

THE EXPORTATION OF WOOL FROM SUSSEX IN THE LATE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

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IN a previous article on the wool trade of Sussex in the fourteenth century I have shown that, so far as we are able to judge from contemporary customs accounts, there was a considerable change in the organisation of the trade between 1330 and 1380.¹ Unfortunately, however, although the surviving accounts for Richard II.'s reign gave the actual ports of shipment along the coast, those for the earlier part of the century made no distinction between the various creeks, and thus afforded no clues as to their relative importance at that period. If we go back to the middle of Edward I.'s reign we can examine a small group of accounts which throws a good deal of light upon early conditions of trade in the county, accounts which are valuable as giving an indication of the geographical advantages which certain ports had over others in the days when national and international trade was less hampered by arbitrary restrictions and impositions than it was during the following century. The accounts referred to are as follows, the fiscal year extending from Easter to Easter in each case:

Chichester	..	..	1287-8, ²	1289-90, ³	1291-2. ⁴
Shoreham	..	..	1287-8, ⁵	1289-90. ⁶	
Seaford	..	..	1286-7, ⁷	1287-8, ⁸	1289-90, ⁹ 1291-2, ¹⁰
Pevensay and Winchelsea	1288-9. ¹¹				

¹ S.A.C., Vol. LXXI., p. 171.

² Customs Accounts 32/1.

³ Ditto, 32/2.

⁴ Ditto, 32/3.

⁵ Ditto, 135/3.

⁶ Ditto, 135/4.

⁷ Customs Accounts 135/2a.

⁸ Ditto, 135/3a.

⁹ Ditto, 135/4a.

¹⁰ Ditto, 135/4b.

¹¹ Ditto, 147/11b.

The accounts cover shipments of wool, wool-fells and hides, but the exportation of hides from Sussex was apparently of little importance at this period. Table I. gives the various annual totals:

TABLE I.

Port.	Year.	Wool.	Wool-fells.	Hides.
Chichester	.. 1287-8	104s. 4 cl.	7272	—
"	.. 1289-90	149s. 32 cl.	5074	—
"	.. 1291-2	150s. 45 cl.	1946	—
Shoreham	.. 1287-8	238s. 31cl.	5476	—
"	.. 1289-90	399s. 41 cl.	6112	85
Seaford	.. 1286-7	113s. 25 cl.	3127	—
"	.. 1287-8	116s. 16cl.	6592	—
"	.. 1289-90	96s. 42cl.	7098	—
"	.. 1291-2	170s. 46cl.	4113	—
Pevensey and Winchelsea	1288-9	43s. 14cl. ¹²	—	—

The above figures show at a glance the relative superiority of Shoreham; Chichester and Seaford were of approximately equal importance, whereas the extreme eastern ports played a somewhat minor rôle. The annual totals sometimes varied considerably from year to year, as one would expect in such days of piracy and political unrest, but the general character of the trade did not change during the period, and the details for any one year may be regarded as typical. In view of this, and in order to bring out as clearly as possible certain local differences, I have mapped the information regarding ships and merchants for the year 1289-90 in the case of Chichester, Shoreham, and Seaford together with the Pevensey and Winchelsea details for 1288-9. I have also included details of the Kentish ports of Romney, Dover, Sandwich and Rochester for purposes of comparison, the year in each case being 1289-90.¹³

Now let us take the maps in turn and examine them. Fig. 1 gives an impression of the amount of activity

¹² From Easter 1279 to Easter 1284 the average annual total was about 28 sacks (Pipe Roll 133, m. 32d.).

¹³ An analysis of contemporary accounts for Kent appears in *Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. XLIV., pp. 218-228.

at each port, for it shows the exact number of recorded vessels that shipped wool during the year. It also differentiates as far as possible between English and alien vessels, both as regards their numbers and their respective shares of the carrying trade. Shoreham, where English vessels outnumbered alien vessels in the proportion of two to one, again stands out prominently.

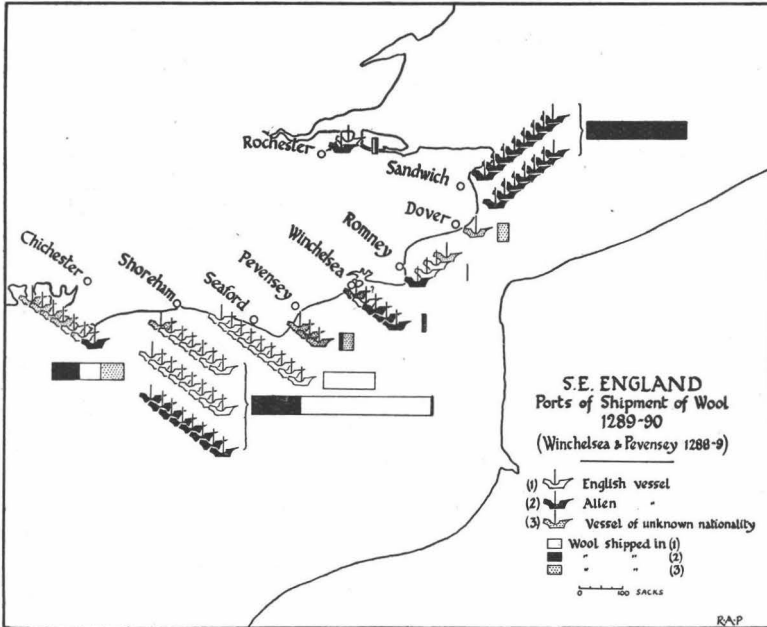


FIG. 1.

The map also shows that whereas the carrying trade of the East Kent ports was almost entirely a monopoly of alien ships, English vessels were employed to a considerable extent in Sussex, the contrast between Seaford and Sandwich being particularly marked in this respect.

Fig. 1 merely distinguishes between English and alien vessels, but in Fig. 2 I have plotted these same vessels according to their ports of origin. Since it is quite clear from their distribution as to whether they

are English or alien vessels, I have used the black and white symbols in Fig. 2 to distinguish between vessels exporting from Kent on the one hand, and those exporting from Sussex on the other, irrespective of nationality. Here we notice another broad distinction between the two counties: the great majority of the vessels shipping wool from Sussex belonged to ports lying to the west of the Straits of Dover, whereas those exporting from Kent had their ports of origin away to

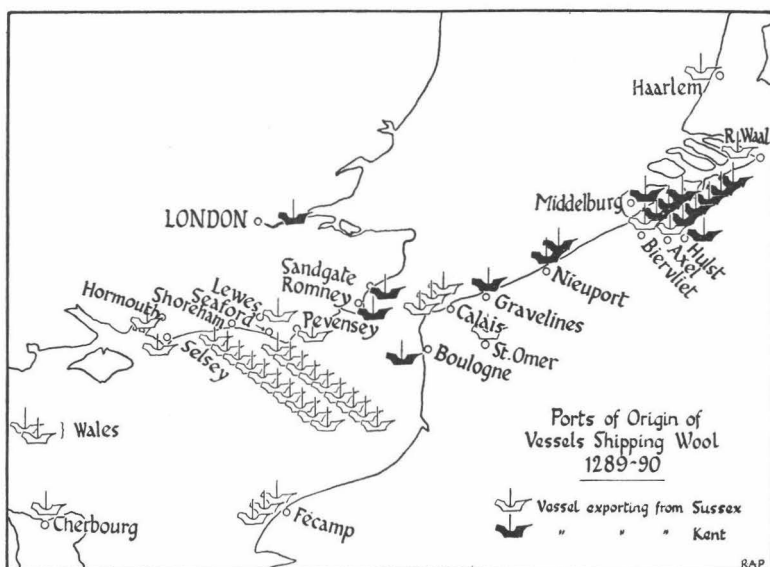


FIG. 2.

the east. This is an important point, for it probably meant that when England and France were at war, or when peacetime piracy was rife in the Channel, the trade of the Sussex ports was more liable to interference than was that of the Kent ports. Judging from a comparison which I have made between the yearly totals for Kent and Sussex throughout the fourteenth century this does seem to have been the case, for when the totals are graphed the curve for Sussex is seen to fluctuate violently, but the rises and

falls in the Kent curve, although corresponding in date, are much less pronounced.

Another point to be noticed is that the numerous English vessels which in Fig. 1 were shown exporting from Shoreham and Seaford are seen from Fig. 2 to have belonged almost entirely to those ports. Under the term "English" I have included two vessels belonging respectively to David de Weoles and John de Weoles on the assumption that Weoles = Wales,

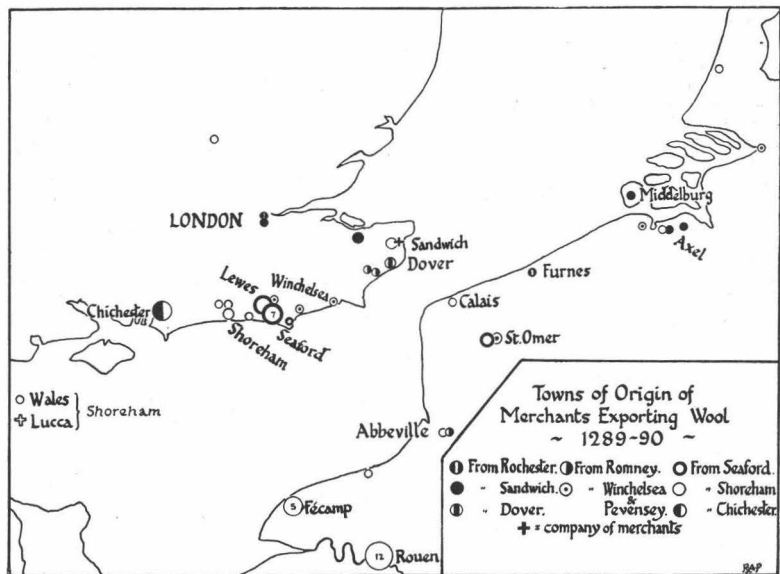


FIG. 3.

but apart from these possible exceptions it is on the whole true to say that although the wool trade was of considerable importance in south-east England yet it only attracted shipping from a comparatively small area at this period.

Fewer vessels are shown on Fig. 2 than on Fig. 1, but this is unavoidable because the accounts do not give the port of origin in every case.

We may learn from Fig. 3 whence came the merchants who were engaged in the wool trade. It has already been stated that alien vessels were easily

outnumbered by English vessels in the carrying trade of Sussex, but as regards merchants the balance was much more even. Nevertheless, there are some marked local differences between Sussex ports that need comment. The trade of Chichester, tucked away in the west, was in the hands of local merchants, many of whom can be traced in the Subsidy Rolls of 1296,¹⁴ and a similar state of affairs existed at Seaford where, apart from a small group of aliens from St. Omer, the merchants engaged were local men.

From Pevensey and Winchelsea local and alien merchants shipped small quantities of wool,¹⁵ but the main interest again centres on Shoreham. At this port alien merchants were clearly in the majority, but what is particularly striking is the fact that 17 of them came from Rouen and Fécamp.¹⁶ During periods of strained or broken relations with France these men would no doubt be the first to withdraw, so it is not surprising to find that by the end of Edward II.'s reign their places had been taken by Sussex merchants whose names appear in the Subsidy Rolls of 1327.¹⁷

The relative importance of English and alien merchants may be discussed from another point of view, and Table II. summarises the wool shipments for 1289-90 (Pevensey and Winchelsea 1288-9) in a manner which illustrates the complex nature of the trade. The figures in some cases are only to be regarded as approximate, since it is difficult at times to tell from a merchant's name whether he were an Englishman or an alien if the town of origin is omitted. In order to make the comparisons as clear as possible I have divided up the wool-fells into sacks, on the basis of 300 fells being equivalent to one sack, and

¹⁴ See *S.N.Q.*, May, 1933.

¹⁵ Of a total of nine sailings during the year, five were from Winchelsea and two from Pevensey, the port of departure in the other two cases not being given.

¹⁶ Out of a combined total (English and alien) of 38. For 1287-8 the number was 7 out of 16.

¹⁷ See *S.N.Q.*, Aug., 1932.

have added them to the wool totals, the aggregate in each case being given to the nearest half sack.¹⁸

TABLE II.

Port.	Wool exported by English merchants in		Wool exported by alien merchants in	
	English ships.	Alien ships.	English ships.	Alien ships.
Chichester	16 6½s.		—	—
Shoreham	104½s.	13s.	199½s.	103½s.
Seaford	95½s.	—	25s.	—
Pevensey and Winchelsea	½s.	19½s.	—	23½s.

These figures are illuminating as far as Shoreham is concerned, for they bring out very clearly the dependence of alien merchants upon English shipping at that port. This is a somewhat unusual feature for such an early period, and suggests that the mariners of Sussex were already at that time making headway against foreign competition in the carrying trade.

Now let us examine the shipping from another standpoint. Disregarding for a moment the distinction between English and alien vessels,¹⁹ we can work out the average amount of wool carried in each vessel and also the average quantity shipped by each merchant. These results are set out in Table III. and reveal some additional points of interest.

TABLE III.

Port.	Year.	Total wool.	Total sailings.	Average cargo.	Total shipm'ts.	Average shipm't.
Chichester	1287-8	128½s.	6	21½s.	7	18½s.
"	1289-90	166½s.	7	24s.	7	24s.
"	1291-2	157½s.	8	19½s.	9	17½s.
Shoreham	1287-8	257s.	18	14½s.	25	10½s.
"	1289-90	420s.	32	13s.	47	9s.
Seaford	1286-7	124s.	12	10½s.	17	7½s.
"	1287-8	138½s.	17	8s.	22	6½s.
"	1289-90	120½s.	18	6½s.	23	5s.
"	1291-2	184½s.	21	9s.	41	4½s.
Pevensey and Winchelsea	1288-9	43½s.	9	5s.	9	5s.

¹⁸ This has also been done in Table III.

¹⁹ Judging from the sizes of cargoes carried there appears to have been little or no difference between English and alien vessels as regards carrying capacity.

In the first place, although the annual totals tended to fluctuate, the averages were practically unaffected. The figures given in Table III. show that the average cargo leaving Chichester was appreciably larger than those from the other ports, and also that there were fewer sailings and shipments. To suggest precise reasons for these differences is difficult, for we have no means of determining all the factors involved. It might be that larger vessels were available at Chichester than elsewhere, but the explanation is more likely to be that at that port there was far less competition for the wool available for export than there was at Shoreham and Seaford. Alternatively we may conjecture that the Chichester wool merchants were better organised than were those at the other ports, and had built up a carefully guarded monopoly which gave each merchant a reasonably large share in the trade of the port.

The largest cargo given in these returns was exported from Chichester on August 24, 1289, by R. Polle of Chichester in a vessel whose master was S. Blanchetape of Calais, and consisted of 58 sacks, 11 cloves, together with 706 wool-fells. Since only one merchant was concerned, this amount also represents the largest individual shipment. Reckoning the sack to weigh 364 lb. (i.e. 52 cloves of 7 lb.) this gives a total weight of nearly 10 tons.²⁰

Generally speaking, merchants at this period traded individually, although partnerships are occasionally noted, and shipmasters sometimes exported on their own behalf. The following extract from the Shoreham account of 1289-90 illustrates the three types of shipment quite clearly:

Date.	Master.	Merchant.	Goods.
June 29, 1289	William of Axel.	William of Axel . . Andrew of Renewylle Bourunsyn of Lucca R. Gwydichun & Co. ²¹ of Lucca	13 cloves. 583 fells. 14 sacks 9 cloves 17 sacks 4 cloves.

²⁰ The largest cargoes in the reigns of Edward II. and Richard II. were found to be 8 tons and 18 tons respectively (*S.A.C.*, Vol. LXXI., p. 177, note).

²¹ "et socii sui."

From this short study we can see that in the earliest days for which detailed statistics are available the wool trade of Sussex was in a flourishing condition. The contrasts with conditions in Kent are very marked and we may conclude that the alien supremacy which was a feature of ports along the east coast did not extend to Sussex at this period any more than it did during the following century.