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'The greatest loss of ships that England ever suffered': English port towns and the king's war in 1375

On 10 August 1375 a convoy of English ships intent on loading salt in the Bay of Bourgneuf, off the coast of Poitou, was set upon by a powerful fleet of Castilian galleys. According to a contemporary chronicle, in the ensuing sea battle seventy-two large English ships were taken, some of which were subsequently burned. We learn nothing more from this source, save that this was 'the greatest loss of ships that England ever suffered'.[1] A petition put forward at the parliament of 1376 by England's port towns, accompanied by a schedule of losses, adds substance to this dramatic but sketchy story.[2] The schedule provides details of thirty-six vessels that had been 'taken and burned' by 'the men and galleys of the Bastard of Spain'. The tonnage and estimated value (including cargo) of each ship allow us to assess the magnitude of the losses, which all told came to over 4400 tons of shipping worth £18,175 sterling. The identification of home ports and ship owners reveals how the resultant 'damage and ruin' was distributed among coastal communities. As for the fate of the masters and mariners onboard these ships: the petition states merely that they were killed, which – judging by the crews employed shortly before and the tonnage of the ships – suggests that perhaps as many as 1000 men were lost.

The parliamentary petition offers an explanation of the circumstances that led to the debacle in the Bay of Bourgneuf. It is claimed that the ships were originally requisitioned to transport Thomas Felton, seneschal of Gascony and William Elmham, governor of Bayonne to Aquitaine. This was service at the king's wages, upon completion of which the ships' masters were free to pursue commercial opportunities. Believing themselves protected by the truce of Bruges, which had begun on 2 August, they sailed into the Bay of Bourgneuf to load salt 'for the provisioning of the realm' of England. As the Castilian galleys' attack was clearly in breach of the truce, the petitioners urged the king to secure 'restitution and redress' for those who had been 'greatly damaged and ruined', their expectation being that he would order the commercial property of his 'enemy of Spain' to be seized. Presented in this way, the whole episode illustrates rather well both the tense intermingling of duty, oppor-

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[1] The Anonimalle Chronicle, 1333 to 1381. Ed.: Galbraith, Vivian H. Manchester, 1927. 77, 79, 180.
[2] Petition: The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, 1275-1504. Ed.: Given-Wilson, Chris. 16 vols. Woodbridge, 2005. V. 351–352. Schedule of losses: The National Archives, Kew [TNA], C 47/30/8, no. 14, printed in Nicolas, Nicholas. H.: A History of the Royal Navy. 2 vols. London, 1847. II. 510–514.

tunity and hazard that attended the maritime community's participation in the king's war, and – with the stakes so high – the necessity of controlling the narrative. Indeed, whether through dishonesty or incomplete understanding, it is evident that the petitioners were not telling the whole story. It is not so much the scale of the reported losses that raises doubts, for in terms of ships lost the shipowners' claims appear modest by comparison with the chroniclers' testimony, but rather the circumstances that led to the battle in the Bay. First, that the Castilian attack was actually in response to the pillaging of Spanish ships by 'fourteen English barges', as narrated by a French chronicler, is a version of events that should not be dismissed out of hand;[3] though since the king of Castile did not consider himself bound by the truce, justification on grounds of retaliation was hardly necessary for his admiral.[4] Second, the movements of the English ships immediately prior to their loss in the Bay were more varied and complex than the petitioners admit. It is unlikely that more than a handful of them would have been needed to ship Felton and Elmham to Aquitaine.[5] Indeed, twenty-three of the thirty-six ships that were lost can be found on the payroll of the fleet that had transported an army of 4,000 soldiers to Brittany in April.[6] (Eighteen of these twenty-three ships, held on arrest at the king's pay, had been awaiting embarkation since the autumn.) Most of the others were doubtless in these waters on purely commercial business. Two, the *Gabriel* of Southampton and the *Paul* of Rye, can be glimpsed shipping wine from Bordeaux during the previous winter, and the *Gracedieu* of Dartmouth had left that port on 20 May, about 12 weeks before meeting its end in the Bay.[7]

The precision with which the losses suffered in the Bay of Bourneuf were documented at the time allows us to assess the significance of this maritime reverse. The crown's capacity to raise fleets for fighting or logistical purposes may have been affected to some degree, but to argue that the loss 'would be felt by requisitioning officers for years to come' would be to exaggerate.[8] Twenty-one of the lost ships had a carrying capacity of 100 tons or more, and so might be considered large, but this represents fewer than ten per cent of the ships of that size recorded in the naval pay rolls from 1369 to 1380. Indeed, of the eighty ships of 100 tons or more in the Brittany transport fleet, mentioned above, fewer than 20 per cent were subsequently lost in the Bay. If this was indeed 'the greatest loss of ships that England ever suffered', it was nevertheless a blow that the English war effort could sustain without buckling. However, as is usual in war, the impact of these maritime losses would have been felt more keenly at local level, within port towns and maritime communities, than in the warlords' council chamber. A nuanced assessment sensitive to local circumstances, including the ports' wider involvement in the king's war, cannot be attempted here; a brief sketch must suffice. Fifteen different port towns suffered losses in the Bay. The greatest blows were meted out to Bristol and Great Yarmouth, each of which lost six ships; but measured in terms of tonnage, Bristol's total loss (1029 tons), inflated as it was by three very large vessels (215, 200 and 170 tons), was more than double Great Yarmouth's (470 tons) – an apt reflection of the contrasting fortunes of, on the one hand, a thriving commercial and

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[3] Chronique des quatre premiers Valois (1327-1393). Ed.: Luce, Siméon. Paris, 1862. 255.

[4] Sumption, Jonathan: Divided Houses. The Hundred Years War, vol. III. London, 2009. 238–239.

[5] A single ship can be associated with Felton's passage. TNA, E 101/34/7 m. 1.

[6] A fleet of 177 ships. TNA, E 101/33/31.

[7] TNA, E 101/180/2, fols. 6v, 15v, 39v.

[8] Sumption, Jonathan: Divided Houses op. cit. 239.

manufacturing centre of 12,000 souls, which at this time was making a healthy contribution to the crown's naval needs and, on the other, a port whose east-coast dominance in fishing and shipping was in now in decline.[9] While it was more usual for a port to lose one or two ships, the impact that this had on maritime communities surely varied a great deal. For Dartmouth, the loss of two ships, while regrettable, would not have been crippling for a port that was, at this time, the leading supplier of shipping to royal fleets, including no fewer than twenty-eight of the vessels in the Brittany transport fleet of April 1375.[10] On the other hand, the loss of the *Seintmariebote* of Bradfield, which had been picking up salt in the Bay for a decade, would have been a devastating blow for this small coastal community in Essex. Rarely called upon by the king's agents to provide naval service, Bradfield may, at a stroke, have lost a quarter of its men-folk in August 1375.[11]

If Bristol and Bradfield occupied opposite ends of the spectrum of maritime communities affected by the disaster in the Bay, Ipswich was in all senses at the mid-point: a busy port town of about 2,900 people,[12] which lost three ships, the *Marie* (100 tons), the *Magdalen* (150 tons) and the *Trinity* (100 tons). As such, Ipswich and its role in the king's war merit closer scrutiny, an exercise that will be pursued for the remainder of this article. All three ships had served in the army transport fleet that reached Brittany in April, along with a fourth vessel from Ipswich, the *Nicholas* (90 tons), which appears to have escaped the disaster in the Bay.[13] The *Marie* and the *Magdalen* were owned by Geoffrey Starling, who for several years as a contractor had played an active – and hitherto perhaps profitable – part in the semi-privatised naval war. But the £686 13s 4d that he now claimed as the value of his lost ships and their cargoes was a huge sum, even for the most prominent family in Ipswich.[14] Along with Richard Lyons, financier and owner of two London ships lost in the Bay, and the powerful lobby of Bristol shipowners, Starling was probably a prime mover behind the parliamentary petition. He no doubt felt that he deserved redress, for together with Richard Haverland, owner of the *Trinity* of Ipswich, Starling had been a loyal supporter of the king's war effort at sea. All three ships had combined commercial seafaring – shipping wine from Bordeaux – with service in army transport fleets in 1369 and 1373.[15]

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[9] Liddy, Christian D.: War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval Towns: Bristol, York and the Crown, 1350-1400. Woodbridge, 2005. 11, 43-6. Saul, Anthony: Great Yarmouth and the Hundred Years War in the Fourteenth Century. Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research. 52 (1979) 105–115.

[10] TNA, E 101/33/31, mm. 3-4. Kowaleski, Maryanne: Warfare, Shipping and Crown Patronage: the Impact of the Hundred Years War on the Port Towns of England. In: Money, Markets and Trade in Late Medieval Europe. Eds.: Armstrong, Lawrin, Elbl, Ivana, and Elbl, Martin. Leiden, 2005. 233–254 (245–246).

[11] Ayton, Andrew, and Lambert, Craig: Shipping the Troops and Fighting at Sea: Essex Ports and Mariners in England's Wars, 1337-89. In: The Fighting Essex Soldier. Recruitment, War and Society in the Fourteenth Century. Eds.: Thornton, Christopher, Ward, Jennifer, and Wiffin, Neil. Hatfield, 2017. 98–142 (131).

[12] Amor, Nicholas R.: Late Medieval Ipswich. Trade and Industry. Woodbridge, 2011. 28.

[13] TNA, E 101/33/31, m. 6.

[14] For the Starlings of Ipswich, see: The House of Commons, 1386-1421. Eds: Roskell, John S., Clark, Linda, and Rawcliffe, Carole. 4 vols. Stroud, 1993. IV. 466–477.

[15] Shipping wine from Bordeaux in December 1372: TNA, E 101/179/10, fols. 19r, 23v, 24r. Transport fleets: E 101/29/35; E 101/36/14, m. 4. British Library, London [BL], Add MS 37494, fols. 19r-19v, 24r.

Indeed, the largest of the three vessels, Starling's *Magdalen*, was additionally deployed in fleet escort and coastal patrolling roles.[16] With a double crew of fifty mariners, further stiffened by thirty archers and thirty armed men, the *Magdalen* would have been a formidable warship. And herein lies part of the explanation of her fate in August 1375: on that occasion she carried no more than a normal commercial crew, which would have stood little chance against the armed might of a Castilian galley.

Turning to the crews of these three Ipswich vessels: the seventy-seven mariners who had served on the voyage to Brittany in April,[17] and who presumably stayed on, were almost certainly all killed in the Bay of Bourgneuf. Although mariner lists for the ships are lacking, as the crews were of conventional, commercial size, we can safely assume that, for many of the mariners, home and family were in Ipswich. Some indication of who they were is provided by a return of mariners resident in the town in the summer of 1372, which records the names of sixty men, of whom forty-six were at sea at the time of the survey.[18] Twenty of them were currently serving on the *Trinity*, Richard Haverland's 100 tons vessel that would be lost in the Bay three years later. Thirteen of the sixty, including eleven at sea, can be found on a list of the greatly expanded, armed crew of the *Magdalen* in 1374, a year before that ship was lost.[19] Although evidently offering an incomplete view of the pool of mariners working out of Ipswich in 1372, the return is nonetheless instructive. It shows how the simultaneous service of several ships would draw heavily on local manpower and that the destruction of those vessels would therefore cast a deep shadow across the town. Indeed, assuming a degree of continuity in the crews of the three ships that were lost in the Bay, perhaps as many as half of the sixty Ipswich mariners recorded in 1372 did not make it home in 1375.

The simultaneous loss of three large ships and their crews through enemy action may well have been an unprecedented maritime tragedy for Ipswich, but by 1375 the people of that port town were well accustomed with the implications of taking an active naval role in the king's war, whether through performance of logistical tasks for the crown – transporting men, horses, and supplies – or combative ones, as fleet escorts or warships for patrolling and offensive operations. The survival of naval pay records in bulk allows us to trace Ipswich's contribution of ships and mariners in some detail. The Scottish wars from the 1290s to the 1330s required naval support for the shipping of supplies, patrolling, blockades and, occasionally, amphibious operations, but the demands placed on individual ports were usually modest. The two ships that Ipswich sent to the fleet deployed at the siege of Berwick in 1319 was typical of what was asked of this port town, the six briefly employed in an east coast fleet in 1327 more unusual.[20] But with the onset of the war with France in 1337 the crown's demands increased significantly, driven by the need to assemble large fleets to ship armies across the Channel. Ipswich contributed twenty ships to the transport fleet of nearly 400 that sailed to Antwerp in July 1338, sixteen to the fleets shipping armies

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[16] TNA, E 101/32/28; E 101/32/29.

[17] *Magdalen* (32), *Marie* (23) and *Trinity* (22), which appear to be commercial crews, perhaps somewhat supplemented. TNA, E 101/33/31, m. 6.

[18] TNA, C 47/2/46, no. 12. For the mariner survey of 1372, see: Ayton, Andrew, and Lambert, Craig: Shipping the Troops op.cit.

[19] TNA, E 101/32/29, m. 2.

[20] In 1319: BL, Add MS 17362, fol. 27v; TNA, C 47/2/46, no. 19. In 1327: E 101/18/3.

to Brittany in 1342, and twelve to the huge armada of over 700 vessels assembled in 1346 to transport Edward III's army to Normandy.[21] Smaller numbers were called upon on other occasions;[22] and during the 1350s and '60s, Ipswich continued to support major logistical operations, the peak turnouts being in 1355 (8 ships), 1359 (11) and 1369 (13).[23] Thereafter, the crown's strategy demanded greater emphasis on sea-keeping operations involving smaller, but more heavily armed 'fighting' fleets, a development in which Ipswich shipping readily participated.

The surviving records suggest that, during the period 1319-89, over two hundred voyages were made in the king's service by Ipswich ships. We can see that there was a good deal of repeat service by individual ships and masters, but can only guess what proportion of the ocean-going vessels based in Ipswich were called upon to serve. In c. 1340, the bailiffs of the town reported that it was home to twenty-four vessels, but how comprehensive that survey was is unclear.[24] Equally uncertain is how far the town's fleet was affected by either the demographic shocks caused by successive plague visitations or by the attritional effects of naval service. That said, the naval contributions made after 1348 suggest that if the number of vessels available had indeed diminished, the shrinkage was not proportionate to the fall in the town's population.[25] Two further conclusions may be offered. The first is that the demands made on Ipswich's shipping were broadly propor-tionate to those made on other east coast ports of comparable size and wealth. The second conclusion concerns the three Ipswich vessels lost in the Bay of Bourgneuf in 1375. While the scale and likely impact of that loss is broadly contextualised by reference to the numbers of Ipswich ships employed by the crown on other occasions in the French war (as discussed above), if we sharpen the focus and examine the records for service performed in 1369–1375 we find that the vessels lost in the Bay constituted a third of the nine distinguishable Ipswich ships of 100 tons or more that had been engaged in naval service during those years.

On occasion, these naval roles involved heavy financial outlay for the people of Ipswich, most notably when they were ordered to build and equip warships for the king's service. A community receiving such an order in the 1370s could expect to spend more than £200 on a single vessel.[26] In 1372–1373, the bailiffs of Ipswich were able to share the cost of building a barge with the neighbouring ports of Colchester and Hadleigh, but they still found it difficult to raise the necessary funds from their own townsfolk.[27] When the barge subsequently joined a royal fleet in 1377, its crew served at the king's wages,[28] as was normal for requisitioned ships during this period. Payment at the standard rates – 6d per day

[21] In 1338: TNA, E 36/203, p. 298; E 101/21/7, m. 3d. In 1342: E 36/204, pp. 232–233; Calendar of Close Rolls: Edward III, vol. VII, 1343-1346. 132–133. In 1346: BL, Harley MS 3968, fol 133r.

[22] E.g. in 1340 (6 ships): TNA, E 101/22/39, m. 1. In 1347 (5 ships): C 47/2/59, m. 5

[23] In 1355: TNA, E 101/36/20, m. 4. In 1359: E 101/27/25, m. 2. In 1369: E 101/36/14, m. 4.

[24] TNA, C 47/2/32, m. 2.

[25] Cf. Essex: Ayton, Andrew, and Lambert, Craig: Shipping the Troops op. cit. 120.

[26] Kowaleski, Maryanne: Warfare, Shipping op. cit. 237–238; Sherborne, James: The English Navy: Shipping and Manpower, 1369-89. In: James Sherborne, War, Politics and Culture in Fourteenth-Century England. Ed.: Tuck, Anthony. London and Rio Grande, 1994. 29–53 (33–34).

[27] Britnell, Richard H.: Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525. Cambridge, 1986. 82–83; Calendar of Patent Rolls: Edward III, vol. XV, 1370-1374. 219, 355.

[28] Calendar of Close Rolls: Richard II, vol. I, 1377-1381. 51, 181–182; TNA, E 101/37/15, m. 1.

for ship masters, 3d for mariners, with, from the 1370s, a 6d per week bonus often being paid – resulted in major injections of cash into local economies;[29] but for much of the period, the terms of royal service were less favourable for shipowners. They were rarely compensated if their ships were damaged or lost while in the king's service. The crown was unusually generous following the Brittany campaign of 1342–1343, and John Irp, owner of at least three ships in the early 1340s, received 10 marks in compensation for damage sustained by his ship, the *George*. But he was the only Ipswich shipowner to benefit in this way and several others were fined for unauthorised withdrawal from the same fleet.[30] Moreover, it was only from the 1380s that the crown regularly offered a 'wear and tear' allowance ('tunnetight') for ships taken into royal service, initially paid to shipowners at the rate of 3s 4d per quarter year for each ton of carrying capacity (£16 13s 4d per quarter for a 100 ton ship).[31] Potentially more advantageous for the shipowner were the freightage payments that were sometimes offered to those willing to deploy their vessels on patrol or as escorts. To engage the services of the *Magdalen* of Ipswich as an escort for the Bordeaux wine fleet during the winter of 1372–1373 the crown paid freightage at the favourable rate of 22s per ton. Geoffrey Starling was thereby assured the equivalent of a good commercial return from a potentially risky voyage.[32]

The crown's willingness on this occasion to pay freightage for convoy escort duty highlights how, from the shipowners' perspective, participation in the king's war involved not only the risk of damage in sea combat, but also missed trading opportunities. The four Ipswich ships that eventually served in the April 1375 army transport fleet had been held idle in port for over six months prior to departure, at a time when wine could have been shipped from Bordeaux.[33] It was no doubt usual for shipowners, where possible, to follow up a spell of naval duty with a commercial venture, but engagement in commerce was itself a potentially hazardous activity at this time. While the port of Ipswich never experienced a ferocious maritime raid of the kind that devastated Winchelsea in 1360, its ships were ever vulnerable to predation on the high seas by organised squadrons of French and Castilian galleys or privateers. In 1336, Thomas Debenham lost his 160 ton ship, the Katherine of Ipswich, worth 200 marks, when it was audaciously seized, just off the coast at Orford, by the men of Calais.[34] In these circumstances, maritime trade could only be maintained at increased cost to those involved, as vessels were double-manned to enhance security, and with the constraints on commercial freedom that were imposed by having to sail in convoys. Seaborne trade was affected in other ways by the war, notably by the damage to wine production caused by campaigning in Aquitaine. During the 1370s wine exports from that region dropped to about a third of the level of the previous decade, the period of the peace of Brétigny.[35]

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[29] Kowaleski, Maryanne: Warfare, Shipping op. cit. 253.

[30] TNA, E 372/192, mm. 29-29d.

[31] The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England op. cit. VI. 179-80; Sherborne, James: English Navy op. cit. 31; Kowaleski, Maryanne: Warfare, Shipping op. cit. 241.

[32] TNA, E 101/32/28.

[33] TNA, E 101/33/31, m. 6.

[34] Calendar of Close Rolls: Edward III, vol. III, 1337-1339. 43–45.

[35] James, Margery K.: Studies in the Medieval Wine Trade. Oxford, 1971. 15–33.

Historians are as yet some way from reaching an understanding of how the shipping and maritime communities of port towns like Ipswich were affected by the multi-facetted challenges presented by intermittent, but often intensive warfare, complicated as they were by a socio-economic context that was destabilised by successive plague visitations and often by environmental change and commercial competition as well. Even when the data for naval and commercial voyages have been fully assembled and analysed, how these inter-related challenges were perceived and conceptualised by the actors in our drama – from shipowners, like Geoffrey Starling, to ordinary mariners – will continue very largely to elude us, except in so far as we are able to draw conclusions from their actions. With reference to our central concern, namely the impact of the debacle in the Bay of Bourgneuf in 1375, the actions of Ipswich's maritime community speak volumes. For while we may be sure that the loss of three ships and their crews was felt with particular intensity, the capacity for recovery and the resolve to return to the fray are quite as striking. As we have seen, Ipswich appears to have lost at least a third of its large vessels (i.e. those of 100 tons or more) in 1375, but nine distinguishable ships of that carrying capacity were deployed by the port in support of the king's naval war during the 1380s.[36] Year after year, Ipswich continued to supply ships, up to half a dozen at a time, for army transport duties (as in 1380) and, in particular, for fleets tasked with a fighting role. The owners of vessels in paid royal service had a right to a quarter share of the value of prizes taken at sea, with half going to the master and crew.[37] For men hardened by a treacherous and unremitting working environment, the prospect of rich booty and prize money would have made service in these fighting *armées* especially appealing. The earl of Arundel's *viage de guerre* in 1387 certainly met their expectations. At the battle of Margate/Cadzand, the earl's *armée* of 51 vessels overhauled a much larger Franco-Flemish wine fleet and captured about 40 ships laden with 5,000 tuns of wine.[38] With the veteran shipmaster Henry Fyn at the helm, the *George* of Ipswich (160 tons) took part in Arundel's triumph.[39] The welcome accorded to this ship upon its safe return home can be easily imagined, and it is small wonder that three large Ipswich vessels, the *George*, the *Margaret* and the *Michael*, signed up for Arundel's next voyage the following year.[40] What we surely see in Ipswich's experience is the capacity of a resourceful, flexible and resilient community to make the best of the king's war as it was being fought in the 1370s and '80s. And perhaps – as has been noted elsewhere – there is some indication here that warfare, for all its deleterious consequences, could serve as a stimulus for 'investment in shipbuilding,

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[36] In 1380: TNA, E 101/39/2, m. 7. In 1383: E 101/40/8, m. 2. In 1385: E 101/40/9, m. 3. In 1386: E 101/40/21.

[37] Monumenta Juridica: the Black Book of the Admiralty. Ed.: Twiss, Sir Travers. 4 vols. London, 1871-6. I. 20–23.

[38] Moore, Tony K.: The Cost-Benefit Analysis of a Fourteenth-Century Naval Campaign: Margate/Cadzand, 1387. In: Roles of the Sea in Medieval England. Ed.: Gorski, Richard. Woodbridge, 2012. 103–124.

[39] TNA, E 101/40/36, m. 1.

[40] TNA, E 101/40/40, m. 1.

in town defences and quayside facilities, and in the training and employment of a whole range of maritime workers'.[41]

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[41] Kowaleski, Maryanne: Warfare, Shipping op. cit. 253.