

# **English Merchant Shipping and the Maritime Communities, c.1588 - c.1765**

**11th September 2025 - Memorial Hall**

Craig Lambert, Professor in Maritime History at Southampton University, previously gave very popular and successful talks to the Society and he gave this presentation on his latest research about English Merchant Shipping and the Maritime Communities, c.1588 – c.1765, that is from the Spanish Armada to the Seven Years War. His talk was the result of a £1 million 3-year research project he undertook.

There were 20 people involved in the research project and it would not have been possible without the use of computer artificial intelligence (AI). Ten of thousands of pages of records from the period were photographed and then AI was taught to read the various versions of handwriting in them, so they could convert it into searchable databases. The AI had to be also taught words like Hampton meant Southampton in early years.

The documents used included ship survey records, musters, port books, letters of marque (permission to attack other country's ships i.e. to be privateers) and many more record books. If a ship was carrying non-taxable goods often it was not shown.

The project recorded 969,309 voyages with our country's top commodity carried being coal. Followed by ale, malt, wheat, iron, wool and wine. Some interesting commodities were children's toys, sheep guts, black bear skins, beaver wombs and daggers for children. There was much trade with the East Indies and tobacco was a significant trade with America and the Caribbean.

Craig then went on to describe the maritime trade of Hampshire that was dominated by Southampton that had a significant trade with the Channel Islands. Between 1565 -1585 Hampshire had 295 overseas and 668 coastal voyages recorded. 17% of overseas voyages went to La Rochelle, 15% Rouen, 12% Honfleur and 11% Bordeaux. Coastal destinations outside of Hampshire, 20% went to Chichester, 14% London and 13% to Poole.

252 ships were recorded in Hampshire during 1566-1567 with 1871 total tonnage and average of 7 tons a vessel. Between 1565-1580 there were 397 shipmasters of which 20% only undertook overseas voyages, 64% only coastal trips and the rest engaged in both.

Regarding Hamble between 1324-1410 it is recorded that 416 ships from Hamble participated in various naval operations. For example, the War of St. Sardos (1324-25) 12 ships, First Campaign of the Hundred Years War (1337-40) 12 ships, Edward III's Brittany Campaign (1342) 13 ships and his last campaign (1377) 11 ships.

There were much larger vessels in the Middle Ages from 1337 to 1386 and Hamble had at least 25 ships over 100 tons such as the 180-ton 'Mary' in 1388, 200-ton 'Rodecog' and 240-ton 'Leonard' that was keeping the seas in 1386. Hamble ships were regular traders with Bordeaux.

In 1565 Hamble had 26 households, 22 boats owned by 24 men. Most of its boats were between 1 and 2 tons with the largest 12 tons. Warsash had 7 ships, 4 of which were used for fishing or oyster dredging, plus 7 mariners and 6 fishermen with no boats. It was clear that there were links between Hamble and Warsash such as Thomas Sexes appears in both lists. During 1566-67 Hamble had 23 ships, 53 total tonnage and an average of 2.3 a ship.

Between 1620-1630 the average age of Hampshire and Isle of Wight crewmen was 34, the youngest 10 years old. The oldest age was 76 and the oldest in the country being 98 years of age.

Finally, Craig summarised that Hamble's late medieval ships were large, many over 150 tons and it was an important port. Large royal ships were docked in Hamble River, especially under Henry V and Henry VI. During the Tudor period its ships became smaller, but they did elsewhere. Gradually, Hamble trade became more coastal and overseas voyages to places like Bordeaux ceased. This led to more coastal voyages such as to the North Sea and its main trade was carrying foodstuffs and wood, as well as fishing and oyster dredging.

By the 18th Century, ships from Hamble were still making significant voyages such as in 1738 the 'Joseph & Mary' of 70 tons was going from Hamble to Gibraltar. Hamble ships also acted as privateers, such as in 1756 when the Hamble merchant ship the 'Dolphin', owned by Joesph Bradby, was given a letter of marque that allowed it to be a privateer during the Seven Years War. Her master was William Coulam, he had a crew of 20 with 4 swivel guns on board.

Those present were fascinated about Craig's new research and again enjoyed his presentation. The meeting concluded by Craig being thanked for all his research that has greatly added new information about the Hamble River and the local area's maritime history.

For more detailed information please see:

[https://maritimebritain.org/english\\_merchant\\_shipping](https://maritimebritain.org/english_merchant_shipping)