

## THE OVERSEAS TRADE OF CHESTER, 1600-1650\*

BY D. M. WOODWARD, M.A.

DURING the first half of the sixteenth century the volume of cloth exported from English ports expanded and this trade became increasingly channelled along the London-Antwerp axis. As a result, the proportion of English trade flowing through the provincial ports, or outports as they are often called, declined.<sup>1</sup> The predominance of London over all the other ports was well established by the start of Elizabeth's reign. According to Lawrence Stone, by the 1560s 'London held a monopoly of commercial activity while every other port in the kingdom, with the possible exception of Bristol, appears to have been in an advanced state of decay'.<sup>2</sup> Later in the same article he suggested that this state of affairs continued throughout Elizabeth's reign: 'London maintained the supremacy over the outports that it had already won in 1559, while Newcastle, Hull, Boston, King's Lynn, Portsmouth, Southampton, Poole, Weymouth, Bristol and Chester remained "manifestly decayed"'.<sup>3</sup> Professor Stone leaves his readers with the impression that the outports are worth hardly a second glance. However, such statements have been modified or challenged by the work of various historians. While agreeing that 'London had an overwhelming superiority over all other English ports' and that London's foreign trade 'was also greater than that of all the provincial ports put together', Professor T. S. Willan pointed out that the trade of the outports was not altogether unimportant.

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<sup>1</sup> J. D. Gould, *The great debasement: currency and the economy in mid-Tudor England* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 118-33 and especially Table XII on p. 120; L. Stone, 'State control in sixteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, XVII (1947), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> L. Stone, 'Elizabethan overseas trade', *Econ. H. R.* 2nd ser. II (1949), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 50. For a similar statement see L. Stone, 'State control', *op. cit.* p. 108.

He suggested that studies of the outports can show, among other things, 'those specialized local products which are obscured or ignored when attention is concentrated solely on London's trade' and also that a study of provincial trade suggests an economy 'which, while primarily agrarian, had long ceased to be simple or self-contained'.<sup>4</sup>

More detailed studies have shown that at least some of the ports listed by Professor Stone were not in an 'advanced state of decay' during the second half of the sixteenth century. The proportion of total English exports flowing through the outports may have declined since the Middle Ages, but this does not necessarily mean that the absolute level of trade passing through each port had fallen, nor that subsequent expansion could not take place.

At Newcastle the rapid development of the neighbouring coalfield led to a tremendous increase of activity; annual coal shipments out of the Tyne expanded from nearly 33,000 tons in 1563-4 to nearly 240,000 tons in 1608-9.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, at Hull by the middle of the sixteenth century 'a breath of change was beginning to stir; a new recovery of Hull's fortunes was coming, which would lead to changing patterns of trade and a future of almost continuous growth'.<sup>6</sup> Further down the east coast the East Anglian ports in the later sixteenth century were 'centres of prosperity, driving a thriving coastal and foreign trade, and making a substantial contribution to the wealth of England'.<sup>7</sup> At Southampton, however, the picture was less bright; there the expansion achieved during the first half of Elizabeth's reign proved difficult to maintain and a period of decline set in during the 1580s.<sup>8</sup> Information for other ports is rather scanty although the historian of Exeter thought fit to write of the 'bustling commerce' of the city,<sup>9</sup> while by the 1580s 'Bristol seems to have been reaching out in its trade' and developing connections with the Mediterranean and the Newfoundland fisheries.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Willan, *Studies in Elizabethan foreign trade* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 65, 90-1.

<sup>5</sup> J. U. Nef, *The rise of the British coal industry* (2 vols, 1932), II, Appendix D.

<sup>6</sup> R. Davis, *The trade and shipping of Hull, 1500-1700*, East Yorkshire Local History Series, XVII (1964), p. 5. See also V. C. H., *East Riding of Yorkshire, I, The city of Kingston upon Hull*, (ed.) K. J. Allison (1969), pp. 133-5.

<sup>7</sup> N. J. Williams, 'The maritime trade of the East Anglian ports, 1550-1590', unpublished D.Phil. thesis (Oxford University, 1952), p. 310. See also pp. iii and 300-10 where he forcibly makes the point that the role of the outports has been seriously underestimated.

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Wiggs, 'The seaborne trade of Southampton in the second half of the sixteenth century', unpublished M.A. thesis (Southampton University, 1955), pp. 52-6.

<sup>9</sup> W. T. McCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540-1640* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Willan, *op. cit.* p. 85. Apparently 'this geographical expansion continued in the nineties'.



Chester was yet another port where trade did not wither away during the sixteenth century. Despite frequent complaints of decay and fears of imminent ruin voiced in petitions from the merchants and citizens, Chester's trade during the century was larger than ever before. In the first half of the century trade with Ireland followed a modestly rising trend while trade with both France and Spain expanded significantly to a peak in the 1530s.<sup>11</sup> Later in the century the trade with Ireland continued to grow, although it proved difficult to sustain the French and Spanish trades at the level achieved during the 1530s. Partly because of the expansion of the English iron industry, the annual import of Spanish iron failed to reach the peak established during the 1530s, although the annual import of French wine probably reached its maximum level for the century during the early 1580s. Following a boom in the early 1580s Chester's continental trade flagged somewhat because of the difficult conditions created by the outbreak of the Anglo-Spanish conflict in 1585. To offset this, however, the volume of goods shipped to Ireland from Chester continued to expand during the last decade or so of Elizabeth's reign.<sup>12</sup>

There is little doubt that Professor Stone painted too gloomy a picture of trade in at least some of the outports during the Elizabethan period. For the subsequent period, running down to the outbreak of the Civil War, Dr W. B. Stephens has suggested that the provincial ports taken together may have accounted for a quarter of the country's overseas trade and he makes the telling remark that 'they cannot continue to be neglected if an overall picture of English commerce is to emerge'.<sup>13</sup> Although conscious of the limitations of his data, Dr Stephens came to the tentative conclusion that the outports accounted for around 26 per cent of total English exports of old draperies and about 23 per cent of new draperies in the first decade or so of James I's reign. By 1640 the position of the outports in the cloth trade may have declined a little, accounting for an estimated 32 per cent of the depleted exports of old draperies but only about 17 per cent of the increased export of new draperies.<sup>14</sup> Individual ports enjoyed varying fortunes

<sup>11</sup> K. P. Wilson, 'The port of Chester in the fifteenth century', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* (hereafter *T.H.S.L.C.*), CXVII (1966), pp. 1-15.

<sup>12</sup> See D. M. Woodward, *The trade of Elizabethan Chester*, University of Hull Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, IV (Hull, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> W. B. Stephens, 'The cloth exports of the provincial ports, 1600-1640', *Econ. H. R.* 2nd ser. XXII (1969), p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 242. Dr Stephens is careful to point out that the port books do not provide trade 'statistics'; see *ibid.* p. 228. The exact performance of the outports in the export of cloth is not certain. See J. D. Gould, 'Cloth exports,

during this period. For some ports, and particularly for the southern and western ports from Southampton round to Bristol, the late 1620s and 1630s seem to have been critical times when the volume of cloth exports sagged. Elsewhere, and particularly at Hull, cloth exports expanded during the 1630s. Chester was another port whose fortunes would seem to have improved at that time; it is suggested, again on the basis of the volume of cloth exported, that:

Chester's trade remained comparatively stable through the early 'twenties, and even rose somewhat in the later 'twenties—so disastrous a period for many other provincial ports—climbing steadily though modestly in the 'thirties. It is an untypical story reflecting a moderate growth in trade with Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

Chester's performance as a port during the early seventeenth century has been the subject of a recent article by Dr Stephens in this journal.<sup>16</sup> In this article he was able to give more details about Chester's trade than was possible in his review of the cloth exports of all the provincial ports, but the picture remains essentially the same: after a period of depression in the early seventeenth century trading conditions improved considerably and 'it is clear that the period 1600–1640 as a whole was not one of gloom'. It seems that between 1607 and 1634 exports of broadcloth increased almost threefold while exports of other old draperies may have increased even faster. The export of new draperies probably expanded also and, in conclusion, it was stated that 'the level of cloth exports was considerably higher in the 1630s than early in James I's reign'.

Although cloth was by far the most important commodity exported from England throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a complete picture either of the country's trade as a whole or of the trade of individual ports cannot be obtained simply by reference to the volume of cloth exported. This is particularly true of the outports. For example, the fortunes of the Newcastle mercantile community were heavily dependent on the shipment of coal rather than of cloth, and alongside cloth exports from the East Anglian ports were heavy shipments of grain in some periods. Similarly, at Chester, the export of cloth was only a part of the port's trade. The present paper is intended to complement the work of Dr Stephens, whose main concern was to trace the volume of cloth exported, by providing data

1600–1640', *Econ. H. R.* 2nd ser. XXIV (1971), pp. 249–52, and W. B. Stephens, 'Further observations on English cloth exports, 1600–1640', *ibid.* pp. 253–7.

<sup>15</sup> W. B. Stephens, 'The cloth exports of the provincial ports', *op. cit.* pp. 233–8.

<sup>16</sup> W. B. Stephens, 'The overseas trade of Chester in the early seventeenth century', *T.H.S.L.C. CXX* (1969), pp. 23–34.



relating to other aspects of Chester's trade. In this way it should be possible to build up a more rounded picture of the port's trade. The following discussion will relate particularly to the import of wine and iron from the continent and the return of calfskins to the same area. In the Irish trade attention will be concentrated on the increased volume of coal shipped out of the Dee and on the return of a range of commodities which clearly indicate the overwhelmingly agrarian base of the Irish economy—skins, wool, linen yarn and livestock.

#### TRADE WITH THE CONTINENT

Chester's trade with the continent developed little during the first half of the seventeenth century. As throughout the previous century, the main, and in some years the only, trading contacts were with France and Spain. The predominant commodity in this trade was wine imported mainly from the great wine ports of Bordeaux and La Rochelle. In the opening years of the century wine imports were at a relatively low level: during the winter six months of 1600–1 197½ tons of French wine were imported, only slightly less than the 199½ tons imported during the full year of 1602–3.<sup>17</sup> What happened in this trade during the period down to 1630 is rather uncertain as few port books have survived. It seems likely that for some reason the compilers of the 1607 port book did not record all the wine cargoes arriving at Chester—the book merely records that 1 tun of French wine and 38 tons of Spanish wine were imported. The next piece of evidence available relates to the year 1620 when something in excess of 165 tons of French wine were imported supplemented by 102 tons of Spanish wine.<sup>18</sup> Imports then continued at a relatively low level for the rest of the early 1620s. Imports during the 1630s fluctuated around a high average level; imports of French wine rose from 257½ tons in 1632 to 360 tons in 1634 but fell somewhat to 276 tons in 1636. Thereafter imports probably expanded rapidly; for the years 1637–9 imports of French wine at Chester and her member ports averaged 810 tons per annum as compared with the total of less than 600 tons for 1636.

<sup>17</sup> These statements are based on the Chester port books for 1600–1 and 1602–3; P.R.O. E 190/1327/28; 1328/20. The 1602–3 book covers a year from Michaelmas 1602. Chester port books during the reigns of James I and Charles I cover a year from Christmas—i.e. Christmas 1606—Christmas 1607; in these instances a single year will be given—viz. 1607. The other port books used are those for 1607 (E 190/1329/9), 1620 (E 190/1332/1), 1632 (E 190/1334/14 and 18), 1634 (E 190/1335/1), 1639 (E 190/1336/3) and 1641 (E 190/1336/12). Port book references will not be repeated in the text unless the source is unclear.

<sup>18</sup> This port book is quite badly damaged.

Chester was clearly the most important wine port in the north west; in 1639 when 772 tuns of French wine were shipped into this area 526 tuns of the wine entered the Dee. At the very end of the decade, however, imports of wine were significantly reduced; total wine imports at Chester and its member ports fell to 456 tuns in 1640 and to 334 tuns in 1641.<sup>19</sup> Included in the 334 tuns imported in the latter year were 200 tuns of French wine and 67 tuns of Spanish wine which arrived at Chester.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from French wine, and smaller quantities of Spanish wine, the other main import from the continent was Spanish iron. However, this trade was at a significantly lower level in the early seventeenth century than it had been for much of the previous century. The peak in this trade occurred during the 1530s when imports averaged more than 400 tons a year.<sup>21</sup> In Elizabeth's reign imports fluctuated but never regained the level achieved during the 1530s;<sup>22</sup> this was due in part to the deterioration of Anglo-Spanish relations but probably more to the growing capacity of the English iron industry which reduced the need for imports. Imports of Spanish iron were at a low level throughout the first half of the seventeenth century; the recorded peak in the trade occurred in 1620 when 86½ tons of iron entered the Dee. The Chester merchants felt that they were able to explain this decline in the trade; in 1619 they explained that:

all the benyfyt in p[ar]ticuler w[h]ich the m[er]chantes of Chester have is a lysence ffor transportation of Calf skynnes . . . [which] lysence maynteanes a trade into byskaye ffrom whence we bringe into the porte aboutes 100 tunes of Iron yerely or hardly so much the Reason for that the place is Cloyed w[i]th Inglyshe Iron and Iron made in Ireland wherof gret store comes to this place.<sup>23</sup>

A few years later a similar plea was made by the mayor and aldermen in answer to a request of the privy council that they should give 'Reasons of the decaye of trade within this porte'. On this occasion it was claimed that 'nowe in regard of the store of the Englishe Iron made neere unto these partes that their is not vented here above 60 tonnes of Spanishe Iron'.<sup>24</sup> As can be seen from the data for 1620 these statements were not very wide of the mark.

<sup>19</sup> W. B. Stephens, 'The overseas trade of Chester', *op. cit.* pp. 32–3. There is a printing error on these pages: Dr Stephens tells me that the details given on p. 32 relating to wine imports at Chester, Liverpool, Beaumaris and Poulton should be dated 1639 rather than 1637. Compare this with the data given in Table VII.

<sup>20</sup> P.R.O. E 190/1336/12.

<sup>21</sup> K. P. Wilson, *op. cit.* p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> D. M. Woodward, *op. cit.* pp. 37, 45–9, 130.

<sup>23</sup> Chester Record Office, M/L/6/135 (1619). I am grateful to Mrs E. Berry, the Chester City Archivist, for providing me with a copy of this quotation.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 155–6 (1621?). Dr Stephens discovered a similar statement in another source: W. B. Stephens, 'The overseas trade of Chester', *op. cit.* p. 31.



Other imports from the continent were prunes and vinegar from France and figs and wool from Spain. None of these trades was very significant and the most important shipment of any of these goods occurred in 1620 when just over 5 tons of Spanish wool arrived at Chester.

Exports to the continent were dominated by a single commodity, tanned calfskins. The origin of this trade lay in a licence granted by Elizabeth to the Chester merchants in 1584. This licence, which allowed the merchants to export 10,000 dickers of tanned calfskins within twelve years, was intended to relieve the Chester merchants who had suffered heavy losses through piracy and shipwreck during the 1570s. The licence was slightly altered in 1586 and then renewed in 1598, 1605 and 1629, thus continuing the privilege down to the Civil War.<sup>25</sup> The value of this licence became immediately obvious in the years after 1584; before 1584 a type of woollen cloth known as Manchester cottons had been Chester's principal export to the continent, but thereafter tanned calfskins dominated this trade.

TABLE 1: *Exports of tanned calfskins from Chester to the continent*  
(in dickers)

1602-3	1607	1620	1632	1639	1641
392.7	181.3	800.4	209.8	87	189

The limited amount of data available in Table I suggests that this was rather a fluctuating trade and that, unlike many other trades, it was at a relatively low level during the 1630s. As the Chester merchants suggested in 1619, Spain was the chief market for tanned calfskins in peacetime; in 1620 80.8 dickers were shipped to France, 548.6 dickers to Spain, and 171 dickers to France or Spain (the port book does not give a clear indication at this point).

Only a small range of other commodities was shipped to the continent from Chester. Various types of cloth—kerseys, broadcloths, fustians, kidderminster stuffs and cottons—were carried to France and Spain, but the quantities were not large and shipments were much less regular and less important than those of calfskins. Quantities of wheat were also shipped on occasion as were small quantities of lead. It is interesting, however, to note the existence of the latter trade for from the late seventeenth century lead became the major item shipped from Chester to the continent; in 1698 nearly 1,800 tons of lead,

<sup>25</sup> For more details of the calfskin licence and trade see D. M. Woodward, *op. cit.* pp. 43-4, 94-5, and D. M. Woodward, 'The Chester leather industry, 1558-1625', *T.H.S.L.C. CXIX* (1968), pp. 85-9. In this instance a dicker meant ten dozen.

two-thirds of it in the form of ore, were shipped to the Low Countries and the trade fluctuated during the eighteenth century to reach a peak of 2,987 tons in 1770.<sup>26</sup>

The overall picture of Chester's trade with the continent for much of the first four decades of the seventeenth century is one of stagnation. Only in the 1630s were there signs of growth and development, but even the increase in the level of wine imports proved to be short-lived. Even before the onset of the Civil War most branches of Chester's trade seem to have been in decline, and this is particularly true of the wine trade. In another important respect there seems to have been little enterprise among the Chester merchants during the first half of the seventeenth century. While the merchants of other ports, and particularly the London merchants, were pioneering new trade routes or developing older routes with areas such as the East Indies and Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the American mainland and West Indies, the Chester merchants were content to ply their well-worn routes to France and Spain. Only occasionally was there any direct contact between Chester and the Low Countries or the Baltic. It was only in the last few decades of the century, when Chester was quickly falling under the shadow of the rapidly rising port of Liverpool, that new trade routes were opened up. From the late seventeenth century, trade with Baltic and Scandinavian ports was developed to procure timber, naval stores, iron, flax and hemp, and trade was also developed with the Low Countries, Italy and the Mediterranean, and the American colonies.<sup>27</sup>

#### TRADE WITH IRELAND

Chester's significance as a port during the first half of the seventeenth century depended very heavily on the movement of goods to and from Ireland. This was the 'bread and butter' trade of the port and remained far more important than trade with the continent and incomparably superior to the minor trades conducted with Scotland and the Isle of Man. Indeed, any real impetus in the trade of Chester came from the port's connection with Ireland rather than from trade with the continent which bulked so large in the trading patterns of most other English ports.

A very wide range of commodities was exported to Ireland.

<sup>26</sup> C. Armour, 'The trade of Chester and the state of the Dee navigation, 1600-1800', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (London University, 1956), pp. 190-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 183, 208-13.



This makes difficult any meaningful statement about export trends, particularly because the customs officials frequently lumped commodities together under headings such as 'goods to the value of . . .' or 'parcels of wares'.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth-while to look a little more closely at the export of one commodity to Ireland. The great bulk of the coal consumed in seventeenth-century Ireland was imported from England and Wales and shipments out of the Dee helped to meet this demand.

TABLE II: *Coal shipments from the Dee to Ireland*<sup>29</sup>  
(in cauldrons<sup>30</sup>)

1602-3	1604-5	1607	1615-16	1620	1632	1639	1641
454	658	c700	1,835	566	2,170	4,644	3,065

As can be seen from Table II, coal exports seem to have fluctuated during the first two or three decades of the century. Following this a period of rapid expansion seems to have set in at some time during the 1620s and continued through the 1630s. However, this trade had little to do with the city of Chester; ships engaged in the trade were laden while at anchor close to the Flintshire shore of the Dee estuary with coal brought from neighbouring pits such as those at Mostyn. Ships employed in carrying coal to Ireland were not true colliers, such as those plying the coal routes south from the Tyne, but ordinary, small merchantmen which were laden with coal to provide a return cargo, or ballast. The increased shipment of coal from the Dee, particularly during the 1630s, probably had more to do with the rapid growth of the livestock trade than with any increase in the demand for Flintshire coal in Ireland; the expansion of the livestock trade meant that many scores of extra vessels were coming into the estuary each year and most would have had to return empty to Ireland if they had not been able to pick up a cargo of coal. It is quite clear that the volume of other commodities going to Ireland was far too small to occupy more than a very small percentage of the vessels engaged in the livestock traffic. Coal exports and livestock imports expanded more or less side by side during the 1630s; between 1632 and 1639 coal exports rose by about 112 per cent while livestock imports rose by about 165 per cent. In 1639, the peak year in both trades,

<sup>28</sup> W. B. Stephens, 'The overseas trade of Chester', *op. cit.* p. 23 also makes this point. However, see D. M. Woodward, *The trade of Elizabethan Chester*, pp. 12-22, to get an impression of the variety of commodities in this trade.

<sup>29</sup> Data for 1604-5, 1615-16, 1620, 1639 and 1641 from J. U. Nef, *op. cit.* II, Appendix D. Data for 1607 from C. Armour, *op. cit.* p. 251.

<sup>30</sup> During the sixteenth century the Chester cauldron was between 1¼ and 1½ tons. At the start of the seventeenth century, however, Chester began to use the Newcastle cauldron of 2 tons. J. U. Nef, *op. cit.* II, p. 370.

306 vessels carried coal out of the Dee and 484 vessels carried livestock into the estuary.

But whatever the true reason for the growth of coal exports from the Dee, it is evident that Flintshire coal became an important source of fuel for the citizens of Dublin, to which port the great bulk of the coal was shipped. In 1636 there was some doubt as to whether or not a levy of 5s. 0d. per cauldron was to be charged on coal shipped to Ireland from England and Wales. Thomas Wentworth, then lord deputy of Ireland, and his council wrote to the English privy council to complain about this situation. They stated that:

Since last Easter more than fifty barques have come here from Chester water. Everyone of these would have brought coal but for the impost, and the amount of coal imported would have been above 2,000 tons. As it is, they have brought none. This will cause a great rise in the price of coal next winter. It is almost the only material used for firing along this coast all the winter from Knockfergus [i.e. Carrickfergus] to Youghal.<sup>31</sup>

Some years later, in February 1641, the mayor of Chester was requested by the council in Ireland to order all ships leaving the port to take on coal for Dublin. It was suggested that immediate payment would be forthcoming because coal was very scarce in Dublin.<sup>32</sup>

During the first half of the seventeenth century the range of commodities imported from Ireland remained essentially the same as it had been throughout the previous century. There was, however, one highly important exception; from sometime during the middle or later years of James I's reign Chester became an important centre of the growing trade in Irish sheep and cattle. The other major imports from Ireland are summarised in Table III.

TABLE III: *Basic Imports from Ireland*

	1602-3	1607	1620	1632	1639	1641
Sheepskins	26,350	36,680	56,050	108,350	24,487	21,725
Kidskins	3,100	—	5,400	1,900	384	1,000
Calfskins	2,050	—	1,000	—	1,460	1,116
Coneyskins	600	1,100	—	—	5,020	5,550
Hides	885	85	1,790	4,285	12,890	7,922
Wool (cwt.)	4	3½	58	209	833½	251
Tallow (cwt.)	27½	21	282½	383	619¾	228½
Linen Yarn (packs <sup>33</sup> )	107½	48	71¾	127½	113	20
Herrings (barrels)	281	654	110	756	357	707

<sup>31</sup> *Cal. S.P. Ireland, 1633-47*, p. 130. The last sentence refers to coal in general not merely to coal shipped from Chester.

<sup>32</sup> *Hist. MSS Comm. 5th Report*, Appendix, p. 350.

<sup>33</sup> A pack of linen yarn weighed 4 cwt. not 4,000 lbs. as stated in C. Armour, *op. cit.* p. 275.



Additional imports included quite large quantities of leather, particularly during the 1630s, candles, timber, old brass and pewter, butter, feathers and various types of woollen and linen cloth.

Important as other branches of Chester's trade may have been for the development of the north west they all pale into insignificance in comparison with the livestock trade during the first half of the seventeenth century. The occasional animal was imported during the sixteenth century but, as can be seen from Table IV, this trade was almost non-existent during the first decade of the next century. The trade then seems to have expanded during and after the 1610s to reach a great peak during the later 1630s.

TABLE IV: *Imports of livestock at Chester*

	1602-3	1607	1620	1632	1634	1639	1641
Cattle	—	16	1,113	4,863	5,519	15,841	7,339
Sheep	—	—	220	1,806	4,525	2,081	3,449
Swine	—	—	—	80	28	—	—

During the first half of the century the import of Irish livestock also increased quickly at other English ports on the west coast and at Welsh ports. Although the national picture is not too clear as yet it would seem that, as at Chester, the trade reached its peak for the pre-Civil War period during the 1630s. It is also not possible at this stage to state what proportion of the trade passed through the Dee estuary. One source suggests that during the year running from March 1640 45,605 cattle and 34,845 sheep entered the country from Ireland.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately the data for Chester does not cover this period but both the data for 1639 and 1641 (given in Table IV) demonstrate that Chester was an important centre of the trade.

From the limited amount of information available it is evident that the bulk of the livestock arriving at Chester was shipped from Dublin; in 1634 some 88 per cent of the cattle and a similar proportion of the sheep were from Dublin. It may be, however, that other Irish ports played a more important role in the trade in other years. For example, the 1639 port book gives the port of shipment of 4,169 of the cattle arriving at Chester; there were 2,751 from Dublin (66 per cent), 1,243 from Strangford (nearly 30 per cent), 95 from Drogheda, 55 from Donaghadee and 25 from Carlingford.

As is shown by Table V this was a highly seasonal trade. The

<sup>34</sup> *Cal. S.P. Ireland, 1669-70*, pp. 54-5. Quoted in J. O'Donovan, *The economic history of livestock in Ireland* (Cork, 1940), p. 63. I hope to be able to be able to say more about the relative importance of the various English and Welsh ports in this trade at a later date.

bulk of the cattle arrived between June and September although the movement of sheep tended to be spread over a rather longer period in some years—from May to October.

TABLE V: *Monthly Fluctuations in the Chester livestock trade*

	1634		1639		1641	
	Cattle	Sheep	Cattle	Sheep	Cattle	Sheep
	%	%	%	%	%	%
January–March	—	—	—	—	—	—
April	4.1	4.5	2.1	—	—	7.5
May	4.4	5.2	8.9	36.5	3.1	38.2
June	24.2	10.4	12.4	13.5	37.2	25.2
July	22.2	24.5	23.0	13.6	31.7	12.3
August	20.7	21.9	27.1	1.2	17.6	13.0
September	14.0	10.6	12.0	—	10.0	3.8
October	7.2	23.0	13.0	30.5	0.4	—
November	2.7	—	1.4	4.8	—	—
December	0.5	—	0.1	—	—	—

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the trade was the large numbers of vessels it employed. In 1634 between 118 and 137 vessels carried 208 cargoes of livestock into the Dee. Five years later, in 1639, between 217 and 251 vessels carried a total of 475 cargoes of livestock.<sup>35</sup> The bulk of the vessels employed in these years were drawn from places along the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh coasts of the Irish sea although some were from further afield, from London, Newcastle, Tewkesbury and, very occasionally, from the continent. Most of the vessels in the trade were relatively small, even by contemporary standards. For example, the average carrying capacity of the vessels engaged in the trade in 1634 was just over 20 tons.<sup>36</sup> Vessels engaged in the trade normally carried nothing but livestock<sup>37</sup> and, as is shown in Table VI, many vessels only made a single run to the Dee with livestock in a particular year.

<sup>35</sup> The identity of a particular vessel is not always too clear. Sometimes vessels with the same name and belonging to the same port arrived at Chester with cargoes of livestock on the same day. On other occasions vessels with the same name, belonging to the same port but with different masters, arrived on different dates; these may or may not have been the same vessels. Therefore, they have been recorded here as a minimum of one vessel or a maximum of two vessels. In 1634 there were 227 shipments of livestock (the identity of the vessel being uncertain in 19 cases) and in 1639 there were 484 shipments (9 uncertain).

<sup>36</sup> The tonnage data given in the port books is only a very rough indication of the size of a vessel; the same vessel is often accredited with a different burthen when it appears more than once in the same book. However, the data is sufficiently reliable to support general statements about the approximate size of vessels, as is done here.

<sup>37</sup> In 1639 only 36 of the vessels arriving with livestock carried other commodities at the same time, although 10 of the livestock vessels returned on a separate occasion with other commodities.



TABLE VI: *Number of voyages made by individual vessels per year in the Chester livestock trade*

Number of voyages	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1634	59	23	10	2	2	—	—
1639	83	40	30	12	7	3	2

Some vessels were heavily committed to this trade. For example, the *Francis* of Dublin arrived at Chester with cargoes of livestock on 19 April, 25 May, 19 June, 11 July, 9 August, 10 September, and 15 October 1639 while the *Michael* of Hilbre carried seven cargoes between 17 May and 25 November 1639. The pace of these vessels was quite leisurely but some ships achieved a much higher work-rate. The *Ann* of Derry arrived at Chester with six cargoes between 21 June and 23 September 1639 as did the *William* of Greenock between 1 June and 23 August in the same year. The fastest runs during the summer of 1639 were achieved by the *Hopewell* of London which arrived with cargoes of livestock on 29 July, 10 August and 23 August. Table VII shows the time gap between the arrival of vessels with a cargo of livestock and their return with another cargo.

TABLE VII: *Time elapsed, in weeks, between the arrival of a vessel with a cargo of livestock and its return to Chester with a similar cargo*<sup>38</sup>

	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	over 10
1634	0	1	10	11	15	7	4	2	1	0	11
1639	0	8	26	47	38	23	12	8	4	7	11

It is not easy, however, to interpret the data presented in this table. The main problem is that it is impossible to know whether ships were employed elsewhere between livestock runs. Perhaps those vessels which returned with another cargo of livestock within five to six weeks had been doing nothing else in between but it is impossible to be certain. Some of the delays can be attributed to the vagaries of weather, but it seems certain that some vessels found other work. It seems unlikely that ships which only made a few livestock runs during a year were idle for the rest of the year, although the pace of trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was often very leisurely and resulted in the inefficient use of shipping. There is no doubt, however, that the whole of Chester's livestock trade could have been handled by many fewer vessels than those which actually found employment.

As with the coal trade, however, the livestock trade was essentially peripheral so far as the mercantile community of Chester was concerned. Very few of the sheep and cattle were carried by Chester merchants. Indeed, a large proportion of the

<sup>38</sup> 1-2 weeks means 7-13 days; 2-3 weeks means 14-20 days, etc.

trade seems to have been controlled by Irish traders. In addition it is quite clear that the animals were not unloaded at Chester, but down the Wirral, and only a small number of the animals seem to have entered the city. At Chester the sheriffs kept an account of the duty paid by merchants, who were not freemen, on goods shipped to the city for sale. These accounts have survived in usable condition for eight years during the period 1605–24.<sup>39</sup> Only for one year, 1611, is there a reference to livestock; on 9 February Sam Bates of 'Hallifex' brought a cargo of tallow, pig grease, bacon, beef and 'Tenn quicke beeves' to the city while in July another merchant shipped 'ix quicke beastes'. There are, in fact, very few references in the Chester city archives relating to the import of Irish livestock. In the Assembly Book, for the period 1603–42, there are only two references to Irish cattle. The first pointed out that an ancient custom of 3d per head on Irish livestock was not being levied<sup>40</sup> while the second, which is worth quoting in detail, suggests that the cattle and sheep were driven round the city:

And Likewise Att the same Assembly [20 October 1637] David francis preferred his Petition thereby shewing that the Trers [treasurers] of this City had given direcons for the Clensing of a Ditch for the Conveyance of water from the Gorsestackes to flookersbrooke alonge the pavement side and that amongst the slutch of the said ditch there is some Clay which is and wilbe Cast upp which Clay (if it be not taken and Carried away) will in the somer tyme be Troden in againe by the Irish or other Cattle and thereby be a meanes againe to Choake upp the said ditch and by his said Peticon desired that he might have the said Clay for his use.

In the margin against this entry is the comment 'Irish Cattell kept att Gorstacks'.<sup>41</sup> Had the livestock actually passed through the city it seems certain that there would be far more reference to the trade in the City Archives.

What happened to the livestock once they had been driven from the area is another story which will be pursued elsewhere. However, it is interesting to note that among the 148 head of livestock owned by Robert Brerewood, the wealthy Chester glover, at his death in 1601 were twenty eight 'Iryche kyne'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Including 1623–4 when the livestock trade was already well established. C.R.O. S.B. (1605–24), 15.

<sup>40</sup> 24 October, 1634. M. J. Groombridge (ed.), *Calendar of Chester City Council Minutes 1603–1642*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, CVI (1956), p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> C.R.O. A/B/2/f.41v; also Groombridge, *op. cit.* p. 194. The Gorsestacks were just outside the city walls and Flookersbrook formed a part of the north-eastern portion of the city boundaries; *ibid.* map 2, following p. 212.

<sup>42</sup> D. M. Woodward, 'The Chester leather industry', *op. cit.* p. 89 and D. M. Woodward, 'Robert Brerewood: an Elizabethan master craftsman', *Cheshire Round*, I, No. 8 (1968), p. 313.



## TRADE DURING THE 1640S

It is difficult to assess the level of Chester's trade during the 1640s. As we have seen, the level of trade in 1641 seems to have been rather low compared with the level of the 1630s; thereafter the picture becomes much less clear. There is no doubt that Chester's trade was severely affected by the ravages of the Civil War both in England and Ireland. Chester itself was subjected to a protracted siege<sup>43</sup> which was inimical to the maintenance of trading contacts, and it has been suggested that in Ireland the wars of the 1640s 'resulted in the devastation of the country and destroyed Ireland economically. . . . Trade had practically ceased in 1642, and in 1648 so little had there been any recovery that it is on record that Liverpool was much decayed as a result of the losses due to the lack of trade with Ireland'.<sup>44</sup>

It is difficult to plot the course of trade after 1642, particularly for individual ports, as few port books or other customs records have survived; as Professor Davis has said, 'from the onset of the Civil War a statistical darkness falls'.<sup>45</sup> Fortunately this situation has been marginally improved recently. A number of customs accounts have been discovered in the Public Record Office relating to the trade of a number of ports during 1649; three of these accounts, covering the period from Christmas 1648 to 21 July 1649, relate to the trade of Chester.<sup>46</sup> They reveal that, while Chester's continental trade had recovered somewhat, trade with Ireland was at a low ebb. During this period of almost seven months nine vessels arrived from the continent carrying 1,300 quarters of rye, 120 quarters of barley, 100 quarters of wheat, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$  tuns of French wine, 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  tuns of vinegar, 209 cwt. of raisins, 77 $\frac{1}{2}$  tuns of sack and 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  tons of Spanish iron.<sup>47</sup> The other branch of the continental trade was at a rather lower level: one cargo, comprising 168 pieces of English fustian and 144 dozen tanned calfskins, was sent to Bilbao; a small mixed cargo

<sup>43</sup> For details, see R. H. Morris, 'The siege of Chester, 1643-1646', *Journal of the Chester and North Wales Archaeological and Historic Society*, New series, XXV (1923).

<sup>44</sup> J. O'Donovan, *op. cit.* p. 39. See also L. M. Cullen, *Anglo-Irish trade, 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1968), p. 29, for similar comments about the low level of Irish trade during the 1640s and much of the 1650s.

<sup>45</sup> R. Davis, *The rise of the English shipping industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (1962), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> P.R.O. E 122/222/11.

<sup>47</sup> Cargoes were from La Rochelle (1) 200 quarters of rye, 100 quarters of wheat; Danzig (1) 900 quarters of rye; Rotterdam (1) 200 quarters of rye; Nantes (1) 120 quarters of barley; Bordeaux (2) 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  tuns of vinegar, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$  tuns of French wine (one of the vessels almost certainly called in at another port before it reached Chester with its cargo of  $\frac{1}{2}$  tun of vinegar and  $\frac{1}{2}$  tun of wine); Malaga (2) 209 cwt. of raisins, 77 $\frac{1}{2}$  tuns of sack; Bilbao (1) 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  tons Spanish iron.

was shipped to Bordeaux; and 18 cauldrons of coal were shipped to Nantes in two vessels. In the Irish trade cloth exports were at a very low level compared with the 1630s and the only commodity sent in any sizeable quantity was coal—706 cauldrons of coal were shipped of which 680 cauldrons were destined for the Dublin market. Most imports from Ireland were also at a low level as is shown by Table VIII.

TABLE VIII: *Imports from Ireland from Christmas 1648 to 21 July 1649*

Sheepskins	5,650	Wool	0	Cattle	0
Kidskins	240	Tallow	151½ cwt.	Sheep	0
Calfskins	0	Linen Yarn	8½ packs	Swine	0
Coneyskins	22,100	Herrings	811 barrels		
Hides	1,118				

The most obvious feature of the trade is the complete absence of livestock imports. Indeed, it has been suggested that the number of livestock in Ireland had been severely reduced by 1650 and that the trade did not really recover until the mid 1650s.<sup>48</sup>

It has been suggested that 'the indications are that when the First Civil War came to an end in 1646 there was a sharp revival of trade' although this revival was checked somewhat towards the end of the decade.<sup>49</sup> This may well be true of the trade of the country as a whole but it is less easy to speak so confidently about the fortunes of individual ports. Although Chester's trade with the continent seems to have revived after 1646, the very low level of the port's Irish trade makes it impossible to talk about a 'very sharp revival of trade'. Indeed, it seems likely that recovery would be delayed in any port which was heavily committed to the Irish trade.

#### CONCLUSION

During the period 1600–40 the volume of trade passing through the port of Chester expanded considerably. As Dr Stephens has shown, cloth exports grew, particularly during the 1630s, and it has been shown here that coal exports and livestock imports grew markedly, again, particularly during the 1630s. But perhaps we should question a little more closely what is meant by an expansion of Chester's trade. There is a natural tendency when dealing with the trade of a single port to assume that an expansion of trade leads to a similar expansion of the fortunes of both

<sup>48</sup> J. O'Donovan, *op. cit.* pp. 39–40.

<sup>49</sup> R. Davis, *op. cit.* p. 11. See also W. E. Minchinton (ed.) *The growth of English overseas trade in the 17th and 18th centuries*, Debates in Economic History, (ed.) P. Mathias (1969), p. 10, where this statement is endorsed.



the city as a whole and the mercantile community in particular; if imports and exports grew dramatically we tend to assume that the city and its inhabitants automatically benefited. Was this necessarily so?

As was shown above, two of the most dynamic sectors of Chester's trade—the export of coal and import of livestock—were essentially peripheral to the fortunes of the city. The movement of both these commodities was conducted downstream from the city and few cargoes were controlled by Chester traders. But, despite this, all was not loss to the city; some of the shipping engaged in these trades belonged to Chester and some of the merchants involved must have acquired at least a part of their return consignments in the city. However, imports from Ireland through Chester were increasing much faster than the exports shipped through the same port. During the later part of the sixteenth century and early years of the seventeenth century Chester had a favourable balance of trade with Ireland, but it is clear that by the 1620s and 1630s the value of imports from Ireland far outstripped the value of exports. The Chester merchants were well aware of this situation; when asked to list 'Reasons of the want of Coyne' the first two of their four explanations were as follows:

1. Irishe Comodities ymported into this place As hydes tallowe yarne beefe And divers other sortes of Comodities sould here for money but most parte of the money exported by them, And not ymployed here.
2. Irishe Cattle greate store brought over, And the money most Carried backe, And not ymployed.<sup>50</sup>

Two further, and partially contradictory, explanations of the difficulties faced by the trading community of Chester were given among the nine 'Reasons of the decaye of Trade within this porte.'

3. Marchantes Cominge out of Ireland, Tradesmen dwellinge in divers parts of Wales Adioyninge to this Cittie, pettye Cheapmen and Pedlers Accustomed to buy all sortes of Comodities here in this Cittie of o[u]r Marchantes, And other tradesmen now furnishe themselves at London to the greate decaye of trade here.
4. Londiners at fayres as at other tymes bringinge in suche store of all Comodities here, bothe by sea, As by land that they doe over Cloye this place with all sortes of Comoditie soe that or Marchantes and Retaylors can not have vent for those Comodities the[y] ymport.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the exaggeration that these pleas probably contain, there is no doubt that the expansion of the Irish trade during this period can have led to only a small increase in the prosperity of the city's mercantile community. Indeed, the city's more important merchants were employed almost exclusively in the

<sup>50</sup> C.R.O. M/L/6/156 (1621?).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

continental trade and here, as we have seen, there was little development for much of the period. Data abstracted from the port books makes it clear that this trade was able to support only a dozen or so merchants. This impression is strengthened by two lists of Chester merchants compiled around 1620; the first, which names eighteen merchants, was headed 'Theis are free of the Company, but live on other trades and Adventure not att all', while the second, giving ten names, was headed 'Theis only are Adventurers'.<sup>52</sup> Complaint was made, at this time, that even in the wine trade the Chester merchants were having to face increasing competition.<sup>53</sup>

Certainly, the volume of goods moving into and, to a lesser extent, out of the Dee expanded considerably during the period 1600-40 and there can be little doubt that a part of the wealth generated in this fashion accrued to the citizens of Chester. But it seems that the bulk of this trade and much of the associated prosperity by-passed the city. The expansion of Chester's trade during the first four decades of the seventeenth century was probably more important to the thousands of Englishmen who were able to supplement their diet with Irish mutton and beef than it was to the citizens of Chester.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* M/L/6/134 (1619).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* M/L/6/135 (1619).