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**VIEWS OF HOSTS: REPORTING THE ALIEN COMMODITY TRADE,  
1440-45  
(ESRC Award Reference No. RES-000-22-0628)**

**END OF AWARD RESEARCH REPORT**

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[NB: The following project research report has been taken from the End of Award Report submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council in December 2005. It is also available on the ESRC's Society Today website (<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk> - search under the award reference number). Any use of this report other than for private study must include a full acknowledgement of the source.]

**Background**

This has been an eighteen-month half-time project, designed to make widely available, and to analyse, information contained in an important, but under-used, collection of documents relating to the trading activities of alien merchants in fifteenth century England.

The documents collectively described as the 'views of hosts' were produced in the early 1440s as a direct result of a statute of 1439. The concept of the 'view of account', a summary often taken to provide a snapshot of the current state of affairs, was familiar to medieval estate stewards (Galloway, Murphy and Myhill, 1993). Similarly 'hosting', under which aliens were twinned with local counterparts for the duration of their visit, had long been accepted by those who earned their living by trading across political boundaries (Barron, 2004; Ruddock, 1951; Thrupp, 1969). What makes the statutory requirement of 1439 radically different is its combination of these two old and unexceptionable administrative techniques to produce a wholly new mechanism by which central government might monitor the alien population. The Exchequer was to be informed not only of the identities of aliens coming and going between this country and foreign lands, but also the names of their business contacts, what prices they were charging and paying for goods, and moreover where and when each deal had taken place. It required an exact timetable and itinerary for each alien merchant for the duration of his visit here. This was a law designed to isolate aliens, extract information from them, and use the knowledge so acquired in order to control their activities as a socially and economically distinct group within the population. It was an ambitious scheme, given the mobility of aliens within England (Bolton, 1998). It sought to provide an administrative framework to demonstrate the effectiveness of earlier measures introduced piecemeal from the 1390s, which required aliens to live with hosts chosen by the English authorities, sell their imported goods quickly, and use their profits to buy English goods for export. This targeting of the alien mercantile community reflected the general anti-alien stance of the Lancastrian period, in which the English and English-born sought to reserve social, political and

economic advancement to themselves simply as a prerogative of liege status. In consequence, aliens were progressively and specifically barred from participation in areas such as brokerage, civic office, the local franchise, membership of craft groups, and lay and ecclesiastical offices where their presence had previously been perfectly acceptable.

The Act of 1439 set up a self-financing plan for reporting alien commercial activity to the Exchequer, with procedures and penalties for non-compliance. Aliens were obliged to report to the local authorities, who thereupon assigned them to the care of English-born businessmen of good character as 'hosts'. Each host kept a register of the alien's activities, charging 2*d.* in the £ for recording each transaction to cover costs. A copy of the host's register was routinely returned to the Exchequer at Easter and Michaelmas, forming the body of documentation now known as the 'views of hosts'. These contain a unique body of data, covering an area for which virtually nothing is otherwise directly known from English records. Access to the information, which is nominally in the public domain and freely available to all, has in practice been the privilege of a very limited number of scholars who were able to visit TNA and tackle Anglo-Norman French and Latin, written in 15<sup>th</sup> century hands. Furthermore, those few specialists who have used the documents have generally raided them for snippets to use as examples in illustration of their own particular arguments, rather than attempting any analysis of the documents as a category. Not only has the nature and location of the material proven an obstacle to their widespread use, but the integrity of the views as a body of documentation in its own right, and as a product of its particular period, has been virtually ignored by those who have managed to access them for other purposes.

## Objectives

The aim of the project was to make the original data collected by the Lancastrian Exchequer directly accessible to the broadest possible readership, opening up full use of the whole range of information for the reader's own purposes. It was further intended to provide a summary of primary and secondary material relevant to the views, embedding the data in its context and enabling the user to make a more informed assessment as to why and how the data was collected, and thus of its likely significance and limitations from the user's own point of view.

To this end, it was intended to present the data in three separate but complementary ways, using Microsoft Word and Access software, to suit the varying needs of users with differing backgrounds:

1. a full transcript in Anglo-Norman French and Latin, retaining Roman numerals. This has been completed, and the transcripts of individual documents have been arranged to run in the numerical sequence in which they are classified at TNA, which has no regard for the location, date or originator of the document.
2. a searchable database in modern English, with Arabic numerals. All the data from the original documents has been entered, as far as possible within the constraints of the format (this is further explained under Method, below).
3. a translation into modern English, with an introduction, index of persons and glossary. The translation has been completed, and the documents reordered to run in a logical sequence based on their location and originator; a draft text

has been sent to the general editor allocated to the project by the London Record Society.

These resources will be made available in both printed and electronic form, which will both assist in conserving the documents and immeasurably improve accessibility for the user. The transcript and database are both to be available through British History Online (the IHR's digital library), alongside other resources for the history of London, while the translation will be published by the London Record Society. The transcript and database are expected to be made available online early in 2006, while publication of the volume is also anticipated to be during 2006.

The remaining Objectives, comprising research questions, are discussed under Results, below.

## Methods

The first task undertaken was to create a transcript of each document, using recognised methods of extension in place of medieval abbreviations and contractions, and preserving as far as possible the idiosyncrasies of spelling peculiar to the host. Each transcript was separately checked against its counterpart original document. The checked transcripts were then used as a basis for the translation from Anglo-Norman French and Latin into English. The translations, when finished, were each separately checked through against their counterpart transcripts.

Some of the information was routine in nature, but elsewhere work was needed in identifying less familiar commodities, weights and measures, which required reference to medieval English, French, Latin and occasionally Italian and Dutch dictionaries backed up by printed editions of the port books and customs accounts of London, Southampton and Hull. Decisions were made concerning weights and numbers, as *mille* for either a thousand or a thousandweight (and similarly *C* for either a hundred or a hundredweight) was used indiscriminately by the hosts. Information regarding the trade affiliations and biographical details for merchants, both English and alien, was gathered, and research was undertaken to identify the likely original names of alien merchants - these were heavily Anglicised by their hosts. The surviving original assignments of aliens to hosts by the local authorities were examined, in order to determine when each particular alien had first been assigned to his host, and whether the relationship between them was likely to have been simply transitory or of a more enduring nature. The quality of the relationship, insofar as it could be determined from the level of detail in the documents, was considered. Attention was also given to the way in which the data was collected, compiled and presented by the hosts in each town, to assess the impact of local variations in how the job was approached by contemporaries. Furthermore, what can be ascertained as to the likely gaps in the survival of evidence - based on the towns to which writs went out requiring proclamation of the new rules - was established, and its significance evaluated.

For the design stage of the database, an entity relationship diagram was drawn up and a chain of separate linked tables was then constructed according to the plan, making full use of the facilities at the Centre for Metropolitan History. A basic input form was devised, in order to simplify the task of data entry. The database was tested and two prototype input forms were amended to produce a third and final version. Data

input was restricted to hard transactions, although some of the hosts included random additional information and fine detail which was not strictly required by the 1439 act. Some of this information – for instance, stock levels and the provenance of particular commodities, the names of ships' captains, and details of loading and unloading – has an intrinsic interest and can be used to add texture to the project as a whole, but is unsuitable for tabulation and statistical analysis.

Although much could be concluded about the extant views as a coherent body of evidence from a simple examination of the texts, the completion of the database and the opportunity to run specific queries has broadened the ways in which they can be interrogated (see below). Despite the caveats which should be kept to the fore in any attempt to manipulate data surviving from such an early period, the hosts and the information they supplied can now be investigated in ways which would far exceed the expectations of those who were responsible for the 1439 act, as well as those who were employed at the exchequer when the returns came in.

## Results

An unanticipated result of the project has been the discovery of four new short views or part-views at TNA, none of which is currently classified as such. These are:

1. E122/61/53 Account by Robert Foreste of imports, sales and exports of foreign merchants resident in his house
2. E122/141/24 Particulars of woad ships at Southampton
3. E101/697/49 Sales of cloth and alum by Venetians
4. E101/128/32 Certificate of John Cantelowe, appointed by mayor to survey merchandise of foreigners

These were assimilated into the project, and have been transcribed, translated and entered into the database alongside the existing known views. This more than compensates for the fact that one of the documents classified and bound with the views by TNA (E101/128/31 return 32) is in fact a mayor's certificate of assignment of hosts, and yields no information on transactions.

One of the primary goals of the project was to make the views available to a wider readership, removing obstacles which prevented users from realising their potential. This has been achieved through the three main outputs of the project: the online transcript and database, and the published edition of the translated views, which will be available in 2006. These will open the views up to frequent, easy use by researchers whatever their combination of abilities with regard to linguistics, palaeography and information technology, and whatever the constraints on their physical mobility. It has further immeasurably improved the speed with which results are obtainable by readers, further encouraging a proliferation of uses.

In terms of the broader research context, the project examined the socio-economic background to the introduction of the legislation of 1439, as expressed in parliamentary petitions, economic theory and literature. Between the pro-French realignment of Burgundy with the treaty of Arras in 1435 and the Anglo-Burgundian truce of 1439, Franco-Burgundian naval forces dominated the Channel in the absence of any credible English fleet, and attempted to enforce a Burgundian ban on the import of English cloth. This posed a threat to the only expanding sector of England's – particularly London's – export market: while the number of broadcloths exported through London slumped, the long-distance trade handled by Italians through

Southampton was stimulated (Rodger, 1997; Holmes, 1961; Barron, 2004). Hostility against aliens in general and Italians in particular intensified in parliament. In 1437, a petition protested that English merchants were being ruined as a consequence of extending credit to Italians, and that proliferating Italian imports were sold at high prices while the Italians used their burgeoning purchasing power to buy in quantity, forcing down the price of English goods for export. Another petition (1439), repeated that prices for imports were outrageously high and the price of English goods had crashed, blaming it on Italian exploitation of markets west of Gibraltar. Both petitions echoed opinions recently expressed in the *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, thought to reflect the views of London-based wool and cloth exporters' support for the duke of Gloucester as captain of Calais: 'The trewe processe of Englyshe polycye ... Is thys ... Cheryshe marchandyse, kepe thamyralte That we bee maysteres of the narowe see'. Certainly two London hosts with interests in wool and cloth – the mercer William Estfeld and the draper Robert Clopton – represented the City in the 1439 parliament. A third petition, again in 1439, urged action against the cartels by which aliens were thought to push up the prices of imports and force down the prices of English goods; responsibility for the current recession and bullion shortage was pinned firmly upon aliens who, it alleged, took great sums of money out of the country, undermining the king's customs revenues and, consequently, funding for the navy (Warner, 1926; Holmes, 1961). The Act of 1439 adopted this petition, using the petitioners' self-financing plan for reporting alien commercial activity to the Exchequer, with procedures and penalties for non-compliance. It was broadly framed, and its nominal purpose - the regulation of all alien trade to prevent the export of bullion – disguised the fact that it actually targeted a much narrower tranche of the alien population. The Hanse, and non-English merchants under the king's obedience, were specifically excluded from the operation of the act, which was intended to remain in force for 8 years. Dovetailing with the Anglo-Burgundian truce in September that year, the statute left English merchants – and particularly Londoners – in an excellent position to reap the benefits of renewed access to Continental markets.

The views tell us about the activities of some 250 aliens engaged in c.2,300 transactions. These name suppliers and clients - mostly London wholesalers, or the better sort of craftsmen and women, but including the royal wardrobe, nobility, gentry, and ecclesiastical houses. Grocery was often weighed, sometimes making allowance in the price for weight of containers, damage in transit and garbelling; cloth was usually measured, and described by colour and type of fabric. The returns sometimes show whether transactions were cash or account, and refer to settlements with existing creditors. The total value of these transactions was £112,037 12s. 4d. dominated by deals in English cloth and wool for export, imported malmsey and pepper, and English tin exports. Overall, imports totalled £54,069 14s. 2d., while exports amounted to £57,967 8s. 2d. Unsurprisingly, the trade was largely handled within London by 30 drapers, 40 grocers and 24 mercers, although 12 tailors and 10 fishmongers were also listed, along with a scattering of other London tradesmen. In terms of the stereotypes perpetrated by the *Libelle*, the views tell us much about Venetian trade in London, vilified as being based on unnecessary frivolities. Of the £112,000 worth of transactions between alien and English merchants, just over £103,000 (92%) involved trade with resident Venetian agents or Venetian galley traders. Imports controlled by these Venetians amounted to £47,766 (out of £54,069), while the buying for export accounted for £55,324 (out of £57,976). The remarkable concentration of commodities in Venetian hands benefitted the English in that the total value of Venetian exports from England *exceeded* that of their imports into the country. Furthermore, there were no 'apes, japes or marmosets tailed',

as the *Libelle* alleged. The luxury goods imported were generally those which provided the means by which the London grocers and mercers built their own fortunes: pepper and other spices, sugars, oil and currants; fine fabrics, raw silk and embroidery thread. Without these, many successful London merchants would have found it tough to make a living. Furthermore, the Venetians also brought some of the dyes and alum essential to the English cloth industry, with which the Genoese were principally credited in the popular imagination.

The project also analysed the system for data collection and enforcement specified by the 1439 act. The gathering and presentation of statistics concerning the alien population was a formidable task in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Bolton, 1998). While other records such as those for the alien subsidy were disrupted by plague during 1442-4, views continued to be returned until Easter 1444, and local authority assignments of hosts until the following Michaelmas. Like the alien subsidy rolls, the views do not cover the whole period for which the legislation was in force, and are not continuous; and, of course, returns came in only from those towns where there were aliens (Bolton, 1998). Writs requiring the proclamation and enforcement of the new law from Easter 1440 went to seventeen towns along the east and south coasts, from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Fowey, yet it is striking that the surviving returns are dominated by London and its outpost Southampton (53 and 9 respectively, totalling 62). London tended to soak up the east coast trade, but there are no returns from Bristol or indeed from the lesser ports of Poole and Sandwich, where the galleys were ordered to publish their regulations in 1441, although all of these were in receipt of a writ (Lloyd, 1991). Seventeen towns should have produced returns, but the only survivals are from London, Southampton and Hull. The London-Southampton axis was vital to Italian trade (Ruddock, 1951), while both popular sentiment and lobbying of parliament was demonstrably anti-Italian rather than anti-alien in flavour. Consequently the real surprise is not the predominance of survivals detailing Italian trade in London and Southampton, but that we should have anything at all for the minor activities of small northern European merchants in Hull (11).

The Exchequer did not issue a standard form for hosts to complete. Thus despite the inclusion of the same basic categories of information, the returns vary widely in what they show us. Their format varies according to place of origin, and also reflects the nature of the trade handled through the town - the resident agents and galley stopovers in London and Southampton generated more complex and extensive paperwork than the transients at the low-value, quick turnaround end of the market in Hull. Each return also mirrors the individual career of the host, in that a grocer would include more detail on grocery than on other goods, while a draper would record cloth measurements down to the last quarter-yard. In London and Southampton, hosts were reassigned to the same aliens every year, allowing the development of a personal relationship. This is not to infer collusion, although no doubt it existed to some degree. The returns usefully expose breaches of the law governing the way in which aliens were required to trade; for example, they sold direct to each other and they sold retail. The views show ten alien households of the sort prohibited by statute, all in London and confirmed in sources such as the alien subsidy records.

However, the views were not uniformly successful in providing the Exchequer with the stipulated data. Many Genoese partially complied with the law in that they presented as aliens and were assigned hosts, but they then refused supervision by virtue of their rights under an alleged charter. Apart from such objectors in principle,

the local authorities were sometimes simply caught out by the assignment of a host to a visitor who turned out either not to be alien, or not to be a merchant. The Venetian Geronimo Dandillo, for example, declined to supply full details of his business because the king had made him indigenous. We can also find alien sailors who dutifully reported their presence and were assigned hosts, although they had nothing to sell. This was a grey area for the local authorities, because ships' crews did trade: the crew of Giacomo Corner's galley, in London between October 1441 and March 1442, sold nearly £770-worth of goods and spent nearly £400 on purchases. Ordinary sailors, netted by mistake, were explained away as paying guests in the host's household. It is worth noticing that hosts submitted their returns even if they had little or nothing to report, and found a range of excuses for failure to make a full survey. Sometimes the Exchequer deadline was blamed: John Chichele's view for 1440-1 for the Venetian galley master Vittore Capello was marked up as not a full account, the merchants still being in London. Thomas Walsyngham submitted only the sales side of a view for Federico Corner and Carlo Contarini in 1441, because they bought nothing until the day the view was delivered into the Exchequer. The most popular reason for a failed return was that the host had never seen the alien with whom he was paired. Altogether seventeen minor merchants covered by twelve returns managed to drop out of sight, all of them disappearing in London. An alien might also report his presence in one town but trade in another: John Chichele reported that the Genoese John di Sacco had sold oil and Spanish lambskins in London during 1440-1, but knew nothing of his purchases which were made at Southampton. The size of London and its commercial link to Southampton also resulted in some aliens being under the supervision of two hosts simultaneously: Alfonso Diaz and Roderigo de Jane had Richard Rich as their host in London from Michaelmas 1443 to Easter 1444, while John Emory was their host in Southampton. The administrative system, clearly geared to cope with itinerants trading small-scale at the point of arrival, had been designed to meet the needs of simpler times. It was stretched beyond its limits by the more sophisticated business methods of resident agents who generated huge numbers of sales and co-ordinated their activities through London and Southampton. It is worth noticing that hosts, although not financially accountable within the Exchequer, took considerable time and trouble – especially in London – to supply information in finer detail than the Act required (Thrupp, 1969). Perhaps they were aware, as businessmen, of the act's shortcomings.

The patchy geographical survival of the views, the deliberate omission of the Hanse, the refusal of the Genoese to account, and the idiosyncracies of the administrative mechanism means that the views cannot present as full a picture of alien trade in England as we might like. Indeed, it would be hard to name any English source which could do so. However, the views are especially valuable in helping us to focus on the Italian trade, particularly that of the large Venetian, Florentine and Lucchese concerns who relied upon cutting-edge business practice. Vilified by the *Libelle* for peddling expensive novelties, in fact they spent far more money in London than they generated from their sales (Bolton, 1998). The views show us how they did it on a daily basis, and here, perhaps, is the key to London's antipathy – they sold to a huge number of clients who usually paid cash, but bought from very few suppliers often on credit. Although they undoubtedly put this cash to excellent use on the money markets (and English merchants made good use of Italian bills of exchange for their own purposes), it was popularly supposed that they must be secretly exporting coin and gold. Above all, and despite their inadequacies, the views demonstrate the sheer

futility of enforcing a balance of trade in London, which did very nicely from the imbalance of which English merchants complained.

## **Activities**

The project was undertaken on a half-time basis for eighteen months, and virtually all of this time was taken up by the three core tasks of transcription, translation and database construction. In addition, a paper was given in the Medieval and Tudor London seminar at the Institute of Historical Research on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2005. A meeting with the London Record Society, originally fixed for 7<sup>th</sup> July, was abandoned due to the breach of security in London, and took place instead on 12<sup>th</sup> September; this discussed the running order of the documents in the printed edition. A research trip to Southampton took place in September, principally for the purpose of examining two documents held in the Civic Centre archive:

1. the steward's book of Gabriel Corbet, a Venetian-born town official who had been a denizen since the early 1430s and purchased wine locally according to one of the views.
2. the petty customs book of Robert Hovyngham, who acted as a host. This turned out to be especially interesting because of the indenture sewn into the back, listing Italian letters of payment which provided a favoured method for paying Southampton's fee-farm (Thick, 1999).

## **Outputs**

There are to be three main outputs:

1. An online transcript of the views. This will be published on the web site of the Centre for Metropolitan History website early in 2006.
2. A database, providing a detailed record of the transactions involving alien and English merchants contained in the views. This has been offered for deposit with the ESRC Data Archive, and will be made available on British History Online, the IHR's digital library, in 2006.
3. A published edition of the translated views of hosts, along with an introduction, footnotes and index. The text is currently being finalised, and the volume is expected to be published in 2006, depending on the publication schedule of the London Record Society.

A paper was given in the Medieval and Tudor London Seminar at the Institute for Historical Research early in May 2005, which served to publicise the project among the staff of universities and other academic institutions. As a result of direct contact with the Centre for Metropolitan History, a postgraduate working on 'marginals' in late medieval London and Bruges has made use of the draft translations and transcripts at the CMH for his doctoral research.

## **Impacts**

The three principal outputs are expected to be of interest to professional historians or postgraduates training within the discipline, economists and economic historians, sociologists and social historians, linguists and linguistic historians, and those specialising in early attempts to collect data on individuals, especially where such data collection can be tied in with implementation of the law. Undergraduates



working in any of these areas will find the outputs an asset, and the translated and database formats are expected to prove particularly useful to them.

The project has made the contents of the views readily available, quickly comprehensible and instantly usable for all those involved in the study of medieval trade and local government. The information in the views can now readily be deployed to explore the purchasing habits of royal and noble households and that of the minor gentry, how civic and mercantile élites organised the wholesale ventures which financed their careers, the small but significant role of women in commercial activities and handicrafts, the changing composition of alien communities particularly within London, and the nature of the relationship between these different categories of alien visitors and their native counterparts. It provides an interestingly English window on the complex affairs of the Borsari bank in London and its customer base, only otherwise accessed through Italian sources. It further illustrates the close ties between London and Southampton, the role of aliens in the import of manufactures and the export of English cloth, and the shortcomings of central government attempts to discover and manipulate the variables of an economy of which contemporaries had at best a poor grasp.

### **Future Research Priorities**

While the main purpose of the project has been to open up the views to a wide range of users, the analysis has highlighted some interesting issues arising from the administrative structure and resources upon which central government could expect to draw in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and its level of understanding of the complex world it assumed to control. Although all the correct procedures were normally conscientiously followed – not least by many of the aliens themselves - there was scant appreciation of the administrative complexities confronting the host on the ground. A question could be raised as to what extent central government either noticed or cared. It would be worthwhile exploring whether 15<sup>th</sup> century royal government had any regard for economic legislation or its effective enforcement, or whether these were dismissed as purely local matters. Should we expect the Crown, or indeed the Exchequer, to be particularly vexed by the nuts and bolts of trade, as long as the more vociferous lobbies among its most influential merchants could be mollified?

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