

Abraham Jennings of Plymouth: The Commercial Career of a 'Western Trader', c. 1602–49

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The early seventeenth century was an important period in the development of English trade and colonization. New trades in fish, fur and tobacco emerged following the establishment of colonial settlements in North America, providing dynamic growth points in an economy experiencing structural change in its major sectors. Though easily exaggerated, the gradual integration of commercial and colonial enterprise during this period laid the foundations for subsequent imperial expansion based less on military conquest than on the widening scope of overseas trade.¹ The merchant community of London played a key role in these developments, and benefited most from them, as newer merchants seized the opportunity to profit from the relative freedom of westward enterprise. The aggressive entrepreneurial activities of men such as Maurice Thompson, one of the leading pioneers behind Atlantic enterprise, have been documented by Robert Brenner in his impressive study of the overseas traders of London.² The comparatively competitive character of these new trades, however, left openings for provincial merchants with ambitions as unbounded as their London counterparts to exploit, though their role in the commercial development of the Atlantic remains a neglected theme of English overseas expansion.³

In the ports and harbours of south west England, ranging from Southampton round to Bristol, small groups of merchants, often of modest means, managed to carve out niches for themselves in transatlantic trade and colonial development despite the threat of metropolitan control and dominance. The merchant community of Plymouth was particularly prominent in supporting such ventures, playing an important role in opening up the Newfoundland fishery to English exploitation, in supporting Elizabethan colonizing schemes, and in participating in the long privateering war with Spain from 1585 to 1603 which encouraged the revival of colonial activity in the early seventeenth century.⁴ The circumstances of the war brought international renown to men like Drake and Hawkins, though at the risk of neglecting the more gainful pursuits of less flamboyant members of

the community. A generation after the deaths of Drake and Hawkins, Thomas Westcote insisted that there were many others, past and present, 'of worthy merit for their stout and hardy adventures, both by sea and land', though 'envious fates have denied their memory to perpetuate'.⁵

Among such neglected members of Plymouth's merchant community, Abraham Jennings stands out as being worthy of particular attention. During a career spanning the first half of the seventeenth century he developed wide ranging interests in the coastal and overseas trades, the Newfoundland and New England fisheries, the plantation trade with Virginia, as well as in privateering and shipping. The purpose of this paper is to provide a profile of the scope and character of Jennings's commercial and colonial activities, and of the links between them, at a time when the exploitation of the Atlantic held out unprecedented opportunities for the venturesome entrepreneur. Despite the fragmentary and occasionally intractable nature of the surviving evidence, the customs accounts for Plymouth provide a rich seam of material for this purpose, which have been supplemented by scattered correspondence and depositions from the state papers and records of the high court of admiralty in London. Such material provides a revealing portrait of the vitality of provincial enterprise during an important transitional period when English enterprise in the Atlantic gathered pace in a more positive form. Jennings's commercial career not only draws attention to the practical contribution which provincial merchants made to the development of transatlantic trade and colonization, it also emphasizes the need to relate these newer enterprises to longstanding, traditional branches of commerce in domestic and European markets. In the long term, the way in which individual merchants responded to these challenges, particularly of forging links between the new and old, was to influence the future shape of the English transatlantic economy.

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Although evidence of Jennings's early years and apprenticeship is lacking, his earliest recorded commercial venture was in the coasting trade. Though unspecialised and often small scale, the movement of goods along the coast was an essential element of English internal and external trade, knitting together London and the outports in a kaleidoscopic pattern of commercial connections. As T.S. Willan pointed out in his pioneering study of the trade, it was in the hands of many merchants who employed a large number of ships, of relatively small burden, which carried miscellaneous cargoes. Much of it appeared 'casual, chaotic and speculative' in character.⁶ As the last head port along the south coast of England, with good harbour

facilities, and an extensive agricultural hinterland, Plymouth had long been a major centre of the trade, serving as 'the emporium of that part and all the country west from it', channelling goods from London and overseas into the small ports and havens of the region.⁷

Jennings's involvement in the trade began in 1602 when he received from London a miscellaneous cargo of aquavita, an unspecified collection of ironmongers' and haberdashers' wares, and a small quantity of weapons and ordnance which included pikes and small shot.⁸ Despite the patchy nature of the evidence, Jennings's interests in the trade continued into the 1630s as the information in table 1 indicates. This summary of the number of ladings consigned to or from Plymouth, in his name, clearly points to a sustained and significant interest in the trade, particularly with London which accounted for nearly two-thirds of ladings received or despatched by Jennings during the years for which evidence survives. Though he also had widespread interests in the regional coastal trade, ranging from Lyme Regis round to Bristol, they were smaller and spasmodic in character when compared with the London trade.⁹

Table 1: Ladings in and out of Plymouth consigned to Jennings for or from other English ports

Number of ladings							
<i>Port of origin or destination</i>	1602/3	1610/11	1616/17	1626/7	1629/30	1630/1	TOTAL
London	1	11	7	10	3	1	33
Fowey	—	1	—	—	1	3	5
Bristol	—	—	—	2	—	—	2
Dartmouth	—	—	—	—	1	1	2
Exeter	—	—	1	—	1	—	2
Helston	—	—	—	—	—	2	2
Mounts Bay	—	—	2	—	—	—	2
Lyme Regis	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Padstow	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Shoreham	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Topsham	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
TOTAL	1	12	10	14	8	7	52

Source: Plymouth Port Books, E.190/1022/19; 190/1024/15; 190/1028/1; 190/1031/10; 190/1032/4; 190/1032/10. The year runs from Christmas to Christmas with the exception of 1602/3 which runs from Michaelmas to Easter.

It is clear from the data in table 1, however, that Jennings's interests in the coasting trade, particularly with London, experienced a severe decline during the later 1620s, which was linked with the wars between England, Spain and France, when enemy vessels swarmed in the Channel seeking easy prey among the small and weakly armed ships sailing along the southern coast of England.¹⁰ In a limited way, the near collapse of Jennings's London trade demonstrates the devastating impact of these wars on an important branch of commercial activity. Unfortunately the lack of evidence for the 1630s makes it impossible to determine if Jennings's activities recovered with the return of peace in 1630.

The structure of this trade defies easy generalization. Like other merchants involved in it, Jennings shipped a wide range of manufactured goods, household and shipping provisions, and smaller quantities of luxury merchandise between major ports such as Plymouth, London and Bristol. In return locally produced goods, foodstuffs and imported commodities from France, Spain, Ireland and North America were regularly sent to London. The miscellaneous character of these consignments is demonstrated by Jennings's trade with London during 1617. From London he received three cargoes which included coal, cordage, cotton wool, glass, grindstones, gunpowder, haberdashery and ironmongers' wares, hops, sugar, tobacco and tobacco pipes, and unspecified grocery wares. In return he sent four ladings to London made up of goods such as almonds, anniseed, figs, Irish beef and pork, and Irish hides and rugs, Spanish iron, tin, cider, train oil, wheat and woad.¹¹ Moreover, as the customs accounts demonstrate, no year was ever really typical of this type of trade: the volume, value and type of cargoes fluctuated widely from year to year.¹² Nevertheless for young provincial merchants the trade was a proving-ground of experience and ability. It also enabled dynamic outport traders, like Jennings, to develop contacts in the metropolitan market which may have been of considerable benefit, not least as a means of strengthening and elaborating the commercial connections between the domestic market and the rest of Europe or beyond.¹³

Indeed, Jennings rapidly became one of the most active overseas merchants in Plymouth during the first half of the seventeenth century. Though much of this trade was channelled through his home town, he was sporadically involved in trading through other ports in the south west.¹⁴ Like other provincial merchants attracted by the rapidly growing transatlantic trade with Virginia, he was regularly engaged in trading through London. The result was a complex and extensive business based on overlapping interests in trade, shipping, fishing and colonization.

Jennings began his overseas trading career in Plymouth at a time of considerable commercial growth and prosperity. The most recent survey of Plymouth's overseas trade argues that its fortunes soared during the period

from 1585 to 1610.¹⁵ Despite the war with Spain long-distance trades to Newfoundland and the Mediterranean held up well for much of the 1580s and 1590s, providing the basis for sustained growth after 1604. Trade with well-established markets in the Bay of Biscay, particularly with Bordeaux and La Rochelle, also grew steadily, though conditions in the French trade became less favourable after 1610. In addition, the two decades following the peace with Spain in 1604 witnessed a considerable expansion in Plymouth's Iberian trades, especially with southern Spanish ports. This expansion was halted by the wars with Spain and France during the 1620s, which had near catastrophic consequences for the port's overseas trade. Many shipowners and merchants turned to privateering, though this was a poor substitute for peaceful trade. As the largest individual shipowner in Plymouth according to a survey of 1626, which shows that he was the sole owner of five vessels, Jennings dabbled in privateering but with little success. He set out the *Little Ambrose* of sixty tons against Spain in 1626, and the *Thomas Discovery* of thirty tons against France in 1627, though neither vessel had much luck at sea.¹⁶ Commercial diversification provided some compensation for the loss of the French and Spanish markets, but trade was slow to recover during the 1630s, and in some cases it failed to reach pre-war levels, though the expansion of the newer transatlantic trades provided some benefits for entrepreneurs like Jennings. Conditions grew worse as mounting political instability culminated in the outbreak of the civil war in 1642 which severely disrupted internal and external trade.¹⁷

These broad commercial rhythms had major implications for the development of Jennings's overseas trading interests. Although the surviving customs records for Plymouth are patchy, in some disrepair, and need to be interpreted with caution, the ten port books that exist for the period from 1610 to 1643 provide unique evidence of Jennings's commercial activities during these years. Though of little value in trying to evaluate the profitability of these interests, such evidence sheds considerable light on the structure and pattern of Jennings's overseas trade, and forms the basis of the following analysis.

As the evidence in table 2 indicates, Jennings rapidly developed a very wide range of overseas commercial interests. During the years covered by the surviving port books he was involved in the import or export of goods from more than thirty ports in Europe, ranging from Hamburg in the north to Venice in the south. Beyond Europe, he participated in the Canary Islands trade, the Newfoundland and New England fisheries, and the transatlantic plantation trades. Given the shortcomings of the surviving evidence, and the occasional nature of much of this commercial contact, there is no doubt that the data in table 2 provide a minimum profile of the extent of Jennings's trading interests.

Although the information in table 2 provides no evidence of the volume or

value of Jennings's overseas trade, it clearly suggests that it was firmly focused on the French and Spanish trades. Together, they accounted for 40% of the total number of ladings in and out of Plymouth during the years covered by the surviving port books.¹⁸ The value of these trades was almost certainly greater than this figure suggests, given the quality of goods imported from France and Spain. With the exception of Marseilles, Jennings traded with a number of French ports scattered along the coast from Rouen in the north to Bordeaux in the south, in an area of long-standing importance for Plymouth merchants. Among these ports La Rochelle was the most important, accounting for 50% of all consignments to and from France, though eleven of the sixteen ladings for the port were shipped during 1620. The reason for this unprecedented upsurge is difficult to explain, particularly as the customs accounts for that year do not list cargoes. When placed in a broader context, however, the evidence suggests that Jennings regularly traded with a range of ports in the Bay of Biscay, shipping anything between one and five cargoes each year.

Table 2: Ladings in and out of Plymouth consigned to Jennings for or from overseas

Number of ladings

<i>Country of origin or destination</i>	<i>1609/ 10</i>	<i>1619/ 20</i>	<i>1626/ 27</i>	<i>1629/ 30</i>	<i>1631/ 32</i>	<i>1632/ 33</i>	<i>1633/ 34</i>	<i>1635/ 36</i>	<i>1637/ 38</i>	<i>1642/ 43</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
Spain	6	12	—	—	3	—	—	5	6	1	33
France	—	12	3	2	—	4	1	5	5	—	32
North America ¹	3	6	1	—	2	—	2	4	3	1	22
United Provinces	1	—	—	3	5	2	4	4	1	—	20
Italy & Southern Europe ²	—	4	2	1	—	—	1	—	4	—	12
Germany & the Baltic	5	—	—	—	1	1	2	—	1	—	10
Portugal	2	3	—	—	1	—	2	—	2	—	10
Ireland	—	3	2	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	8
Channel Islands	—	—	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3
Scotland	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Canary Islands	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Miscellaneous & unknown	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	1	1	—	4
TOTAL	17	42	11	7	12	8	13	20	24	2	156

Source: Plymouth Port Books, E.190/1023/18; 190/1029/19; 190/1031/5; 190/1032/2; 190/1033/15; 190/1033/26; 190/1034/5 18; 190/1035/10; 190/1036/18. The year runs from Christmas to Christmas.

¹ With the exception of a vessel bound for Florida in 1633/34, and another for New England in 1637/38, these destinations were all at Newfoundland.

² Excluding Spain and France.

Jennings's trade with Spain was predominantly focused on southern ports such as Alicante, Cadiz, San Lucar and Malaga, though he was also involved in trading with Bilbao in the north. This Spanish trade was complemented by a lesser, but regular, trade with Portugal which was concentrated on Lisbon, Aveiro, Oporto and Viana. The Iberian trades in total accounted for more than a quarter of all Jennings's consignments to or from Plymouth during the years covered by the surviving evidence, confirming the growing importance of these markets for Plymouth merchants during the early seventeenth century.

In addition to the French and Iberian trades, Jennings developed extensive commercial interests with the United Provinces. His trade with Amsterdam, Rotterdam and to a lesser extent Middelburg accounted for 13% of total ladings. Cumulatively the French, Iberian and Dutch trades accounted for 60% of all ladings in and out of Plymouth, and nearly three-quarters of all ladings shipped to or from European ports. Though too much weight should not be attached to these figures, they demonstrate the importance of the Iberian, French and Dutch markets for Jennings's commercial operations. His interests in other European markets were limited, although they included a regular trade with Ireland, and occasional trading contact in the Mediterranean, particularly with Italian ports, as well as with northern Europe, Scotland and the Canary Islands.

This commercial pattern was subject to considerable fluctuation as a result of the ebb and flow of international trade. War dislocated trade, particularly during the 1620s when Jennings's main markets in Spain and France were closed for a time. The consequences are strikingly revealed in table 2, which shows a precipitous decline in the number of ladings in or out of Plymouth after 1620. These figures also indicate that Jennings's commercial activities were slow to recover during the 1630s, and may never have returned to pre-war levels. Even in 1636 the number of ladings was less than half the total for 1620. Any strengthening of trade in the later 1630s, even in the core Spanish and French trades, was clearly cut short by the outbreak of the civil war which had disastrous consequences for Jennings's commercial operations.

The impact of these developments on the character of Jennings's overseas trade is less easy to determine because of the limitations of the surviving evidence. Nevertheless it is clear that though Jennings did not specialise in any particular commodity, his interests in overseas commerce were more concentrated on certain types of good compared with those in the coasting trade. From Spain and Portugal he imported luxury goods such as wine, sherry, sugar, preserved fruits and Castile soap, as well as salt, iron and cork. Wines and aquavita came from

France, as did shipping supplies such as canvas, pitch and rosin, and grains, especially wheat, barley and rye. Shipping supplies, including cables and cordage, as well as pitch and tar, and a more varied range of ironmongery wares, tiles and brickstones, and glass and copper, were imported from the United Provinces. Timber and other shipping supplies also came from the Baltic. Rice and luxury cloth, such as mohair, were imported from the Mediterranean.

Exports were less varied. Cloth, including Devon dozens and serges, was sent to Spain and Portugal, as well as to other overseas destinations. Newfoundland fish and train oil, complemented by locally caught herrings and pilchards, were shipped to Iberian and Mediterranean markets. Luxury goods from Spain and Portugal, such as Majorcan oil, sherry and fruit, and tobacco from Virginia, were re-exported to the United Provinces and the Baltic. Grain, wine, salt and soap were occasionally exported to Ireland.

In any one year Jennings might be involved in trading with a range of European ports, handling a broad variety of commodities. The volume, value and regularity of such shipments was subject to considerable fluctuation, as the data in table 2 imply. During 1633, for example, he shipped eight cargoes through Plymouth: seven were inwards from French and Dutch ports, one was sent outwards to Hamburg.¹⁹ Among the goods landed in Plymouth were cables, cordage and rope; various amounts of canvas, tar and pitch, wheat, barley and rye, stone and iron pots, and thread. The one recorded outward bound cargo was a lading of pickled lemons, imported from Viana in June 1632. The customs value of these commodities, when given, ranged from twenty-five shillings for pack thread to nearly £245 for various ladings of cordage.

Despite its variety, however, there was some degree of specialisation and concentration in Jennings's overseas trading activities, particularly in the richer Iberian trades in which cargoes of cloth and fish were exchanged for wines, sugar, oil and other luxury consumer goods. More significant was the economic integration between Jennings's interests in trade and shipping, as reflected in the import of cables, hemp, timber and other ship supplies from the United Provinces and the Baltic. Such supplies formed a regular, and occasionally considerable, part of Jennings's imports into Plymouth. The development of these complementary interests in trade and shipping was of particular value in the newer transatlantic trades where shipowning provided merchants with some compensation for high freight and insurance charges. In Jennings's case shipping provided a common thread linking together diverse interests in trade and fishing. Although sparse, the evidence suggests that he was heavily involved in the pilchard fisheries of south

west England and Ireland. He owned at least three barges, small sailing vessels used in the inshore fishery, and a fishing 'pallace' in Plymouth where the catch was cured. The customs accounts also record the regular consignment of cargoes of pilchards from the south west to markets in the Mediterranean, including Alicante, Venice and Naples. By the 1620s he was involved in the rapidly growing pilchard fishery in Munster, freighting three ships for a voyage to Ireland in 1628.²⁰ Significantly, these interests in the fish trade extended across the Atlantic where they became linked with colonial settlement in Newfoundland and New England.

Jennings's participation in the transatlantic fisheries and the plantation trades with Virginia and New England, and his support for the settlements of Newfoundland, Guiana and Florida, confirms his position as one of the most enterprising entrepreneurs in the south west. Like a small number of other merchants in the region, which included John Delbridge of Barnstaple, he was prepared to invest capital in colonial enterprise at a time when many of the wealthiest merchants in London were reluctant to do so.²¹ In these circumstances provincial merchants were able to play a significant part in opening up the north Atlantic to English trade and colonization, and in a way which began to break free from a long standing tradition of privateering and plunder, laying the basis for rapid commercial development in the 1620s and 1630s.

Jennings's interests in the Newfoundland fishery were the most important part of his transatlantic enterprises. With a small group of others, he played a pioneering role in the growth of Plymouth's interests at Newfoundland and its subsequent expansion along the coast of New England during the early seventeenth century. His local prominence in the fishery is suggested by his membership of the Newfoundland Company in 1610, which was otherwise dominated by merchants from London and Bristol.²² While the company was never a success, its commitment to the colonization of Newfoundland raised the possibility of a clash of interests between Jennings's interests in fishing and settlement, though, in practice his support for colonization was outweighed by the scale of his fishing activities. As table 2 shows, he was regularly involved in setting out fishing vessels to Newfoundland from 1610 through to the early 1640s. In 1620 he set out six ships to the fishery, at least two of which he owned, whose combined tonnage amounted to 550 tons burden.²³ All six returned from Newfoundland in September laden with cargoes of fish and train oil. In fact the transatlantic fishery accounted for more than 10% of all ladings at Plymouth during the years for which evidence survives. This figure, moreover, tends to underestimate the real extent of Jennings's

interests, because outward bound fishing vessels, sailing in ballast, were usually not recorded in the customs books.

Such sustained and extensive interests in the fishery were rivalled by few others at this time. The port books record the landing of 12,000 dry and wet Newfoundland fish in Plymouth during 1632, at least 50,000 in 1634, and 24,000 in 1638.²⁴ As Jennings was involved in the profitable triangular trade, in which cargoes of fish were carried direct to markets in Spain and Italy, these are clearly minimum figures. One of the indirect benefits of the Newfoundland fishing trade in the early seventeenth century was the way in which it assisted the English commercial penetration of the Mediterranean, where demand for fish was strong, enabling merchants like Jennings to enhance profits through the development of a multilateral trading structure. In January 1630, for example, the *Expedition* and *Benediction* arrived in London with cargoes of currants from Zante on the last leg of what was almost certainly a triangular fishing venture to Newfoundland.²⁵ In this way fish provided a medium of exchange which went some way towards offsetting the cost of importing luxury goods from markets in southern Europe.

Although the transatlantic fishery was a profitable trade, little evidence survives of the profit Jennings made from it. That it could produce considerable gross returns is clear from John Smith's reference to a venture set out by Jennings in partnership with his brother in 1614. According to Smith the *Abraham*, of 220 tons, and the *Nightingale*, of 100 tons, returned from New England with a lading of fish which 'at the first penny came to 3150 pounds'.²⁶ Assuming that the cost of setting out fishing vessels to New England was slightly greater than for Newfoundland, this venture may have netted a profit of between £1,500 and £2,000 for Jennings and his brother.²⁷ Though it would be unwise to generalize from a single voyage, these figures provide some indication of the potential profit to be gained from the North American fisheries.

Despite the rapid growth of English interests in the transatlantic fisheries in the early seventeenth century, the fishing trade was vulnerable to international competition and conflict. It was severely disrupted by the wars with Spain and France during the 1620s, when French corsairs raided Newfoundland and Biscayan privateers lay in wait for returning fishing vessels.²⁸ Jennings managed to maintain an interest in the trade, but at a reduced level, and only after some restructuring of his marketing operations. The wars may have enabled him to get a foothold in the potentially lucrative business of supplying naval expeditions with provisions, in July 1628 for example a consignment of 31,970 Bank fish was requisitioned from him to supply

the expedition to the Ile de Ré in France, but this was poor compensation for the loss of the Spanish and French markets. Although Jennings was awarded £642 for his fish, some of it was still outstanding at his death in 1649.²⁹

Jennings's interests in the transatlantic fisheries drew him into several colonial enterprises in Newfoundland and New England during the early 1620s. In 1621 he was providing support for Sir George Calvert's colony at Ferryland. According to Edward Winne, the governor of the colony, Jennings's 'help and furtherance' was important during the difficult early years of settlement.³⁰ In May 1622 one of his ships carried 'people and provision' to the colony. The following year he was involved in similar dealings with a small settlement at Cupids Cove, but no evidence survives of any further support for the colonization of Newfoundland. In conjunction with these interests, Jennings also acquired an extensive stake in the New England fishery, the growth of which during the first three decades of the seventeenth century was linked with the attempted settlement of several coastal sites in the region, and the colonization of Virginia further south. His earliest recorded interest in New England can be traced back to 1607 when he supported the attempt to establish a colony at Sagadahoc by the Virginia Company of Plymouth.³¹ Not only was he a subscriber to the venture, but he also supplied goods such as 'Iron pottes boxes Chafyng disshes lockes & divers other wares' for the voyage.³² A dispute over the financing of the venture led to a protracted legal suit in chancery between Jennings and Sir Ferdinando Gorges, a prominent promoter of the colonization of New England. Though the outcome of the case is unknown, such disorganization contributed to the collapse of the Sagadahoc colony during 1608.³³

Despite the suit with Gorges, during the 1620s Jennings became a supporter of the Council for New England, the successor of the ill-fated Plymouth based Virginia Company, in which his former protagonist was the leading figure. In 1622 he purchased a share in the 'mainland of New England' from the council, as a means of developing his fishing and shipping interests across the Atlantic.³⁴ In partnership with a group of Plymouth merchants he established a plantation on Monhegan Island during 1622 or 1623. The value of the island to the development of the New England fishery was well known to English fishermen and colonial adventurers. As one of the most important fishing stations in Maine, it was being used as a base for a winter fishery as early as 1619, enabling the fishermen to 'take the benefit both of the first and last fishing season'.³⁵ Its economic potential was recognised by Sir Edwin Sandys in 1621 when he claimed that 'The fishing at monhigen exceedeth newfowndland fishing caryed into

spayne.'³⁶ Though exaggerated, there is no doubt that the New England fishery grew rapidly during the early seventeenth century; according to a subsequent report it was attracting between 40 and 50 English ships, of 'reasonable good burthen', each year before the war with Spain in 1625.³⁷ Jennings and his partners established a fishing station and trading post on Monhegan with the purpose of combining cod fishing with the fur trade. The plantation was not a success, however, partly because the fur trade failed to develop as a result of its poor location for dealing with local Indians. In 1626 it was broken up and sold off. William Bradford, governor of Plymouth plantation and Edward Winslow, visited the island and purchased 'diverse usefull goods', including trading wares, goats and corn, worth more than £400. Bradford later recounted how the arrival of David Thompson, a trader from Piscataway, 'was some hinderance to' the sale, allowing Jennings's men on Monhegan to hold 'their goods at higher rates; and not only so, but [they] would not sell a parcell of their trading goods, excepted they sould all.'³⁸ The disposal of these goods, and the sale of the island to two Bristol merchants, Robert Aldworth and Giles Elbridge, for £50, provided some compensation for a venture in which Jennings had clearly staked a substantial amount of capital. Although his interests in the New England fishery continued, and became linked with the transatlantic provisioning trade, the evidence for these activities is limited and difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, in 1629 he set out the *Reformation* of Topsham on a fishing voyage to New England, with a lading of supplies for Virginia; and in 1638 he despatched a cargo of wines, aquavitaes, vinegar, salt, soap and malt, aboard the *Seahorse* of Plymouth, for New England. By the 1630s, when Plymouth had become an important port of departure for New England, so much so that its 'wine, tobacco, and whores' were commented on by John White, he was also probably involved in shipping colonists thence.³⁹

During the 1620s, particularly after the collapse of the Virginia Company of London in 1624, Jennings's transatlantic ventures widened to include the development of a sustained interest in the Virginia trade. In October 1625 he was reported to be setting out a vessel for the relief of the colony, which was still struggling to survive following the Indian attack of 1622.⁴⁰ The following year he despatched three shipments of supplies to Virginia from London. These included 200 pairs of shoes, 180 pairs of worsted stockings, 120 gallons of oil and a large number of knives and locks, laden aboard the *Marmaduke*; various amounts of pitch, nails, locks, hinges, soap, butter, currants and mustard seed, aboard the *Peter and John*; and cloth, pitch, almonds, locks, scales and tobacco pipes, aboard the *Plantation*.⁴¹ In 1629 he shipped two cargoes

of wheat to the colony from Plymouth.⁴² However, Jennings's attempt to become established in the colonial tobacco trade met with varying success. After a short-lived boom during the early 1620s, the price of tobacco collapsed, falling to as little as one penny per pound by the later 1620s, a price which was barely sufficient to cover the charge of freight across the Atlantic. Profits were also squeezed by the poor quality of Virginia tobacco. After being sent several cargoes of bad tobacco from the colony, Jennings complained that it was 'soe poore a Commodetie [that] unlesse it bee very good there is noe medlinge with it'.⁴³ One consignment was so bad that he threatened to leave it on the account of his factor in Virginia. So serious was the situation in 1630 that Jennings advised his recently appointed agent in the colony, the ambitious merchant-planter George Menefie, to keep the season's crop of tobacco in Virginia if freight charges to England were high.⁴⁴

Despite these difficulties Jennings maintained an interest in the tobacco trade throughout the 1630s. The surviving customs accounts indicate that he imported 7,300 pounds of tobacco into London in 1626, 600 pounds in 1627, 2,500 pounds in 1631, and 4,000 pounds in 1633.⁴⁵ The following year he re-exported two consignments of Virginia tobacco from Plymouth to Middelburg and Hamburg.⁴⁶ That these interests continued is revealed by several references to cargoes of Virginia tobacco, owned or part-owned by Jennings, in cases being heard by the high court of admiralty during the early 1640s. In 1642 he imported 4,000 pounds of tobacco into London.⁴⁷

Despite the potential for tobacco to become a commodity of mass consumption, however, the pressure on profits during the later 1620s created instability which led some merchants, including Jennings, to support economic diversification in the colony. In 1630 he was encouraged to hear that the settlers were 'making rape oyle and divers other things'. Orders by the governor and council that no planter should cultivate 'above 2,000 plants per head . . . must bee good', he informed his factor; if 'they goe one [in] these wayes', he added, 'god willing I wilbee doing to some purpose'.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, such support for control and regulation was unwelcome to many planters in Virginia, whose response to falling prices tended to be to increase production, fuelling the competition over profits between merchants and planters on either side of the Atlantic. The consequences of this competition for middling traders like Jennings are unclear, but it probably left many vulnerable to the aggressive commercial operations of a group of London merchants whose interests in the trade were aimed at securing control of the supply of tobacco in the domestic market. Provincial merchants such as Jennings were rarely in a position to rival or threaten the interests of the Londoners.⁴⁹

Jennings's activities elsewhere across the Atlantic were marginal to his

involvement in the plantation trades or transatlantic fisheries, though of interest in confirming his support for western colonization. In 1620 he was 'a favorer and Assistant unto Capten North', who was trying to establish a tobacco colony along the river Amazon.⁵⁰ With the support of a group of anti-Spanish courtiers and magnates, including Robert Rich, second earl of Warwick, North had formed the Guiana Company aimed at exploiting the resources of the Amazon region. Though North led an expedition to the Amazon during 1620, the company was suppressed by the king following strong protests from Spain, apparently ending Jennings's interest in South America. His support for the settlement of 'Florida', a vague geographical description for the area south of Virginia, was also abortive. In 1634 he laded a cargo of cloth and iron pots aboard the *Harry* of London which was bound for 'Florida' according to the customs records. The purpose of the venture, in which the London merchant Samuel Vassall played a leading role, was to establish a plantation at the mouth of the St. Helena river in a region known as 'Carolana', with the intention of developing a trade with the Indians. Although little evidence survives of the enterprise, the plantation was not a success and it is unlikely that Jennings profited from it.⁵¹

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Despite his modest background Jennings became one of the most prominent and successful merchants in Plymouth during the first half of the seventeenth century. Although no evidence survives of the profitability of his commercial ventures, it is clear that he was able to make a competent living from overseas trade. By the time of his death, he was a wealthy man of considerable standing in the local community. He owned houses in Plymouth and Saltash, property scattered throughout southern Devon and Cornwall, ships, boats and fishing palaces and was able to leave bequests in his will worth nearly £1,000. Much of this property was left to William, his eldest son and heir, though Jennings also made provision for five other sons, who received various lands and tenements around Plymouth, or cash bequests; his only surviving daughter, Elinor, was left £600, to be paid within three months of his death. In addition, Jennings left bequests of £5 each to the poor of Plymouth and Saltash, and another of £20 to fulfil an undertaking made in 1645 to contribute £50 towards the cost of building a new church in Plymouth.⁵²

Such bequests provide some insight into Jennings's character, though in this respect the shortcomings of the remaining evidence are nearly insurmountable. That he was ambitious and determined to succeed as a merchant is implicit from the foregoing profile. He may not have

carved out a landed estate for himself, unlike many successful London merchants, but the steady accumulation of property in Plymouth and neighbouring parishes such as Saltash, Whitchurch and Hardness, enabled him to transfer the profits from trade into more secure investments in land. Like other successful merchants in the region he served on various commissions relating to maritime affairs. In September 1627 he was nominated by the Privy Council as one of four 'Westerne Traders', who were 'fitt and indifferent persons', for the collection of money for a proposed expedition against the pirate port of Algiers.⁵³ During the 1630s he was regularly appointed by the high court of admiralty to act as a commissioner in various legal suits involving merchants in the south west. His business reputation was such, that for much of this period the powerful Dutch West India Company also used him as an agent.⁵⁴ A promising, and potentially lucrative, position as collector for Sir John Eliot, vice-admiral of Devon, was lost following the latter's dismissal in 1626.⁵⁵ Eliot's estrangement from court, and hostility towards the Duke of Buckingham, the king's powerful favourite and lord admiral, were related to bitter local rivalries in which Jennings was briefly entangled. In April 1627 Sir James Bagg, Eliot's rival and successor as vice-admiral, informed Buckingham that Jennings was Eliot's 'right hand' in Plymouth; more alarmingly, the following year he accused him of being 'a common abuser of all His Majesty's service' in the town.⁵⁶

Although Bagg's reports were unsubstantiated, and coloured by personal animosity, they were given some substance by Jennings's relationship with the earl of Warwick, whose hostility to the king's attempts to levy a forced loan during 1626 and 1627 may have been part of a more extensive campaign against royal policy, which reached into the south west. While Warwick refrained from publicly opposing the loan, in 1627 he met Eliot in Plymouth, shortly before the latter openly denounced it.⁵⁷ When Warwick stayed in Plymouth during April 1627 he lodged with Jennings, who was described as the earl's servant. The following year he was reputed to be the earl's 'agent and intelligencer' in the south west.⁵⁸ The relationship continued into the 1630s when Jennings acted as an agent for the Providence Island Company, in which Warwick was a leading member.⁵⁹ These links placed Jennings on the fringes of an ambitious colonial interest group, whose wider political significance during the later 1630s is well known. Though sketchy, the evidence suggests that common commercial and colonial interests possessed political implications capable of linking diverse groups and individuals in London and the provinces, although they remained undeveloped until the outbreak of the civil war.

That war had disastrous consequences for English overseas trade, and no doubt for Jennings's own trading activities, though the effects were partly cushioned by his acquisition of extensive property in the south west. Little evidence survives of his activities during the war, or the closing years of his life. Though too old to take an active part in the conflict, his sympathy for the parliamentary cause is indicated by the confiscation of his interests in the manor of Trematon in Cornwall because he was 'in rebellion' to the king.⁶⁰

During a commercial career which spanned more than four decades, Jennings made an important contribution to the maritime economy of the south west. Within the region he was a leading merchant involved in the coasting and overseas trades, the shipping industry, and the pilchard fishery. He was also a powerful promoter of the transatlantic fisheries, a regular trader with Virginia, a supporter of New England, and an investor who was prepared to lend a hand to colonial and commercial initiatives along the Amazon and in Carolina. Though the success of these ventures varied, their significance should not be slighted. Transatlantic enterprise was opening up new fields of economic opportunity, particularly for merchants like Jennings who were able to combine wide ranging interests in trade and shipping. As this profile has shown, there was no immutable barrier between mercantile interest in the coasting, overseas or newer transatlantic trades. In any one year Jennings was involved in a large number and variety of commercial ventures. The degree of overlap between these enterprises enabled the newer trades, in American fish and tobacco, to be assimilated into the local and regional economic infrastructure without too much difficulty; indeed, one of the sub-themes of Jennings's trading career was the way in which it contributed to the formation of links between diverse and distant markets across the Atlantic during a pioneering period in the development of English America. Although the process was rarely complete or tidy, the successful combination of such disparate activities was heavily dependent on the entrepreneurial abilities and functions of merchants such as Abraham Jennings, whose role in the commercial and colonial development of the Atlantic is worthy of wider recognition.

Notes

¹ Recent interpretations include K.R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630* (Cambridge, 1984), and D.B. Quinn and A.N. Ryan, *England's Sea Empire, 1550-1642* (London, 1983), though the Newfoundland fishery preceded colonization by several decades.

² R. Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 123-4, 134-5, 156-67, and K.R. Andrews, *Ships, Money & Politics: Seafaring and Naval Enterprise in the Reign of Charles I* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 57-61, 91-2. See also J.R. Pagan, 'Growth of the tobacco trade between London and Virginia, 1614-40', *Guildhall Studies in London History*, III (1979), pp. 248-62.

³ Though see Alison Grant, 'Breaking the mould : North Devon maritime enterprise 1560-1640' in T. Gray *et al.* (eds.), *Tudor and Stuart Devon: The Common Estate and Government* (Exeter, 1992), pp. 133-8, and S.E. Hillier, 'The Trade of the Virginia Colony 1606 to 1660' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool, 1971), pp. 43-5, 397-400.

⁴ M. Oppenheim, *The Maritime History of Devon* (Exeter, 1968), pp. 46-7, 58-9; K.R. Andrews, *Elizabethan Privateering: English Privateering during the Spanish War, 1585-1603* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 67-8, 83-4, 116, 147, 178-80; C. Gill, *Plymouth : A New History*, 2 vols. (Second edition, Newton Abbot, 1979), I, pp. 149-50, 154-96.

⁵ T. Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in MDCXXX*, edited by G. Oliver and P. Jones (Exeter, 1845), p. 380.

⁶ T.S. Willan, *The English Coasting Trade 1600-1750* (Manchester, 1938), p. 192.

⁷ Westcote, *Devonshire*, p. 377.

⁸ Public Record Office, London, (Port Books), E.190/1022/19 (hereafter cited as E.190).

⁹ E.190/1023/6, 7, 9; 190/1024/7, 23; 190/1028/4, 9; 190/1135/1, 7, 9 provide evidence of this regional trade.

¹⁰ M. Duffy *et al.* (eds.), *The New Maritime History of Devon, volume 1: From Early Times to the late Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992), p. 132; Willan, *Coasting trade*, pp. 23, 29-30; Andrews, *Ships, Money and Politics*, pp. 19-20.

¹¹ E.190/1028/1.

¹² E.190/1024/15; 190/1028/1; 190/1032/4.

¹³ Port books referred to in note 12 provide evidence of this movement, as do E.190/1031/1 and 190/1032/10.

¹⁴ Evidence for a small and intermittent trade through Bristol, Fowey, Helston, Penryn and St. Ives can be found in E.190/1021/5; 190/1024/5, 19, 20; 190/1027/11; 190/1029/8; 190/1135/6. They are not considered extensively in this analysis, unless of significance to the general argument.

¹⁵ Duffy, *New Maritime History*, p. 105.

¹⁶ Oppenheim, *Maritime History of Devon*, p. 62; T. Gray (ed.), *Early Stuart Mariners and Shipping : The Maritime Surveys of Devon and Cornwall, 1619-35* (Devon & Cornwall Record Society, New Series, 33, 1990), p. 84, 111; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1628-29*, pp. 291-2.

¹⁷ Duffy, *New Maritime History*, p. 132.

¹⁸ The subsequent survey of Jennings's overseas trade is based on an analysis of E.190/1023/18; 190/1029/19; 190/1031/5; 190/1032/2; 190/1033/15; 190/1033/26; 190/1034/5, 18; 190/1035/10; 190/1036/18.

¹⁹ E.190/1033/26.

²⁰ E.190/1024/5; 190/1025/16; 190/1027/4; 190/1029/8; 190/1033/15 & 26; West Devon Record Office, Plymouth, 754/81; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1628-29*, p. 241; J.C. Appleby (ed.), *A Calendar of Material relating to Ireland from the High Court of Admiralty Examinations 1536-1641* (Dublin, 1992), p. 181.

²¹ Grant, 'Breaking the mould', pp. 137-8 has some valuable comments on Delbridge.

²² G.T. Cell, *English Enterprise in Newfoundland 1577-1660* (Toronto, 1969), pp.

53–9; Cell (ed.), *Newfoundland Discovered: English Attempts at Colonisation, 1610–1630* (London, 1982), p. 51; C.T. Carr (ed.), *Select Charters of the Trading Companies, A.D. 1530–1707* (London, 1913), pp. 51 ff.

²³ E.190/1029/19.

²⁴ E.190/1033/15; 190/1034/5; 190/1035/10.

²⁵ Cell, *English Enterprise in Newfoundland*, pp. 101–6; E.190/34/2.

²⁶ P.L. Barbour (ed.), *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631)*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill and London, 1986), I, p. 434.

²⁷ Based partly on contemporary estimates of fitting out costs in Cell, *English Enterprise*, pp. 150–3.

²⁸ Gray (ed.), *Tudor and Stuart Devon*, pp. 188–9; Andrews, *Ships, Money and Politics*, pp. 19–20; Cell, *English Enterprise*, pp. 106–7.

²⁹ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1628–29*, p. 201, 214, 215; *Acts of the Privy Council, 1628–29*, p. 22. Jennings left the money due from the king, for these provisions, to one of his sons, Charles. West Devon Record Office, Plymouth, will of Abraham Jennings, 754/84.

³⁰ Cell (ed.), *Newfoundland Discovered*, pp. 51, 196, 256–8.

³¹ R.A. Preston, *Gorges of Plymouth Fort: A Life of Sir Ferdinando Gorges, Captain of Plymouth Port, Governor of New England, and Lord of the Province of Maine*, (Toronto, 1953), pp. 216–17; Alden T. Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians 1620–1675* (3rd edition, Norman and London, 1995), pp. 12–14.

³² D.B. Quinn (ed.), *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612*, 5 vols. (London, 1979), 3, p. 455.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 454–65; D.B. Quinn and A.M. Quinn, (eds.), *The English New England Voyages, 1602–1608* (London, 1983), p. 377.

³⁴ *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, 1574–1660*, p. 31, 34, 36. And for evidence of Jennings's plans to build a pinnacle in New England.

³⁵ *Maine in the Age of Discovery: Christopher Levett's Voyage, 1623–1624 and a Guide to Sources* (Maine Historical Society, 1988), p. 64.

³⁶ British Library, London, Additional Mss. 34121, f.15; Harleian Mss. 1058, f.10v; Barbour (ed.), *Works of Captain John Smith*, I, pp. 434–5.

³⁷ [John White], *The Planters Plea* (London, 1630), p. 23; Emerson W. Baker *et al.* (eds.), *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega* (Lincoln & London, 1994), pp. 192–3, 200, 202, 206.

³⁸ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1912), I, pp. 340–41, 447–8; R.A. Preston, *Gorges of Plymouth Fort*, p. 419; Baker, *American beginnings*, p. 209; Henry S. Burrage, *The Beginnings of Colonial Maine 1602–1658* (Portland, Maine, 1914), pp. 164–6, 182–3, 218.

³⁹ E.190/1035/10. P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], H.C.A.15/1; White, *The Planters Plea*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, 1574–1660*, p. 76.

⁴¹ E.190/29/4.

⁴² E.190/1031/20.

⁴³ PRO. H.C.A. 14/49, nos. 289, 453.

⁴⁴ PRO. H.C.A. 15/1. J.J. McCusker and R.R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill & London, 1985), pp. 118–23 provide details of the general trend of tobacco prices.

⁴⁵ E.190/31/3; 190/38/1. N. Williams, 'England's tobacco trade in the reign of Charles I', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 65 (1957), pp. 403–49.

⁴⁶ E.190/1034/5.

⁴⁷ PRO. H.C.A. 14/49, nos. 289, 453.

⁴⁸ PRO. H.C.A. 15/1.

⁴⁹ Williams, 'England's tobacco trade', pp. 403–49. E.122/196/24. PRO. H.C.A. 15/1 contains evidence of Jennings's support for economic diversification in the colony.

⁵⁰ J. Lorimer (ed.), *English and Irish Settlement on the River Amazon, 1550–1646* (London, 1989), pp. 214–15; *Acts of the Privy Council, 1619–21*, p. 193.

⁵¹ E.190/1034/5. PRO. H.C.A. 13/51, ff. 207v–8, 270–73.

⁵² West Devon Record Office, Plymouth, 754/84, will of Abraham Jennings, contains details of property.

⁵³ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1627–28*, p. 567; *Acts of the Privy Council, 1623–25*, p. 22; *Acts of the Privy Council, 1627*, p. 87, 355; *Acts of the Privy Council, 1627–28*, p. 34.

⁵⁴ PRO. H.C.A. 14/49 contains many admiralty commissions involving Jennings; West Devon Record Office, Plymouth, 754/84.

⁵⁵ Harold Hulme (ed.), 'Sir John Eliot and the Vice-Admiralty of Devon', in *Camden Miscellany XVII* (Camden Society, 3rd. series, LXIV, 1940), pp. 4–7, 9–10, 36.

⁵⁶ PRO. S.P. 16/61/36; 16/109/87.

⁵⁷ Richard Cust, *The Forced Loan and English Politics 1626–1628* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 229–32, 271; H. Hulme, *The Life of Sir John Eliot 1592–1632* (London, 1957), pp. 155–7, 166–8.

⁵⁸ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1627–38*, p. 143; PRO, S.P. 16/47/39.

⁵⁹ *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, 1574–1660*, p. 312, 316. K.O. Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630–1641: The other Puritan Colony* (Cambridge, 1993), is the most recent study of the company and its activities.

⁶⁰ M. Coate, *Cornwall in the Great Civil War and Interregnum, 1642–1660* (Oxford, 1933), pp. 107, 216, 218–19 for the possibility that two of Jennings's sons fought on opposing sides during the war.

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