

Paper presented at the Archaeology Symposium:

Plymouth 1620: The Place, the People, the Evidence

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On the Waterfront: Plymouth and its Maritime Entrepreneurs, 1580-1620

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The maritime entrepreneurs of Plymouth in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were, at least in the popular imagination, mostly buccaneers and privateers. In this talk, however, the less glamorous story of the development of the port during the decades preceding the visit of the Puritan immigrants in 1620 aboard the ships *Mayflower* and *Speedwell* was told from the perspective of the archaeology of the harboursides at Sutton Pool and Stonehouse. The talk focused, as did the symposium to which it contributed, upon the place, the people and the evidence from (or relating to) those now distant past times.

The talk began by sharing some thoughts about ships and storehouses as the principal ‘objects of investment’ by Plymouth’s early seventeenth century entrepreneurs. Images were shown of near-contemporary early depictions of merchant vessels as well as of modern (and functional, life-sized sailing) reconstructions of ‘Pilgrim era’ vessels. Images of warehouses on The Barbican were also shown. These substantial stone buildings, while not necessarily dating back to 1620, nonetheless convey the character of Early Modern era Plymouth waterside warehouses. The talk went on to outline how archaeological excavations around Sutton Harbour and at Stonehouse have helped build up a picture of maritime commercial life (and the quayside investments that sustained it) during this crucial early seventeenth century period in the growth of the size and importance of the port. The role of merchant venturers in the western Mediterranean and Atlantic trade out of Plymouth and other ports in southwest England was then highlighted. This was part of a mushrooming of the wider British mercantile marine at this time, which helped lay the foundations for Britain’s emergence in subsequent centuries as a significant world trading – and colonising – power.

Plymouth’s Stuart period waterfront archaeology includes the remains of major quays, slips and warehouses, uncovered during modern redevelopment especially between the years 1992 and 2002. In addition, and integral to the harbourside reclamations, was the dumping of large quantities of broken potsherds and other rubbish from tips located elsewhere in the rapidly expanding and commercially successful town. Other residues from the reclamation fills included the waste products from industrial activities such as leatherworking. The talk ‘homed in’ (by way of example) upon the excavations at Dung Quay in the north-western corner of Sutton Harbour. The excavations there produced some surprising results from quite mundane material: for instance, it was found that (here at least) coarse pottery from North Devon was as much as *five times* more common than that derived from the kilns at St Germans just across the estuary. This at least raises the *possibility* that links between the

merchants and early industrialists of Barnstaple and Bideford on the one hand and the early British North American colonists on the other may have been stronger than those with contemporary Cornish merchants.

Meanwhile, colourful finely decorated (and probably quite fragile!) Italian pottery from Liguria was apparently imported in quantity along with rougher Portuguese pottery. The quantities of the latter found here, and the existence of waste from its manufacture, even suggests that there may have existed at that time in Plymouth a small but active resident community of Portuguese traders and potters. It was most likely these settlers who brought into the port the more exotic eastern Mediterranean, Persian and even Chinese ceramics (probably just individual vessels such as represented by the pieces of such exquisite vessels found in the dumps at Castle Street on The Barbican).

Archaeological evidence from the early Stonehouse Quay area also demonstrates that this private port also witnessed investment in harbourside facilities. From documentary evidence (including pictorial illustrations) it is also evident that shipbuilding was another important sphere of marine commercial investment in the early seventeenth century. This activity took place around Sutton Harbour and at Stonehouse, but also at Saltash and Oreston – although direct archaeological evidence from these latter two places has not yet been found.

While famous maritime marine figures such as Drake, Hawkins and Raleigh are often presented as the key players in the development of the fortunes of the Devon ports, they were not the only prominent local investors. The talk ended with a photo of a tiny brooch painting by the miniaturist to the royal court, Isaac Oliver. This was a portrait of Thomas Fownes (d. 1638). Fownes was Mayor of Plymouth in 1610 and 1619. And his many lifetime achievements may have included helping to finance an expedition to Virginia at almost the same time as the voyage of The Mayflower to Massachusetts colony in 1620....