ledgers of merchants like John Smythe can be very revealing when studying the extent of smuggling in the city," says Jones. "By the 1540s, Smythe had become one of the most powerful merchants in Bristol – responsible for about 5 per cent of all Bristol's continental trade – and it's clear that he used his trading influence to control the movements of customs officers.

"One such officer, who was involved in the wine trade, was provided with £300–£400 of wine on interest-free credit: a clear conflict of interest. There was no way that officer would board one of Smythe's ships to seize goods, as he would have known that his large debt could have been recalled at any time."

Positions of power

The crown introduced incentives for informers in an attempt to crack down on smuggling. It also offered a 50 per cent share in any illicit goods seized to those who came forward with information. But many of the merchants involved in the trade held positions of power, which made it easy to persecute those who acted against them.

According to Jones, of the 15 Bristol merchants known to have been involved in the trade by 1550, no less than 10 served as sheriffs, mayors or MPs of the city at some point. Among them was John Smythe, who was sheriff once and mayor twice.

Merchants went to extreme lengths to avoid the potentially prying eyes of customs officers. But, says Jones, if these failed and it looked likely that they were about to be caught, there were still tactics they could employ to wriggle out of facing the full force of the law.

"They would often get a friend to go and arrest the ship first in the name of the king or queen, the idea being that once the ship had been seized, no one else could arrest it," explains Jones. "The friend would then initiate what was known as a 'feigned' prosecution in the exchequer courts in London but then withdraw the charge or allow it to be disproved. The vast majority of cases tackled in the exchequer were either abandoned, or ended with the goods seized being valued for a tiny proportion of their true worth."

Customs officers were also known to give merchants advanced notice of planned searches on their ships. One such warning, contained in a letter written in 1558 by an MP, William Tyndall, to his brother Robert, informs the latter that his illegal shipment of grain is under threat: "I have had much talk with the customer and controller, who be honest men but yet (being informed) must needs do what they would not willingly. And therefore I pray God send time for that pinnace that she may depart, otherwise I fear me the officers must needs come aboard and for their own discharge do harm."

Avoiding prosecution

Bristol's wider trading history can still be seen in the city – from Corn Street's 18th-century exchange building, where merchants of all stripes conducted business transactions, to the four flat-topped bronze tables located nearby. Known as 'nails', these were used by merchants to conduct business, striking the top when the transaction had been agreed. But much of the evidence of Bristol's smuggling history is hidden within merchants' surviving account books. When compared with official records, these reveal significant discrepancies between how much money the merchants made, and what they actually declared. It is this, says Jones, that demonstrates the extent of illegal trade in the city, and the types of people engaging in it.

Smuggling as a trade waxed and waned over the centuries – when taxes were high, there was always an incentive to smuggle. Bristol's smuggling history is well documented and many private records of the period have survived. But its activity was not unusual, according to Jones. As the second most important port in the country at the time, smuggling in the city may have been conducted on a larger scale, but there is plenty of evidence of illicit activity taking place in other ports, such as Southampton, King's Lynn and Hull. H

Words: Charlotte Hodgman. Historical advisor: Dr Evan Jones, senior lecturer at the University of Bristol, and author of *Inside the Illicit Economy: Reconstructing the Smugglers' Trade of Sixteenth Century Bristol* (Ashgate, 2012)

VISIT

Ashton Court, Bristol

Long Ashton, Bristol, BS41 9JN
● *bristol.gov.uk*

Merchants used these flat-topped tables, known as 'nails', to transact business

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The replica *Matthew* in Bristol's floating harbour. The original ship, which sailed to North America in 1497, is now believed to have been involved in smuggling activities

ALAMY/JENI NOTT

"MERCHANTS WENT TO EXTREME LENGTHS TO AVOID THE POTENTIALLY PRYING EYES OF CUSTOMS OFFICERS"

SMUGGLING: FIVE MORE PLACES TO EXPLORE

1 Cardiff
Where the crown's reach was limited

Smuggling here was aided by the city's remote location and the Welsh language, which helped it elude the reach of the crown. Nearby Sully Island and Swan-bridge port were also involved in smuggling: court records for the latter from 1569 reveal the seizure of 28,000lb of cheese and 80 barrels of butter.
visitcardiff.com

2 Isle of Man
Where English laws were obsolete

Henry IV granted trade freedom for the island to Sir John Stanley in 1405, and it remained outside of crown control for over 300 years, becoming notorious as a centre for smuggling in the 18th century. An English act of parliament in 1704, which banned trade with France, did not apply to Manx vessels, so French wine and brandy were frequently smuggled into Britain.
visitisleofman.com

3 Custom House, King's Lynn
Where grain was smuggled abroad

Thanks to its status as England's leading grain producer and its proximity to the Netherlands, East Anglia was a focus for the illicit trade in grain, which, during the 16th century, was smuggled through the port of King's Lynn. The town's custom house dates from the late 17th century.
kingslynnonline.com

4 Southampton
Where wool was smuggled to Italy

Southampton's smuggling history is primarily linked to the export of wool, largely to Italy. Nearby Netley Abbey and Castle are both said to have been used to store contraband, while the 18th-century Luttrell's Tower boasts extensive views of the Solent, and a tunnel to the beach.
discoversouthampton.co.uk

5 Dockside, Hull
Where offloading sites abounded

According to customs officers in Hull in the late 16th century, the "43 several places of charging and discharging of merchandise at wharfs and cranes belonging to the merchants" made it almost impossible to properly police the traffic of goods. Their pleas for one wharf for overseas trade were answered in 1775.
visithullandeastyorkshire.com