



Ipswich – a Hanseatic port

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For centuries, towns on the East Coast of England have been involved in maritime trade and during the medieval period, in the 12th – 15th centuries, they were among the wealthiest in the land. Overseas trade played a huge role during this period of economic growth and the European merchants of the Hanseatic League played a powerful part in trading activity.

The League, or Hanse, was a confederation of merchant guilds in North Western and Central Europe with the aim of protecting economic and diplomatic interests along their trade routes. Hanseatic cities and towns developed their own legal systems and hired mercenaries for mutual aid and protection, but the organisation was never State controlled.

The Hansards formed a powerful North European trading empire, ensuring that Baltic trade was almost completely in their hands. The German town of Lübeck became a centre of the organisation after the first Hanseatic parliament in 1358 and trading routes extended from Belgium, around the North Sea and the Baltic as far away as Norway and Iceland.

London became one of the four most important foreign *kontore* - or headquarters for the Hanse, together with Bruges, Novgorod and Bergen. The London base was known as the London Steelyard, from the German word *stálhof* - a place where goods were offered for sale. The London Steelyard, developed into a “city within a city”, and the German merchants used their skill in trade politics to achieve good terms for themselves.

Outside London there were *kontore* in Lynn, Boston, Kingston-upon-Hull, Ipswich, Yarmouth and further afield at York and Newcastle. Lynn and Boston had early Hanseatic connections from the 12th century, while Ipswich developed significance in the 14th and 15th centuries. By the 1440s Ipswich exported 8% of the country’s total export of woollen cloth.

As a Headport, Ipswich had jurisdiction over the subsidiary ports of Colchester, Maldon, Harwich and Dunwich. It is listed as having a Hanseatic *Kontor, or Steelyard*, and was also a staple port for wool, meaning that it was the sole authorised centre for wool exporting in Suffolk, along with Yarmouth, Norwich and King’s Lynn further north. The only surviving Hanseatic warehouse in Britain today is at King’s Lynn.

Despite written evidence of Hanseatic trade in Ipswich there is no physical evidence of such a building now remaining, though historic maps show many warehouses and merchant premises lining the river bank. **(1)**



As the port developed these were gradually demolished to make way for industrialisation and the building in 1839 -1843 of the new Wet Dock, the largest enclosed dock in Britain at the time. Industrial buildings for milling and engineering took their place beside the new quays of the deep water dock and the railway serving the huge Ransomes’ agricultural machinery factory on Ransomes’ Quay.

Merchant Ipswich

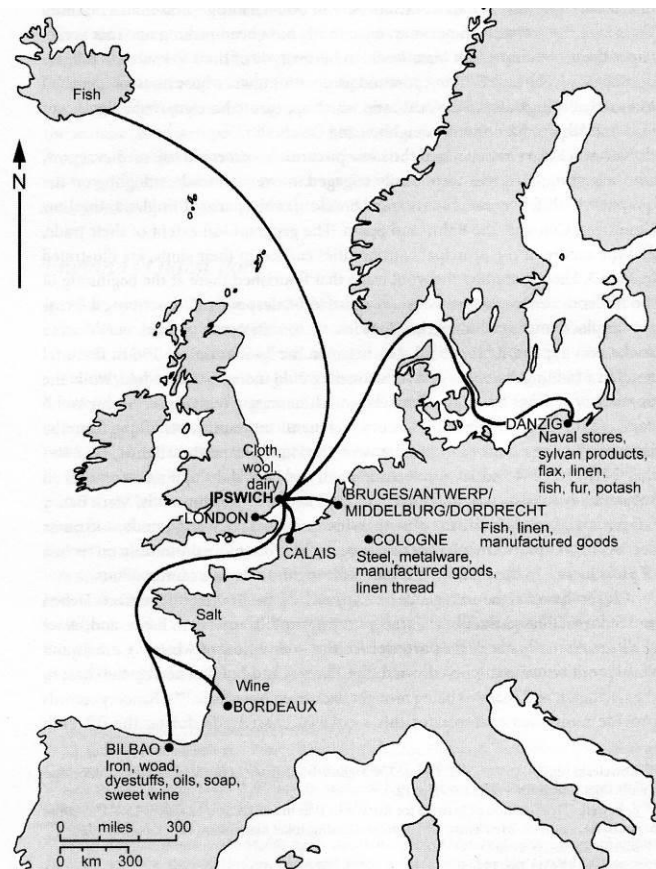
Situated at the head of the Orwell estuary, some ten miles inland, Ipswich offers an ample, sheltered anchorage, which in the medieval period would be less exposed to raiding and piracy. In the 1390's these advantages were of concern to all traders. Moreover, ports such as Middelburg in Zeeland, and Dordrecht in Holland were within easy navigable reach, without the long tortuous passage into the Thames estuary and up to London.

These ports were the gateway to the big trading cities on the Rhine, such as Antwerp, with its trade fairs and merchant contacts into southern Europe, and Cologne, the gateway to the Baltic. (2)

By 1395 Ipswich had developed into an important port for the export of wool, with some 71 merchants involved in this trade, much of it to the wool staple port of Calais.

Around 2000 sacks of wool were exported annually in this period up to the late 1420s.

Hanseatic merchants were involved in this trade, with many ships from Holland making for the Orwell. Masters of the Dutch ships were made welcome in the Town.



1396 – 98 Exports from Ipswich headport

Wool (value £4263)
Hides and skins (cat, calf, rabbit)
Dairy
Fish

Imports

Wine (value £4000)
Dyes
Salt
Grain
Stone
Furs
Timber

In the 14th century Ipswich merchants were competing in Danzig (modern Gdansk) on the Baltic, with merchants of the German Hanse. Relations weren't always easy, and in 1385 Robert Waleys and seven other Ipswich traders complained to Parliament that their cargoes had been seized there and the result was a mass arrest of English shipping in 1396. {a}

More peaceful conditions for trade followed after Richard II established a truce and Ipswich trade focused on the North Sea coast from Northern France up through Flanders to Holland – the end of the fourteenth century was a prosperous period for the whole country.

The Hanse established rights and privileges for themselves in England, and by the mid-15th century merchants of the German Hanse, and particularly from Cologne, dominated trade from Ipswich. The Cologne merchants remained on good terms with those from Ipswich when relations with other Hanse groups deteriorated.

- They had their own corporate body
- They exercised freedom of trade
- They enjoyed exemptions from customs tariffs
- They had their own community based at the Steelyard in London with satellites in major provincial ports such as Ipswich

The Hanseatic presence in Ipswich contributed to an increase in cloth exports, as Suffolk became the leading cloth-producing county and a major supplier of cloth to the Continent. From 1417 – 1435 much exporting was diverted from London so that Ipswich became an important outpost of the London Steelyard. Between 1415 – 1466 Hanse merchants trading with Ipswich handled:

Cloth	84.9%	
Dyes	84.5%	
Mercery and haberdashery	89.9%	
Iron and ironwork	69.7%	
Salt	80.4%	{a}

(3)



However, the 15th century saw some changes in the relationship; English merchants wanted similar rights in Europe but the Hanse were determined to deny them. In September 1451 the Ipswich bailiffs were ordered to arrest Hanseatic ships and cargoes, and in 1456 Hanse merchants complained of being attacked by English ships of war and being prevented from leaving port.

The Treaty of Utrecht in 1474 brought an end to hostilities but it also affected the situation of the merchants of Cologne. Once so prominent in Ipswich, they had maintained good relations with the borough during the period of hostilities but were now out of favour with the League. This may explain why Hanseatic exports from Ipswich declined during the 1470s, and came to an abrupt end by the end of the century.

Suffolk cloth

Suffolk was a huge centre for cloth weaving during the 13th and 14th centuries, with production centred in towns such as Stowmarket, Bury St. Edmunds, Lavenham, Ipswich, Hadleigh, Sudbury, Long Melford and in villages of the Brett Valley. The cloth was of good weight and produced in larger or smaller bolts. The heavier broadcloths were 28 yards long by about five feet wide, and straights were 18 yards long by one yard wide. The quality cloths were produced in boroughs such as Bury, Sudbury and Ipswich where craft guilds and the urban authorities were sufficiently powerful to impose quality control and ensure a high-grade product.



Suffolk cloth was renowned for its colours, and there was huge demand on the Continent, combined with a considerable import trade for dyeing ingredients. **(4)**

After the mid 14th century a general growth in prosperity created more demand for clothes and bedding among the whole population.

This opened up a mass market for cheap and colourful textiles, reflecting a new fashion for bright colours.

Blue and green cloth was produced in Bury, while red and russet was a speciality of Stowmarket. Hadleigh was known for its lightweight straights, in bright colours, particularly violet. Quantities of madder for reds and russets, and woad and lichens for blue and green dye were imported from France and Germany into Ipswich.

Hanseatic merchants in Ipswich

The history of Ipswich is the history of its merchants who secured the privileges of self-government in the charter of King John of 1200. They set up a sophisticated system of self-government, appointing two bailiffs and twelve portmen to control matters both civil and legal and set up a merchant guild to protect the mutual interests of the trading community. Ipswich is particularly fortunate in its rich and detailed records from this period.

An ordinance of 12 December 1320 stated that:

- Goods coming into the town were to be freely and openly offered for sale. Some townsmen had played host to visiting merchants and had bargained with them “privily”.
- Agreed bargains were to be recorded in front of the bailiffs
- Goods arriving by land or sea were to be delivered to the appointed place of sale
- Foreign (alien) merchants about to sail for home should be free to buy ship’s victuals wherever they wished.

These rules seem designed to enforce legal trading with transparency and fairness, and to eliminate the threat of power play among business interests, including those of the Hanse merchants.



A decree of 1385 relates particularly to “aliens” or foreigners, termed *forinseci*. They were allowed to become burgesses if they gave a gift to the merchant guild, known as “the hanse of the gild”. This was developed to demand that *forinseci* burgesses should take a mansion in the town or become a householder for at least a year and a day. {b} (5)

A striking feature of the free borough in its early days was the privileges deliberately accorded to traders. The thinking was clearly that unity in the trading fellowship and also resulting from self-government based on justice would be instrumental in regulating the town as a community and not just as a market. The Borough of Ipswich actively encouraged foreign merchants to take a stake in the town and become part of the community.

The focus of economic activity and wealth was in the community of merchants and master mariners on the riverside quays, at shipyards, and in taverns; some Hanseatic and foreign merchants were to be found settled in this area, particularly in the parishes of St. Mary at Quay, St. Peter and St. Clement. One Hanseatic merchant, John (alias Hans) Bonsthorp, living in the parish of St. Mary at Quay, wished to be buried *in the church tomb wheresoever I die.* {a} (6)



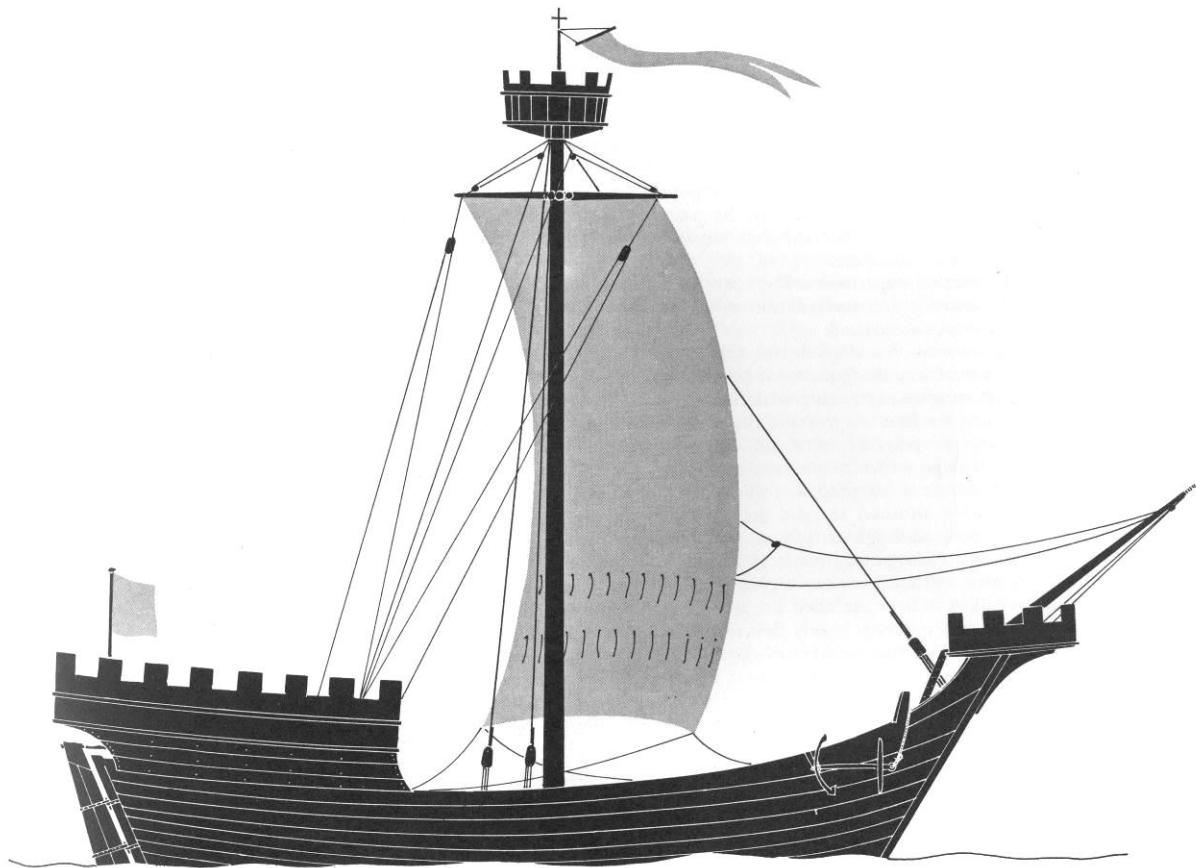
In 1443, 91 foreign and 61 Hanseatic merchants are recorded. Hanseatic merchants from Cologne plied their trade with enormous energy and ruthlessness as shown by the fact that Hans Bowman, Henning Buryng, Henry Iserhode, Herman Rinck and Johann “van A”, together traded half of the recorded cloth exports in the mid 15th century. {d} Others active in Ipswich at the time came from Lübeck, Hamburg, Duisburg and Nijmegen. All other major commodities were also controlled by the Hanseatic merchants, who took care to remain on diplomatic terms with the locals, so highly did they value the trade. {a}

There was a sustained Hanseatic presence in Ipswich during the 1470s's despite a decline in trade. Included in records of those allowed customs rebates were Joris Tack (Duisburg), Heinrich van der Hath (Hamburg) and Hans Stutt (Danzig) – all established Hanseatic merchants.

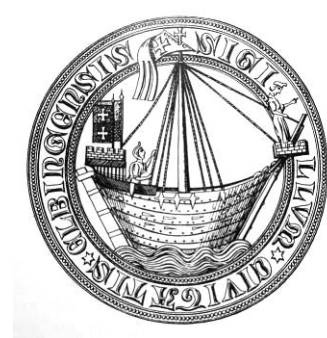
The Steelyard (London) memorandum of 1476 mentions “residencia” at Ipswich, Boston and King’s Lynn, a broad reference to communities of Hanseatic merchants outside London. From time to time the London *kontor* was required to issue certificates for the use of customs officials verifying the Hanseatic status of merchants. Such a certificate is appended to the 1481-2 particulars of accounts for Ipswich, with 14 merchants named. However, as trade further declined records show that the demand for houses and lodgings quickly died as the Hanseatic merchants departed towards the end of the century. {c}

The Hanseatic Cog

The cog was a type of cargo ship particularly used by the Hanseatic merchants between the 12th to the 15th centuries. The wreck of a cog was excavated from the river Weser at Bremen in 1962. Its length was 24 m – relatively short, with a straight bow and stern with a long attached rudder. It was flat-bottomed, to facilitate entry into shallow Baltic and North Sea harbours. There was a light superstructure, probably designed as a lookout shelter, both fore and aft. A central mast supported one square sail. Sturdy and stable, these ships had remarkable sailing and handling qualities. (7)



The first Ipswich borough seal of 1200 shows an early cog, which would have been the most important type of ship built on the Orwell at the time. The ship on the Ipswich seal is noticeably similar to those depicted on many continental seals, such as those of Lübeck, Danzig or the 1350 seal of Elbing in North-East Poland, all Hanseatic towns, within reach of Ipswich traders. (8, 9,10)



About half the ships trading into Ipswich were built in Europe, and the other half were of local origin – three versions of a ship called *Kogg John* are recorded. The *Mary*, built in Ipswich, carried 110 tuns of wine when it arrived in October 1386, and *The Trinity* had 60 tuns when it docked in May 1397.



A fully laden cog needed deep water so could not be sailed up to the shore at high tide and unloaded when the tide went out. It needed to anchor in deep water, so arose the need for wharfs, gangplanks and cranes for landing the cargoes.

(11)

Quays and warehouses of the Hanseatic period

Ipswich is the oldest of English ports with an almost continued record of trading since the year 600. In 1283 it was described as “a thriving port and prosperous town” whose householders had a “remarkably high assessed wealth”. The leading merchants of the town were busily engaged in overseas trade, mingling on the quayside with fellow merchants from London, other parts of England, the Low countries, Cologne, the Baltic and Spain.

One of the earliest quays was Bigod’s Quay, which had its entrance opposite the site of Wolsey’s Gateway. The Bigod family became Earls of Norfolk and were important in protecting Ipswich and East Anglia during the Norman period. Their large stone-built house in College Street reflected their influence.



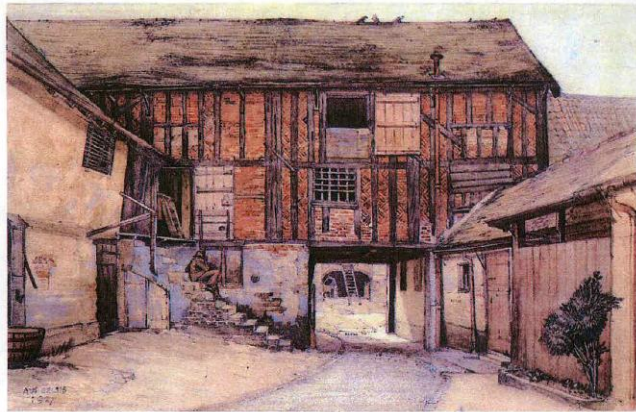
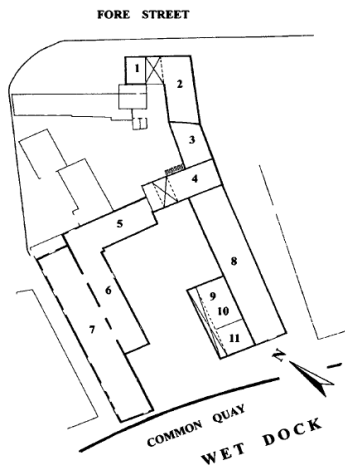
(12)

Speede’s map of 1610 and Pennington’s map of 1778 show clearly the historic pattern of merchant premises built along the river bank. These consisted of a main frontage facing a street parallel to the river bank, used for trading, with a range of courtyards and warehouses leading to the river so that ships could unload directly into their owners’ premises. This layout is very similar to that of the historic warehouses in King’s Lynn and London. It is possible that there were inlets at certain points, either natural or man-made, which enabled boats to be more easily unloaded in shallower water beside a warehouse.



'Isaac Lord's' warehouse is the last surviving example of a merchant house and warehouse from the medieval era. It continued in use until 2000, when it was given a new lease of life as a popular drinking and music venue. It originated in medieval times as a commercial premises for the export of wool and the trading of goods from Flanders and the Low Countries. The trading house fronting Fore Street dates in part from 1418 -1449 and the photo shows the carriageway entrance to the warehouse yard, though this was originally narrower.

The range of warehousing stretched south to the river bank for the unloading of cargo. **{d}** (13,14,15,16)



The Neptune Inn is a fine example of an 15th /early 16th century merchant's house just to the east of Isaac Lord's and following a roughly similar plan.

Early descriptions suggest there may have been an inlet from the river which came up to the colonnaded east side of the warehouse to enable loading and unloading to take place within direct view of the owner. If the original merchant had his own private quay he would not have needed his warehouse to be right at the river's edge. **{e}**



(17)

There were a considerable number of merchant premises along the river bank, to the east and west of the Common Quay, and not until the excavation of the Wet Dock in 1837 were new wharves laid out next to the water, thus allowing for direct access to ships by horse and wagon, and soon, by the railway. Before this time, it was only the Common Quay that gave direct access to the water, with the medieval town crane, dating from at least 1477, to assist unloading. (18)



In medieval and Tudor times merchants built themselves fine houses in streets near the Common Quay, the most significant being those of Thomas Drayle, Thomas Pounder, Henry Tooley, and Thomas Eldred. During the Tudor period Bigod's Quay was taken over by the prosperous Smart family, and Smart's Quay, with its typical front range on College Street, with a wagon entrance leading to a courtyard and riverside warehouse, remained until partly demolished in the 1930s and finally in 1954.

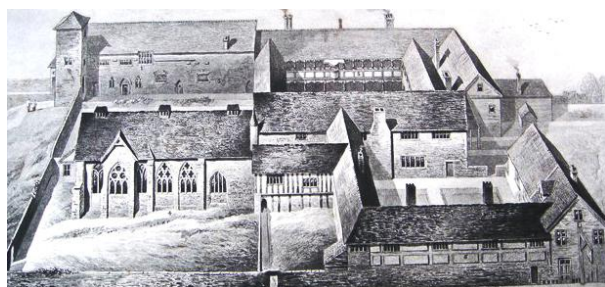
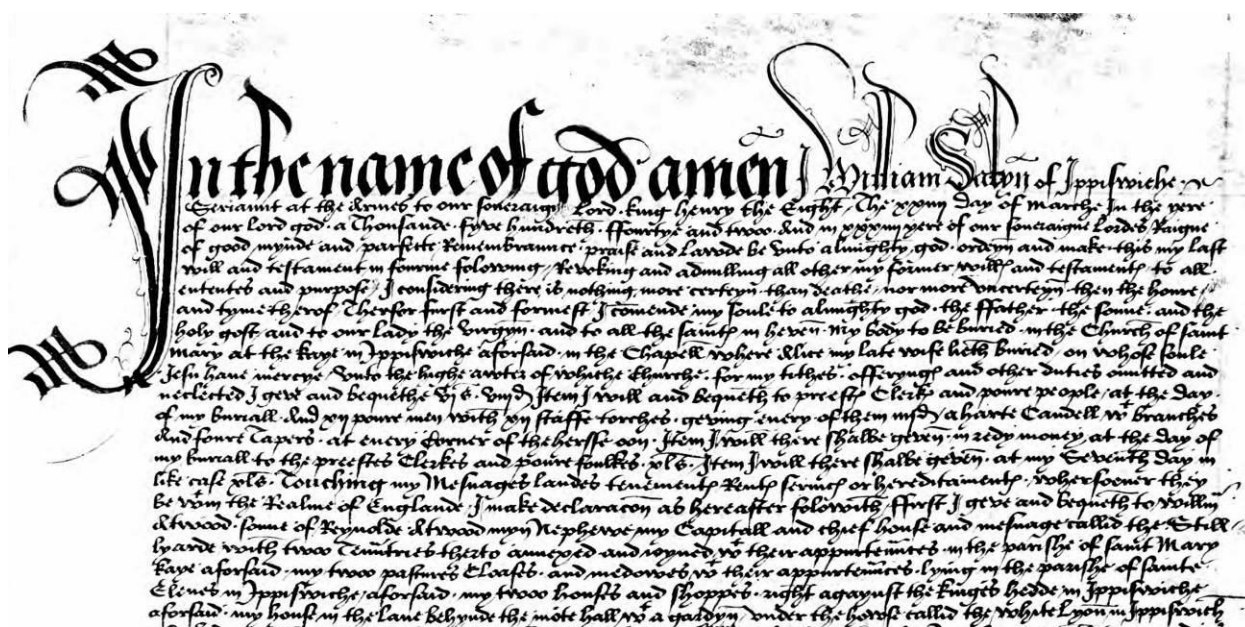
(19, 20, 21)



William Sabyn and The Steelyard

William Sabyn (also Sabine) was a prominent Ipswich merchant and seafarer. Born in 1491, as a young man he knew Thomas Wolsey, and gained preferment in the King's service as a serjeant-at arms and in the Royal Navy as a captain, during which time he was involved in various hostile encounters with piracy. In 1521 he became a customs weigher at Ipswich, though soon returned to the high seas; he was a town bailiff and served as MP from 1539 -1541.

He owned many properties in the borough, but his main residence was known as The Steelyard, next to the Blackfriars to the east of Foundation Street, in the parish of St. Mary at Quay. His will of July 1543 refers to *my house and messuage called the Stillyarde.... in the parish of Saint Mary Kay.* {f} (22, 23)



In 1541, after its dissolution, the site of the Blackfriars was granted to him by Henry VIII. He was a great benefactor of St. Mary at Quay, providing funds to build the south aisle and he was buried there in 1543. A plaque and a window bearing his arms was placed in that aisle, but these no longer remain. {g}

An interesting story concerns one Edmund Harman, originally from Ipswich, who became barber to Henry VIII and eventually a member of the Privy Chamber. Born in 1509, his father was a "gentleman". As a young man, his patron was very possibly William Sabyn, who as a serjeant-at-arms was responsible for the King's safety and who may have recommended Harman as suitable to attend to the royal throat!

The Harman genealogy established that his name was spelt Harman or Herman, which suggests a Germanic origin, though his father was said to be “of Ipswich”. His grandfather was said to have been “of the Steelyard”. This could refer to the best known Steelyard, the Hansa headquarters in London, but it may well refer to the Hanseatic steelyard, or kontor, recorded in Ipswich. {h}

So the question is, where exactly was the Ipswich steelyard? As a warehouse/headquarters for Hanseatic merchants, it would most likely have been situated near to the river, but for good dry storage of goods, would have needed to be on firm ground. The river at Ipswich was wider in medieval times, with considerable marshy areas and shallow creeks on its banks. One of these probably abutted the “Neptune” warehouse, and another ran between the two churches of St. Peter and St. Mary at Quay, fed by the stream beneath the present Lower Brook Street. The street called Lower Wash, was so named because of its nearness to the water, and a tendency to flood.

So, although William Sabine’s house was possibly some hundred yards north of the actual river bank, there might be good reason for the *Kontor* to have been situated there, on firmer, drier ground but near an inlet, providing a “quay” for unloading. In 1460, an Ipswich merchant, John Caldewell expressed in his will the hope that his son Edmund might have *the place at the cay where Herman dwelleth*. Surely a tantalising link between Sabyn, Edmund Harman (or Herman) and family, leaving us with the question – was Sabyn’s Steelyard and the “cay”, one and the same place? If so, could this have been the site of the Ipswich Kontor?

Geoffrey Chaucer and his Merchant – facts immortalised in fiction!

Born in London circa 1343, Geoffrey Chaucer came from a family of prosperous wine merchants who had traded in Ipswich for more than one generation – his grandfather is said to have owned a tavern in the centre of the town.

(24, 25)



He is best known as the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, and as one of the greatest English writers, but he was a man of many skills, serving as courtier, diplomat and civil servant. His connection with Ipswich's merchant history lies in the fact that he was appointed comptroller of customs for the Port of London when aged 31. We can guess that he must have had a good knowledge of trading, and of the wine and wool trade in particular, of weighing goods and checking payments between traders and ship masters, and of the importance of fair dealings in regard of tariff arrangements. No doubt he gained skill in handling disputes between rival traders, and particularly with the keen approach to bargaining of the Hanseatic merchants.

As a writer, his knowledge of both Ipswich and London enabled him to capture the flavour of life in the taverns and quaysides and he also understood the importance of the trading route out of Ipswich across to Zeeland and the challenges which all sea traders faced. In *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* he describes the Merchant, well-dressed in fine clothes, with his beaver-trimmed hat from Flanders, who wanted the sea route between Middelburg and the Orwell to be kept clear of pirates at all costs.

*He wolde the see were kept for any thyng
Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle. {i}*

An Ipswich merchant, perhaps, who embodies all the rewards and the risks for maritime traders in whatever century.

620 years later! Isaac's pub and music venue on Wherry Quay 2017. (26)



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Ipswich Maritime Trust

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The Trust began life in 1982 at a time when the Wet Dock was in serious decline with very few vessels and many redundant historic buildings. Today, the principal aim of the Trust is to bring to everyone's attention the astonishing maritime history of the Orwell and its Port, reaching back to before the 7th Century, enabling Ipswich to claim to be the oldest continuously occupied English town. We undertake a wide range of activities which includes holding a series of winter and spring talks on a maritime related theme, and running the Window Museum on Albion Wharf for which we are always keen to collect and display maritime artefacts.