

THE CITY AND THE WINE TRADE: AN EARLY HISTORY

Wine — this liquid — fruit of the vine made of human hands.

Wine that doth gladden the heart of man.

Yet

Wine is commerce and trade

The stuff of Royal Households and Kings.

The need of the Army

The source of revenue and taxes

The interest of the City.

And what an interest they took.

But before dealing with that let me sketch in the historical background.

In medieval times the scale of the wine trade in Europe was large. Wine was England's largest single import. Indeed the English Kings regarded it as of great importance that wine reached the country in sufficient quantities to be sold at reasonable prices.

Today we are concerned with the position of London — which was the greatest importer of wine. Whilst both Southampton and Bristol were wine ports, the cost and awkwardness of transporting wine by land resulted in their tonnages never consistently matching that of London.

The Vintners were of course heavily involved in the wine trade both as wholesalers and as keepers of taverns and inns. Their trade was heavily regulated not only in the City but also by the laws of the realm. The fortunes of the trade fluctuated a great deal. Thus the wine imported in 1500 was roughly half that imported in 1300 and the price had nearly doubled in this period.

During the mid-13th Century one third of all Aldermen were involved in the wine trade, although not all were Vintners. This surprising figure has been obtained from royal records and not from records in the City and it is possible that an even greater percentage of the Aldermen were involved.

The fortunes of the Vintners and others involved in the wine trade depended on the King. During Edward I's reign the Vintners went into a decline because he favoured the Gascons and the Italians. Indeed during his reign trading was made much easier for all foreign merchants who for a time were taxed less vigorously than the native inhabitants. Some say that this favourable treatment by Edward I was necessary in order for him to find favour with the foreign merchants from whom he had borrowed vast sums of money. Not only did the Aldermen's interest in the wine trade decline but relations between the

citizens of London and the foreign merchants deteriorated during this period, even leading to riots.

Whilst Edward II followed the same pattern as Edward I, after Edward III's accession to the throne the pendulum swung again. The Vintners gained exemption from prize — a tax of 1 tun for every vessel carrying less than 19 tuns and 2 tuns for any vessel loaded with more than 20 tuns — a tax which mitigated against small imports and which was applied regardless of the quality of the wine — this somehow seems familiar today.

With the upturn in the trade by the mid 14th century 3 Vintners alone were handling between 10% and 17% of London's wine imports. Even this however was not enough for the Vintners to compete satisfactorily with the Mercers who were to become the premier Guild. In 1364 the Vintners purchased a Royal Charter from Edward III granting them a monopoly in the retail trade of all imported Gascon wine. The prosperity that followed this enabled the Vintners to build their own Hall and in due course to attain their own coat of arms — but as late as 1447. Thus in the 15th century only 3 Sheriffs and one Alderman were Vintners. In the 14th century there were 5 Mayors, 5 Sheriffs and 5 Aldermen — all Vintners. In 1516 the Vintners were one of the great 12 but placed 11th. If this list had been made early in the 14th century the Vintners would probably have been second or third in the list.

You may well ask why wine was so important to England and to London.

There was a long tradition of wine drinking in this country founded, some say, during the Roman period. It has been said that its continued use has been attributed to the use of wine in the celebration of Mass.

England initially grew her own wine, importing only small amounts. However when her Kings gained land in western France vine growing decreased in England. The lands round Bordeaux and elsewhere were now ruled by the same Monarch with the consequence that wine could now be imported into England at a fraction of the cost it took to produce at home. British demand for wine was one of the major forces behind Bordeaux becoming an almost exclusively wine growing area. In return for the wine England exported corn, wool, fish and other goods. It is interesting to note that even at times of great shortage of corn in England its export to Bordeaux still took place even when the exporting of corn was generally banned. In 1364 the Vintners were granted licences expressly exempting them from currency export restrictions when they went to buy the vintage in Gascony or Spain.

Thus in the fifteenth century the English wine trade made up a third of all English imports. In the 1950's it represented only 1% of all her imports.

In the 1360's England was taking one half of Bordeaux's entire vintage. Wine was consumed in huge quantities by all the large households of England. Nobles supplied their servants and retainers with wine. Not surprisingly households further inland consumed less wine than those near the sea, due no doubt to the expense of transporting wine over land.

The largest single importer and consumer of wine during the 14th and 15th centuries was the King. Through his Butler he bought vast quantities of wine. The Butler used the Rights of Purveyance, often corruptly. The King needed wine not only for his household but also for all the royal castles which he supplied. All soldiers were given an allowance of wine. In times of war the amount of wine needed increased as more soldiers were employed.

Edward II in 1308 ordered 1,000 tuns of wine to celebrate his marriage — the equivalent today of 1,152,000 bottles of wine!

Wine was used to obtain favours and to pay fines and debts. The City Corporation itself gave 10 tuns of wine and 10 pieces of wax on the marriage of Lionel, King Edward II's son. In 1418 London sent 30 butts of sweet wine as well as brown ale to Henry V's army.

The system of providing credit and financing trade was in large measure built upon the wine trade where credit was in increasing use.

In times of war convoys were organised by the King so that they could go safely to and from Bordeaux.

In 1347 the King imposed a special tax of 2 shillings on a tun of wine to be used for the upkeep of ships of war protecting the realm from enemies. Henry VII used the same device for the repair of the navy. He passed a Statute in the fifteenth century stating that wines owned by natives could only be transported on English, Irish and Welsh ships. Furthermore the crews must come from those countries or from Calais. The aim was to increase the levels of native shipping so that this would be available for use at times of crisis.

The importance of wine enabled the kings to tax it heavily and in times of great need the kings did not hesitate to raise extraordinary taxes on wine. This was perhaps easier to do than to tax staple goods such as corn as taxing these could lead to riots and starvation.

As will be appreciated, the wine trade was of immense value to England. It is interesting to note that the consumption of wine by Englishmen at this time was considerably higher than today. In the fifteenth century an average of eight pints per head was drunk each year.

Developments in the wine trade in the XIVth and XVth Centuries

The prosperity of the English wine trade depended on a number of different factors. First, it depended on the more or less friendly relationships existing between England and the continental powers and on the degree of security afforded to the mercantile marine. It was affected by the legislative and municipal regulations by which kings, parliaments and corporations attempted to control, assist or limit this trade.

Technological advancements were enabling wine to be shipped on longer voyages from more southern European countries. The Italian fleets were coming north and the trade as always depended on changing tastes. The prosperity of England affected the trade and of course the wine itself was affected by the annual weather where it originated.

The Letter Books of the City of London demonstrate the variety of wines that reached England including Tuscan Red, Cretan and a sweet Greek wine. But it was still the Bordeaux trade which dominated the English wine trade in the first three decades of the fourteenth century. As mentioned earlier, as a result of the laws passed by Edward I native wine importers were only taking approximately 40% of the total wine imported.

As the fourteenth century continued native involvement in the wine trade increased. War with France aided this development. However the war damaged the wine trade as it disrupted the economies of both England and France and increased the dangers to overseas trade. The war with France however benefitted the Spanish share of the wine trade. Spain started from a small but firm base in the 1320's but by the mid-century the Spaniards were handling large tonnages which increased throughout the following years, at least until 1367. In the period 1360 to 1361 sixty nine Spanish ships were in Bordeaux buying wine.

By the mid-fourteenth century there was red Tuscan wine, wine from Crete, a sweet Greek wine from Candia and another called Riva, probably a sweet white wine, and another from Morocco. The lists began to become endless — like today. Notwithstanding this the share of England's imports from Bordeaux still represented about 85% of her imports of wine.

In the mid-fourteenth century all sorts of strange statutes were passed. In 1353 it was decreed that merchants both Gascoine and other strangers may bring their wine safely to all ports in England. In 1368 a statute was passed stating that all Gascoine wines should be brought in by Gascoine and other alien merchants and English merchants should not go to Gascony. This damaged the supply so that in 1369 native merchants were allowed to go to Gascony on condition they brought back at least 100 tuns of wine. The fighting in France

made it more difficult to obtain wine for England because it could be more easily sold within the French region to the soldiers.

The wine trade appears to have been generally depressed at the beginning of the fifteenth century, which given the circumstances is hardly surprising. In the beginning of the fifteenth century the Butler's accounts show a complete absence of Spanish merchants, although this was due to warfare. By 1413 they were again bringing a great deal of wine from Spain.

In general, the English and the French kings did try to maintain trade whenever foreign relations permitted this. In 1409 a writ was received by the Mayor and Aldermen from the King informing them that it was safe for them to go to La Rochelle as the King of France had granted them freedom to do so. At the beginning of the fifteenth century about 200 English ships were going to Bordeaux for the vintage season or in the early Spring.

In the mid-fifteenth century the loss of Bordeaux and Bayonne in 1453 was catastrophic. Prior to this event huge quantities of wine were produced and exported by Bordeaux and imported into England. However following this event the tonnage decreased from 13,000 tuns to a mere 3,000 tuns. This disrupted the economy of Bordeaux which had no desire to be linked with France or be ruled by French kings.

During the next decade France and England were not on good terms. In 1462 Louis XI of France forbade the export of any merchandise to England. Edward IV retaliated by forbidding the import of wine from Gascony. The trade of course was devastated.

In 1474 a Treaty was signed between France and England. Following the peace, trade in wine between the two countries increased. Not only was Rhenish wine supplied but they bought wine from western France and carried these wines to England. The Italians were also supplying England with wine. The Venetians imposed a tax on sweet wine exports for the upkeep of their navy. Henry VII retaliated by imposing a tax of 18 shillings in 1491. This tax was due to continue as long as the Venetian tax remained yet when the Venetians abolished their tax the King only reduced his — because he had discovered that this was a further useful source of revenue.

The last quarter of the fifteenth century saw an increase in the total tonnage imports of wine resulting from better foreign relations in general and in particular with France although the trade never reached its former heights.

Conclusion

The wine trade was declining generally throughout the period about which I

have been speaking due to mounting costs and tax but also as a result of the increasing consumption of beer which was a much cheaper home grown product and easily obtainable. The trade of course continued into the next and subsequent centuries but that is not my topic for today.

Before concluding I would like to acknowledge the help I have received from reading my daughter Candida's thesis "The London Vintners and the Wine Trade in the 14th and 15th Centuries". Her dissertation contains a number of acknowledgements and I would like to read one of them:—

"In writing this dissertation, my greatest thanks, however, go to the Corporation of the City of London. Without the Guildhall Library, which they support, this dissertation would have been far more difficult to write. The publishing of many London Records, encouraged by the City Corporation, made available to me sources that would otherwise have been inaccessible".

L.St. J.T.J.