

**The Men of Bristol and the Atlantic Discovery Voyages of the  
Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is concerned with the Atlantic voyages which departed from Bristol in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Very little is known about the individuals from the city who played a part in these expeditions and this dissertation is an attempt to address that deficiency. In the last decades of the twentieth century the historian Alwyn Ruddock was rumoured to have made some significant finds regarding the Bristol voyages of discovery, finds which would have rewritten the history books. However, Ruddock died in 2005 leaving little more than several letters and a book proposal produced in 1992 to hint at the revolutionary discoveries she had made. The following chapters aim to investigate the leads she left regarding those men from Bristol who played a part in the voyages, investigating not only their possible role in the expeditions, but placing that within the wider context of their lives.

The first and second chapters will consider two of the men Ruddock stated were involved with the voyages of John Cabot in the late 1490s: John Esterfeld and William Weston, both merchants of Bristol. In chapter three a primary document which directly connects the men with Cabot and the Atlantic expeditions, and what it could refer to, will be examined.

Chapters four and five will go on to consider other Bristol men who possibly played a part in the voyages. Initially the life and career of John Esterfeld junior, another whose involvement was suggested by Ruddock, will be examined, followed by an investigation into the lives of Hugh Elyot and Robert Thorne, men long thought to have played some part in the Atlantic expeditions.

The conclusion will consider the weight of the evidence and what it reveals about the Bristol men who were involved in the Atlantic voyages of discovery from the city.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol. The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

*Signed:*

*Date:*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to avoid the name of John Cabot in Bristol. As well as a monument dedicated to him to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of his 1497 voyage to Newfoundland, there are schools, shopping centres and numerous companies in the city which bear his name. A replica of his ship the *Matthew* floats in the harbour at Bristol docks. This Italian navigator is regarded as something of a local hero, the man who discovered North America. However, Cabot could not have achieved what he did alone. He needed financial backers and crew, men with previous experience and knowledge of overseas voyages and of the Atlantic itself. Sailing as he did from Bristol a number of men of that city must have been involved in some way in the discovery voyages that left from the port in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The surviving contemporary sources confirm this. The ambassador of the Duke of Milan, Raimondo de Raimondi de Soncino, wrote to his master in December 1497 that Cabot's companions 'are practically all English and from Bristol.'<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that 'the leading men in this enterprise are from Bristol.'<sup>1</sup> The *Chronicle of Maurice Toby* relates that in 1497 'the land of America was found by the Merchants of Bristowe in a shippe of Bristowe, called the *Mathew*.'<sup>2</sup> There is also evidence that Bristol men were working independently for some time before Cabot appeared on the scene in the mid-1490s, actively exploring the Atlantic in search of the elusive Isle of Brasil. In 1480 William Worcestre recorded that John Jay junior was involved with a voyage commanded by 'Thloyde,' perhaps Thomas Lloyd, to seek out Brasil.<sup>3</sup> There is evidence that in 1481 another expedition was made, this time with the involvement of Thomas Croft.<sup>4</sup> In July 1498 Pedro de Ayala wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain that Bristol ships had been exploring the Atlantic annually for the last seven years in search of the Isle of Brasil.<sup>5</sup> In 1497 an English merchant called John Day described how the land Cabot reached had in fact already been found and discovered in the past by men from Bristol,<sup>6</sup> although it remains unclear just when such a discovery was made. Therefore Bristol men were clearly involved in voyages into the Atlantic at the turn of the sixteenth century, both in association with John Cabot and independently. Despite this, almost nothing is known about these men as individuals, no monuments commemorate them, and no schools proclaim their names. However, this

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII*, (Hakluyt Soc., 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., cxx, Cambridge, 1962), pp.209 and 211.

<sup>2</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.206.

<sup>3</sup> F. Neale (ed.), *William Worcestre: The Topography of Medieval Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.51, Bristol, 2000), pp.234-5.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.188-9.

<sup>5</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.228.

<sup>6</sup> L.A. Vigneras, 'The Cape Breton Landfall: 1494 or 1497: Note on a Letter from John Day,' in *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol.38, 1957, pp.219-28 and Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.211-14.

situation seems, gradually, to be changing, as recently new evidence has emerged that throws some light on who these Bristol individuals were, and seeks to restore them to their rightful place within the history of Atlantic discovery voyages.

In 1992 Dr Alwyn Ruddock submitted a proposal to the Exeter University Press (UEP) to write a book about John Cabot which would coincide with the five hundredth anniversary of Cabot's voyage to North America in 1497. Ruddock, a reader in history at Birkbeck College, University of London (1952-76), was a highly esteemed economic historian who specialised in the Italian community of late medieval England, but had also published several works connected with the Atlantic voyages and the merchants of late medieval and early modern Bristol.<sup>7</sup> However, the celebrations of 1997 arrived, and the book was not yet ready. Following several years of ill health, Alwyn Ruddock died on 21 December 2005, the long awaited book still unpublished.<sup>8</sup> Her obituary in *The Guardian* newspaper appeared in February 2006. Written by Dr Emma Mason, a friend and former colleague, the piece revealed that Ruddock had 'left strict orders that all research papers were to be destroyed at her death.'<sup>9</sup> Ruddock's will confirmed these instructions, and shortly after her death one of her trustees ensured the destruction of all her unfinished writings and research as well as any letters, photographs and microfilms. Ruddock had in fact never submitted any sort of draft manuscript to UEP; all that remained of her years of research for the book was the rather brief and vague 1992 proposal and certain items of correspondence.<sup>10</sup> However, these alone suggest that Ruddock had made some significant discoveries, which, if proved accurate, would considerably add to our present knowledge of the Atlantic voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and the men involved in them.

An article by Dr Evan Jones entitled 'Alwyn Ruddock: 'John Cabot and the Discovery of America,' due to appear in print in 2008, sets out Ruddock's 1992 book proposal and considers ways in which the finds and discoveries hinted at by Ruddock could be investigated further. The proposal was brief, by no means a full and detailed synopsis of the argument Ruddock intended to make in the final publication, and the historian nowhere

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<sup>7</sup> A.A. Ruddock, 'Columbus and Iceland: New Light on an Old Problem,' in *Geographical Journal*, Vol.136, No.2, (Jun, 1970), pp.177-89; A.A. Ruddock, 'John Day of Bristol and the English Voyages Across the Atlantic Before 1497,' in *Geographical Journal*, Vol.132, No.2, (1966), pp.225-33; A.A. Ruddock, 'The Reputation of Sebastian Cabot,' in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Vol.47, (1974), pp.95-9.

<sup>8</sup> E. Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock: 'John Cabot and the Discovery of America,'' Institute of Historical Research, <<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2007.00422.x>, 2007> May 2007, pp.1-3.

<sup>9</sup> E. Mason, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' *The Guardian*, 17 Feb 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/otherlives/story/0,,1711599,00.html>> August 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.3-4.

includes any formal references as to where documents may be found, although states that she discovered new sources of information in English and Italian archives.<sup>11</sup> This is supported by a letter Ruddock wrote to David Beers Quinn, the leading figure in the field of Atlantic discovery voyages of the day, in March 1992, when she states that she feels confident that she has researched in quite some depth the sources to be found both in England and Italy.<sup>12</sup> However, despite these vague references, Jones suggests that within the proposal pointers to research can be found and explored. The article emphasises that such endeavours are certainly worthwhile, and one should not dismiss the claims made by Ruddock as fabrications of an aging scholar and as having no historical foundation. While it is possible that some of Ruddock's claims do not have firm evidence behind them and will subsequently be proved to be flawed, new findings in the proposal which have been followed up so far have been found to be accurate and verifiable, suggesting that there is much valuable information to be gleaned from the brief book outline.<sup>13</sup> Various items of correspondence written at the time Ruddock was conducting the research for her UEP book also survive and confirm the notion that there is certainly some merit in the views expounded in the book proposal, and that they are worth pursuing.

The 1992 proposal suggests that Ruddock had discovered some twenty one documents previously unknown to scholars. This would have added considerably to the overall picture of the discovery voyages, as almost everything known at present comes from about twenty five surviving documents.<sup>14</sup> Ruddock claimed that these new finds had furthered knowledge of several aspects of the Cabot voyages, including the existence of the earliest yet account of the voyage of 1497, the fact that there were survivors from the 1498 voyage and that they actually returned in the spring of 1500 rather than perishing at sea as was previously assumed, and that Cabot received financial backing from the Italian merchant community in London, a hitherto unknown fact. Perhaps even more significant is the suggestion that the friars, who are known to have sailed with Cabot in 1498, made a successful landfall and remained there for some time, sailing northwards and establishing the first European Christian settlement in North America and building the first church on the continent.<sup>15</sup>

Within the limited scope of this dissertation, Ruddock's claims concerning individual Bristol men who participated in the Atlantic voyages will be investigated. In the part of the

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Alwyn Ruddock to David Beers Quinn, 22 March 1992. Library of Congress, Box 158, Folder 7.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' pp.5 and 31.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.5, nearly all published in Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' pp.16, 26, 8-9 and 22-3.

book outline which sets out Ruddock's plans for her chapter on Cabot's voyage of 1498, the Esterfeld, or Esterfield, and Foster, or Forster, families of Bristol are said to have been involved in the preparations for the expedition. The experience of the Foster family within the Icelandic trade is emphasised, and the previously unknown fact that the Esterfelds received loans from Henry VII is suggested.<sup>16</sup> Here then are two families that Ruddock believed to have been involved with Cabot and the voyages of discovery from Bristol, a fact hitherto unknown. The Esterfelds were an important Bristol merchant family, which had been involved with overseas trade for some decades. John Esterfeld senior was a major importer and exporter and also participated in the civic life of the city serving as bailiff, sheriff, mayor and Member of Parliament for Bristol. His son, John Esterfeld junior, served as Henry VII's chaplain at St George's in Windsor Castle. John Foster was another member of Bristol's elite merchant class, having dominated Bristol's trade with Iceland in the second half of the fifteenth century. However, Foster died in 1492, and Jones therefore suggests that Ruddock is in fact referring to his son-in-law, William Weston, who was also a member of Bristol's merchant community and had been involved with the first recorded voyage from Bristol to Madeira in 1481.<sup>17</sup> The Esterfelds and Weston therefore, were clearly commercially aware men who may have seen some merit in Cabot's plan to create direct trade links between Bristol and Asia, as he proposed to do in 1497.

Items of correspondence between Quinn, Ruddock and Margaret Condon of the Public Record Office, also suggest that it is worth pursuing the involvement of the Esterfelds and Weston in the Atlantic voyages of discovery. In 1981 Condon wrote to Quinn regarding a document she had discovered which referred to 'certain matiers of variaunce' between John Esterfeld and William Weston. The document states that Weston was shortly to participate on an Atlantic voyage, sailing 'to serche and fynde if he can the new founde land.'<sup>18</sup> Quinn discussed this find with Ruddock who was confident that it belonged to the months immediately prior to Cabot's 1498 voyage and confirmed that Weston was a key supporter of this expedition.<sup>19</sup> Ruddock also highlighted that certain complications exist when attempting to define the role of John Esterfeld in the Atlantic discovery voyages. In the last two decades of the fifteenth century there were at least four men in Bristol all named John Esterfeld. John Esterfeld, merchant, not only had a son John, the cleric, but also named a younger son John as well. Ruddock believed that at least two, and perhaps three, of the John Esterfelds of Bristol

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.19.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.20.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Condon to David Beers Quinn, between 27 November and 15 December 1981. Library of Congress, Box 165, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages: Some Additional Information, 1981-1990*, Folder 9. Quinn collected his correspondence with Condon regarding this matter in one folder which takes its name from the abandoned paper he wrote in 1981.

<sup>19</sup> Ruddock to Quinn, 22 March 1992.



were very much involved in the affairs of Cabot, although she could not say with certainty which John Esterfeld the Condon document referred to.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Ruddock had not come across the document herself previously, as if she had, she would undoubtedly have checked the chancery petitions and discovered the matter it was referring to, which confirms the identity of the Esterfeld in question.

Another document unearthed by Margaret Condon revealed that at some point in 1501-2, Hugh Elyot, another Bristol merchant, received a grant of one hundred pounds from the king.<sup>21</sup> Hugh Elyot and his business partner Robert Thorne have for some years been thought to have played a role in the Bristol discovery voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Thorne's son, also named Robert, claimed in 1527 that his father 'with an Marchaunt if Brystow named hughe Elliot [were] the discoverers of the Newfound Landes.'<sup>22</sup> Various documents suggest that the men, particularly Elyot, were significant in the post Cabot Atlantic expeditions which left from Bristol in the early sixteenth century. The household books of Henry VII reveal rewards made to men of Bristol voyaging to North America in first years of the sixteenth century, and letters patent granted by the king for the purpose of overseas exploration were issued to syndicates of which Elyot was a member. Other documents also illustrate that the men were involved in the Company of Adventurers to the New Found Lands.<sup>23</sup> The butlerage account found by Condon contributes to our knowledge of Elyot's role in the Atlantic voyages and also reveals the extent of royal support which existed for these intrepid Bristol merchants.<sup>24</sup> This dissertation, while focusing primarily on the Esterfelds and William Weston, men previously unknown to have been involved, will also consider what we know of Elyot and Thorne, Bristol merchants known to have been involved with late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Atlantic voyages from Bristol.

During the last decades of the fifteenth century Bristol exported more cloth, imported more wine and handled more goods subject to poundage than any other provincial port. Atlantic expeditions would have needed heavy expenditure and so perhaps the prosperity enjoyed by Bristol in the late fifteenth century enabled its merchants to participate.<sup>25</sup> However, despite this prosperity Bristol trade experienced upheaval, an experience that itself

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<sup>20</sup> Ruddock to Quinn, 22 March 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Condon to David Beers Quinn, 28 September 1981, Library of Congress, Box 165, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages: Some Additional Information, 1981-1990*, Folder 9.

<sup>22</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.202.

<sup>23</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.215-6 and 250-61 and 262-3.

<sup>24</sup> Condon to Quinn, 28 September 1981.

<sup>25</sup> J.W. Sherborne, *The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages*, (Bristol, 1971), p.28 and P. McGrath, 'Bristol and America, 1480-1631,' in K.R. Andrews, N.P. Canny and P.E.H. Hair (eds.), *The Westward Enterprise. English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic, and America 1480-1650*, (Liverpool, 1978), p.84.

provided impetus for the search for new markets and resources to trade. Following the loss of Gascony in 1453 Bristol merchants desperately sought new markets. Some believed the future lay in the Mediterranean. In 1457-8 Robert Sturmy attempted to establish a direct trade link with the Levant, by-passing the Italian middlemen.<sup>26</sup> Attention increasingly shifted towards the Iberian Peninsula and closer contacts were built up with Spain and especially Portugal.<sup>27</sup> Bristol merchants were also experiencing pressures to the north as rivalry with the Hanse in Iceland increased, so much so that by 1481 the trade with Iceland was virtually over.<sup>28</sup> Following the loss of the Icelandic trade, merchants needed not only new markets but new fishing grounds. Some historians suggest that the Atlantic voyages of the 1480s and 90s out of Bristol were fishing expeditions to the Newfoundland Banks, and that any discoveries of land were not publicised in order to keep the fishing grounds secret. However, others maintain that the expeditions were voyages to discover land and fishing grounds that had been discovered in the past and subsequently lost.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the motive behind the late fifteenth century voyages, there is evidence to suggest that the experienced merchants of Bristol would have had knowledge of the Atlantic and what possibly lay out to the west. Norse sagas told of discoveries of land in the west and some historians assert that Bristol ships were travelling to the Norse colony of Greenland at least until the mid fifteenth century and would have heard of these tales. However, there is not any conclusive proof that the Greenland colony even existed by this period.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, records reveal that there were Icelandic men and boys living in Bristol in the late fifteenth century, people who could have brought with them knowledge of the northern seas and perhaps even of lands out to the west.<sup>31</sup> The close contacts established with Portugal could also have brought Bristol merchants knowledge of theories of lands in the Atlantic and voyages made in the past, especially as at this time Portugal was involved in numerous expeditions to Africa and into the Atlantic.<sup>32</sup> Therefore at the turn of the sixteenth century it is reasonable to suggest that the merchants of Bristol would have heard about the possibilities of new markets and fishing grounds that lay to the west and perhaps even about discoveries that had already been made. The economic situation that these men faced at the end of the fifteenth century would have encouraged them to exploit such knowledge. When Cabot appeared on the scene he offered the possibility of establishing

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<sup>26</sup> S. Jenks, *Robert Sturmy's Commercial Expedition to the Mediterranean (1457/8)*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.58, Bristol, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> D.H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate. Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700*, (Oxford, 1991), p.24.

<sup>28</sup> D.B. Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America, 1481-1620. From the Bristol Voyages of the Fifteenth Century to the Pilgrim Settlement at Plymouth: The Exploration, Exploitation, and Trial-and-Error Colonization of North America by the English*, (London, 1974), p.47.

<sup>29</sup> Ruddock, 'John Day of Bristol,' p.231 and Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, pp.21-2 and 48.

<sup>31</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, pp.50-1 and Ruddock, 'Columbus and Iceland,' p.184.

<sup>32</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, pp.51-2.

a direct trade route between Bristol and the riches of Asia, something which would have brought huge wealth to Bristol and especially its merchant class. All this helps explain why experienced Bristol merchants such as the Esterfelds, Weston, Elyot and Thorne might have become involved with expeditions into the Atlantic.

In the last few decades numerous books and articles have been published in the field of the discovery voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Works such as James A. Williamson's *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII*, Samuel Eliot Morison's *The European Discovery of America* and David Beers Quinn's *England and the Discovery of America*, have covered this area of research at length and in detail.<sup>33</sup> There have also been discoveries of documents long forgotten about which revealed important new information concerning the expeditions. The most significant of such finds was probably the letter referred to above discovered by L.A. Vigneras in 1956 in which John Day, an English merchant, wrote to the Lord Grand Admiral of Spain, most probably Christopher Columbus, about the voyage of 1497 and referred to pre-Cabot voyages across the Atlantic by Bristol men.<sup>34</sup> However, Ruddock's book proposal and private correspondence suggest that her research would have made a highly significant contribution to the debate, not only adding greatly to the number of documents in circulation connected to the Atlantic voyages, but in furthering our knowledge and understanding of this period of activity. Rumours of Ruddock's revolutionary finds had been circulating for some years while she conducted her research,<sup>35</sup> and perhaps scholars did not pursue certain lines of enquiry themselves as they were confident that Ruddock's book would be the definitive and up to date work in the field. However, the long awaited book never appeared and it remains to be seen what can be salvaged from the fragments of research that remain. This dissertation is in no way an attempt to address this mammoth task. It merely sets out to consider one aspect of the discoveries hinted at by Ruddock in her 1992 book proposal; that of the Bristol men who were closely involved with the Atlantic discovery voyages. It seeks to investigate not simply how these men might have been involved in Atlantic discovery, but to learn anything we can of their lives. This dissertation will attempt to place them within the context not just of the discovery voyages but also within that of early modern mercantile Bristol.

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<sup>33</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America. The Northern Voyages A.D. 500-1600*, (New York, 1971); Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*.

<sup>34</sup> Vigneras, 'Cape Breton,' pp.219-28 and Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.211-14.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.4.

## CHAPTER 1 – JOHN ESTERFELD SENIOR

John Esterfeld was a member of Bristol's merchant elite, a class which not only directed the trading interests of the city, but which also dominated its civic life. As such, in the last decades of the fifteenth century Esterfeld was one of the key players in the politics of Bristol. He served as bailiff in 1472 and in 1482 was appointed sheriff, serving in the same office again in the civic year of 1484. In September 1487 Esterfeld was elected as mayor for the first time, going on to serve twice in that post, again in 1494-5.<sup>36</sup> He served in parliament in 1485-6 and again in 1487, being elected while still mayor.<sup>37</sup> At other points during these years Esterfeld remained an active member of the city council and civic elite, being appointed constable along with Henry Dale in September 1492,<sup>38</sup> and appearing in commissions at various points. In December 1495 for example Esterfeld was named as one of those commissioned to execute the office of Admiral of England within the city and county of Bristol, an office which had been exempted from the jurisdiction of the Admiral of England since a grant of Edward IV. This commission was repeated in November of 1498.<sup>39</sup> He also served as a justice of gaol delivery from 1488.<sup>40</sup> John Esterfeld therefore, was one of Bristol's ruling political elite during a period of significant events both locally and on a national scale. During his time on the council he would have lived through the deaths of Edward IV, Richard III, Edward IV and Edward V, and witnessed the beginning of a new royal dynasty with the coronation of Henry VII October 1485. On occasion Esterfeld, as a member of the council, may even have come into personal contact with such figures. Soon after he acceded to the throne Henry VII visited Bristol.<sup>41</sup> Then, in 1489, the civic officials of Bristol were summoned before the king in London to present a group of men from Waterford

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<sup>36</sup> L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar, By Robert Ricart, Town Clerk of Bristol 18 Edward IV*, (London, 1872) pp.45 and 47-8; *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol*, (reproduced Bristol, 1910), pp.72 and 77; *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office. Prepared Under the Superintendence of the Deputy Keeper of the Records. Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III. 1476-1485*, (London, 1954), p.288; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office. Prepared Under the Superintendence of the Deputy Keeper of the Records. Edward IV, Edward V, Richard III. 1476-1485*, (London, 1901), p.328; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office. Prepared Under the Superintendence of the Deputy Keeper of the Records. Henry VII. Vol.2. 1494-1509*, (London, 1916) p.10; E.W.W. Veale (ed.), *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.8, Bristol, 1938), p.152; E.W.W. Veale (ed.), *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society. Vol.18, Bristol, 1953), p.98 and J.C. Wedgwood, *History of Parliament. Biographies of the Members of the Commons House 1439-1509*, (London, 1936), p.303.

<sup>37</sup> Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, p.303.

<sup>38</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office. Prepared Under the Superintendence of the Deputy Keeper of the Records. Henry VII. Vol.1. 1485-1494*, (London, 1914), pp.405 and 410.

<sup>39</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1494-1509*, pp.50 and 155.

<sup>40</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1485-1494*, pp.212 and 351, *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1494-1509*, pp.31, 33, 68 and 147 and Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, p.303..

<sup>41</sup> *Adams's Chronicle*, p.75.

they had in their custody having arrested them for bringing counterfeit money into England.<sup>42</sup> It is possible that Esterfeld was among this group of dignitaries. Henry VII returned to Bristol in 1490 along with the Lord Chancellor, Cardinal John Morton, when a Benevolence was collected from the city.<sup>43</sup> Several years later Bristol dignitaries again became involved with the king when Henry VII's uncle, Jasper Tudor, Duke of Bedford, died at Thornbury in December 1495. The mayor and his followers transported the body to Keynsham where it was to be buried. When the King and his Queen visited Bristol shortly afterwards the council received great thanks for their efforts.<sup>44</sup> Esterfeld was a member of the council during the threats to the safety of the fledgling dynasty, during the Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck affairs of the 1480s and 1490s. In 1497 following Warbeck's welcome in Cornwall, Cornish rebels asked Bristol to billet two thousand men in the city. The council forbade the rebels to approach and set to work fortifying the defences, an approach commended by the king.<sup>45</sup> Esterfeld remained a supporter of the Tudor dynasty, in 1502 sending to Queen Elizabeth, who was then residing at Berkeley Castle, a gift of oranges and 'suckades'.<sup>46</sup>

Esterfeld would have also served the city during events of local importance. 1483 was the year of a great flood in Bristol. The waters washed away houses, corn, and cattle and drowned some two hundred people. Bristol merchants, conceivably Esterfeld amongst them, according to a local chronicle, were particularly affected as the flood waters ensured that 'great hurt was done in Bristow in merchants' houses and cellars.'<sup>47</sup> The beginning of the last decade of the fifteenth century saw some improvements to the infrastructure of the city, improvements which the council would have overseen, such as the construction of a new stone bridge over the weir and the paving of numerous Bristol streets.<sup>48</sup> There had been tensions between the Abbey of St Augustine's and the city of Bristol for centuries, but in the 1490s the issues of trading privileges, jurisdiction and sanctuary came to a head. *The Great White Book of Bristol*, begun in order to record the dispute, mentions that John Esterfeld, as a prominent member of the council, was involved. In 1496 relations had worsened to such an extent that a riot broke out between the men of the Abbey and of the mayor on the green outside St Augustine's.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Adams's *Chronicle of Bristol*, p.76 and Toulmin Smith, *Maire of Bristowe*, p.47.

<sup>43</sup> Adams's *Chronicle*, p.77.

<sup>44</sup> Adams's *Chronicle of Bristol*, p.77 and Toulmin Smith, *Maire of Bristowe*, p.48.

<sup>45</sup> Toulmin Smith, *Maire of Bristowe*, pp.48-9.

<sup>46</sup> Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, p.303.

<sup>47</sup> Adams's *Chronicle*, p.74 and Toulmin Smith, *Maire of Bristowe*, p.46.

<sup>48</sup> Adams's *Chronicle*, p.76 and Toulmin Smith, *Maire of Bristowe*, p.47.

<sup>49</sup> E. Ralph (ed.), *The Great White Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.22, Bristol, 1979), pp.52-3 and P. Fleming, 'Conflict and Urban Government in Later Medieval England: St Augustine's Abbey and Bristol,' in *Urban History*, Vol.27, No.3, (2000), pp.331-4.

As a wealthy and influential citizen and a member of Bristol's civic elite Esterfeld was required to perform legal functions. The witnessing of wills was one such duty, one which brought him into contact with other Bristol notables and merchants, such as John Foster and William Weston.<sup>50</sup> He also acted as the executor for Henry Vaughan in 1499.<sup>51</sup> Esterfeld became entangled in a legal dispute which was to last some years regarding the inheritance of the Rowley family. In 1479 William Rowley, a merchant of Bristol, died. His will dictated that his effects were to be parted between his wife Joan and their children.<sup>52</sup> The wardship of his unmarried children and the administration of the will was put into the hands of Rowley's mother, uncle, John Esterfeld and one William Wodynton.<sup>53</sup> Over a decade later, in 1492 the case was to surface again. In December of that year John Prowt petitioned that Esterfeld, the mayor and commonalty of Bristol should appear before the king in chancery. He claimed that before she died, Joan Rowley, one of the under age, unmarried daughters of William, had contracted to marry Prowt and bequeathed him the sum her father left her. Following her death, the petitioner attempted to recover the money from Esterfeld but he refused. Esterfeld, along with the mayor and commonalty, argued that in line with an ancient custom of the city, if a burgess died with unmarried children a share of his money was to go to those children. If they subsequently died unmarried before reaching the age of twenty one their portion of the inheritance was to go to their surviving siblings. However, Prowt maintained that Joan had made a valid will in which she bequeathed the petitioner her inheritance. Eventually Esterfeld was compelled to pay out the money to Prowt.<sup>54</sup>

As well as his role as a long-serving civic dignitary Esterfeld was one of Bristol's leading merchants. His principal trade was with Gascony and the Iberian Peninsula. Of his exports seventy four per cent went to Spain and twenty three per cent to Portugal. In terms of imports forty seven per cent came from Spain and twenty six per cent from Portugal, with a further twenty three per cent from Bordeaux.<sup>55</sup> Amongst those who traded with Gascony and Iberia at this time, around thirty five men invested large sums of money equalling one hundred pounds or more. Even within this group of wealthy merchants, John Esterfeld stands

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<sup>50</sup> T.P. Wadley, *Notes or Abstracts of the Wills Contained in the Volume Entitled The Great Orphan Book of Wills, In the Council House at Bristol*, (Bristol, 1886), pp.156-7, 164, 169-70; *Adams's Chronicle*, p.74 and E.W.W. Veale, *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.16, Bristol, 1950), pp.63 and 64.

<sup>51</sup> Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, p.303.

<sup>52</sup> Wadley, *Great Orphan Book of Wills*, pp.161-2.

<sup>53</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1485-1494*, pp.413-4; F.B. Bickley (ed.), *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, Vol.2, (Bristol, 1900), pp.197-9 and J. Veale, *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.8, Bristol, 1937), pp.159-60.

<sup>54</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1485-1494*, pp.413-4; TNA C1/106/37, *Early Chancery Proceedings*, (1486-93); Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, p.303 and Wadley, *Great Orphan Book of Wills*, p.162.

<sup>55</sup> W.R. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, (Manchester, 1978), p.208.

out.<sup>56</sup> From 1485 to 1487 he was the second largest importer of cloth and the third largest importer. The customs accounts for 1479 to 1480 reveal the merchandise that Esterfeld was shipping on a regular basis. During this period he transported woad, wine, sugar, cloth, hides, calf-skins and oil on some sixteen ships. In 1480, for example, Esterfeld was clearly trading in France, dealing in woad and wine, as in March of that year a grant was made to him and two other Bristol merchants in consideration of the wreck of a ship in the port of La Rochelle, which had been laden with their merchandise.<sup>57</sup> The accounts also demonstrate that Bristol's important merchants were often involved with the same voyages. Along with others, Esterfeld was engaged in accessing the same markets and trading aboard the same ships as men such as Robert Thorne and John Jay, also merchants involved with the Bristol Atlantic voyages of the era.<sup>58</sup> In 1480-1, for example, the *Trinity* of Bristol, under the direction of John Jay, made a voyage to the ports of Andalusia and North Africa. Esterfeld employed the ship's purser, John Balsall, as his agent on the expedition. Balsall was to sell consignments of cloth given to him by Esterfeld before the ship left Bristol and make a return in money or wine from Spain. This expedition was made shortly before the *Trinity*, along with the *George*, made the expedition of 1481 into the Atlantic in search of the Isle of Brasil.<sup>59</sup> Whether Esterfeld himself was involved in Atlantic expeditions, he continued to trade overseas throughout the 1480s and 1490s in markets he knew well. In October 1500 he appears in the accounts shipping six tons of wine.<sup>60</sup> As late as January 1504, the year before he died, Esterfeld was still actively engaged in overseas trade, shipping seven and a half tuns of wine over from France.<sup>61</sup>

Esterfeld, as a wealthy merchant, was also involved in a number of property deals within Bristol and the surrounding area. In November 1493 he, along with other Bristol notables including William Weston, Richard Hobby, John Wyot, John Rowley and John Roweland, bought land from Thomas Baker in 'Yatton, Kyngeston Seymor, Nye, Blakedon, Wynchecombe and Chirchill.'<sup>62</sup> In 1501 certain tenements of Sir Nicholas Growmere were enfeofed to Esterfeld and Henry Dale. These included messuages and fourteen cottages in St Peter Street, Defence Street, Broad Street, a tenement on the bridge over the River Avon, and

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<sup>56</sup> Sherborne, *Port of Bristol*, pp.27-8.

<sup>57</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1476-1485*, p.193.

<sup>58</sup> E. M. Carus-Wilson, (ed.), *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.7, Bristol, 1937), pp.224-85.

<sup>59</sup> T.F Reddaway and A.A. Ruddock (eds.), 'The Accounts of John Balsall, Purser of the *Trinity* of Bristol, 1480-1,' in *Camden Miscellany Vol.23*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ser. Vol.7, (London, 1969), pp.7, 20 and 12.

<sup>60</sup> J. Vanes (ed.), *Documents Illustrating the Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century*, (Bristol Record Soc. Vol.31, Bristol, 1979), p.77.

<sup>61</sup> *1503/04 Collectors Account*, <<http://bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Ireland/datasets.htm>> August 2007.

<sup>62</sup> *Medieval Feet of Fines*, <[http://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/fines/abstracts/CP\\_25\\_1\\_202\\_42.shtml](http://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/fines/abstracts/CP_25_1_202_42.shtml)> August 2007.

messuages on West Tucker Street and Corn Street.<sup>63</sup> Here then, as through his political and mercantile activities, Esterfeld was in constant contact with men such as Weston who were involved with Atlantic expeditions, connections which could have provided the impetus or means for his own involvement.

Esterfeld married twice. First to Maud, whose will was proved in 1491. This document mentions four children: John, Henry, Isabel and Joanna.<sup>64</sup> By November 1492 Esterfeld had evidently married again, to Scolastica, formerly Scolastica Boket, widow of the late William Boket, who at this time was involved in a dispute in chancery with David and Joan Underwode over money that 'David had exacted from her.'<sup>65</sup> John Esterfeld made his will on 5 February 1504 and died the following year, some time immediately prior to 17 March 1505.<sup>66</sup> He was buried in St Peter's Church beneath a large flat stone, in which was inserted a brass which reputedly bore the inscription 'beneath this marble is entombed the illustrious John Esterfeld, merchant, and twice mayor of this town, and alderman also, together with the remains of Alicia [or Scolastica], a learned woman, and of Matilda [or Maud], his wives.'<sup>67</sup> Esterfeld's will reveals some of the property and goods he owned at the time of his death. He appoints his eldest son John executor along with John Vaughan, asking them to dispose of the residue of his goods not bequeathed as they think best 'for the welth of my soule.' He requests that his body be buried in the chapel of Our Blessed Lady of the Bellhouse in St Peter's Church, also giving to that chapel his 'best masse boke my chalice of siluer and gilt and my Cruettes of siluer.' For the good of his soul he asks that 'an honest priest' sing in St Werburgh's Church for 'the space of an hoole yere.' In terms of bequests to his family, Esterfeld leaves his wife Scolastica all goods that she had before the time of their marriage, as well as one hundred pounds. He permits her to remain in their dwelling so long as she pays the rent of four pounds a year, and to retain a garden in St Leonard's Lane. To his eldest son John he gives 'ijj of my best gownes furred with such as thatt please him best' as well as 'my best coverpayne other wise called a bredcloth.' To his son Henry he leaves 'my best coverlet of aras work the which I had of maister ffoster and a fethre bed with a bolster and ij pylowes garnessed.' He also gives him two new houses in Small Street. His daughter

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<sup>63</sup> Ralph, *Great White Book*, p.117 and Roger H. Leech, *The Topography of Medieval and Early Modern Bristol. Part I: Property Holdings in the Early Walled Town and Marsh Suburb North of the Avon*, (Bristol Record Soc., Vol.48, Bristol, 1997), pp.68 and 59.

<sup>64</sup> E.W.W. Veale (ed.), *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society. Vol.2, Bristol, 1931), p.58 and Wadley, *Great Orphan Book of Wills*, p.177 .

<sup>65</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office. Prepared Under the Superintendence of the Deputy Keeper of the Records. Henry VII. Vol.1. 1485-1500*, (London, 1955), p.189.

<sup>66</sup> C.D. Ross (ed.), *Cartulary of St Mark's Hospital Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.21, Bristol, 1959), p.288.

<sup>67</sup> J.F Nicholls and J. Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present. Vol I: Civic History*, (Bristol, 1881), p.219.



Jane receives all these goods if her brothers should die without heirs. To his youngest son John he leaves money, plate, a featherbed and items of silver. He confirms the bequests his mother made to him in her will of a house in Temple Street and a garden in Old Market.<sup>68</sup> There may well have been other properties and lands owned by Esterfeld that were not included in his will, as it was common to hand land over to children as they came of age.<sup>69</sup> Despite this, the will, reveals Esterfeld's wealth at the time of his death, demonstrating that despite possible financial involvement with the failed 1498 Atlantic voyage, Esterfeld succeeded in overcoming this and retaining his position as one of Bristol's elite merchants.

Esterfeld was clearly a wealthy and influential citizen of Bristol. His involvement, politically and commercially, with men such as Weston, Jay and Thorne may have encouraged him to engage in Atlantic expeditions. He was certainly a man willing to search out distant markets in order to secure a profit, as demonstrated by his involvement with the voyage to North Africa in 1480-1. Ruddock does not suggest that Esterfeld himself actually went on a discovery voyage, simply that he was involved in the preparations and financing of the expedition. In 1498 five ships accompanied Cabot from Bristol, four equipped by merchants of Bristol and London, one by the King.<sup>70</sup> It is entirely plausible that Esterfeld was one of these merchants.

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<sup>68</sup> TNA PROB/11/14, *The will of John Esterfeld*, (6 Feb 1504).

<sup>69</sup> T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death Do Us Part. Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England*, (Oxford, 2000), p.68.

<sup>70</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.91.

## CHAPTER 2 – WILLIAM WESTON

William Weston, also a Bristol merchant, is said by Ruddock to have been involved in Cabot's 1498 voyage. According to the historian, Weston, along with Cabot, returned to Bristol in 1500 having made landfall in North America, and received compensation from the king before living out his last years in Bristol.<sup>71</sup> It is unknown at present that the 1498 voyage even made landfall in North America, let alone that it returned to England. There is some evidence that Cabot, or at least one of the ships, made it across the Atlantic, as following Gaspar Corte-Real's expedition in 1501, the Venetian ambassador in Portugal wrote that the Portuguese sailors had found that the natives possessed a broken gilt sword which appeared to be Italian and some silver earrings that were almost certainly Venetian.<sup>72</sup> While some have suggested that these items were left behind after Cabot's men went ashore in 1497,<sup>73</sup> it is possible that they point to some success of the 1498 expedition. In a personal letter Ruddock goes into more detail, claiming that Weston was the only survivor of the 1498 voyage to receive compensation from Henry VII and that he was involved in the first North West Atlantic voyage. This must refer to the voyage of the *Dominus Nobiscum*, the ship that carried the friars across the Atlantic in 1498, and possibly coasted north along the North America in 1499.<sup>74</sup> Quinn suggested that the 'matiers of variaunce' document discovered by Margaret Condon revealed that Weston was being commissioned by the king to look again for the New Found Land after the failure of the 1498 voyage, dating the writing of the document to 1499 or 1500.<sup>75</sup> However, Ruddock was adamant that the document was written in the months immediately prior to the departure of Cabot's expedition from Bristol in 1498.<sup>76</sup> This would indeed be evidence that Weston was at least intending to accompany the Italian navigator aboard one of the five ships that went. Ruddock maintained that the tradition of a great two year voyage, which departed in 1498 and returned in 1500 remained in Bristol for generations, although unfortunately from where she found this information is unknown.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.26.

<sup>72</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.229-30.

<sup>73</sup> Morison, *European Discovery*, p.180.

<sup>74</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.27.

<sup>75</sup> David Beers Quinn to Margaret Condon, 15 December 1981. Library of Congress, Box 165, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages: Some Additional Information, 1981-1990*, n.d., Folder 9 and David Beers Quinn, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages: Some Additional Information*, unpublished 1981. Library of Congress, Box 165, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages: Some Additional Information, 1981-1990*, Folder 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ruddock to Quinn, 22 March 1992.

<sup>77</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.28-9.

In the 1992 book proposal Ruddock refers to the ‘Forster family and their long tradition of Iceland voyages.’<sup>78</sup> Jones suggests that this must be in connection with Weston as the husband of Agnes Foster, the daughter of the great Bristol merchant John Foster who died in 1492. Foster was particularly important in Bristol’s Icelandic trade. Between 1461 and 1478 he is recorded as handling seventy per cent of the cloth exports, sixty nine per cent of the export value, and eighty per cent of the import value of the port’s trade with Iceland.<sup>79</sup> Foster was also active in other overseas markets, a customs account reveals that he shipped merchandise on the *Seynt Spirit* of Fuenterrabia in December of 1479, along with other important Bristol merchants including John Esterfeld.<sup>80</sup> As a member of Bristol’s elite merchant class, Foster participated not only in the commercial life of the port but in the civic and political activities of the city as well. He was appointed bailiff in 1462, sheriff in 1474 and mayor in 1481. He also served as Member of Parliament for Bristol in 1489.<sup>81</sup> Weston’s links with Foster may have helped his own political career in Bristol. Records show that in the years before Cabot’s voyages Weston was mixing with the other key players in Bristol’s commercial and political life. For example in 1482 and 1483 Weston, along with John Esterfeld and others, was involved in the proving of a number of wills.<sup>82</sup> Weston can be seen to be moving in the same circles as other important Bristol figures again in November 1493 when Weston together with Esterfeld and other notables, were involved in the purchase of certain lands from Thomas Baker.<sup>83</sup>

However far the connections of his father in law boosted his standing in civic terms, Weston was certainly a merchant in his own right. A document dating from the late 1480s or early 1490s shows that at this time he was engaged in trade with the Iberian Peninsula, placing him in Portugal with a ship called the *Anthony* of Bristol. Weston borrowed money from one Thomas Smyth and it was agreed that the sum would be repaid once the ship arrived safely into the port of Kingrode just outside of Bristol. However, if the ship was to incur damage from storms or the like before making it back to Bristol, Weston was to be discharged of his debts. The ship was caught up in a storm and wrecked off the English coast. Smyth commenced an action of debt against Weston, in response to which Weston petitioned Cardinal Morton, the archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor, to have the matter

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<sup>78</sup> Jones, ‘Alwyn Ruddock,’ p.19.

<sup>79</sup> W.R. Childs, ‘England’s Icelandic Trade in the Fifteenth Century: The Role of the Port of Hull,’ in *Northern Seas Yearbook*, (1995), p.22.

<sup>80</sup> Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, pp.233-4.

<sup>81</sup> *Adams’s Chronicle*, pp.69, 72 and 74 and Toulmin Smith, *Maire of Bristowe*, pp.43 and 45.

<sup>82</sup> E.W.W. Veale (ed.), *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.16, Bristol, 1950), pp.62-4.

<sup>83</sup> *Medieval Feet of Fines*.

settled in chancery.<sup>84</sup> Weston was also involved in markets further a field. A Bristol customs account reveals that on 18 May 1480 the *Mawdeleyn* of Quimperle sailed from Bristol to Madeira. William Weston shipped a cargo of cloth on this voyage.<sup>85</sup> Although this was perhaps not the earliest voyage from Bristol to Madeira, it is the first that we know of and as such was probably only one of a small number at this time.<sup>86</sup> The first recorded voyage from Madeira to Bristol was in 1486 which again suggests that this was a new area of trade.<sup>87</sup> This demonstrates that Weston was involved in a relatively recent and developing area of Bristol's overseas trade, suggesting that he was commercially aware and perhaps open to taking risks to secure a profit.

Weston's links with Madeira and the Azores would have brought him into contact with Portuguese merchants and seamen and therefore it is possible to surmise that he would have been aware of their stories and theories of what lay out to the west and perhaps even of past expeditions of discovery into the Atlantic. Portugal had for some decades been engaged in Atlantic voyages and the tales could have reached Weston from the ports of the Azores. His father-in-law's connections with Iceland could also have provided Weston with knowledge of old sagas of land to the west. There is even the possibility that Bristol men themselves were travelling to Iceland and from there beyond into the Atlantic in the second half of the fifteenth century. The biography of Christopher Columbus written by his son, Ferdinand, gives some suggestion that a voyage was made to Iceland and beyond from Bristol in 1477. Although the passage is somewhat cryptic it seems that Columbus had knowledge of an expedition made in February 1477 from Bristol. Ruddock suggests that this possibly relates to a voyage made by men from Bristol to Iceland and beyond which Columbus later came to know of. However, while merchants and fishermen had been sailing each spring to trade and fish in Iceland for some decades by 1477, it still remains uncertain whether this voyage of further exploration was ever actually made.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the links Weston had with the Portuguese and possibly the Icelandic trades, would have provided him with the opportunity to learn about theories of land lying out to the west and perhaps of previous attempts, successful or not, to find it. Although, this must be purely speculative, it does demonstrate that Weston was a potentially useful man for Cabot to involve in his own discovery voyages, and perhaps even why Weston, a commercially aware man, would have been willing to participate in the challenge of exploiting new and untapped resources and markets.

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<sup>84</sup> TNA C1/175/45, *Early Chancery Proceedings*, (1486-93).

<sup>85</sup> Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, p.285 and Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.187.

<sup>86</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, p.57.

<sup>87</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.187.

<sup>88</sup> Ruddock, 'Columbus and Iceland,' p.184.

Ruddock refers to Weston's last years in Bristol, following his return in 1500 from North America.<sup>89</sup> In a letter to Quinn, she writes that 'he is an interesting figure but seems to have been broken financially and died not long afterwards.'<sup>90</sup> A document of 1505 describes Agnes Weston as a widow, living in the messuage in Corn Street in Bristol left to her by her father which she held for her lifetime.<sup>91</sup> This seems to support Ruddock's claim that he died sometime in the first years of the sixteenth century. The tenement where Agnes was living was that which featured in the 'matiers of variaunce' between the Westons and John Esterfeld while Weston was involved in the preparations for his Atlantic voyage. Foster's will reveals that the couple were already living there in 1492 at the time of his death,<sup>92</sup> but can only have been there for a couple of years as William Weston is recorded as living in a tenement on the north side of Wine Street in 1489.<sup>93</sup> In terms of Weston being financially broken it seems plausible that he could have invested considerably in Cabot's 1498 voyage. Following the discovery and landfall made in 1497 it had been hoped that an expedition the next year would succeed in making it to the great markets of Asia and creating a direct link with them through the port of Bristol. However, it gradually became apparent that Cabot had not discovered the shores of Asia, and had in fact bumped into another landmass blocking the way to the riches of the east. Weston would not have been alone in his disappointment. Henry VII had himself equipped one of the five ships accompanying Cabot in 1498.<sup>94</sup> If Weston had invested heavily in the voyage, he could have found himself seriously out of pocket.

William Weston, although not as distinguished a citizen and merchant as John Esterfeld, appears from the records as a man very involved in overseas trade and the exploitation of burgeoning markets. It is possible that Weston, in accompanying Cabot in 1498, hoped to discover, if not the great markets of Asia, another island like Madeira on which sought after sugar could be grown and shipped back to the markets of Western Europe. Weston's Portuguese and Icelandic links could have encouraged him to take the risk to finance heavily in the expedition and accompany Cabot across the Atlantic.

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<sup>89</sup> Jones, 'Alwyn Ruddock,' p.26.

<sup>90</sup> Ruddock to Quinn, 22 March 1992.

<sup>91</sup> Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.16, p.175 and TNA PROB/11/14.

<sup>92</sup> TNA PROB/11/9, *The will of John Foster, merchant of Bristol*, (1492).

<sup>93</sup> Leech, *Topography*, p.181.

<sup>94</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.91.

### CHAPTER 3 – ‘MATIERS OF VARIAUNCE’

In 1981 Margaret Condon of the Public Record Office wrote to David Beers Quinn concerning a document she had found which suggested that William Weston was involved in the Bristol discovery voyages to North America. The document revealed that he was connected in some way with John Esterfeld. As discussed above, Esterfeld and Weston were both members of Bristol's merchant class, involved in overseas trade, as well as both participating in the civic life of the city. However, this document relates to a specific matter involving the two men, and seems to add weight to Ruddock's claims that the men were connected to the discovery voyages. It was addressed to the archbishop and chancellor of England from the king regarding 'certain matiers of variaunce' pending in the court of chancery 'betwixt John Esterfelde of our Towne of Bristowe marchant on the oon partye and william Weston of the same marchant on the other.' It mentions a 'a certain injuncon lately passed out of our said court ayenst the said William,' and commands that since 'we entende that he [i.e. Weston] shall shortly with goddess grace passe and saille for to serche and fynde if he can the new found land,' the said matter and injunction should be suspended until he returns from the expedition.<sup>95</sup> The document is dated simply 12 March, however, the fact that it is addressed to the 'Cardynall Archiebisshop of Canterbury primat of all England and Chauncellor of the same' gives some clue as to its origin. The address must refer to John Morton who held the posts of both archbishop and chancellor between March 1487 and October 1500, and as such the document must lie between these dates. In correspondence with Quinn Ruddock states that she believed it was written in the months immediately prior to Cabot's 1498 voyage to North America, suggesting that Weston accompanied the expedition.<sup>96</sup>

The 'matiers of variaunce' to which the document refers appears to have been a complaint made by Esterfeld against Weston and his wife Agnes in regards to the terms of the will of Agnes' father, John Foster. When Foster died in 1492 he left a will which set out his bequests of land, property and goods to family, friends and religious institutions. One of the main features of the will was the provisions Foster made for the maintenance of an almshouse he had founded some years before his death at a cost of some three hundred, an institution commonly known as Foster's almshouse.<sup>97</sup> It was built, along with a chapel dedicated to the Three Kings of Coleyn, in the northwest end of Steep Street in the parish of St Michael's in

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<sup>95</sup> Condon to Quinn, between 27 November and 15 December 1981.

<sup>96</sup> Ruddock to Quinn, 22 March 1992.

<sup>97</sup> W.K. Jordan, 'The Forming of the Charitable Institutions of the West of England: A Study of the Changing Pattern of Social Aspirations in Bristol and Somerset, 1480-1660,' in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Ser., Vol.50, No.8 (1960), p.26.

Bristol, and provided fourteen chambers and gardens for a priest, eight poor men and five poor women. He directed that certain lands and tenements in Gloucestershire were to be sold by his executors and the resulting money was to go towards the maintenance of the almshouse and chapel. He named John Esterfeld and John Walshe his executors, leaving them a silver cup and twenty pounds for their troubles. As well as bequeathing those of his goods and property not included in the will to his executors, he left Esterfeld a house in Small Street and a garden in St Leonard's Lane, those which Esterfeld himself bequeathed in his own will of 1504. Foster left his daughter and her husband a property in Corn Street, in which they were living at the time of his death, and decreed that it remain theirs for as long as Agnes should live. However, he stipulated that they should also contribute ten shillings a year towards the cost of maintaining the chapel and almshouse.<sup>98</sup>

In the 1490s, 1498 if we accept Ruddock's dating of the document, Esterfeld, as Foster's executor, petitioned that Weston and Agnes should appear in the court of chancery as they had not kept to the terms of Foster's will. In his bill of complaint, Esterfeld confirmed that Foster had, for the life of Agnes, devised a messuage upon the couple, but only as long as they 'shuld sufficiently repayre susteyne and mayntene the same mesuage.' He also explained that they were required to pay annual rents to the prioress and convent of St Mary Magdalene, the abbot and convent at Tewkesbury and the proprietors of the church of St Werburgh's in Bristol. Esterfeld went on to emphasise that Weston and his wife were required to pay each year for the life of Agnes towards the costs and reparation of the chapel and almshouse 'if nessitye of reparation of the same so require or elles not.' If the executors found Weston and Agnes to be in default of these terms in any way then the couple were firstly to be warned to amend these faults. If sufficient action had not been taken by them to remedy such faults within two months of the warning being issued then the executors were permitted to sell off the messuage, dividing the proceeds from the sale into three equal parts, two of which were to be disposed of for the maintenance of the almshouse, the third going to St Werburgh's church. Esterfeld claimed that he had 'been credibly enformed that theseid mese is greatly in decaye for lacke of reparacions.' Despite having asked on numerous occasions to be permitted to see the messuage to gauge the state of it, Esterfeld maintained that he had been denied access. He goes on to claim that Weston and Agnes have not paid the rents required of them. In line with Foster's will Esterfeld has therefore attempted to sell the property, but has been unable to do so due to the couple's refusal to admit him, or any potential buyers, to view the messuage and as such it remains unsold 'to the hynderaunce of theseid last will.' Esterfeld seeks a writ of subpoena commanding Weston and Agnes to

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<sup>98</sup> TNA PROB/11/9; TNA PROB/11/14; and Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.16, p.175.

appear in chancery. In reply to the bill of complaint, the Westons claim that John Esterfeld is merely seeking to cause 'trouble and vexacion' for them, as he has done in the past and maintain that the messuage is lawfully theirs until the death of Agnes. They claim that the property is in a good state of repair and that they have never denied Esterfeld access to do what he 'ought to do by right or by order if the lawe.'<sup>99</sup> At present the final outcome of the case remains unknown. However, Agnes, is recorded as a widow, living in the property on Corn Street at time of Esterfeld's death in 1505 suggesting that the property remained with the Westons.<sup>100</sup>

Foster's almshouse and its maintenance continued to be of importance for John Esterfeld. He carried out repairs on the building, as well as on other properties bequeathed to him by Foster, at his own costs upwards of one hundred pounds, without which it is probable that the almshouse would have foundered. Esterfeld also purchased the fee of the land on which the almshouse stood from the monastery of Tewkesbury to help secure its future.<sup>101</sup> John Walshe, the other of Foster's executors, contrary to the terms of the will sold Foster's lands and tenements in Gloucestershire and used the money for his own use. However, in recompense, when he died Walshe left Esterfeld fifteen messuages, a garden and the reversion of eight messuages and parcels of land, although they were not as valuable as the Gloucestershire properties he had sold. Esterfeld caused the rents, revenues and profits from the lands given by Walshe to go towards the maintenance of the chapel and almshouse.<sup>102</sup> Before his death shortly before 17 March 1505, Esterfeld set out his provisions for the almshouse and the ordinances for its governance. In 1504 an indenture was drawn up for the 'ferther profytyng and perpetuall contynuaunce of the saide prest poore men and women.' An 'honest and dyscrete prest' was to be employed to say mass daily in the chapel of the Three Kings to pray for the souls of Foster, his wife Elizabeth, their fathers and mothers, and for James Venables, as Foster had stipulated in his will of 1492. Esterfeld ordained that mass should also be said for the good estates of himself, his executors and for his two wives. The inmates of the almshouse were also required to pray for their souls. The ordinances dictated that the inhabitants of the almshouse were to be English, unmarried and at least fifty years old upon admittance to the institution. After his death, Esterfeld stipulated that the responsibility to choose new male inmates lay with the mayor and aldermen of the city, that for new female

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<sup>99</sup> TNA C1/199/76, *Early Chancery Proceedings*, (probably 1498).

<sup>100</sup> TNA PROB/11/14.

<sup>101</sup> Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.16, p.175; C. Burgess, 'By Quick and By Dead. Wills and Pious Provision in Late Medieval Bristol,' in *English Historical Review*, Vol.102, No.405, (Oct, 1987), pp.837-58, p.846 and Jordan, 'Charitable Institutions, pp.26-7.

<sup>102</sup> Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.16, p.175 and T.J Manchee, (ed.), *The Bristol Charities, Being the Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring concerning charities in England and Wales, so far as relates to the Charities Institutions in Bristol*, Vol.1, (Bristol, 1831), p.82.



inmates with the mayoress. However, the master of the hospital of St Mark's of Billeswick was granted the right to appoint one of the eight poor men and one of the five poor women. A 'discrete' person was to be appointed to gather the rents and revenues coming from specified lands and tenements to ensure that the chapel and almshouse were well repaired.<sup>103</sup> An indenture drawn up following Esterfeld's death in 1505 between the mayor and commonalty of Bristol and the master of St Mark's, Thomas Tylar, set out the responsibilities of the hospital towards the almshouse and chapel. Duties included overseeing repairs of the building, the appointment of new feoffes for Esterfeld's properties in Corn Street, Marsh Street and St Michael's Hill from which revenues were going to the almshouse, and the distribution of alms amongst the inmates.<sup>104</sup>

For wealthy men such as Foster and Esterfeld the endowment of almshouses was a spiritually attractive investment at a time when good works were considered of the utmost importance for one's soul. Another Bristol merchant, William Canynges, also followed the practice, establishing two almshouses. However, Foster's almshouse is the only long-term late medieval charitable institution in Bristol that can be examined in any detail.<sup>105</sup> Esterfeld's involvement with John Foster's will and almshouses however, reveals more than simply the charitable works of Bristol's wealthy merchant community. The document discovered by Condon relating to this affair, reveals that Weston was intending to participate in an Atlantic voyage and perhaps even suggests how Esterfeld could have come to know of and become involved in the expedition. Ruddock lists both Esterfeld and Weston as having played a part in the Atlantic discovery voyages of the late 1490s. While the document discovered by Margaret Condon reveals one, particularly significant, incident when the two men came into contact, throughout the last years of the fifteenth century there would have been some degree of interaction between the two men. They were men who would have moved in the same circles in Bristol and come into contact with each other on a number of occasions, as has been shown above. This suggests that one or the other could have introduced the other to the notion of Atlantic discovery and have introduced them to Cabot's planned expedition.

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<sup>103</sup> Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.16, p.175 and Ross, *Cartulary of St Mark's*, p.121.

<sup>104</sup> Ross, *Cartulary of St Mark's*, pp.122 and 257-8.

<sup>105</sup> Burgess, 'Wills and Pious Provision,' p.845-7.

## CHAPTER 4 - JOHN ESTERFELD JUNIOR

Having examined the lives of Weston and the elder John Esterfeld, it seems appropriate to consider the other Bristol men who could have been involved in the preparations for the late fifteenth century Atlantic voyages from the port. Ruddock, after all, did refer to the Esterfelds plural rather than singular. The eldest son of John Esterfeld, also named John, was a cleric. Henry and a younger son, again called John, followed in their father's footsteps and entered the commercial life of Bristol as merchants.<sup>106</sup> By 1500 John Esterfeld, cleric had been appointed king's chaplain, in November of that year being granted for life the prebend of the royal college of St Mary and St George in Windsor castle, vacant after the death of Thomas Fraunceys. In August 1504 Esterfeld was presented with the parish church of Bradwell in the diocese of London which was available after the resignation of Gundissalvus Ferdinandi. Later that year, in December, he was granted a canonry and prebend in the collegiate church of Bridgenorth, following the death of William Shurley.<sup>107</sup> Esterfeld's increasing status is demonstrated again in 1504. An indenture was drawn up between the king, the abbot of St Peter's Westminster and several third parties, whereby the third parties agreed to undertake to celebrate annually a specific anniversary. One such party were the chancellor, masters and scholars of the University of Oxford, whose agreement was acknowledged in St Mary's Church before John Esterfeld.<sup>108</sup> Esterfeld served as administrator to the dean of St George's chapel, Thomas Hobbes, becoming involved in a dispute sometime between 1504 and 1515 with Richard Wrottesley, the farmer of the deanery of Wolverhampton regarding an action brought concerning the profits of the deanery which Wrottesley maintained had not been paid.<sup>109</sup>

Esterfeld remained connected with events in his home town however. In 1504 he was made one of the executors of his father's will, along with John Vaughan, and as such was responsible for some of Esterfeld senior's property in Bristol, including the rents collected from lands and tenements that would only go to the younger son John once he came of age.<sup>110</sup> He continued to have interaction with the merchant community in Bristol he had grown up in. Esterfeld's name surfaced several times in the dealings of the Staple Court in Bristol regarding claims for orders of Attachment in respect for claims for money arising from the

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<sup>106</sup> E.E. Rich (ed.), *The Staple Court Books of Bristol*, (Bristol Record Society, Vol.5, Bristol, 1934), pp.130-1.

<sup>107</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1494-1509*, pp.220, 372 and 399.

<sup>108</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office. Prepared Under the Superintendence of the Deputy Keeper of the Records. Henry VII. Vol.2. 1500-1509*, (London, 1963), pp.205-6.

<sup>109</sup> TNA C1/305/74, *Early Chancery Proceedings*, (1504-15).

<sup>110</sup> TNA PROB/11/14.

estates of the deceased. In 1512 John Whyte, a pewterer of the city, demanded the arrest under writ of attachment of Esterfeld, and John Vaughan, as executors of Esterfeld senior's will, in respect of a debt of four marks.<sup>111</sup> Also that year John Bouwet, a Bristol merchant, and John Greere, a grocer, and his wife Joanna, issued an attachment against Esterfeld and Vaughan, in respect of a debt of seventy five shillings.<sup>112</sup> Esterfeld, therefore, despite becoming a cleric, did not completely distance himself from mercantile Bristol and its activities.

The most significant post held by Esterfeld was that of king's chaplain. In his will of February 1504 Esterfeld senior described his son as 'maister John Esterfeld my boy chanon of saint George chapell within the castell of Windesore.'<sup>113</sup> Even by the standards of the day Henry VII was a pious man. He heard two or three masses daily, was a frequent almsgiver, and made regular pilgrimages to shrines. He also founded convents and carried out building work on the chapels at Windsor, King's College, Cambridge and the Westminster Abbey.<sup>114</sup> It was to the chapel of St George's at Windsor that Esterfeld was appointed king's chaplain. Permanent chapel royals had been established at a number of residences since Norman times. Edward III had made St George's a chapel royal in 1348, rededicating it to the Virgin Mary, St George and St Edward the Confessor. Henry VII took a personal interest in St George's, intending it as his resting place after his death, and continuing the great construction project initiated by Edward IV. However his attention shifted to Westminster and it was left to his son to complete the work. As a king's chaplain in the chapel royal at Windsor, Esterfeld would have celebrated mass daily for the king's soul and the souls of his ancestors and heirs.<sup>115</sup> As Windsor was one of Henry VII's favoured royal residences, Esterfeld could have come into contact with the monarch on a number of occasions. In 1507 Thomas Wolsey was appointed as one of Henry VII's chaplains, his subsequent career evidence of what could be achieved in the role.

Although it cannot be said with certainty that John Esterfeld of St George's, Windsor, was one of the Esterfelds referred to in Ruddock's 1992 book proposal, it is at the very least plausible that he did play some role in the late fifteenth century discovery voyages. The cleric clearly remained involved in activities in Bristol and in regular contact with influential merchants there. It is possible that this is where the connection between the Esterfelds and

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<sup>111</sup> Rich, *Staple Court Books*, p.159.

<sup>112</sup> Rich, *Staple Court Books*, pp.129-30.

<sup>113</sup> TNA PROB/11/14.

<sup>114</sup> R.L. Storey, *The Reign of Henry VII*, (London, 1968), p.63.

<sup>115</sup> J.C. Cox, 'The Collegiate Church of Windsor,' in *The Victoria History of Berkshire*, Vol.2, (Folkestone, 1912), pp.108-9 and 106.

loans from Henry VII originated. While Esterfeld senior probably came into contact with the king occasionally as a civic dignitary of Bristol, his son conceivably knew the king more intimately, as a trusted spiritual advisor. He was perhaps a significant link in the preparations for the Atlantic expedition in securing a loan from the monarch to help finance a voyage his father and others were planning in Bristol.

## CHAPTER 5 – HUGH ELYOT AND ROBERT THORNE

In 1527 Robert Thorne described to Dr Lee, the English ambassador in Spain, that his own ‘inclination or desire’ for exploring and discovering had been inherited from his father who, ‘with an [other] Marchaunt if Brystow named hughe Elliot [were] the discoverers of the Newfound Landes.’<sup>116</sup> Since then it has commonly been accepted that Hugh Elyot and Robert Thorne the elder, merchants of Bristol, were involved in the Atlantic discovery voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, although there has been some debate as to whether they made it to North America before Cabot, with Cabot, or after him. John Dee, the Elizabethan mathematician, claimed that Elyot and Thorne had discovered land across the Atlantic in 1494, although where he got this information from is unknown. The word ‘discoverer’ could after all, in the context of the sixteenth century, refer to the men making a fuller examination of a land already known to exist.<sup>117</sup>

Hugh Elyot and Robert Thorne were both active in the overseas trade of Bristol in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. As business partners they were involved in various foreign markets. Robert Thorne was particularly involved with the trade between Bristol and the Iberian Peninsula. In the 1490s and early 1500s customs accounts show that he was trading in Andalusia, whilst Elyot traded with Ireland.<sup>118</sup> Despite being business partners Elyot and Thorne worked with other merchants independently as well. Sometime between 1500 and 1504 Henry VII made a grant to Hugh Elyot and Robert Popham, also described as a merchant of Bristol, of all wines called ‘prisewynes’ in the port. The king granted one hundred pounds to Elyot and others to support them in their travels to ‘*Insulam de novo*.’<sup>119</sup> This reveals that there remained a high degree of royal support for Atlantic voyages at this time. The grant also reveals that Elyot was working with other merchants. He, along with his partner, Robert Thorne, moved within Bristol’s circle of wealthy merchants and as such came into regular contact with men such as Esterfeld and Weston. For example, in 1480 a customs account records that in April of that year Elyot shipped goods aboard the same ship as Esterfeld.<sup>120</sup>

As members of Bristol’s elite merchant class, Elyot and Thorne were also naturally involved with the civic life of the city. In 1500 Hugh Elyot was appointed as one of the

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<sup>116</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.202.

<sup>117</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.131, 201 and 26-7.

<sup>118</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, p.56 and *1503/04 Collectors Account*.

<sup>119</sup> Condon to Quinn, 28 September 1981 and *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1500-1509*, p.214.

<sup>120</sup> Carus-Wilson, *Overseas Trade*, p.278.

sheriffs of Bristol.<sup>121</sup> In 1503, around the time that he is recorded as living in a tenement of Witham Priory on St Nicholas Street, Robert Thorne also served in that office.<sup>122</sup> In 1514 Robert Thorne was appointed mayor, although it is debatable whether this was the elder Robert or his son of the same name.<sup>123</sup> Certainly only a few years later Robert Thorne the elder was dead, although there remains some confusion over the exact date. It seems that in 1518 William Dale of Bristol brought an action against the mayor and the aldermen in the Court of Star Chamber regarding the matter of sheriffs' expenses. The mayor of Bristol sent some of his men, including Thorne, to London to refute the claims made by Dale. Whilst away on this business Thorne died. Other sources maintain that he died sometime after 1519 following a more permanent move to the capital.<sup>124</sup> Clearly by 1525 however, he was dead, as from that year the will of his wife, Joanna, survives, in which she is described as a widow.<sup>125</sup> Various Elyots and Thornes continue to appear in the civic lists of the city during the following years suggesting that both families remained important in Bristol. Despite relocating to Seville, Robert Thorne the younger remained committed to his birth place, founding a grammar school there with his brother Nicholas, an idea which possibly originated with their father.<sup>126</sup> The younger Robert, as he asserted in 1527, had inherited the desire to explore, believing that a North West Passage could be made, or even a route passing directly over the North Pole.<sup>127</sup>

The household books of Henry VII suggest that voyages across the Atlantic were being made in the first years of the sixteenth century, recording the rewards given to men who had been to the new found land and the items they had brought back with them. While these could be belated rewards for the earlier voyages of Cabot in the late 1490s, taken together they do suggest that expeditions were taking place in the early sixteenth century. In September 1501 a reward was given to William Thomas of Bristol, followed in January 1502 by a payment to 'men of bristoll that founde thisle.' In September 1502 rewards were granted by the king to 'the merchauntes of bristoll that have bene in the newe founde launde,' as well as to 'a mariner that brought haukes,' and to 'an other that brought an Egle,' suggesting that not only were voyages taking place but that they were successfully making landfall. Such rewards continue over the next few of years with money going to 'one that brought the haukes from the Newfounded Island' in November 1503 and to 'a preste that goith to the new Ilande,' in April 1504. In August 1505 the king gave one hundred shillings to the

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<sup>121</sup> *Adams's Chronicle*, 79.

<sup>122</sup> Leech, *Topography*, p.149 and *Adams's Chronicle*, p.79.

<sup>123</sup> *Adams's Chronicle*, p.82.

<sup>124</sup> Ralph, *Great White Book*, pp.3-4 and John Latimer, *Sixteenth Century Bristol*, (Bristol, 1908), p.41.

<sup>125</sup> Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.18, pp.3-4.

<sup>126</sup> Jordan, 'Charitable Institutions,' p.36 and Latimer, *Sixteenth Century Bristol*, p.41.

<sup>127</sup> Morison, *European Discovery*, p.233.

‘Portyngales that brought popyngais and cattis of the mountayne with other stuff to the King’s grace.’ Three native men from North America were even brought before the king in England.<sup>128</sup> This demonstrates that successful voyages were being made across the Atlantic in the early years of the sixteenth century.

There is a certain amount of evidence that suggests that Elyot and Thorne financed or even participated in these ventures. In January 1502 Hugh Elyot, Robert Thorne and his brother William Thorne, were granted a remission of twenty pounds on duties payable on the cargo they brought back on a new ship they had purchased in Diepe, Normandy, named by them the *Gabriel*, upon her next arrival into Bristol from Bordeaux. In May 1502 one Thomas Thorne was paid twenty pounds. Although there is no conclusive proof that the two incidents are related, perhaps the *Gabriel* had arrived into Bristol before the authority for the remission had been granted and Thomas Thorne, a relation of Robert and William, was required to collect the payment as the others were away from Bristol for some time, perhaps on an Atlantic expedition.<sup>129</sup> This is of course speculation, but there is firm evidence that Elyot and Thorne were involved in such ventures. On 9 December 1502 letters patent for exploration were granted to Hugh Elyot and Thomas Asshehurst, merchants of Bristol, and to Joao Gonslaves and Francisco Fernandes, Azorean-Portuguese, permitting them to ‘find, recover, discover, and search out any islands, countries, regions or provinces whatsoever heathens and infidels in whatsoever part of the world placed.’<sup>130</sup> The inclusion of the Portuguese, or ‘Portyngales,’ in this syndicate supports the suggestion that it was this group which made the voyages Henry VII was granting rewards for. What came to be called the Company of Adventurers to the New Found Lands was clearly emerging under the auspices of Elyot, who also received financial assistance from Bartholomew Rede of London.<sup>131</sup> There is some suggestion that Sebastian Cabot, son of John, may have been involved with Elyot and the others in some way at this time in his search for a North West Passage.<sup>132</sup> Ruddock asserted that Sebastian made two North Atlantic voyages, one in 1504 and the second in 1508-9. The first was made in the ships of Bristol merchants, the other in ships provided by the king. In 1504 two of the Bristol ships, the *Jesus* and the *Gabriell*, were provided and fitted out by Elyot and Thorne. Ruddock maintains that the *Gabriell* had in fact already made the voyage to North America in 1501 skippered by a kinsman of Robert Thorne, John A

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<sup>128</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.215-6 and 222.

<sup>129</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.132 and 247-8.

<sup>130</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.250 and Calendar of Close, H2, 320.

<sup>131</sup> K.R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement. Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630*, (Cambridge, 1991), p.49.

<sup>132</sup> Quinn, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages*.

Mayne.<sup>133</sup> The 1504 expedition returned to Bristol between Michaelmas and December of that year carrying a large cargo of salt fish from the Newfoundland Banks. This cargo was recorded in the accounts as being exempt from customs duties as these were not levied on fish taken from the sea. This supports the notion that none of the Atlantic voyages to have left from Bristol previously, whether under the command of John Cabot or otherwise, were engaged in fishing as no records for any other exemptions of this sort before this voyage exist.<sup>134</sup> The Bristol customs accounts for Michaelmas 1503 to 1504 reveal that Elyot, William Thorne and William Clerk, a Londoner who traded in Bristol and belonged to the Company of Adventurers, do not appear as trading in or out of the port for several months, lending support to the possibility that they were on a voyage overseas. Robert Thorne appears in the accounts several times throughout the summer however, and so did not participate on any such expedition.<sup>135</sup>

By around 1506 the Company of Adventurers was falling apart. Robert Thorne, and his brother William, do not appear in the records in connection with the Atlantic again. It is possible that after 1504 they withdrew from such expeditions, although they could have continued to exploit the Newfoundland fisheries independently from Elyot.<sup>136</sup> Elyot and Thorne had traded in partnership for two decades by this point, and long-term partnerships that lacked a strong family character often disintegrated eventually becoming vulnerable to disputes and litigation.<sup>137</sup> Certainly the relationships between the others in the syndicate began to deteriorate. Elyot became embroiled in litigation with the others. In 1506 William Clerk was awarded a sum of money for the losses he incurred after investing in a voyage planned by Elyot to North America, which seems not to have taken place. Clerke complained that, despite Elyot's claims to the contrary, he had paid off money he owed Elyot by the date agreed and that in fact Elyot owed him money.<sup>138</sup> Francisco Fernandes demanded that Elyot appear in chancery after the Bristol merchant commenced an action of debt against Fernandes claiming that he owed him one hundred pounds. Fernandes claimed that this was fabrication of Hugh's 'malicious mynde,' and that it was Hugh who was indebted to him. Fernandes complained that he remains in prison 'ayenst all right and goode conscience.'<sup>139</sup> Although undated this case probably occurred in 1506 as well. Following this there are no further traces of the Company of Adventurers in the records, perhaps indicating its fracturing and

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<sup>133</sup> Ruddock, 'Reputation of Sebastian Cabot,' pp.96-8.

<sup>134</sup> Ruddock, 'Reputation of Sebastian Cabot,' p.98.

<sup>135</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp.137-8.

<sup>136</sup> Quinn, *Henry VII and the Western Atlantic Voyages*.

<sup>137</sup> Sacks, *Widening Gate*, p.69-70.

<sup>138</sup> Vanes, 133-4 and Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.263.

<sup>139</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.264 and Veale, *Great Red Book*, Vol.16, p.22.



eventual break up.<sup>140</sup> Before its collapse, the Company, despite Sebastian Cabot's possible involvement and search for a North West Passage, seem to have moved away from the search for a trade link with Asia which dominated the expeditions of the late 1490s. Elyot and Thorne focused more on exploiting the Newfoundland fisheries and in establishing a market for trade in North America. The disintegration of the Company suggests that they were too ambitious in their aims and expected too much of a sparsely inhabited and underdeveloped land.<sup>141</sup> North America clearly did not live up to their expectations, and led to the disbandment of the syndicate and the abandonment of voyages across the Atlantic for some time.

The Atlantic and potential markets out to the west were not the only focus for Elyot or Thorne in the early years of the sixteenth century. Accounts show that Elyot was still shipping cargos to Ireland including such merchandise as wine, silk, salt, cloth and honey in 1503 and 1504. Robert Thorne meanwhile, remained active in trade with the Iberian Peninsula shipping cargos of cloth to Andalusia and bringing back olive oil, wine and wax.<sup>142</sup> In 1505 aboard the *Jesus*, Elyot and Thorne shipped one hundred and fifty tons of salt from Brouage to Bristol.<sup>143</sup> Elyot and Thorne therefore, remained successful merchants and were able to retain their position despite the failures and disappointments of the Atlantic expeditions. The two men moved in the same circles as Esterfeld and Weston, and as such perhaps shared their knowledge of Atlantic expeditions with them. It is possible that the men were involved with the same voyage, or voyages, prepared by Esterfeld and Weston. However, Elyot and Thorne clearly continued to pursue attempts to exploit the North Atlantic discoveries of land and well stocked fisheries into the sixteenth century, following Weston's financial collapse and death and the death of Esterfeld. Despite this, their efforts proved economically unviable and they were persuaded to return to their more traditional routes of commerce in order to make a profit.

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<sup>140</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.139.

<sup>141</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, pp.126-7.

<sup>142</sup> *1503/04 Collectors Account*.

<sup>143</sup> Vanes, *Overseas Trade*, p.102.

## CONCLUSION

Ruddock believed that men from Bristol very probably found land across the North Atlantic at some date prior to 1480 but subsequently its exact location was lost or forgotten, and that the voyages after that date, including the ventures of John Cabot, were attempts to re-find it.<sup>144</sup> It seems that Esterfeld, Weston, Elyot and Thorne participated in some of these attempts, in collaboration with Cabot or otherwise. The investigations carried out for this dissertation have failed to find any documents which conclusively support Ruddock's claims for the involvement of the Esterfelds in the financing of Cabot's Atlantic ventures, or for the return of Weston from the 1498 voyage and his subsequent financial crisis. However, it has placed these men within the context of mercantile Bristol at the turn of the sixteenth century and in the process has demonstrated that their involvement with the Atlantic voyages of discovery from the city is not only possible but also highly plausible.

The Esterfelds, Weston, Elyot and Thorne would all have moved within the same circles in Bristol. They were all involved with the overseas trade of the city and were members of the class which dominated its civic life. As such, there would have been some degree of contact between the men, to a lesser or greater extent. They were members of the council during the same period and would have regularly encountered one another in the course of their civic careers. The records demonstrate, as discussed above, that they were also involved with each other in economic and commercial terms. They were concerned with many of the same overseas markets and at times participated on the same ventures abroad. Perhaps they shared their knowledge and ideas with one another of past and planned expeditions into the Atlantic. This is of course speculation, but individually at least, they would have come into contact with the tales told by foreign sailors of lands that lay out to the west and the stories of discoveries made in times past. The condition of Bristol's trade at the end of the fifteenth century must also have played a part in encouraging these men and others like them to invest in Atlantic voyages and the potential discovery of new and untapped markets. The economic prosperity of Bristol at this time would have allowed such wealthy merchants as these to find the money required to finance such ventures. The loss of Gascony earlier in the century and the serious blow dealt to trade with Iceland by the activities of the Hanseatic League, may also have spurred them on across the Atlantic in search of new opportunities. Esterfeld, Weston, Elyot and Thorne, were clearly all commercially aware men, with experience of exploiting overseas markets to their full potential, as demonstrated by Esterfeld's venture to North Africa and that of Weston to Madeira. In Cabot's plan to

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<sup>144</sup> Ruddock, 'John Day of Bristol,' p.233.

create a direct link between Bristol and Asia they would surely have seen an opportunity to be exploited. A potential source of profit would also have been apparent in the vast fish stocks of the Newfoundland waters particularly following the loss of the Icelandic fisheries, as demonstrated by the efforts made by Elyot and Thorne in the early years of the sixteenth century.

Elyot, Thorne and the Esterfelds remained successful merchants throughout the period. Any involvement with the expeditions into the Atlantic did not seriously jeopardise their more traditional forms of commerce. They all remained active in established European overseas markets, such as Gascony, Portugal and Spain, and continued to trade in their staple goods such as wine, woad and cloth. However, according to Ruddock, Weston apparently returned in 1500 financially broken, perhaps a contributing factor in his death not long afterwards. The other merchants were able to cut their losses when Atlantic activities proved unprofitable, but it seems that Weston either did not have the secure commercial base that the others had established for themselves before he went overseas, or that he simply invested too heavily in the Atlantic expedition to deal with the consequences of its failure to find the markets of Asia.

Henry VII was clearly interested in Atlantic exploration and the possibility of creating direct trade links with Asia and of establishing a fishery in the northern waters. The fact that he was prepared to postpone the 'matters of variance' between Esterfeld and Weston until the latter returned from the expedition, reveals, perhaps not only the importance of Weston and his knowledge and experience to Cabot, but also the degree to which the king was committed to seeing the venture through successfully. Henry VII's grant to Hugh Elyot in the early sixteenth century demonstrates that this support still existed, despite the earlier setbacks and failures. Perhaps events would have taken a very different course if Henry VIII had been as committed to Atlantic voyages as his father. Following his accession to the throne in 1509 such ventures were seen as of little importance and put on hold. It was not until the later sixteenth century that the rich fisheries off Newfoundland began to be exploited by England.

The merchants of Bristol were concerned with securing a foothold in markets new and old, and in maximising their profits. They were not focused on exploration for its own sake, and would have been more concerned with securing a return on the capital they invested in such expeditions, than on gaining themselves a place in the history books of exploration and discovery. As such, merchants such as Esterfeld, Weston, Elyot and Thorne must have regarded the voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as a loss. Not only had they failed to create a direct trade link with Asia, but any efforts to trade with the newly

discovered land proved short-lived and fruitless.<sup>145</sup> Despite their aims, however, the men of Bristol, had played a significant part in discovering a new, or at least new to fifteenth century Europe, continent. As such the roles of the Bristol men in the Atlantic discovery voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries ought to be recognised and explored further.

Until relatively recently the Atlantic voyages of John Cabot and his discovery of North America were attributed to his son, Sebastian Cabot. This confusion began as early as the sixteenth century as Sebastian seems to have repeatedly misrepresented his role in the early expeditions.<sup>146</sup> Scholarship has ensured that John's endeavours have once more been recognised and his place in the history books secured. However, as wealthy, commercially minded men, and the financial backers of Cabot, the merchants of Bristol, cannot be excluded from the picture. These men would have had a clear agenda of their own and would not have financed or participated on any proposed voyage had it not fitted in with their own purposes.<sup>147</sup> As such they were key players in the discovery voyages and their part needs to be re-examined. It can only be hoped that the roles of the individual Bristol men who played a part in the preparations for the Atlantic voyages and even in the expeditions themselves will soon receive the same treatment that John Cabot has and be remembered for their part in the discovery of North America.

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<sup>145</sup> McGrath, 'Bristol and America,' p.90.

<sup>146</sup> P.E. Pope, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot*, (Toronto, 1997), p.58.

<sup>147</sup> E. Jones, 'The Matthew of Bristol and the Financiers of John Cabot's 1497 Voyage to North America,' *English Historical Review* Vol.121, No.492, (2006), p.790.

**Appendix I:**  
**Extracts from the Will of John Esterfeld, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1504**  
**(TNA PROB/11/14)**

I John esterfeld of bristowe merchant being in good and hole mynde at that tyme make this my testament...

I bequeith my soule unto almighty god and to oure Lady saint Mary and to alle the holy company of heven and my body to be buried in the holy Oratory of our blessed Lady of belhowsse within the church of saint Peter in Bristowe. Also I gyve to the said chapell of our Lady my best masse boke my chalice of siluer and gilt and my Cruettes of siluer from I bequeath to the high aulter of saint warbroits chirch in Bristowe for tithes and offerings forgotten...Also I will that an honest priest that sing before my Wif in saint warbrois chirch in Bristowe by the space of an hoole yere and he to have for his salary vi li...

Also I bequeith to my wife Scolast alle such goods of hir mone that she had before the tyme and the tyme of our marriage that was not given nor spent before the tyme and houre of my departing...Also I will that my said wife scolast have during hir life after the first yere of my deceesse suche state as I have in my dwelling place so that she be disposed to dwell therin hir self orells not she paying for the rent as I do that is to saye to sir John Rodney knight by the yere iv li and she to fynd reparacions. Also the to have my gardeyn in saint Leonards lane aslong as she dwelleth in my said house. Also and my wife will not kepe and hold in hir hands the house that longeth to saint warbrois church which I hold and paye therfor by the yere xiiij & iiij d. I will that myn executoure restore it to church ageyn...

Also I bequeith to maister John Esterfeld my boy chanon of saint George chapell within the castell of Windesore iij of my best gownes furred with such as thatt please him best...Also I Bequeith to him my best coverpayne other wise called a bredcloth...Also I bequeath to my boy Henry Esterfeld my best coverlet of aras work the which I had of maister ffoster and a fethre bed with a bolster and ij pylowes garnessed. Item I gift unto him a psalterboke and a matens boke and my best cheyne of gold with the crosse ther unto belonging and a paire of complete harness and in potts pannys basyns ewers and peuter vessell the value of my \_\_\_ and my clothe presse to pak in clothes Also a good flok bed with a bolster and in like wise a mattress with a bolster. Also I bequeith to him ij newe houses that I made in SmalStrete wherin John Jamsye and William Hurst nowe dwelles in and if he dye withoute heirs of his body lawfully begotten then the houses to remayne to my yong boy John Esterfeld and to his

heirs and if he dye withoute heirs then to my doughte Jane poppheyne and to hir heirs...Also I gyve and bequeith to my yong boy John Esterfeld xx li that is to sey in plate xxx li and iij li that is in thands of his maister Daudid Philip alis Daudid Cogan. Also my best featherbed that hath in my greate chambre and my fine coverlet of old aras also a powche of purpull velvet...Also I will that he have alle the lands that his moder bequeithed him by hir testmament that is to sey a hause with thappurtences in Temple Strete wherin William Maltman late dwelled and a gardegn in the olde market place wherin John Spencer mercer nowe holdeth the rent therof \_\_ to be begot in the hands of my boy maister John Esterfeld till he be of lafull age...and if he dye withoute heirs then the said house and gardeyn to my boy Henry Esterfeld and to his lafull heirs and if he dye withoute lafull heirs then the said house to remayne to my doughter and to hir lafull heirs male...if they alle dye then the saime houses and gardeyne to remayne to the Almehouses of the iij kings of colegn...

Also I bequeith unto William Grevell s'iaunt at lawe Recorder of Bristowe John Esterfeld klerk Henry Esterfeld John Esterfeld my sonnes John Roweland Richard Hoby merchanuts Thomas Hardyng common clerk of the towne aforesaid and John Knottyng the reversion of vij messuage and ij parcelles of land vsid with fullers Rakkes with their appurtenaues set and being in the parisshs of the holy crosse of temple in the towne aforesaid and of a mesuage set in a strete called marshtstrete which alice wicham nowe holdeth for terme of hir life and the reversion of ij parte of that mesuage with the appurtenaues set in cornestrete of the said towne which agnes weston wydowe nowe holdeth for time of hir life To have and to hold and perteyne the said reversion of the forsaid mesuages lands and tenements and also the saime mesuages lands and tenements thappurtenaues immediatly when it falleth after the deth of the alice wicham and agnes weston to the said William Grevell John Esterfeld clerk Henry Esterfeld John Esterfeld the yonger John Roweland Richard Hoby Thomas Hardyng and John Knottyng their heirs and assigns forevermore therof to execute and fulfille diuerse devises and intentions and Intentions conteyned and specified in Indentures by me...

Also I will that afore my decesse my executours or their assigns have in their rule and possession alle my boks of my dettes alle my obligacions and billes obligatory and also alle my keys of alle my cellers with alle the salt therin and to sell my merchandise to the moost value and to dispose the money therof in good works and in the execution of that my will aforesaid...

The residue of my goods not bequeathed I gif to myn executours to \_\_ dispose to the pleasure of god as they think best for the welth of my soule and in especial to have remembrance to the almashouse.

**Appendix II:**  
**Extracts from the Will of John Foster, 6 August 1492**  
**(TNA PROB/11/9)**

I John Ffoster of Bristow merchaunt being of good and hole mynd...

I bequeith and recommende my soule unto allmyghty god my maker and redemer and to our lady saint mary virgine and all to all saints and my body to be buried beside the ault of the holy trinitie within the pariss church of saint werburgh virgine of Bristow...

I will that my said executours of my goods find an honest priest to syng dayly in the chapell of myn almshouse set in stepestrete in the pariss of michell in Bristowe...for my soule and for the soules of Elizabeth late my wife oure fadres modres and benefactoures and in \_\_all for the soule of James Venebles...

Also that the saime myn executoures of my goodes pay and distribute weekly...after my decesse amonge the poore people dwelling in my chambers of the saide almshouse...

also I will that my proffet of and in all my landes and tenements...in cam slymbrigge coslyngton and arlyngham in the countie of Glouc make or do to be made unto Richard ffoster my sonne and to kateryn his wife...

founde in the said chapell a perpetuall chantrey of \_\_ to sing ther for the soules afore rehersed and in founding establisshing and endoying of the saide chantrey with landes tenements and all other thynges that to such a chantrey is necessary...

Also I will that agnes my doughte wife unto William Weston merchant have and hold among the naturall liff of the saime agnes my mesuage with thappurtenaunces sett in cornstrete of the said towne of Bristow in which mesuage the saime William Weston and agnes nowe dwells...the saime William and agnes aslong the lif of the saime agnes shall sufficiently repaire susteyne and mayntene the saime mesuage...and if any defaute of reparacion of the saime mesuage be found at any tyme here after by my saide executours or by another of them or by their attorney and then if the said William Weston and agnes his wife or others of them be warned on the half of my said executors to amende the saime defaultes...Also I will that the said William Weston and agnes his wife during the lif of the saime agnes pay yerely

toward the reparacion of my said chapell and almeshous xs. if necessite of reperacion of the saime so require or els not...

John Walsh and John Esterfeld I make ordeyne and name of this my \_\_\_ testament executours and I bequeith to each of them for his laboure and attendaunce tobe had in execution of the saime xx li st and ay cup of silver gilt.



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