

Jonathan Harlow. *The Trade of Bristol in the later Seventeenth Century*. Avon Local History & Archaeology Books no. 33, 2021. 41 pp, numerous b/w ill. and tables. [ISBN 978-1-911592-33-4]

This is an accessible introduction to the trade and mercantile life of Bristol during the turbulent years of the Interregnum, Restoration and Glorious Revolution, written by an expert in the field. Dr Harlow aims this booklet at the general reader, using a chatty and informal style. The remit is broader than the title might suggest. In part, Harlow considers the nature and development of the port's commerce - what was traded, to where and when - but the booklet also goes much further: it considers how goods were shipped, how trade was regulated and why some practices were so different to those of later centuries. Harlow notes, for example, that the turnaround time of vessels in Bristol was slow by the standards of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was not because the merchants and shipowners of early modern Bristol were lazy or inefficient. Rather it was a result of the way wharfage duties were structured. Charges were by the shipment, rather than by the amount of time spent at the quayside, removing the incentive to hurry the unloading process. Instead, it encouraged merchants to use their vessels as floating warehouses – often only unloading goods once a buyer had been secured.

In addition to examining trade and shipping, the booklet investigates the merchants themselves. Who were they, how were they trained and how did they conduct their business? This section includes discussion of the apprenticeship system and the places from where apprentices were drawn, the ways in which merchants established their own businesses, as well as the ways in which they kept accounts and maintained their reputation and credit. Harlow ends with a ten-page portrait of the successful Quaker merchant, Thomas Speed. This section draws on Speed's 1680s commercial ledger, previously published by Harlow as a Bristol Record Society volume, as well as his PhD.¹ Reading Harlow's much abridged history, what is clear is just how precarious a merchant's career was in this period. Flexibility and resilience were needed to deal with 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Many of Speed's experiences might seem extraordinary, or even tragic, to a modern reader: he lost four wives and many children over a period of several decades. Yet Speed's experience was not atypical – particularly for someone who, like him, was lucky enough to live to seventy-seven. In an era in which death by accident or illness were common, when a couple swore to remain married 'till death us do part' that did not necessarily mean very long!

The booklet is a light and enjoyable read. Some of the discussions of the figures are a little opaque, while the brevity of the work can result in generalizations. Fundamentally, however, the booklet provides a vivid sense of how the mercantile world 'worked' during the period. And while it is aimed at the general reader, there is much in it of use to specialists too.

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¹ Jonathan Harlow, *The Ledger of Thomas Speed, 1681-1690* (Bristol Record Society publications, vol. 62, 2011); idem, 'The Life and Times of Thomas Speed' (PhD thesis, University of the West of England, 2008).